



YB+YS SEASON 1, EPISODE 6: Influencer Marketing in Gaming With Alicen Lewis & Samantha Abernathey

0:53 Megan Ingram (MI): The gaming industry has exploded over the last year and no need to look any further than the popularity of Twitch and the rise of eSports. This week, we're hosting an influencer and gaming round table with Alicen Lewis, who is a product manager, program manager and lover of all things, influencer marketing formerly with Twitch and The Marketing Arm, and Samantha Abernathey, who is all about getting people talking about games and currently the influencer marketing manager for Golin Los Angeles currently on the Nintendo of America team, emblematic of both her professional expertise and lifelong love of video games. Super excited to chat influencer marketing and gaming with you both. Glad to have you on the pod today.

1:32 Yeah, super excited to be here. Thanks for having us.

1:35 MI: Yeah. So to kick things off, obviously the influencer marketing industry has been very interesting in the last year. How have you seen influencer marketing changing in gaming since you've been in the industry?

1:48 Alicen Lewis (AL): I could start with that. A lot of my experiences are Twitch specific, but it's been really great to see influencers really start to understand their worth, because I would say the first point, they are Creators and that's the type of thing they do. But they now understand that working with brands can actually be great in terms of funding projects. They want to be able to do cool, big things. And they're learning that they don't have to work with people just because they've been reached out to, they can actually find the brands that really naturally fit with the things that they're interested in and make cooler content because of it.

2:29 Samantha Abernathey (SA): Yeah. And jumping off of that, I think that we're seeing brands beyond just gaming, understanding the importance of gaming influencers. Influencer marketing for gaming is still vitally important to this industry, but you're seeing brands, fashion, food, tech, et cetera, really understanding the importance of utilizing these Creators who are already producing consistent high quality content. Understanding the importance of Creators who are making this kind of stuff, and making these communities that are so passionate and strong, and then using them to create consistent advertising opportunities.

3:25 MI: Yeah, that totally makes sense to expand upon what you were just already saying. What have been some of your favorite activations in the last year? Some examples of brands that have done this really well.

3:38 AL: So on the Twitch side, some of my favorite ones have been when we integrate beyond just - so I'm no longer at Twitch, but I think this was maybe about a year ago, Borderlands worked on a Twitch extension where you could actually have the viewers interact and change things that were happening in the game for the launch. So that was

great. They also did a “Surprise and Delight” where they had a character pop into chat and gift-out subscriptions. Borderlands in general just did a very good, multi-sided approach when they did this. And I thought personally, it was super cool to go beyond just having an influencer play a game.

4:22 MI: That's awesome.

4:24 SA: Allie fully stole mine. I'm so upset. [laughter] Just talking about this, too. One thing I found really interesting was that Burberry, for their 2021 spring fashion show, decided to use Twitch as their platform. Obviously given the COVID-19 pandemic, they could no longer do traditional London Fashion Week. So they chose to show it on Twitch. They actually utilized “squad streaming”, which is a really special format exclusive to Twitch. And we're able to use that format to activate, which meant that there were all of these different streams happening at the same time that people could jump in and out of to see different perspectives of the show. And it kind of democratized the experience of a fashion show. Obviously, those are extremely high profile events that normally your average person can't really experience. But instead, you got to join the models as they were getting ready from one stream and then see the musicians performing from the other. And then actually watch the show from the front row in another view. So I thought that was really cool. That's something that I think Twitch is really doing a good job of learning how to activate alternative experiences.

5:58 MI: Yeah, I definitely agree. And I think that that's a really great example of using a different type of activation that we've seen have some success, and play well in the market, especially over the last year. Talk a little bit more specifically about gaming. What do you enjoy most about working in marketing for gaming?

6:20 SA: I've been a gamer my entire life. I can't remember not being a gamer. I literally have the earliest memories of my life playing Gameboy and Nintendo 64 and GameCube when I got a little older. All of that is intrinsically linked to my childhood. Working in gaming is just a validation of me being a kid. And my parents being like, “Get off X gaming console. You're spending too much time there.” And so it's satisfying to be able to turn that into a career. But I think one of my favorite things about working specifically in marketing for gaming and especially in influencer marketing, is that both Allie and I are extremely good at connecting with people. And influencer marketing and marketing in general is about making those connections in a positive way and putting these people together and providing them opportunities and connecting with them on a real level. So influencer marketing for me, I like to say, is like making friends for profit. Not that we're trying to get something out of them, but that we're trying to support them. And so it allows us to make these long-term friends and support them. For instance, I'm currently working with a campaign that I was able to suggest a long-term influencer Creator friend of mine for. And I think she's going to be signed for it. And I'm really excited about that because she creates awesome stuff. And so I've been friends with her since I went to an Overwatch league event, supporting women in 2018 I think, and we just hit it off and now I can suggest her for a campaign where hopefully there will be a large-scale yearly thing that she'll have opportunities for.

8:27 AL: And I would say building off of that, it is about supporting the Creators and the content they can make, but then it also gives you access to content that you might not have thought of otherwise, or you wouldn't be able to do otherwise. So for example, one of the campaigns I worked on was for HP Omen and we did what we called HP Omen Crossover, where we paired a NBA player with a gaming influencer, “Jake and bake,” and we just had them game together and chat and it wasn't revolutionary. And that's something you see on Twitch a lot is like, how can we cross over these? The funny part is, do you even call them influencers at that point? Or do we just say celebrities from other parts of different industries and be able to bring them in and really get to mix and match in a way that goes beyond gaming? As much as I love gaming marketing and being a gamer and things like that, I also love seeing how, especially in the advertising and influencer marketing, you can really change up what the norm is.

9:28 MI: Yeah. That's a great point. And I definitely think that's something that's worked really well, and I love to see out of brands. What are some of the trends you've seen for game marketing that the audience should be on the lookout for?

9:45 SA: A real push towards incorporating an influencer in every level of it. I think that they've really understood that influencer is key, that they're not ignoring it. And I also think, rightfully so, understanding that the biggest influencer isn't always better. That's something that I've seen, especially in the last year or so, recognizing that you're 3 million plus subscribers on YouTube or followers on Insta or Twitch, et cetera. They're not necessarily going to produce the best results. People understanding that micro-influencers or mid tier influencers actually have those conversion rates that are a lot stronger sometimes because those communities are much more loyal and engaged, and therefore they're going to transition their audiences into sales much more easily.

10:52 AL: Yeah. And building off of that, I think something that we saw, when I was at Twitch is we did custom commercials and getting a custom commercial for your brand could be, get X, random stand in, who isn't actually specifically someone, but we personally love pulling people from the community. They didn't even have to be like the biggest influencer. We just liked authentically having a Twitch streamer. One of the ones we did was advertised for Indeed.com and talking about hiring an Emote artist and things like that. And it was actually a very real experience and being able to integrate the people from our platform, instead of it just being like, oh, this person looks like they would make sense for the commercial, really spoke to the audience in ways.

11:37 MI: And oftentimes too, they can have a unique audience too, for the brand that maybe they didn't think of before that is very engaged with whatever it is that they're trying to push forward.

11:50 SA: Yeah. I think you have to think really holistically about this kind of marketing. If you're thinking about games marketing in general, you really have to understand completely what you're doing. So if you're marketing on a game, you want to understand, especially if you're marketing a non-endemic brand, you need to understand. Okay. If you're marketing for a type of food, does it make sense to market with this game? Does it make sense to market with this influencer? Where you see fails or where you see missteps is when they're not paying attention and partnering with - like what Overwatch league partnered with DJ Khalid and everyone was like, what are you doing? Stuff like that. It's understanding the communities that you're trying to reach holistically.

12:43 MI: Yeah. So I guess to follow that up, what would you say is the most common misconception about influencer marketing and gaming?

12:53 AL: I would say one of the most common misconceptions is that you can basically use anyone as long as they're big. So like this whole idea that - Oh, I'm Oreo and I really want to use like the biggest Twitch streamer, but then it becomes an issue of let's say that the Twitch streamer is actually really into health food or is clearly allergic to something within the Oreo or things like that. I think the interesting part about, especially influencer marketing versus celebrity is people are almost more aware of the different quirks of different streamers. People are aware that this person might be lactose intolerant or this person never touches junk food or things like that. Whereas, celebrities, yes, some of the hardcore fans might know those details, but in general, I have no idea if Kim Kardashian can't eat a specific fruit.

13:42 SA: Yeah, I think Allie hits the nail on the head for that one. Influencer communities are hyper-aware. They're also generally younger. Across the board, they're mostly created by millennial and gen-Z who are more internet savvy, more aware that they're being marketed to. You've got people who are just generally more advertising averse. So the integrations need to be more natural, organic, and authentic. So with influencer marketing, I think a lot of people just assume that if they put an ad or just a broll, something with influencer marketing, then they're going to get results. But where those missteps happen is when they're not organically integrating with the influencer or not

doing their research, like Allie said, to see if that will actually fit with the influencer or Creator's content. I guess this is less of a misconception and more of a misstep, but it's like not understanding that there are a lot of different ways to incorporate influencer marketing. You don't just have to create an ad. You can actually have them integrate things in fun ways. Create fun activities that they could do that could promote the content, like on Twitch. There's so many different ways to activate. Or on YouTube you can have a variety of different video content that they can do. Instagram, it can be utilizing a bunch of different types of their platform stuff. So Reels or Stories swipe activities, things like that. So it's maybe not a misconception, exactly. But it's not taking full advantage of the platform that you're trying to advertise on.

15:52 MI: Yeah. Going to talk a little bit about Creators specifically. Do you have any advice for Creators who would be interested in sponsoring or a sponsorship?

16:06 SA: I have the worst one and it sucks so hard, but working for a family-friendly brand, I can tell you this right off the bat. Be aware that if you're posting a ton of swear words or inappropriate content, that I'm automatically discounting you. And it sucks. I hate it. Me personally, I think it sucks, but it's like if you're swearing all over your brand, like an inordinate amount, or if you are posting photos that are showing you drinking or unfortunately showing you in lingerie, then you're out for me.

16:37 AL: Yeah, I think that also is part of a bigger question that has more to do with being aware of the choices that you want. And if your content is about being edgy or is about being able to cuss because that's real and authentic, that's totally fine. And honestly, there are- So Sam works specifically for Golin working with Nintendo and that's a very specific niche, but there are other brands who might not mind as much, or maybe they are specifically looking for people who are outside the box thinkers who are doing something very different. I would say that my advice isn't "don't do things", it's be aware of what your strengths are and what are the types of brands that A- you're interested in, and then B- that would want to work with you because that type of thing does align. Like an example might be, and you might actually be a great fit for Mike's Harder Lemonade, because part of their thing is about being edgy and outside the box and pushing boundaries. But maybe you wouldn't have been the best fit for Nintendo depending on what type of content you're making. But the thing I want to avoid is ever telling Creators not to make the content that they are passionate about, because that is the best content that they're going to make. If you start making content because you want brand deals, I think that you're going to destroy your own user base.

18:00 SA: That's a great point. And thank you for that. I fully agree. I think that it's just when I have influencers reach out who are like "I want to be a part of the program!" and then their entire channel is inappropriate content then sorry, I can't help you.

18:18 MI: That also gets back to your point about "fit" right with the brand. Do you fit what they're standing for and making sure that that aligns? And for different brands, there can be different reasons, but if there is that fit, then that's a good match. And that's someone you should work with.

18:34 SA: Yeah. I also think that there are so many wonderful variety Creators out there. I strongly believe that especially with variety gaming, do whatever you would like. I think that it behooves people to find their niche, not necessarily in terms of type of game, because I am all for variety gamers. Most enjoy a variety of gamers. But find your niche in the way you approach streaming is really helpful for brands to find you. Not saying like, choose your one box and stick to it, but more like, are you a streamer who really focuses on building the community and having interactive content, are you more of a walk-through streamer? Are you more of a let's play? That helps us in choosing who to partner with. And again, pick based on what you like to do, not saying choose because you want to fit with the brand, but if you have a good niche in some instances that might help us in partnering.

19:53 MI: Yeah. Who do you think is a Creator doing great work right now, out there?

20:02 AL: So I'm biased again, but really, Twitch, at least when I was there. And it seems like they continue to have a really good relationship with "[negaoryx](#)." I really love both the content that they make on their own channel. Like unbranded. They are very wholesome. They're very much about being honest. But I think they actually got noticed recently because they called out someone being misogynistic in their chats. So still, it's a good example of being able to be very positive, but still very honest. So I love their content. And then they were also just a pleasure to work with in terms of any branded campaigns that we did just because they were so good at seeing the positivity or the alignment and hyping that up. So I'm a big fan of "negaoryx."

20:50 SA: Yeah, I am too. I'm going to be biased and say, "[Dechart Games](#)" because I love them. It's a streamer duo. They're married and very, very sweet. They have an amazing community that is just immensely supportive and constructive and positive. It's Brian and Amelia, they are voice actors, duos. You'll recognize Brian, if you've played *Detroit, Become Human*. He's one of the leads. But they have done their community building properly. They know what they're doing. They really have made it correct. And I really love what they have created in that sense.

21:44 MI: Gotcha. Talk a little bit about people trying to get into the gaming industry. Do you have any advice for people trying to break in?

21:55 AL: First piece of advice is network. That's one of the biggest things in the gaming industry. Once you're in the gaming industry, it's a lot easier, oddly, to hop to different job roles, even if they aren't super related. But then my second piece of advice is be really good at the thing you decide to do because lots of people want to be in the gaming industry. And I feel like it's the Disney effect as well. The gaming industry and Disney run into the same thing where it's, I want to be in this industry. I want to be at this company. I'm willing to be a janitor who just works hours taking out trash or something. I just want to be a part of it, but they aren't necessarily looking to hire for that. They're looking for the best fit. So it may turn out that you may be the most passionate gamer interested in an HR position, but they are going to hire the person with 10 years of HR experience at like Amazon or some other big tech company where they actually have the work experience. Passion is important, knowing the industry is important, but it can only get you so far if you don't actually have the skills they're hiring for.

23:00 SA: Yeah, but working off of that, I also think that it's important to note that you don't necessarily need to have experience in the gaming industry to get into the gaming industry. I think it's important to see if you're interested in the gaming industry, but not specifically in development, there are a lot of other opportunities. Obviously, we're both speaking from the sort of the marketing/PR side of things, but neither of us came to gaming from a gaming schooling. So I think we came into it more from a media/PR approach. And I think that is true for a lot of people I know. We are approaching it from the perspective of like - you are very skilled and you have experience that can translate into gaming. And I've been in gaming now for a while, but a lot of people ask, how do I get into gaming? Well, what experience do you have that you can- on your resume or in an interview- translate? So if people want a good entry level job for marketing or for PR maybe something like a community manager. Well, that has elements of social media. It has elements of customer service. And those are things that you can find in other jobs. If you worked as a customer service agent at another company, that translates very directly into working as a community manager at a gaming company. So I'm working as a mentor in two different programs right now for the gaming industry. And that's something I'm working with my mentees on is that even though I know that you might have some experience in the classroom, you also have experience in your part-time jobs or your summer jobs that will translate.

25:02 MI: Gotcha. Yeah, that totally makes sense. And I definitely think that's something people should be looking for. Looking a little bit more into the future. Where do you think influencer marketing and gaming will be in five years? Let's say.

25:27 SA: I hope that influencer marketing will become more democratized in terms of the types of people that we're working with. You're seeing it a little bit more now, but I would love to see more of the top influencers being people of color, LGBT, women, et cetera. Especially on Twitch, it's still dominated by white dudes. So I'd love to see that more broadened at least.

25:57 AL: One of the things I'm curious about is as platforms realize that there is money in terms of connecting brands with Creators, how are those platforms going to create systems to be able to do programs like that? I know Instagram has specifically allowed people to make their promoted posts one of the ones that they sponsored with an influencer otherwise, and I unfortunately don't know where that's going to go for each platform, but I do want to see how that develops, because I think that will also oddly change how people make content, because I think that there'll be keeping it in mind as they are making content.

26:40 MI: Yeah, that's a great point. Well, last question before we leave. What is one takeaway from influencer marketing in gaming you didn't expect to have?

26:53 AL: One takeaway that I didn't expect to have is how incredibly fun it can actually end up being. If you make that proper alignment between the different programs. For the "It 2" release, we ended up sending "Pokimane" through an "It 2" fun house and experienced it with her as we went through. And as much as we do move or as much as I did, I guess I should use past tense since I'm an alum from there. But as much as we did move campaigns, it's always fun when something pops up that you didn't expect because there was synergy you never saw coming. We always try to make good content, but sometimes it just turns out that something can be really fun. And the influencer is actually very excited about the particular brand they're working with.

27:48 SA: Yeah. I think that's a great point. And I also think that for me, it's how creative it can be. A lot of people, and maybe this is just in my specific roles, but a lot of people see it as Slot A, Slot B, and then you put them together. But for me, it's so much more than that. We are thinking about holistic start to finish creative campaigns. And a lot of times that is very, very elaborate and complex. Not complex in a bad way, but we are thinking about things that are fun and organic and we're coming up with the entire idea for it. So it really allows you to exercise a lot of creativity. It's writing up the plan for it, and then it's seeing it through to the finish. So it's very satisfying. It's very gratifying to see something come to life. And then with the final event or the launch, it's so immensely heartwarming, especially when there is that synergy that Allie mentioned. I also love that for a lot of the campaigns, especially ones that go well, I get to take away friends. I have a number of influencers that I'm working with now who have my phone number and then we chat and we text. And they're really lovely human beings. And I'm so grateful to be friends with them. A couple of them have made me their mod on their Twitch channel, which is concerning. But I love them and I'm so grateful for it. And it's just been such a wonderful, wonderful experience. And I think that it's been something that I fell into is the wrong word. I did seek out influencer marketing after being in gaming PR and social media for a while, but it's really creative and a lot broader than a lot of people initially think.

30:00 MI: Yeah. Well, thank you both so much for joining the show today. It was so great chatting with you. Where can listeners find you?

30:11 AL: So I'm mostly on Twitter. I don't know exactly how to do this over a podcast because I spell my name oddly, but it's @alicen_lewis. And that's the easiest way to find me. I spell Alicen very interestingly.

30:28 SA: I'm also mostly on Twitter. You can find me at @heysaber, and that's the same on Instagram as well, but I'm much more active on Twitter.