

Are social media agencies prostituting their brands?

 By [Melody Maker](#)

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The scandal [about social media consulting firms buying fake followers](#) to boost their own social media profiles as well as those of their clients is sad but not unexpected.

It's direct consequence of the Wild West nature of social media, where there are many black hat guns-for-hire who will go to any lengths to achieve results that are favourable for their clients, at least seemingly so. What many brands want is as many Facebook fans and Twitter followers they can get, because they for some reason believe that this is the true metric for success in the social media space.

The result is that it becomes tempting even for the most ethical and legitimate digital agencies to boost the numbers they deliver for their clients by simply buying fans and followers from a service such as [ilovemylfollowers.com](#). Who is going to know, after all?

The controversy points to two major issues that we need to face up to in the social media world. Firstly, that we need to accept that the size of a social media community isn't the sole or even the best way of gauging its success. Secondly, those of us interested in promoting a vibrant but credible social media sector need to start pushing for more independent regulation.

What's the point in having numbers for numbers' sake?

As far as the first point goes, it's hard to fathom why anyone thinks accruing followers as quickly as possible at any cost is the sole important end goal in social media. That's especially so when most of those followers aren't real people, but spam bots or dummy accounts or equally as inactive.

Trying to boost your social media community quickly with "paid for" members is ultimately as pointless and self-defeating as paying for sex. Ultimately you lose credibility no matter how well you run your account in other respects, because the people you have just paid to "love" your brand essentially don't and that goes against the whole ethos of social media being about authentic conversation and dialogue with your consumers.

Building a community organically is more like looking for and building an authentic relationship with someone - sure it takes a lot more work, but is ultimately more rewarding. The people in your community will actually be engaged with your brand, and you'll actually be doing business with them. The point of social media is to have authentic customer relationships, not the most fans or followers. Social media consultants need to spend time educating their clients about the real metrics for success in social media rather than accepting or even encouraging a focus on pure numbers.

Space for some regulation, and a code of ethic

This brings me to my second point. Today's social media sector is mostly unregulated, apart from the mostly inadequate measures taken by platforms like Facebook and Twitter to weed out nuisance spammers and fake accounts.

Nearly anyone can claim to be a social media guru without signing up with an industry body or getting any accreditation.

I believe that there is space for some sort of industry regulation here, with a code of ethics that agencies and brands that are committed to sound social media practices will be happy to sign. They would perhaps need to commit themselves to an independent audit to ensure that their followers are indeed acquired in an ethical manner and that their behaviour is fair and consumer-friendly.

This type of self-regulation works very well in industries such as mobile marketing - overseen by the Wireless Application Service Providers Association - and advertising - guided by the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa. Perhaps an organisation like the Digital Media and Marketing Association (DMMA) could take the lead in terms of regulating social media practices across South Africa.

Social media is in its infancy in many ways, but the market is tough and competitive. The best practices are not yet clear, there are no clearly defined metrics for success and the pressure to deliver instant results is immense. The best advice for brands is to scrutinise carefully any agencies they work with and look for those that are focused on delivering authentic measurable results through integrity and hard work. It takes time to build a community in this manner, but the payoff is worth it.

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