Inside the LAB

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INFLUENCER FEST 2026

The Future of Influence is Already Here.

We knew there was interest in influencer marketing.
We knew the space was evolving quickly.

What we didn't fully expect was the turnout, the engagement, and the level of conversation that happened inside the room.

More than 180 people registered for Influencer Fest 2026. Nearly 160 attended. Brands, creators, agencies, media companies, and marketers all showed up to talk about where this industry is going next.

And the biggest takeaway?

The influencer space is maturing fast.

The conversations are becoming more strategic, more measurable and more business-driven. The gap between the brands that understand this space and the brands that don't is widening quickly.

Here are the three topics that we tackled and some of the themes that stood out most from the day.



PANEL 1 Ben Leber: former Vikings Linebacker, Current KFAN regular, Vikings sideline reporter and co-host of Twin Cities Live, Allison O'Keefe: Senior Manager of Influencer and Creator Marketing at Best Buy, Katie Turcotte: Director of Influencer Marketing at Ovative Group.



Aaron Deets: Social Media Associate at Inspire Medical Systems.

HOW BRANDS REALLY THINK

One of the strongest conversations from the event centered around how brands are actually approaching influencer marketing internally. The biggest misconception? That influencer marketing is still experimental.

It's not.

The brands seeing the best results are building creator strategies directly into their marketing ecosystem. Not as a one-off campaign. Not as an add-on. As part of the actual plan.

Best Buy shared that creators now play a role across the entire shopping journey:

- Discovery
- Education
- Consideration
- Conversion

But what stood out most was how brands evaluate success today. Follower count alone is becoming less important. Brands are increasingly looking at:

- Engagement quality
- Audience trust
- Content performance
- Storytelling ability
- Paid media efficiency

Another major takeaway was around creative freedom. The best-performing content is rarely over-scripted. Audiences can immediately tell when something feels forced.

The brands winning right now are the ones giving creators strategic direction while still allowing them to communicate in their own voice.



PANEL 2 Marney Gellner: Studio host for the Timberwolves and Twins, play by play voice of your Minnesota Lynx and KFAN regular, Lindsey Ranzau: Creator on Instagram at Lindsey Ranzau, Emily Carriveau: Creator @SmallTownMe, Sara Johnson: Brand Marketing at Mall of America.



Quinn Kuntz: Former D1 hockey player and current content creator for the Big Ten Network.

AUTHENTICITY & ALIGNMENT

If there was one word repeated throughout the event, it was authenticity. Creators spoke openly about how quickly audiences can detect misalignment between a brand and a creator partnership.

One of the most impactful moments of the event came during a live audience exercise where attendees were asked to stand if they had ever accepted a partnership that didn't fully feel aligned. Nearly half the room remained standing.

The panel discussed how successful partnerships today are less about transactions and more about relationships.

Creators want:

- Brand alignment
- Creative trust
- Long-term partnerships
- Clear communication

Brands want:

- Authentic storytelling
- Consistent performance
- Trusted audience connection

The middle ground is collaboration.

Several creators emphasized that one of the biggest mistakes brands make is trying to control every detail of the content. The best partnerships happen when creators are trusted to communicate naturally with their audience instead of reading from a script.

One line from the panel stood out:

“If it’s not a hell yes, it’s a no.” Go with your gut. Trust what you know. “Your audience can tell 100% if you’re being inauthentic.” Lindsey Ranzau

The other very underestimated concept was establishing the relationship through a live meeting, either by zoom or in person. Doing a zoom call to go over a creative brief can be the difference between a successful outcome and one that is flat.



PANEL 3 Stephanie Hansen: Emmy Award winning TV host and author, Jason DeRusha: Content Creator and afternoon voice on WCCO, Paige Geary: Director of Digital Marketing at Kwik Trip, Sam Rook: Vice President of Marketing at Mystic Lake.



Olivia King: Content Creator and sideline reporter for Gopher hockey.

THE BUSINESS OF INFLUENCE

The final panel focused on something the industry doesn’t always talk about publicly: The money.

Pricing. Usage rights. Exclusivity. Deliverables. Measurement. And one message became very clear:
Brands are no longer just paying for impressions. They’re paying for trust.

Creators who have built loyal, engaged communities hold real value because audiences believe them. The panel also highlighted how sophisticated brands are becoming when evaluating influencer performance.

Today, brands are looking deeper at:

- CPMs
- Engagement rates
- Customer acquisition
- Long-term brand lift
- Conversion behavior
- Content usability

Another major topic was usage rights and content ownership. Many creators are becoming more strategic about:

- How long brands can use content
- Where content can appear
- Exclusivity timelines
- Paid amplification rights

As the industry matures, these conversations are becoming standard. One of the more interesting discussions centered around long-term partnerships versus one-off deals. Brands repeatedly emphasized that creators who are collaborative, aligned, authentic, and easy to work with often become much more valuable over time than creators focused only on short-term payouts.

At the end of the day, the creator economy is no longer just creative.

It’s business.

FROM THE LAB

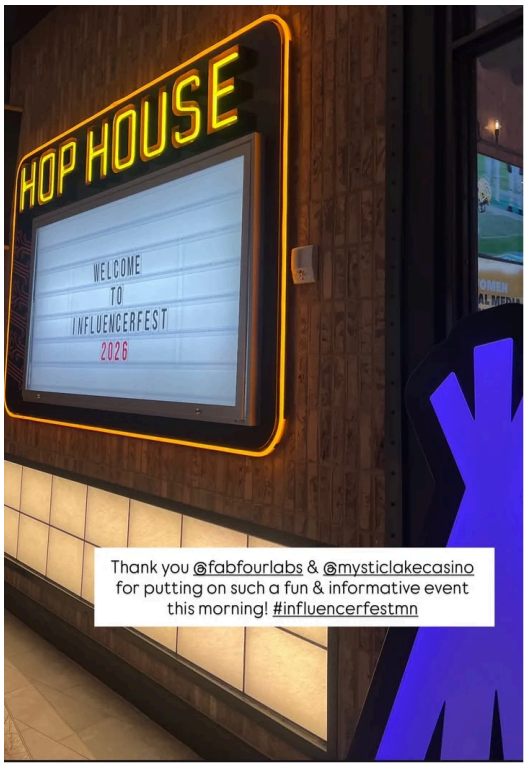
The biggest takeaway from Influencer Fest 2026 wasn’t just the turnout.

It was the appetite for the conversation.

The room was filled with people trying to better understand where this industry is heading and how to build smarter partnerships between brands and creators.

And based on the response, this conversation is only getting started.

We’ll see you at the next one.













Thank you to our amazing partners in this event:

If this sparked ideas and you want more stories, from the Lab, hit reply and tell me one challenge you're wrestling with. The next issue might be built around your problem.

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Fab Four Labs Marketing

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