

AMA Mindful Marketing Ethics Challenge

Executive Summary

Influencer marketing is one of the most powerful forces in modern advertising, with studies showing that their content value is more impactful than traditional celebrity endorsements (Pan, Blut, Ghiassaleh, 2025). Wilderquest, a new manufacturer of outdoor apparel, footwear, and equipment, is considering launching its first influencer campaign. Impact, an agency, has presented a comprehensive proposal centered on micro-influencers. While thorough, the plan raises significant concerns about effectiveness, legality, and ethicality.

The proposal's definition of the target market as ages 18-60 is overly broad and fails to account for differences in lifestyles and digital behavior. Its reliance on follower thresholds over engagement, unrealistic posting requirements, and lack of emphasis on authentic product use weaken potential effectiveness. More critically, Impact recommends concealing sponsorships, embellishing benefits, and depreciating competitors, exposing Wilderquest to possible FTC violations and undermining its values of honesty and authenticity.

This report recommends narrowing the target market to Gen Z and Millennials (ages 18–35), requiring FTC-compliant disclosure, mandating authentic product use, adjusting posting frequency, emphasizing fact-based competition, diversifying influencer partnerships, and incorporating user-generated content. Together, these measures will ensure Wilderquest's influencer strategy is both effective and ethical, strengthening brand equity, trust, and long-term sales growth.

Introduction

Over the past decade, influencer marketing has grown from a niche tactic into a common strategy that shapes consumer purchasing at unprecedented levels. Unlike traditional advertising, influencers provide personal endorsements that audiences perceive as authentic and relatable. However, this rise has also raised concerns about manipulation, exaggeration, and lack of transparency, eroding trust in a strategy once known for its genuineness.

Wilderquest, a relatively new outdoor gear brand, is preparing to enter influencer marketing for the first time. Impact, an influencer marketing agency, has delivered a detailed proposal built around micro-influencers. While promising reach and diversity, the plan also includes practices that could compromise effectiveness, violate federal advertising regulations, and damage Wilderquest's values of authenticity and respect.

This report analyzes Impact's proposal through effectiveness, legality, and ethicality, and presents actionable recommendations for improvement.

Key Issues in Impact's Proposal

Effectiveness Concerns

Impact's definition of the target market as ages 18-60 is overly broad. The media use, values, and purchasing motivations of Gen Z differ drastically from those of Gen X, making it unlikely that one campaign could resonate with all. This lack of segmentation risks producing generic messages that appeal weakly to everyone. Similarly, the requirement that influencers have a "distinct persona" is vague, while the minimum follower threshold of 10,000 prioritizes popularity over engagement. In practice, nano-influencers with fewer than 1,000 followers often generate higher engagement and stronger trust (Harshitha, Shetty, & Sairam, 2021). Finally,

requiring influencers to post daily creates content fatigue and undermines authenticity. Instead of generating desire and action, such repetition could alienate audiences.

Legal Concerns

Impact's most troubling element is its recommendation that influencers do not disclose sponsorships or free products. This directly violates Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines, which require clear and conspicuous disclosure of all material connections between brands and influencers (Federal Trade Commission, n.d.). Failure to comply could expose both influencers and Wilderquest to penalties, lawsuits, and reputational harm. Beyond legality, concealment undermines the authenticity that influencer marketing is intended to deliver.

Ethical Concerns

Impact's expectations also raise serious ethical concerns that conflict with Wilderquest's values. By requiring embellishment of features and forbidding negative feedback, the proposal undermines honesty and risks deceiving consumers. Encouraging influencers to disparage competitors manipulates buyer choice and fails to treat other brands fairly. Respect is also compromised by messaging that portrays consumers' lives as "lacking without Wilderquest," exploiting insecurities rather than affirming worth. Responsibility is neglected by allowing influencers to promote products they have not used, stripping audiences of genuine evaluations and reviews. Finally, encouraging technology to enhance photos or videos without disclosure risks misleading consumers. Collectively, these practices jeopardize consumer trust and contradict Wilderquest's commitment to authenticity.

Recommendations

Effectiveness

Wilderquest should narrow its target market to Gen Z (18-25) and younger Millennials (26–35). Gen Z audiences are highly active on TikTok and Instagram, motivated by authenticity and sustainability, and represent long-term loyalty potential. Millennials balance careers and families, use Instagram and YouTube to research purchases, and prioritize value and reliability. Gen X could be addressed with informational YouTube or Facebook content but should not be the primary focus of influencer-heavy campaigns. This is because Gen X is less responsive to influencer marketing, preferring reviews, tutorials, and trusted communities over social media endorsements. This segmentation ensures that messaging resonates with the groups most likely to engage and make a purchase.

Influencer selection criteria should be refined. Rather than prioritizing follower counts, Wilderquest should focus on influencers who consistently produce outdoor content and have strong engagement. Nano-influencers should be included alongside micro-influencers, as their smaller communities often generate higher engagement and conversion rates (Harshitha, Shetty, & Sairam, 2021). Selecting influencers who are existing Wilderquest customers or who have organically featured the brand further enhances authenticity.

Posting frequency should be scaled back from daily to two to four posts per week, with content aligned to platform norms. On TikTok, short, spontaneous videos can highlight boots in action on a hike. On Instagram, reels can showcase lifestyle aesthetics of outdoor adventures. On YouTube, long-form content such as detailed reviews or “day in the life” videos provide depth

and credibility. This multi-platform approach sustains attention and builds trust across the stages of the AIDA model.

Legality

To ensure compliance, Wilderquest must require full FTC-compliant disclosure of sponsorships and compensation. Influencers should clearly label posts with hashtags such as #ad or #sponsored whenever products are provided, or affiliate commissions apply. This protects the brand from regulatory risk while reinforcing credibility among consumers who value transparency.

Additionally, Wilderquest should mandate that influencers personally use products before promotion. For example, a TikTok influencer can film a weekend camping trip with Wilderquest gear, while a YouTube creator could review a tent after extended use. By ensuring real experience, endorsements remain truthful and legally defensible, and consumers receive experience-based insights.

Ethicality

Ethical safeguards are equally important. Wilderquest should prohibit influencers from exaggerating features or implying that consumers' lives are incomplete without its products. Instead, messaging should highlight how Wilderquest enhances outdoor experiences while respecting consumer autonomy.

Competition should be addressed responsibly. Rather than depreciating rivals, Wilderquest should emphasize measurable strengths such as affordability, sustainability, or durability. This fair approach builds credibility and avoids reputational risk while still differentiating the brand respectfully.

Wilderquest should also set guidelines for visual content. AI or editing tools may be used to improve clarity, but influencers should not misrepresent product performance. For example, altering colors or digitally enhancing durability misleads consumers and undermines trust. Clear ethical standards around visuals ensure decency and protect long-term brand integrity.

Finally, Wilderquest should diversify its influencer partnerships beyond micro-influencers. Collaborating with nano-influencers, outdoor educators, environmental advocates, and local adventurers introduces credible voices with highly engaged audiences. Vetting influencers for authentic engagement metrics, such as comments and saves are effective as well. These partnerships reflect Wilderquest's values of fairness and respect, rewarding genuine expertise rather than mere popularity.

To complement partnerships, Wilderquest should launch a user-generated content (UGC) campaign, such as #MyWilderquest, encouraging customers to share their authentic experiences with items. UGC provides powerful social proof, with research showing increased conversion and higher purchase intention compared to disclosed advertisements (Mayrhofer, Matthes, Einwiller, & Naderer, 2019). Featuring customer-generated stories alongside influencer campaigns balances professionalism with authenticity, building community ownership of the brand. To summarize these recommendations, Table 1 outlines Wilderquest's revised influencer marketing requirements.

Conclusion

Influencer marketing offers Wilderquest an opportunity to expand its reach and deepen consumer loyalty. However, Impact's current proposal risks undermining effectiveness through

broad criteria, vague targeting, risky disclosure requirements, and breaching ethical standards by encouraging embellishment, disrespect, and unfair comparisons.

By narrowing its target to Gen Z and Millennials, requiring transparency, mandating authentic product use, adjusting posting strategies, and embracing fair competition, Wilderquest can develop a campaign that is both effective and ethical. Expanding influencer selection and encouraging user-generated content further strengthens trust and engagement.

This balanced approach positions Wilderquest not just as a provider of outdoor gear but as a leader in authentic, responsible marketing. In a marketplace where consumers increasingly value transparency, Wilderquest's commitment to genuineness will drive sustainable sales and long-term brand equity.

Table 1 Revised Wilderquest Influencer Marketing Requirements

Category	Wilderquest Requirement Adjustments
Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gen Z (18-25) and older Millennials (26-35) • U.S. based, not necessarily U.S. citizens • Racially diverse • Gender inclusive
Psychographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic outdoor and environmental lifestyle (hiking, camping, climbing) • Being relevant- engaging, timely, meaningful • Diverse range of followers, <1,000 to >100,000 (includes nano-influencers, and micro-influencers). • Wilderquest Customers, and/or outdoor content creators • Strong engagement rates (saves, shares, comments)
Promotional Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post average 4x a week with content tailored to platforms norms (TikTok for short adventure clips, Instagram for visual storytelling, YouTube for detailed reviews) • Content should be honest and not disparage competitors • Mandatory disclosure of compensation and partnerships
Compensation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive monetary payment in the form of affiliate commissions: 10% off each sale, made through the influencer's unique link or code.

References

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