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Scroll, Like, Buy... Believe?

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From dry shampoo demos to “get ready with me” reels, today’s entrepreneurs aren’t just selling products—they’re selling *themselves*. In 2025, your brand isn’t just your logo—it’s your face, your story, your dog, and occasionally, your breakfast. Welcome to the age of the social media entrepreneur, where a good skincare routine might be your strongest pitch deck. But when every founder also plays influencer, and every product launch comes with a vulnerable backstory and a filtered selfie, a bigger question emerges: how do these entrepreneurs keep the stakeholders engaged throughout?

Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop is a sharp example of today’s brand logic—she’s not just selling detox kits or “vagina-scented” candles; she’s selling *herself*. Goop thrives on emotional storytelling over science, with followers loyal to the lifestyle she embodies. But when trust hinges more on persona than proof, where does influence end and manipulation begin?

This study examines 417,957 Instagram posts from 277 beauty and lifestyle entrepreneurs—spanning over 9TB of captions, comments, images, and videos. Using (Keller, 2001)ⁱ Brand Resonance Model, we reframe its traditional product focus to argue that, the entrepreneur *is* the product—reshaping how resonance works in the digital age.

In the following sections, we discuss our findings:

From Founder to Friend: Why Real Beats Right

On Instagram, entrepreneurs aren’t just selling—they’re socializing. The most effective founders become trusted voices by sharing lifestyle moments and personal stories, not just business wins. But here’s the twist: too much expertise can actually backfire. Followers crave connection, not a lecture. Forced vulnerability or overly polished advice feels off. What resonates is honest, human content—speaking like a peer, not a professor. In the scroll of daily life, approachability builds more trust than authority ever could.

People Don’t Just Buy Products—They Buy People

Audiences are more interested in your personal life than your product line. Posts about your travels, your pregnancy, or your daily routine get significantly more attention than work-related updates. Lifestyle content performs best—not because it’s fluff, but because it builds emotional connection. Take the case of Olive & June, a nail care brand that gained traction not through product specs but through its founder’s candid, unfiltered content—videos of toddler meltdowns mid-manicure and honest confessions about business failures. Her followers didn’t just buy nail polish—they bought into her.

And for underrepresented founders (women and LGBTQ+) sharing authentic, identity-rooted stories isn't just powerful; it's strategicⁱⁱ. Visibility builds relatability, and relatability builds loyalty. So don't dial yourself down. Your story is your edge. Let people see the human behind the product.

Celebrity Brands and the Ethics of Influence

This dynamic becomes even more complex when celebrities and ethical considerations enter the chat.ⁱⁱⁱ Think of Kourtney Kardashian's *Lemme*, which sells everything from sleep gummies to "stress support" supplements—products often light on scientific backing (2 clinical trials) but heavy on personal branding. It raises a serious concern: when emotional storytelling is used to sell unverified health claims, where's the line between trust and manipulation?

So, What Should Entrepreneurs Do?

1. Show heart, not just hustle. Deep emotion or calm clarity wins attention. "Meh" doesn't.
2. Use your voice, not just your resume. Credentials are great, but they won't keep people engaged.
3. Put your life in the frame. Personal content is what builds connection.
4. Balance vulnerability with vision. Be real—but be intentional.
5. Don't downplay your identity. It's often what makes your brand unforgettable.

Why It Matters Now

Instagram isn't just a highlight reel, it's a sales engine. Instagram engagement and commerce data compiled from industry insights report 35% of internet users on the platform, 1 million new users joining monthly, and 90% following at least one business. Shopping posts rack up 130 million engagements a month, and with a 1.08% conversion rate and \$65 average order, it's clear: if you're selling, your audience is already window-shopping. So, if you're not showing up, you're missing out.

Social trust is under pressure. Stakeholders are tired of polished perfection and overly branded content. They want transparency, connection, and truth, not another glossy sales pitch. That's why understanding how trust is built in digital spaces is no longer optional—it's a competitive edge. For many founders, especially those who've been overlooked by traditional entrepreneurship ecosystems—this new landscape offers a rare opportunity. Being real isn't a risk anymore, it's a strategy. So the next time you're about to hit "post," ask yourself: are you sharing content—or building connection? If it's the latter, chances are, they'll not only double-tap, they'll stick around.

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ⁱ Keller, K.L. (2001) Building Customer-Based Brand Equity. *Marketing Management*, 10, 14-21.

ⁱⁱ 618 Media. (n.d.). *Diversity & representation: Embracing inclusivity in media & marketing*. Retrieved April 21, 2025, from <https://618media.com/en/blog/diversity-representation-embracing/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Clark, Daniel & Jno-Charles, Alisa. (2025). The Child Labor in Social Media: Kidfluencers, Ethics of Care, and Exploitation. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 1-28. 10.1007/s10551-025-05953-7.