

'It is a nice way to make money': Meet some of Arizona's wildly successful influencers

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Kalani Hilliker has been in the spotlight for most of her life.

When she was 11, she became a regular on the Lifetime reality show “Dance Moms,” showcasing competitive young dancers and their firebrand coach.

Now, as a 24-year-old, Hilliker, @KalaniHilliker on Instagram, still lives her life in full view of the public. Her 4.7 million TikTok followers have gotten to see her get engaged, celebrate her bachelorette party and plan her upcoming wedding.

Mixed in with posts about her dancing, going to the beach and playing golf are videos of her promoting energy drinks, makeup, hair services and other businesses that seek her out for her wide audience to market their products.

Hilliker is one of thousands of people capitalizing on their social media platforms to market products, services and experiences, and has learned to make a career out of it.

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“It’s a privileged job to have,” Hilliker said. “I’m in a very lucky position. If someone wants to do a brand deal for my bachelorette — sponsorships so my friends don’t have to pay — I’m going to do it.”

Influencers have become their own type of celebrity, with followers looking to them for advice on fitness, beauty, family life, fashion, food and entertainment. With an up-and-coming food scene and fast-growing population, Arizona has become home to many prominent influencers who have amassed followings around the country and internationally.

Some Arizona social media personalities have piggybacked their influencing careers off stints in reality television, like Arie and Lauren Luyendyk, the former lead and winner of a season of "The Bachelor." Others, like Matt and Abby Howard, have grown their following by creating popular social media channels, documenting their lives on TikTok and YouTube.

Broadcasting your life to millions of people on social media can be profitable, with brands paying thousands of dollars to influencers to get a post on their feeds or placement in their stories.

Influencer marketing has become such an important component to marketing that public relations and marketing companies have begun to put just as much emphasis on influencers as they do on more traditional advertising and media outreach, said Jennifer Kaplan, president and CEO of Evolve Public Relations and Marketing.

"Their following may be just as impactful as traditional media coverage," Kaplan said about working with influencers.

Kaplan said businesses include paying for influencers in their advertising budgets.

"If it is set up in the right way, I feel that influencers are extremely valuable and can really enhance and elevate a business," Kaplan said.

Those partnerships can take many forms but usually include paying an influencer to use a product or visit a business, like a restaurant, hotel, spa or entertainment venue, and then post about their experience.

Businesses can also send influencers products to try, or other promotional materials, in the hopes they will post about them. The deals can also involve trades, like a hotel stay or a free meal in exchange for a post, and most influencers engage in all types of brand partnerships.

"Some influencers won't come in without getting paid, period," she said. "Some are getting thousands of dollars."

Social media stars: [Meet some of Arizona's influencers, from food to parenting to lifestyle](#)

'A mini reality show on their Instagram'

JJ Garcia, who gained a social media following after appearing regularly on a reality show about his sisters, former WWE stars Brie and Nikki Bella, realized influencing could be a real

career when his daughter was born.

“Our first big, big deal was Pampers,” Garcia, @TheVacationJJ on Instagram, said of starting out in influencing with his now ex-wife, Lauren. “They paid us \$50,000 plus free diapers. We had done smaller deals of \$1,000 here and there, but then we cleared Lauren’s salary for the year with one deal.”

Influencing isn’t a full-time job for Garcia, who also works at a recruiting firm with his mom, but it is for Lauren.

“It is the market of advertising,” Garcia said of influencing’s impact. “My ex-wife moves the needle when a product is getting posted.”

The global influencer marketing industry was estimated to be worth \$25.44 billion in 2024 and projected to reach \$97.55 billion by 2030, according to Grand View Research.

Garcia said it is easy to see why people who have been on reality shows often find a lot of success as influencers.

“The successful influencers are basically doing a mini reality show on their Instagram every day,” he said.

For Kristen Keogh, a former television news reporter and in-game host for the Arizona Coyotes, the money she makes for one sponsored Instagram reel equals what it would have taken nine or 10 full shifts to make at her job in TV news.

“At my last TV news job, I made \$75,000, but that is not that hard to make in influencing,” she said. She is @KristenKeogh on Instagram.

After her son was born, she realized she didn’t want to be spending all her time working at the TV station and decided to lean into a following she’d built while writing a hiking and outdoors blog for women.

“I needed a foot surgery, and thought it was something a lot of hikers might need,” she said. “I reached out to the medical device company that made the device I needed, sent them a message on Instagram and asked if they had ever worked with influencers. I had 19,000 followers at the time and got a \$20,000 project with this medical device.”

Keogh, who has also worked in making commercials and advertising, said an influencer does the job of producing, editing, hair and makeup, filming, writing a script and other jobs that would all be done by multiple people on a film set.

“When you think about the 10 people it takes to make a commercial, one influencer is way more effective,” she said.

A successful influencing career requires a person to stay relevant and hold an audience's attention, and attention can be fleeting.

Growing an audience: 'It's all about passion'

Some influencers started posting because they had large followings already on social media, but for others, a viral post launched a career option.

Tatum Beck calls herself “the weird big sister of the internet.”

She had planned to become a teacher and was doing her student teaching at a Valley high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. She and her brother, Noah, who has since become an extremely successful influencer, started making videos, and he had one go viral.

Both of their followings have grown, with Tatum, @TatumBeckk on Instagram, racking up 3.1 million followers and Noah getting 33 million.

“People started following me because I’m Noah’s sister,” she said, adding that she has tried to distance herself from her brother to create her own niche and following.

After a bad experience left her disillusioned with teaching, she said she decided to dive into content creation. Around 2021, brands started to notice her, and she made videos with Circle K to promote their coffee machines, CoverGirl mascara and Sonic Drive-In.

She has a manager who negotiates with brands, but she does sometimes reach out to companies herself if there is a collaboration she wants to do.

“Everything I’ve accepted has been things that I love,” she said.

She was recruited to join the “Hype House,” a group of popular social media stars who lived and made content together. She said she declined because she felt she had to stay true to herself and would hate living in a house with influencers.

"So many tripods," she joked.

The pandemic also pushed Afi Maita to launch her own business, both in fashion styling and influencing. She was furloughed from her job and wanted to try something new.

"I utilized that time, started creating style videos, how to put outfits together," Maita, @AfiLikeTaffy on Instagram, said. She started tagging some of her favorite brands and letting them know she was a fan and started getting noticed by some of the companies she loved.

"It's all about passion and asking for what you want," she said.

She still works as a stylist, but that work bleeds into her work as an influencer.

Even though she is considered a micro-influencer based on the size of her following, Maita said major brands notice her because she has strong engagement with followers and a strong presence in the industry. Major brands have worked with her, including retailer TJMaxx, which flew her to New York City for a brand campaign.

Aiesha Beasley started blogging as a "fun little hobby" more than a decade ago. After a friend encouraged her, she started a new Instagram account focused on fashion in about 2017.

She later moved from Tucson to Phoenix for a job, but after moving to remote work during the pandemic, she decided to start posting on TikTok for fun.

"I started a whole series on Arizona places. I wanted to discover new places, cute places I could go," she said.

Her account, @AieshaBeasley on Instagram, grew, partially because Arizona hosted the Super Bowl in 2023 and a lot of brands were in Phoenix to promote products. She has been able to make content creation her full-time job for the past two years.

"When I quit my job, I had a plan in place," she said. "I made sure I had six months of savings, and I had to prepare to lose my health insurance. Now, I always have to ask myself, am I getting steady work, am I making enough? Now, I'm making three to four times what I was making at my full-time job."

Beasley's Instagram is full of videos of her visiting small businesses in Arizona or traveling around the state giving reviews and recommendations.

She likes to work with small businesses, but a lot of that is done for trade, she said, like a complimentary meal, stay or service in exchange for posting about it. Most of her money comes from collaborations with much larger businesses. She often works with Salad & Go and Fox Restaurant Concepts.

Melissa Anaya wanted to start a marketing agency in 2017, and started taking on local restaurants as clients. She was relatively unknown to a lot of the restaurants she approached, so she decided to create a trusted presence on social media, so she could use it to pitch potential clients.

She started her social media accounts, Eat Drink AZ, @EatDrinkAZ on Instagram, and grew as an influencer at the same time as she tried to build her marketing business.

She has grown the business to also include employees, some of whom also make videos on her social media influencing pages. If a business wants a post or video specifically from Anaya, it comes with a higher cost now, she said.

Making money by sharing your life

Most money from influencing comes from brand sponsorships, where brands pay an influencer to come to their business and post about it, or use their products and share their experiences.

Money paid for these types of posts can vary widely, from a few hundred to tens of thousands of dollars.

“We all have different business models,” Anaya said. Depending on what businesses she is working with, she tailors her rates and expectations. Often, smaller restaurants don’t have a budget to pay for influencer marketing, but can offer a trade, like hosting Anaya and a friend for a meal in exchange for exposure on her social media.

But the real money comes from brands paying for that coveted exposure. Smaller influencers, she said, can make \$500 to \$1,000 per feature they create for businesses, while bigger influencers can easily make \$1,000 to \$5,000 per feature in her industry, Anaya said.

Getting a viral video, even if it means doing that one for free, can pay off and lead to several paid deals, she said.

"You're going to go out there to get the most viral videos for that exposure, then the paid ones come in," Anaya said.

When a buzzy new restaurant opens that influencers are clamoring to try and want to be the first person to post about, all bets are off, she said.

"It can be competitive," she said. "I've seen people editing while they're eating."

Garcia said his posts are often a mix of paid sponsorships and his sharing items he got for trades or promotions. Videos of him cooking or content with his two daughters are usually his most successful for viewership.

"I love making restaurant videos. I love supporting local companies," he said. "I make a video and I can get a lavish dinner."

Those posts, like videos made in a restaurant in exchange for dinner, are often trades, he said, but if a brand wants his kids in a video, they have to pay.

"We put it in an account for them," he said of money made off content with his daughters. "In the future they will have a chunk of change. It will probably be enough to pay for their college."

How much a business spends on influencing depends a lot on the work they expect the influencer to do, Garcia said. A reel for Instagram or a TikTok video is a common request, along with posting on their stories, which are only visible temporarily.

Many who use influencing as a full-time job have managers and public relations professionals to help them negotiate their rates and manage the work that they take on.

Another income stream can be from "user-generated content," which does not get posted on the influencer's own pages. Instead, the influencer acts as a spokesmodel for the company and the company then uses it on its own channels.

Beasley said about half the time a brand reaches out to her for her sponsored posts, and the other half of the time she approaches them.

"I do decline a lot now, I can't take on everything, but I'll send a DM or an email if it's something I'm really interested in," she said.

Hilliker said she compares influencing to being a real estate agent. Sometimes, sales are going great, and one major deal can bring in a lot of money, but those deals can be inconsistent.

“It is a nice way to make money, but no one can take it for granted,” she said.

Kaplan has owned her company for 15 years, and in the past seven to 10 years, influencer marketing has exploded in popularity to tailor a message directly to potential customers, delivered by people who they are already interested in.

Some of her clients, she said, want influencers before they want anything else.

When ice cream giant Ben & Jerry’s hired Evolve for local marketing and public relations, the first thing they wanted was to reach out to influencers.

“Let’s scoop up some great, colorful, flavorful ice cream, let’s have them eating it, let’s have them take a photo of it,” she said. “They want it in a great cone that’s dipped in chocolate around it so it really can convey and get people excited, especially in the summer.”

'People can be cruel': The downside of living publicly

Making money by posting your life means much of your lifestyle and family are open to public scrutiny.

While attention can bring money and social media stardom, it can also mean influencers have very little privacy, and their life choices are fodder for public conversation.

While Hilliker was quick to point out influencing is a “privileged” job to have, it comes with its drawbacks.

“There’s ups and downs,” she said. “It’s not easy to deal with people criticizing you. People can be cruel.”

The cruelty of the internet is easy to find on her Instagram posts. Under a slideshow of photos of Hilliker and her friends at her bachelorette party, comments calling it “revolting,” “trashy” and “tacky” were mixed in with comments from followers supporting her.

“I love the block button,” she said.

Protecting her own mental health has meant ignoring much of what's posted about her, she said. She has publicly shared her own struggles with mental health, and said she hopes to be a role model for younger people experiencing online bullying.

"There's a lot of kids on social media now, and I teach kids, and it breaks my heart that they could maybe feel the way I felt," she said.

Living publicly can also mean that the world gets a view of family tragedies.

Popular [parenting influencer Emilie Kiser's toddler drowned](#) at home in Chandler in May. In court filings Kiser, who was not interviewed for this story, said the child's death had become a "media frenzy."

Deciding whether to show kids in online content is a tricky decision, influencers said.

Garcia, who posts his daughters on social media, said there is a "fine line" for what should and should not be shared.

"People love content with kids, which is a sensitive subject," he said.

Keogh said she recently decided to stop showing her young son's face on social media, but he does appear in her content, either from behind or with something covering his face. She said she's also scaled back on posting about her personal life.

"It's for his protection. We know there are creeps out there," she said. "When I was in TV news, I had to get three restraining orders in one year."

Maintaining credibility while earning a paycheck

Being honest with an audience while still being paid to promote a product can mean walking a fine line on deciding what to share, and what deals aren't worth it.

Anaya said she won't post a negative video but is selective when it comes to restaurants she will go to for content. For her, a restaurant cannot have a lower rating than a four on Google or a 3.8 on Yelp.

"I don't consider myself a food expert. I believe that every restaurant has a unique customer for them," she said. "I would never destroy a business based on the four or five items I try."

Anaya said it's very rare for her not to like something, but if it happens, she will ask to exchange it or give them a chance to fix it.

She did go to a restaurant intending to post about it and was supposed to be paid for the content, but soon after found out it was on a "dirty dining" report about health code violations.

"I tore up their check and said I'd keep the content, but we would revisit it in a year," she said.

Keogh agreed it is rare for her not to like something but won't post about it if it happens.

Last year, she said, she and her family were hosted by a hotel and had a "horrible experience."

"I told them I can't share this," she said. "It wouldn't be ethical for me to share. It's more important for me to have trust from my audience."

In the case of the hotel, it was a complimentary stay, not a paid sponsorship, but Keogh said she would not take payment from a business she did not have a good experience with that wouldn't lend itself to a positive post.

But Keogh said a recent trend with brands working with influencers does concern her. She has seen contacts recently asking for "user-generated content," meaning it won't be posted on her page, but part of the contract also requires the influencer to leave the company a five-star review.

Many times, a contract like that is signed before the influencer even uses the product, meaning they are asked to commit to a five-star review before they try it.

"To me, that's totally unethical," she said.

Kaplan, the marketing executive, said she helps clients outline what the expectations from both the company and the influencer will be, in terms of payment, products or services provided and what posting they can expect in exchange.

She said businesses will stay away from working with influencers who are known to bash on companies. She advises her clients to make sure they are communicating with influencers

they hire about their experiences and address any issues, but said if a review is real, factual and constructive, that can be part of soliciting influencer content.

A negative post from an influencer can have a lasting impact, she said.

“It can really affect a business,” she said. “It can bring a business down and that’s the power of influencers.”

Local influencers can mean big exposure for small businesses

Some local influencers, like Anaya, Keogh and Beasley, tailor most of their content to an Arizona-specific audience.

By nature, Anaya’s business of reviewing and highlighting restaurants creates a local focus, appealing to both Phoenix residents and visitors looking for places to try while they’re in the state.

She has also created travel guides with reviews and recommendations for local trips, like Jerome or Flagstaff.

Keogh built her brand focusing on hiking and outdoor activities in Arizona, but as her son has gotten older, he told her he didn’t like hiking anymore. Now, she focuses a lot of her work on recommending places to go for families with young kids, including family-friendly hotels, activities for kids and products parents might like.

She started a series of posts called “Fun Places to Hide from the Heat” to recommend activities for families to do with kids in the summer.

“I am so hyperlocal,” she said. “What I like sharing is what I like to do in Arizona.”

Most of Beasley’s content includes reviewing restaurants, bars, shops and services like spa treatments offered at local Arizona businesses.

She even filmed videos for her followers about apartment hunting and places she considered living in Phoenix, sharing pros and cons for people who might also be looking in the city.

She also created a series about local Black-owned businesses and events tailored to the Black community in Phoenix.

“I am a Black creator, it is so important to me to highlight Black businesses,” she said.

For other creators who focus more on national brands, the location matters less.

“If I can do my job from anywhere, why not do it here?” Hilliker said of her hometown of Scottsdale. Hilliker does feature local restaurants, hotels and bars in her content, but her audience is much less geographically focused.

For Beck, who also grew up in the Valley, she could probably get more brand deals if she lived in LA like her brother, but said for now she likes living in Arizona.

“It’s my little bubble,” she said. “I don’t feel like I have to dress a certain way or act a certain way.”

None of the influencers interviewed for this story moved to Arizona for his or her influencing career, but a law in California that extended financial protections for child actors to child influencers could bring changes to the industry.

California’s law, and others like it, has requirements concerning payment for children who are featured in content that generates money. Illinois, Minnesota and Utah have also enacted laws regarding payment to children featured in influencer content.

Does influencing have a life span?

An influencing career depends on staying relevant and capturing enough of an audience that brands are willing to fork over money in exchange for that exposure. Most expect that their relevancy does have a shelf life, but how long an influencing career can last is anyone's guess.

Few of the creators interviewed for this article completely relied on influencing for their income, with most mixing in other work to supplement it.

“While my son was little, this is what worked best for us,” Keogh said of influencing, but she was also recently hired as the host of Trail Mix’d, a half-hour hiking-focused show on Arizona PBS. She will host the show’s third season, which will include eight episodes.

Beck has her eyes set on leaving Arizona, aiming to move to Hawaii. Whether she will continue her social media career there is yet to be seen, she said.

“Brand deals have been slower,” she said of her recent work. “Social media was not my end-all, be-all.”

Hilliker said income from influencing has given her time to return to her real passion, dancing. She teaches dance and has dreams of opening her own studio someday.

She said her videos of teaching dance are usually the content that get the most positive response, which makes her proud.

“Call me a good dance teacher,” she said. “It’s all I care about.”

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