

● // The Audience First

INFLUENCER GUIDE FOR LEAN TEAMS:

How lean teams make confident
influencer decisions before budget moves



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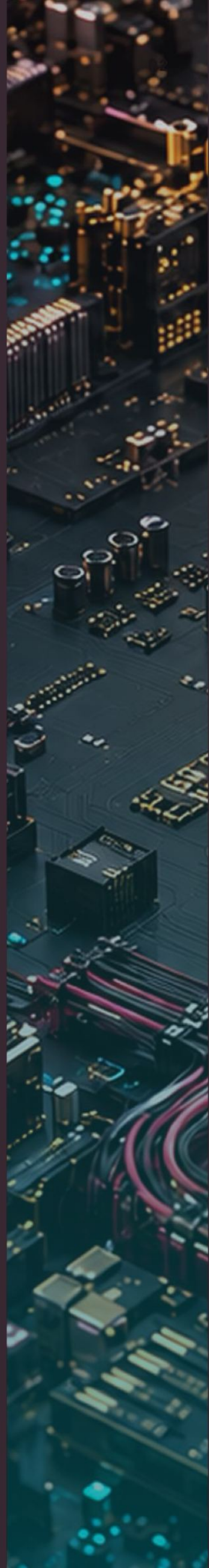
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EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT INFLUENCE.

ALMOST NO ONE FEELS EARLY.

If you've spent any time around influencer or content marketing lately, you've probably noticed how similar the conversations have started to sound. Creators are everywhere. The audience is harder to pin down. In 2026, news cycles reset daily and attention shifts even faster, which has a lot of marketers looking for something more dependable than guesswork.

Most teams agree influencer marketing works. Almost no one feels confident explaining why a specific program worked, or knowing ahead of time whether the next one will. That's the part people rarely say out loud.

Influencer marketing rarely fails in obvious ways anymore. It misses quietly, through programs that are good enough to keep running and vague enough to teach you nothing. The cost shows up in one place first. Timing.

Timing matters today, and it's what has changed the most. A trend can hit your dashboards only after it's already started to cool. Clear performance usually arrives after the moment has moved on. That's why influencer marketing has quietly become one of the fastest-moving parts of the go-to-market stack, and one of the hardest to see clearly when decisions stay flexible, subjective, and scattered.

That frustration is showing up everywhere right now, sitting just beneath day-to-day decision-making. You hear it inside comments. In follow-ups after panels. In the half-joking admissions that a meaningful call was made on instinct because there simply wasn't a better signal to go on.

At some point, someone inevitably asks, half-curious and half-resigned:

"HASN'T SOME TECH STARTUP FIXED THIS BY NOW?"

What they're really asking is something else. Why does influencer marketing still feel harder than it should, given how much data, tooling, and attention surrounds it? And why do so many smart teams still feel late?

● // Chapter 02

WHY INFLUENCING FEELS HARDER THAN IT SHOULD.

There's a specific kind of anxiety that comes from underperformance you can't explain.

A campaign lands in the middle of the range. Good enough to keep going. Vague enough to learn nothing from. Average performance is the hardest to diagnose.

PICTURE THIS:

A creator hits benchmarks. Engagement looks fine. Nothing flags red. Then the post disappears into the feed.

Two weeks later, someone asks what you'd change next time. You scroll. You squint. You say something about creative direction or audience fit, even though you're not sure that's true.

That's the anxiety teams are reacting to today. Not failure. Uncertainty.



Nothing's ever clearly broken, it just sort of half-performs, meaning nothing clearly worked. And when leadership or a client asks what to change next time, the answers typically stay abstract. "Creative." "Fit." "Timing." None of it feels satisfying, or like the answer they need in that moment.

The worst part is that influencer marketing is full of these moments because so many decisions around new campaigns, starting with discovery, happen without enough context. Creator selection. Timing. Audience fit. Brand safety. Scale. Each one feels reasonable on its own. Together, they create invisible risk.

For lean teams, there's no cushion. No extra headcount to absorb misses. No spare cycles to quietly rerun experiments.

EVERY DECISION CARRIES WEIGHT.

● // Chapter 03

FROM CREATORS TO COMMUNITIES: THE SHIFT UNDERWAY.

What's interesting right now is that the most energized conversations happening aren't about creators. They're about audiences. More specifically, they're about micro-communities—small, tightly connected groups where language, norms, and influence form early.

One team we worked with was tracking a handful of creators in wellness. On paper, they looked interchangeable. Similar reach. Similar engagement.

What wasn't obvious from dashboards was that one creator kept showing up in the same private Discord threads and comment chains. People quoted her language. They followed her recommendations before she posted links. The others were visible, sure. She was influential, everywhere she went online, her comments and posts were followed, reshared, and highly engaged with.

That difference only showed up when the team stopped looking at creators in isolation, and started listening intelligently to the culture behind the conversations around them. This is where micro-community intelligence becomes essential, and increasingly so every day, not as a buzzword, but as an operating advantage.

Inside these smaller communities, culture lives in conversation. Every word chosen, every phrase repeated, every shift in tone carries information for our AI-driven platform at Lickly.



Lickly can sense

**INFLUENCE
FORMING
BEFORE IT
BECOMES
OBVIOUS.**

WHY MOST TEAMS STILL FEEL LATE.

Most influencer tools are built to summarize what already happened. Creators. Posts. Clicks. Shares. Useful for reporting. Far less useful for deciding what to do next.

That gap matters more now than it used to because creator marketing isn't a side channel anymore. For most teams, it's an always-on, operating machine built to keep the brand present where buyers are forming opinions and making choices.

The expectations have shifted with it too. Teams have to move faster, stay culturally current within daily news cycles, all while showing measurable impact with fewer cycles and less room for drift.

Yet most tools still assume the work can be managed through retrospectives. The problem isn't that teams lack data. It's that the information they need shows up after the decision has already been made. By the time a trend gets named, the advantage is gone. By the time a creator "works," the moment has shifted. Creator and influencer marketing is accelerating faster than the infrastructure most teams use to make decisions.

Net-net, most reporting answers the wrong questions. It's useful for recapping what happened, but not for shaping what comes next. Teams need insight that supports real decisions, fine-tuning creative, reallocating budget, cutting what isn't performing, and adjusting imagery and channels before momentum fades. Without that, programs stay reactive, even when teams are working nonstop.

That's what happens when tools are built to recap instead of guide. Teams spend more time defending results than improving decisions. The problem isn't effort. It's missing context at the moment it could change what happens next.

That's what "late" looks like. You don't miss by a mile. You miss by a week. By the time you optimize, the moment has already moved on.

The fix is simple in principle and hard in practice. Get closer to the audience before you commit budget. See what's building, where it's building, and why it's moving. Then choose the story, the creator, and the context with intention.

That's how the top enterprise brands and agencies have been using RAD Intel's audience insights and platform. Now we're bringing the same decision advantage to the mid-market with Lickly, our SaaS platform for influencer and content marketing.

2026 REALITY CHECK:

◆ U.S. creator ad spend hit **\$37B in 2025** and is projected to reach **\$44B in 2026**, nearly 4x faster growth than the total media industry

◆ **Measurement is the #1 barrier** to creator marketing growth for the second year, ahead of content velocity, AI adoption and brand fit

◆ Global influencer marketing platform market grew from **\$25.44B → \$34.25B** in a single year, with the broader industry **projected to hit \$40.51B in 2026**

◆ U.S. influencer **spend hit \$10.52B in 2025**, a year ahead of forecast, and is projected to **reach \$12.17B in 2026**

WHAT PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY EXCITED ABOUT.

When people light up talking about the future of influencer marketing, it's rarely because of bigger creator databases or more sophisticated dashboards. Those things matter, absolutely, but they aren't what changes how the work feels.

What teams are genuinely excited about is clarity before commitment. Being able to see where conversations are forming. Understanding which communities are gaining momentum. Knowing who influences whom before it becomes obvious at scale.

That kind of access and early visibility shifts the entire posture of the work. Creator selection stops feeling like a gamble and starts feeling reasoned. Timing feels intentional instead of rushed. When something performs well, it makes sense, not because it got lucky, but because it was aligned with how people were already engaging.

Teams also feel more confident. When you understand what's resonating, you can move deliberately, adjust thoughtfully, and stay active inside the communities that matter most.

This is where influencer marketing starts to feel less like a series of bets and more like an operating system.

Prepared teams plan better, commit with confidence, and explain decisions while the work is still unfolding.

That feeling of being early doesn't come from prediction. It comes from proximity to audience behavior as it's forming.

What teams are leaning into in 2026:

As influencer and creator marketing mature, teams are prioritizing insight that supports earlier, more confident decisions.

◆ Industry research shows that a majority of marketers now **view timing, cultural relevance, and audience understanding as more critical than creator scale alone.**

◆ **Reports from eMarketer and Deloitte** indicate growing demand for tools that surface community-level engagement patterns, not just post-campaign performance metrics.

◆ As creator spend continues to rise in 2026, marketing leaders increasingly cite **decision confidence and preparedness as key drivers of program success**, not volume or reach.

What excites the teams we're talking to at Lickly, isn't access to more data. It's having the ability to know what to do with it while it still matters. That's exactly where our platform helps brands move faster, make better calls, and drive stronger outcomes, including up to 3.5X ROI reported on campaigns.

So decision-making doesn't feel easier in influencer. It feels heavier. More options, less conviction, and timing that keeps slipping. That's the gap. Not information. Judgment.

Senior teams look for context that helps them answer a few critical questions early.

- ◆ What conversations are forming right now
- ◆ Which themes are gaining traction
- ◆ Where engagement is strengthening or softening
- ◆ Who actually shapes behavior inside the communities that matter

When teams can answer those questions, the work becomes steadier. They don't need to be perfect. They need to be explainable. One agency lead put it simply, "I don't need to be right every time. I need to know why we're making the call while there's still time to adjust it."

That mindset changes how programs operate. And that's exactly what we built Lickly to do. Instead of hoping performance confirms a good decision, teams using Lickly make decisions they can stand behind before results arrive. Risk narrows because choices are grounded in observable audience behavior, not instinct alone.

Explainable programs work differently. Teams know what audience they were prioritizing. They know what engagement patterns informed the call. They know what they expected to see, and what would cause them to change course.

Explainable programs are easier to improve because teams know what audience they prioritized, what informed the decision, and what would cause them to change course.



How experienced teams reduce surprises in 2026:

- ◆ Industry research shows that **measurement clarity and explainability** remain among the top challenges cited by brand and agency leaders as programs scale
- ◆ Creator and influencer budgets are increasingly committed earlier in planning cycles, **raising the cost of late or unclear decisions**
- ◆ Teams that align creator selection and timing to audience engagement patterns **report faster iteration and stronger performance** than those relying solely on post-campaign reporting

FROM THE FIELD

Across programs run on the Lickly platform, teams consistently reduce internal debate and rework once decisions are grounded in audience context. Instead of revisiting why a creator was chosen after launch, teams enter campaigns with shared clarity on what they expect to see, and what would prompt a change.

That's the difference experienced teams are optimizing for.

OPERATING WITHOUT GUESSWORK.

Once teams stop guessing, the work changes.

Decisions get easier to make because they're grounded in something current and observable. When a call has to be made, there's context behind it. The first shift is structural. Teams no longer start with creators. They start with the audience. The DNA driving creator performance.

With Lickly, they define who they're trying to influence, then build creator lists based on overlap with that audience and influence inside the communities that matter. That audience definition lives inside the workflow. It isn't a slide deck, a one-off brief, or a separate tool someone has to maintain. It becomes the starting point for everything that follows.

From there, teams can track how conversations are forming, which themes are gaining traction, and where engagement is strengthening or softening. As patterns emerge, teams can make adjustments while work is live, with a clearer rationale for what changes and why. Scale becomes more deliberate. Teams expand spend or content when engagement supports it. They pause or shift when it doesn't. Momentum no longer feels like a surprise. It becomes something teams can recognize and respond to with intent.

Guesswork doesn't disappear overnight. It shrinks cycle by cycle. At first, teams stop being surprised by failures. When something underperforms, the inputs are clear enough to diagnose what happened. Then teams stop being surprised by wins. Strong performance becomes easier to explain because it traces back to audience behavior, timing, and message alignment.

Over time, results feel more repeatable. This is the shift that matters most for lean teams. When decisions are grounded in shared audience context, the work simplifies. Fewer uncomfortable explanations. Fewer post-campaign debates that don't lead to better calls next time.





Reviews become calmer because expectations were clearer going in. Teams can speak plainly about what they saw, what they expected, what happened, and what they'll do next.

A self-serve platform reinforces that rhythm. Because audience definition, conversation, context, and creator selection live in one place, teams move faster without losing alignment. Creative, strategy, and execution stay connected because they're anchored to the same view of the audience.

That's how influencer and content marketing becomes easier to run at scale. Not because every campaign hits, but because the work becomes easier to learn from and easier to repeat.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN TEAMS REMOVE GUESSWORK:



Teams using audience-first workflows reduce rework because creator lists and creative direction are grounded in the same audience definition



When audience context stays close to execution, teams make faster adjustments with less internal debate



As creator budgets grow in 2026, more teams are prioritizing systems that support repeatable decision, not just end-of-campaign reporting

FROM THE FIELD

Across programs run in Lickly, teams have consistently tightened cycles.

- 01 Creator lists finalize faster, often in minutes, with rationale for each and story angles to join live conversations happening right now, not interrupt them with yesterday's relevancy
- 02 Creative direction becomes more specific because teams can use Natural Language search and prompting directly in the Lickly dashboard to pull audience language and themes into briefs
- 03 Briefs get built faster and land cleaner because the exact phrases audiences are using translate into sharper hooks, angles, and creator guidance with fewer rewrites, for example a team pulled 3 repeated community phrases into the brief and aligned creators in 1 pass
- 04 Weekly reviews become decision-ready because audience segments, creator lists, and results live in one place, making it easier to answer what changed and what we do next, for example a status workflow that used to take 2 hours across tabs becomes a 15-minute readout with clear next actions
- 05 Scaled decisions feel more deliberate because the team is working from shared audience context, so budgets shift based on what's resonating now, not what looked good last week

● // Chapter 07

HOW LEAN TEAMS NAVIGATE INSIDE A SYSTEM.

Lean teams need an environment that supports judgment. It's powerful to show clients insight that's current this week and continues to evolve as future events approach, giving them clarity they can act on now and plan around next. That's the difference between running influencer and content as a series of one-off pushes versus running it as a system.

When teams operate inside a system, audience context stays close to the work. It isn't trapped in slides, scattered across tabs, or lost in a weekly reporting cycle. In Lickly, that context lives inside the workflow itself, alongside creator discovery, planning, and execution. That proximity changes the rhythm.

Instead of rebuilding understanding for every new campaign, teams carry it forward. Audience segments evolve. Language shifts are visible. Engagement patterns strengthen or soften in ways teams can see and respond to.

Momentum becomes easier to recognize early because the inputs stay consistent. Decisions become easier to explain while they're still unfolding because everyone is working from the same audience view.

This is where influencer and content marketing start to feel like an operating system, not a series of disconnected bets.

That planning advantage matters because most teams aren't judged on a single campaign. They're judged on consistency.

Lickly's end-to-end platform for influencer and content is what allows lean teams to stay active, relevant, and credible without burning cycles or people - time and time again.

LICKLY SUPPORTS LEAN TEAMS IN THREE WAYS:

◆ Reduces rework.

When audience definition lives in Lickly and stays connected to creator lists and briefs, teams spend less time debating fundamentals. Creator lists finalize faster. Creative direction sharpens earlier. Reviews get cleaner because the reasoning behind each call is already clear

◆ Reduces internal friction.

Lickly is self-serve, strategy, creative, and execution can move in parallel. Agencies don't have to wait for updated decks. In-house teams don't have to translate context across tools. New contributors can step in without resetting the process

◆ Improves planning

Teams can monitor how attention builds toward known moments and prepare accordingly. Content, creators, and messaging are ready earlier, then refined as audience engagement evolves



EXAMPLES ACROSS TEAMS USING LICKLY

Consumer brand — in-house team:

You're planning around a seasonal buying moment. In Lickly, you can see which product attributes and objections are showing up in community conversations this week. You update briefs using the exact language audiences are already repeating and shortlist creators with real overlap in those communities. As the moment approaches, you scale the creators driving the right engagement, not just reach.

Consumer brand — agency team:

supporting multiple brands at once. Lickly lets you monitor audience behavior across categories without rebuilding context each time. Creator lists finalize faster, briefs are more specific, and weekly updates focus on what to do next instead of explaining what already happened.

Professional services — in-house team:

You're growing awareness in a local market where trust drives demand. Lickly helps you see which questions and themes are surfacing in community discussions. You shape content to address those topics directly, select voices that already carry credibility locally, and track whether engagement strengthens as awareness builds.

Professional services — Agency team:

You're advising clients across regions. With Lickly, you can show how engagement patterns differ by market and where messaging needs to be adjusted. Client conversations shift from generic recommendations to clear, localized direction grounded in audience behavior.

B2B — in-house team:

You have a major industry moment on the calendar. In Lickly, you can see which themes are gaining traction inside buyer communities weeks in advance. Messaging evolves alongside audience interest, creators and partners are chosen for relevance, and by the time the moment arrives, the approach is already informed.

B2B — agency team:

You're guiding clients through complex buying cycles. Lickly gives you a shared view of how conversations are forming across audiences. Instead of guessing which angles will land, you can recommend direction backed by live engagement patterns and adjust as interest shifts.

**MAKE CLEARER
DECISIONS, AND PLAN
AHEAD, TOGETHER.**

// Chapter 08

LESS DASHBOARDS, MORE DECISIONS.

By the time teams reach this point, they've already felt the shift. Audience context is close. Decisions get made faster. Planning gets calmer. Now the question becomes simple. What does the platform need to do day to day to keep teams moving with confidence.

Dashboards summarize. Decisions require context. Most teams already have reporting. They can see posts, clicks, engagement, and spend. What's missing is the layer that connects those numbers to clear next moves while the work is live.

That's where Lickly's AI-driven platform differentiates. It starts with audience, not creators. It surfaces what's resonating inside the communities that matter. It connects that to creator discovery, creative direction, and timing so teams can make calls with a clear rationale, not a rushed guess.

WHAT CHANGES IN WEEKLY REVIEWS WITH LICKLY:



Fewer surprises because audience definition stays consistent across planning and execution



Faster decisions because creator lists, creative direction, and timing sit on top of shared audience context



Clearer next steps because teams can move from engagement patterns to action without rebuilding the story in a deck



Teams don't need to know everything. They need to know three things early.

- ◆ Which audience segment is actually responding
- ◆ What themes and language are landing right now
- ◆ What to do next

When that context is available inside the platform, reviews change. Agency reviews stop being slide reads. They become decision sessions. In-house reviews stop being defensive. They become directional.

Teams can answer the questions leadership and clients care about in plain language.

- ◆ What did we see
- ◆ What did it mean
- ◆ What are we doing next

Conversations calm down because the inputs are shared. Debates shrink because the work is explainable. Results make sense because decisions are connected to audience reality, not just post-campaign metrics.

● // Chapter 09

WHAT WE'RE SEEING INSIDE LIVE PROGRAMS.

Across live programs, a few patterns show up consistently when teams use Lickly's audience-first workflow. These are not theoretical improvements. They're practical changes in how decisions get made.

01

Observation 1:

Fixing the audience before touching the creator list saves weeks. In one program, a team started by defining audience segments inside the platform before generating a creator list. As they looked closer, they removed a segment that fit the demographic profile but showed very different buying behavior than the brand expected.

That single change reshaped everything that followed. The creator list came together faster. Fewer creators were debated. Less time was spent justifying exclusions. The team didn't feel constrained - at all. They felt clear, and dare we say excited about the campaigns they were running again.

02

Observation 2:

Timing improves when audience behavior and posting patterns align. Another team assumed they knew the right launch window based on past campaigns. Engagement usually follows a familiar curve. This time, audience behavior showed something different. A key segment shopped earlier in the week, while most shortlisted creators posted later, after interest had already peaked.

The team adjusted posting schedules and shifted creator emphasis to match when the audience was actually in-market. The result was stronger. Not because more content went out, but because it landed when people were ready to act.

03

Observation 3:

Audience-led lists surface the right micro-creators and reduce wasted spending. When lists start with audience overlap instead of follower size, smaller creators with outsized influence rise quickly. These creators didn't dominate feeds. They shaped conversations inside specific communities. Their recommendations traveled further within the audience that mattered. Spend dropped. Efficiency improved. Outcomes arrived faster because the work traveled through trust, not reach.

None of these decisions felt risky when they were made. They felt grounded. That's what teams notice first. Less debate. Fewer course corrections. Programs that make sense before results arrive, not just after.

THREE OUTCOMES TEAMS REPORT FIRST:



Creator lists finalize faster because inclusion is based on audience overlap not taste



Creative gets sharper because briefs pull directly from audience language and themes



Scale feels deliberate because spend follows engagement patterns, not post-campaign explanations

● // Chapter 10

INTRODUCING LICKLY. THIS HAS BEEN HAPPENING QUIETLY.

For years, this way of operating existed almost exclusively inside enterprise environments.

RAD Intel's AI-driven platform was trained, tested, and proven running real-time influencer and content programs for Fortune 1000 brands, global agencies, and seven-figure recurring engagements.

What changed wasn't the approach. It was access.

Teams outside enterprise have the same expectations now. They're expected to be fast, culturally current, and accountable for outcomes, without the same headcount and tooling. That shift is why this style of operating has been spreading. Quietly at first. Then quickly.

WHY ACCESS MATTERS NOW:



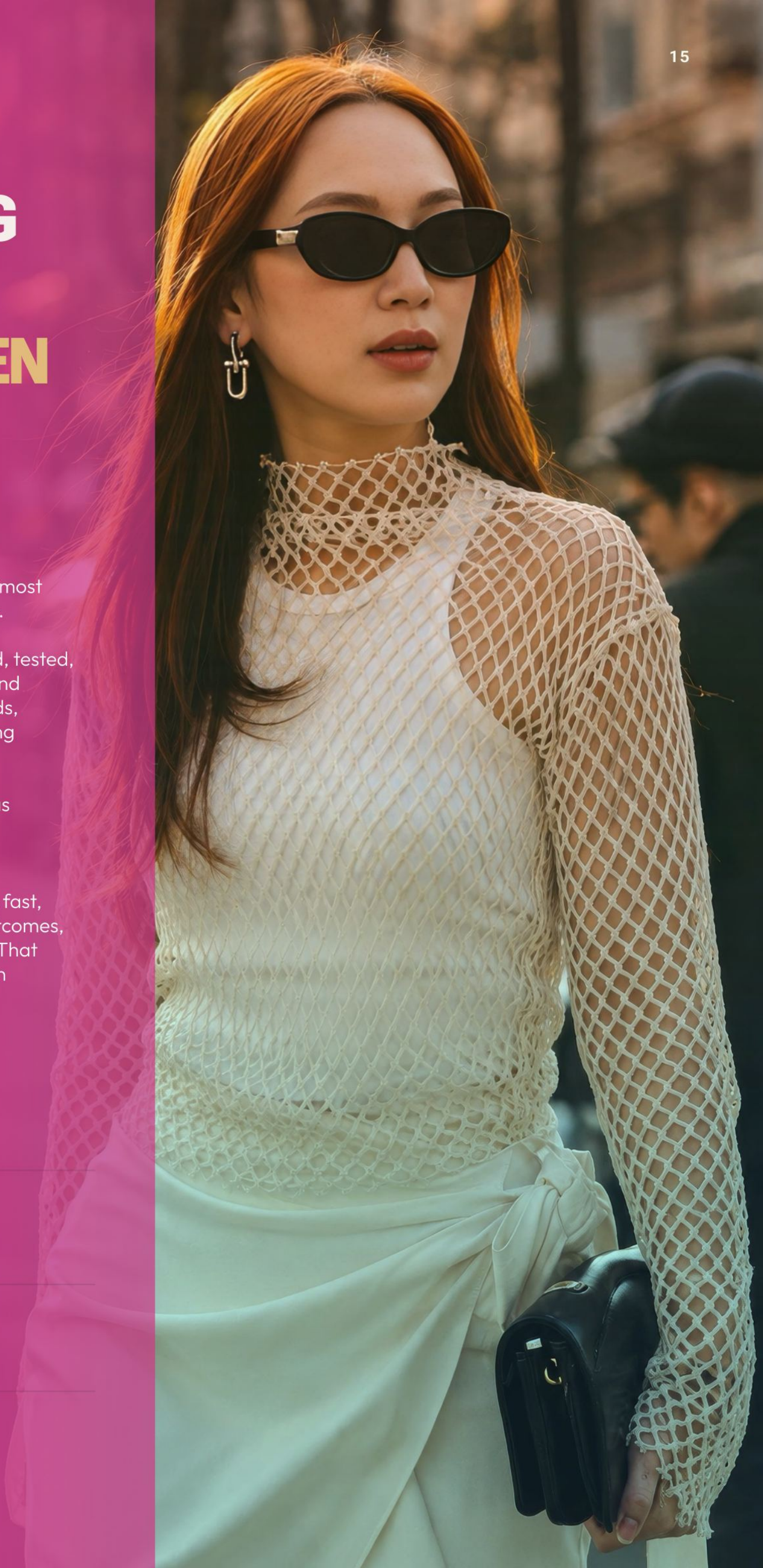
Creator and content programs have moved from experimental to always on



Cultural cycles move faster than traditional reporting can support



Teams with less headcount still get graded on the same outcomes



WHERE LICKLY FITS IN FOR YOU AND YOUR BRAND / CLIENTS

Lickly brings this enterprise-proven intelligence to mid-market brands and boutique agencies in a self-serve SaaS platform. It's audience-first. Real-time. Built for lean teams who can't afford blind spots.

Inside Lickly, teams can define audience segments, map micro-communities, see what's resonating, and build creator lists based on overlap with the audience that matters. They can use Natural Language search and prompting directly in the dashboard to tighten creative direction and move from insight to action without switching tools.

Audience fit is only part of the equation. Teams also need confidence that creators align with brand values and won't introduce unnecessary risk. Lickly helps surface those considerations before campaigns launch, reducing surprises and protecting brand equity.



See Audience-First Influencer Marketing In Action.

Lickly helps lean teams discover creators, understand audiences, reduce risk, and make better campaign decisions before budget movements with less rework and fewer surprises

Request a demo to see how it works

[REQUEST A LICKLY DEMO TODAY](#)

DICTIONARY

Angles

The specific story frames or approaches used to communicate a message in a way an audience is already primed to engage with.

Hooks

The opening language or framing that earns attention quickly and pulls audiences into the message.

Audience-first

Starting with who you need to influence, then choosing creators, timing, and angles based on what's resonating in those communities.

Audience overlap

How closely a creator's engaged audience matches the segment you're targeting, beyond follower count.

Momentum before spend

Understanding how engagement is building early enough to shape decisions before budget is committed.

Community conversation

The public, organic dialogue happening across platforms that shows what people care about, how they talk about it, and what's gaining traction.

Planning cycle

The period where budgets, calendars, and priorities are set, often before performance data is available for the next moment.

Creator list

A curated set of creators selected based on audience relevance, influence inside communities, and fit for the moment, not just reach.

Scale

Increasing spend, creator volume, or content output based on audience response and engagement patterns.

Decision-ready context

Audience understanding that makes performance data actionable, not just reportable.

Explainable decisions

Being able to clearly state why a creator, message, or moment was chosen and what would prompt a change.

Governance

Clear ownership and guidelines for decision-making, including selection criteria, approvals, escalation paths, and what triggers scale, pause, or change.

Momentum

When attention and engagement begin building around a theme, topic, or angle, indicating where to lean in.

Buyer communities

Groups where professionals share opinions, evaluate options, and shape purchasing decisions through ongoing conversation.

Operating confidence

The ability to make and defend decisions before and after execution, with fewer surprises and less debate.

Creative direction

The angles, hooks, and language choices that shape what gets made and why it should land.

Repeatability

The ability to produce consistent results because decisions build on shared audience context.

Dashboard

A reporting view that summarizes performance metrics, useful for tracking outcomes but incomplete without context.

Spreadsheet theater

Reporting that looks polished but doesn't clarify what to do next.

Timing

When content goes live relative to audience behavior and attention cycles, including when people are most receptive to act.

Always-on

A continuous program cadence where creator and content work runs year-round, not as isolated campaigns.

In-market

A state where an audience segment is actively considering, researching, or ready to buy, sign up, or take action.

Micro-community

Small, tightly connected groups where influence forms early and language spreads quickly.

Course correction

A mid-flight change to creators, angles, timing, or audience focus based on what's showing up in engagement patterns.

Prompting

Using guided inputs inside the platform to generate structured outputs like audience summaries, creator list rationale, and creative direction.

Creator selection

The process of choosing creators based on audience overlap, community influence, and what's resonating right now.

Self-serve

A workflow where teams can access insights, build lists, and make decisions directly in the platform without relying on manual requests or extra headcount.

Decision support

Insight that helps teams choose what to do next while work is live, not just summarize what already happened.

Trust

The credibility that forms inside communities over time, often driving behavior more than reach or impressions.

Natural Language search

Searching the platform using plain-English questions to surface themes, language, and audience insights quickly.

Iteration cycle

The repeatable loop of listening, deciding, launching, learning, and refining without starting from scratch.

Audience context

The surrounding insight that explains what's happening in a community, why it matters, and what it suggests you should do next.

Audience segment

A defined group you're trying to reach, shaped by shared behaviors, interests, and language, not just demographics.

