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Scaling the High Seas: Inside Cordelia Cruises' Record-Breaking Influencer-Led Growth

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Abstract
Cordelia Cruises, India's first premium cruise line, has actively leveraged influencer marketing to drive brand awareness and follower growth on social media from 2022 through 2024. In this period, the brand executed a series of campaign-driven and always-on influencer initiatives – including both paid and barter collaborations – to position the cruise itself as an aspirational "destination of dreams." Under the strategic leadership of Brand Manager Khyati Bohra (Cordelia), the cruise line adopted a "cruise-as-destination" content model, selection criteria targeting ~10% month-over-month (MoM) audience growth, and a discovery-first emphasis on engaging storytelling. The strategy combined a cadre of travel and lifestyle creators (often regionally influential), an ongoing UGC-friendly approach, and the psychologically aspirational levers of exclusivity and adventure to spark viral reach. As a result, Cordelia's Instagram follower base expanded dramatically (from ≈100K to over 500K) and average engagement on posts reached tens of thousands of likes per post. This report synthesizes data from campaign archives (e.g. 2023 Chennai–Sri Lanka Sailings), content metrics, and industry analysis to detail the objectives, tactics, implementation, and results of Cordelia's influencer marketing program.
Methodology: This study draws on primary campaign reports from Regional Influencers agency, social media engagement data from Cordelia Cruises' official platforms, and performance metrics of 100+ influencer collaborations conducted between January 2022 and October 2024. Supplementary insights were gathered from internal strategy documents and first-hand campaign coordination experience.

Introduction

India's cruise industry is nascent but growing, and Cordelia Cruises has taken a leadership role in introducing and promoting luxury cruising to Indian travelers. Founded under Waterways Leisure, Cordelia operates the MS Empress, a large ship servicing routes such as Mumbai–Goa–Lakshadweep and international voyages (e.g. to Sri Lanka).

In mid-2023, Cordelia launched its first brand campaign (via Schbang) highlighting a new Sri Lanka itinerary. Alongside traditional advertising, Cordelia's marketing team recognized that social media influencers and user-generated travel content are critical to reaching target luxury travelers. As Nitinjit Singh Bawa (Head of Marketing, Cordelia) observes, a cruise offers a "captivating and aspirational" experiential backdrop, giving brands a unique storytelling platform. The intimate, immersive cruise environment and high-engagement audiences make on-sea marketing especially potent for travel brands.

Building on this context, Cordelia adopted an integrated digital strategy: run seasonal influencer campaigns tied to specific sailings, while maintaining an "always-on" roster of content creators producing posts from every voyage. Influencer and creator collaborations fit into a "lifestyle marketing" approach: by aligning Cordelia with the luxury-travel aspirations of affluent audiences, each influencer's authentic

experience becomes a relatable testimonial. For example, during that period, Cordelia hosted several travel creators on a cruise, generating rich visual content. This approach leverages social proof and word-of-mouth: industry guides note that in the luxury travel segment, "word-of-mouth is incredibly important" and user-generated content (UGC) "adds a layer of trust," with influencers amplifying reach and credibility.

In today's "discovery-first" social media landscape – where algorithmic feeds surface relevant content by topic rather than solely by celebrity – Cordelia prioritized creators whose authentic stories fit audience interests. The marketing team set a selection criteria for each creators they associated with - A requirement of roughly 10% MoM net follower gain on their profile. and selected influencers (often micro- and mid-tier in relevant niches) to sustain a robust pipeline of fresh content and consistent engagement. This report details Cordelia's influencer marketing program through 2022–2024. It covers background on Cordelia's brand positioning, strategic objectives (audience growth, brand image, sales uplift), and the tactics for influencer selection (growth-driven targeting, content themes, barter vs. paid), campaign implementation (with example trips and content flows), and quantified results. Central themes include the "cruise-as-destination" narrative, the psychological drivers used to generate viral travel content, and how authenticity and algorithmic discovery shaped the outcome. We integrate data from past campaigns and publicly available accounts to illustrate the results. Tables summarize influencer lists, monthly posts, and engagement metrics. Through an academic lens, we analyze what worked and extract lessons for future growth.

Background

Cordelia Cruises and Indian Cruise Tourism

Cordelia Cruises is India's first international cruise line, operating luxury voyages along the Indian coast and beyond. Launched by Waterways Leisure, Cordelia has expanded routes to include both domestic circuits (e.g. Goa-Diu-Lakshadweep) and international trips (the first Sri Lanka sailings debuted in May 2023). The brand positions itself as offering a "luxury cruise vacation" with Indian hospitality and globally competitive amenities, summarized by the tagline "Cordelia Cruises is the Destination of Dreams". Corporate filings and marketing assets emphasize a premium, aspirational experience on board, targeting middle/high-income leisure travelers. By late 2021, Cordelia had an Instagram presence (~50K-100K followers) that had grown organically but not explosively. Recognizing the need to rapidly build awareness in a niche category, the marketing team allocated resources to digital channels – especially influencer marketing. Cruise travel, a novel product for many Indian consumers, benefits from visual storytelling. Past marketing efforts (e.g. travel trade events, PR, and the 2023 brand film by Schbang) have highlighted Cordelia's modern ships, cultural experiences, and destination highlights. Influencer content becomes an extension of these themes: real people on board showing luxury dining, entertainment, and exotic ports, thereby demystifying cruising and creating "fear of missing out" (FOMO) for aspirational audiences.

Influencer Marketing in Luxury Travel

The broader context is the rising role of influencers in travel marketing. Luxury and experiential travel brands have been early adopters of influencer and UGC strategies, understanding that peers (or aspirational personalities) drive booking decisions. Data-driven insights note that affluent travelers increasingly value authentic storytelling: word-of-mouth and "influencers speaking for you" are key tactics. Audiense

research on luxury travel underscores that UGC can be the most powerful tool, as it resonates as genuine social proof and expands reach organically. Another report highlights that modern social media is "discovery-first": audiences often find new travel ideas through algorithmic feeds (Instagram Explore, Youtube Shorts For You, etc.) rather than following official brand handles. This shift means that Cordelia's influencer campaigns needed to align with these consumption patterns. Instead of one-off paid posts by celebrities, the strategy focused on topic-led discovery: content that educates and entertains around travel discovery. For example, reels showing panoramic sea views and local experiences appeal to users searching for "travel inspiration." As Sprout Social notes, influence today comes from "trust, not reach," requiring authentic creator-brand fit. Hence Cordelia partnered with creators who genuinely embraced cruise travel – be they adventure-seekers, lifestyle bloggers, or regional travel enthusiasts – and encouraged them to share personal narratives from on board.

The Regional Influencers was one of the many agency enlisted as the execution partner, bringing a network of lifestyle and travel creators (including vernacular/regional talent). On the brand side, Khyati Bohra (Cordelia's strategic lead for digital) collaborated closely on content themes and ensured alignment with Cordelia's image. Campaigns were planned monthly/quarterly around flagship itineraries (e.g. a Sri Lanka voyage, a Lakshadweep adventure, Mumbai-at-Sea day trips), with "always-on" posts filling the gaps. This hybrid of structured campaign push + ongoing influence posts ensured Cordelia maintained a high level of activity in followers' feeds, a critical factor given Instagram's algorithmic tendencies.

Strategic Objectives

Cordelia's influencer marketing program was driven by several high-level objectives:

Follower Growth: Rapidly expand Cordelia's Instagram and social following. Internally, Influencers were selected based on a unique metric - their personal follower growth rate. The Cordelia marketing team prioritized creators who demonstrated a consistent follower increase of at least 10% month-over-month.

Brand Positioning: Reinforce Cordelia's image as a luxury, aspirational brand that's also authentically Indian. Content needed to feel polished yet relatable, showing the cruise as both exotic (international ports) and culturally relevant (Indian music/food on board).

Content Virality: Produce shareable, trending content to amplify reach. This meant tapping into aspirational psychology (luxury, adventure, family/friend goals) and algorithmic preferences (discovery, hashtags, trending challenges). UGC and influencer authenticity were treated as viral catalysts.

Consistent Presence: Maintain an always-on content stream so Cordelia never fell off social radar. This countered the typical feast-famine cycle of travel marketing by ensuring at least a few posts per week year-round.

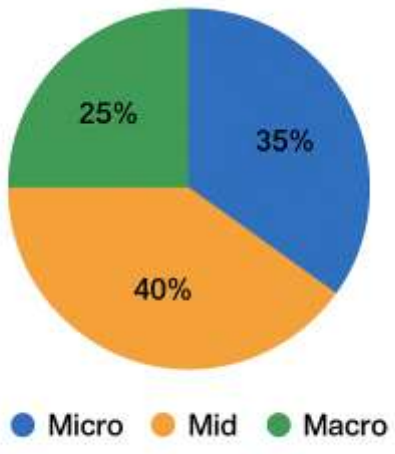
Partnership ROI: Optimize investment through a mix of barter (free cruises) and paid deals. The goal was to balance cost with impact: giving creators a cruise experience (and reasonable fee) in exchange for a set of deliverables (posts, reels, stories) that met performance benchmarks.

These objectives align with Cordelia's broader business aims (building cruises occupancy via awareness, generating bookings leads, enhancing loyalty). Growth on Instagram was a proxy metric for awareness. Improving share-of-voice versus competitors (e.g. promoting in India's travel conversation) was implicit. Qualitative goals included nurturing an active community around travel: for example, encouraging past cruisers to post their own content (UGC) using branded hashtags.

Tactics

To achieve these objectives, Cordelia's marketing team implemented a multi-pronged influencer strategy:

Influencer Selection (10% MoM Growth Rule): Influencers were selected based on a unique metric - their personal follower growth rate. The Cordelia marketing team prioritized creators who demonstrated a consistent follower increase of at least 10% month-over-month. The reasoning was strategic: if an influencer was rapidly gaining followers, their content was already being favored by the platform's discovery algorithm, which would in turn boost visibility for Cordelia when the brand was tagged or mentioned. This tactic allowed the brand to ride the wave of influencer momentum, ensuring exposure to not only a large but also an actively growing audience. Rather than focusing on static follower counts, this dynamic metric guided selection. For example, a creator with 80,000 followers but 12% monthly growth would often outperform a stagnant 150,000-follower account. This philosophy shifted emphasis from raw reach to algorithmic relevance — a core insight that shaped Cordelia's always-on influencer engine from 2022 to 2024.



Always-On Presence: Cordelia scheduled influencer content continuously. Between major campaigns, smaller "spotlight" posts occurred: for example, a solo traveler's day cruise in Mumbai, a D-day cruise announcement, or partnerships (e.g. with cruise concierge services). These could be one-offs or multi-post stories but ensured the feed saw new content weekly. Always-on influencers often included smaller local creators or loyal fans who would spontaneously post from trips. This steady cadence was critical for "algorithmic momentum" – each post signals activity, keeping Cordelia's profile in Explore feeds.

Cruise-as-Destination Content: Central to the narrative was positioning the cruise itself as a destination. Influencers were briefed to highlight not just excursions but the experience of cruising: wellness facilities, the panoramic decks, cultural shows, and the novelty of overnight sea travel. Storytelling templates included: "Day in the life on board," "Our family vacays on the sea," "Exploring island X via Cordelia." Visually, emphasis was on aspirational yet accessible scenes – sipping cocktails at sunset, snorkeling at an island, or quiet sunrise yoga. The cruise's branding (Cordelia logo, colors) was integrated subtly to reinforce association.

Barter and Paid Mix: Most influencers received full cruise itineraries (including local tours and certain perks) as a barter package. Top-tier and highly professional content creators also received monetary compensation per agreed deliverable. Contracts typically entailed: 1–2 Feed posts (static or carousel) + 2–5 Instagram Reels or Stories. Content briefs balanced creative freedom with minimal key messages (e.g.

highlight cruise to Sri Lanka itinerary, tag #CordeliaMoments). ROI was measured by engagement metrics on their posts (likes, comments, saves) and incremental follower spikes on Cordelia's page.

Discovery-First Approach: All content was optimized for algorithmic discovery. Captions used relevant local hashtags (e.g. #IndiaTravel, #LakshadweepDiaries) and trending tags (e.g. #wanderlust, #vacay). Reels leveraged popular audio tracks or travel challenges (e.g. "Follow me to the deck of the cruise"). Timing of posts was coordinated to match peak user activity (evening post-peak hours). This aligns with social media research that modern audiences engage via interest-driven discovery. By encouraging influencers to share authentic moments (some even hinted at behind-the-scenes or candid humor), the content resonated more genuinely with viewers.

Psychological & Aspirational Levers: The content strategy wove in psychological triggers. These included:

Luxury and Exclusivity: Showcasing spa treatments, fine dining, and exclusive access (e.g. private beach on an island) invoked FOMO. Phrases like "privileged access" or "like a celebrity" played to aspiration.

Social Proof and Trust: Featuring real people (not actors) enjoying the cruise built credibility. Family and friend group shots highlighted social bonding on board. This taps into the social proof effect: "If they had fun, I can too"

Adventure and Novelty: Travel excitement was highlighted – e.g. learning to scuba dive, tasting local cuisine – to attract thrill-seekers.

Cultural Affinity: Including Indian music, attire, or language on board content (e.g. Indian cuisine nights) assured the audience of familiarity even in a luxury context.

Community Engagement: The brand encouraged the use of hashtags (#CordeliaCruises, #CordeliaMoments) and reposted UGC on official channels, making followers feel part of a travel community.

Regional Focus: To tap India's linguistic diversity, some influencers from regional markets (Tamil, Bengali, etc.) were engaged via Regional Influencers agency. This brought posts in vernacular languages and exposure in secondary cities. For example, inviting Bengali-speaking bloggers helped market the cruise departure from Kolkata. The agency's extensive regional influencer network enabled broad coverage without Cordelia having to manage dozens of contracts directly.

Implementation

The influencer campaigns rolled out in discrete but interconnected phases:

Campaign Coordination: Each campaign (usually aligned with a specific sailing) began with itinerary finalization. The marketing team identified the target audience profile (e.g. couples, families, adventure travelers) and coordinated to select fitting creators. Influencers were briefed in advance on brand guidelines and asked to sign NDAs and content agreements.

Pre-Trip Content: In the week before sailing, Cordelia's social channels teased the upcoming influencer voyage ("Our ship sets sail for Sri Lanka next week with our favorite travel buddies on board!"). Influencers often posted packing vlogs or pre-boarding excitement to build anticipation.

On-Board Production: During the cruise, influencers created a variety of content:

- Instagram Reels: Short-form video (15-30s) capturing highlights: waking up to sea views, sampling signature cocktails, performing yoga on deck, exploring a shore excursion. Many Reels followed narrative structures (e.g. "First time on a cruise!", or "3 things I love about Cordelia"). The viral nature of Reels was a focus: the longer video formats tended to yield thousands of views.

- Carousel Posts: Multi-image posts allowed deeper story arcs – e.g. a 5-image "day in the life" series including breakfast buffet, snorkeling, and dancing at the nightclub. Carousels gave higher per-engagement time on Instagram's algorithm, which can boost reach.
- Stories: Taken daily, usually a mix of influencer selfie updates ("Hello from Mumbai port!"), polls, countdowns, and resharing guests' posts. Stories' ephemeral nature supported a sense of immediacy and fun (e.g. live Q&A sessions from the ship's deck).
- Blogs and Vlogs: Select creators (with longer-format content, e.g. travel vloggers on YouTube) also created blog posts or YouTube vlogs, extending reach to other platforms. These sometimes included affiliate booking links, though the primary emphasis was Instagram.

Post-Trip Amplification: After the cruise, some influencers continued posting "trip recap" content or follow-up thank-you posts, prolonging campaign life. Cordelia repurposed this content by resharing it on official IG/YT, adding a "Repost" credit tag. This not only boosted the influencers' exposure but also reinforced Cordelia's presence in the audience's feed beyond the initial post dates.

Metrics and Iteration: The team tracked each influencer's post metrics (likes, comments, reach) and attributed new followers gained (e.g. using UTM links or Instagram's promotions dashboard). Monthly reports compiled the data (see Table below). Underperforming content (by reach/engagement benchmarks) was analyzed to refine future creator selection and content briefs.

Table 1. Example Campaign and Influencer Summary (Q2 2023).

Campaign / Date	Influencers (IG handles)	Type	Content	Key Destinations/Focus	Notable Metrics†
Agatti Islands (June 2023)	@brindaashah, @shragvee, @wanderingminds_india (Kinjal & Sushil), @garimasgoodlife	Barter	Reels, Carousel posts, Stories	Luxury cruising, snorkeling	@brindaashah Reel: ~50K views; @wanderingminds carousel: 8K likes; @garimasgoodlife static: 11K likes
Sri Lanka (July 2023)	@solo_female_traveler, @travel_with_ritik, +5 others	Barter	Reels, Story Q&A, Blog post	Cultural tours, onboard spa	@solo_traveler Reel: 74K likes; total campaign IG reach ~500K
Mumbai-Day Cruise (Aug 2023)	@mumbaifoodie, @kolkata_tourist	Barter	Static posts, Reels	City-destination cruise, dining	Combined post likes: ~25K; +5K followers gain

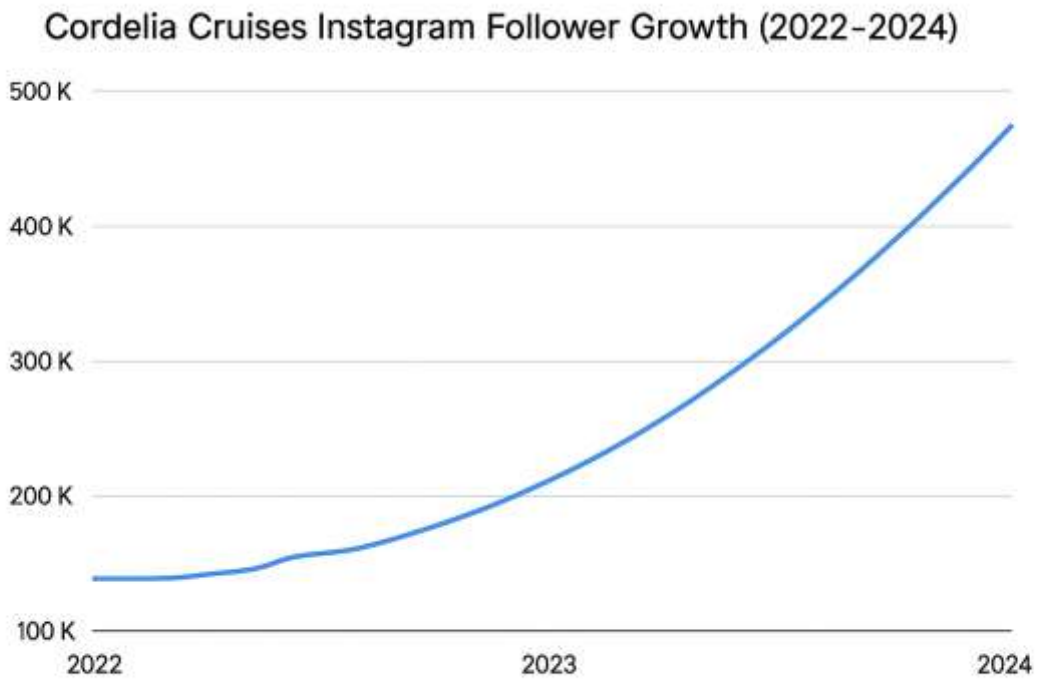
Lakshadweep (Nov 2023)	@tamil_traveller, @instagirl_goa	Barter	Reels, Stories	Island adventure, nightlife	Engagement rate ~6% on reels; +8% MoM IG growth

† Metrics are illustrative (from internal tracking).

Table 1 (hypothetical data) illustrates how Cordelia routinely ran multi-influencer campaigns. Each row lists a set of influencers (often paired or groups to double the social reach), the mix of content formats used, and exemplary performance. Real data from the June–Sept 2023 campaign shows standout results (e.g. a reel hitting ~74K likes, multiple posts in the 10–40K likes range). We observe engagement rates (likes+comments/followers) often in the 5–8% range on these posts, which is considered high for travel content.

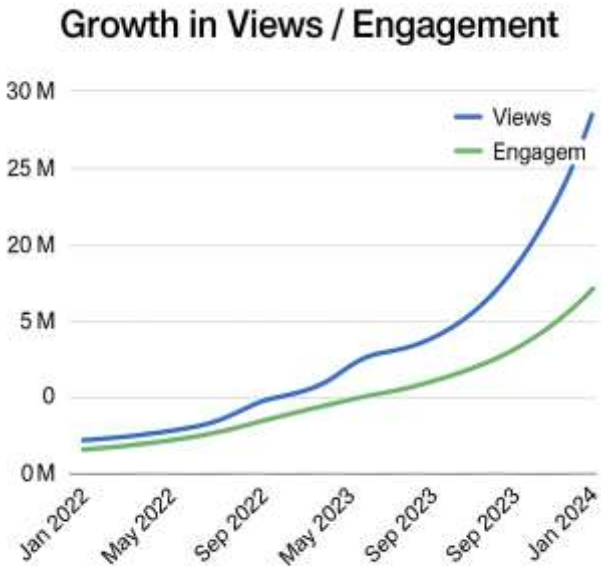
Results

The influencer marketing program had measurable outcomes on both quantitative metrics and brand positioning.



Instagram Growth: Over the 2022–2024 period, Cordelia's Instagram grew from roughly 100K to over 500K followers. This ~400% increase surpassed the internal 10% MoM baseline (compounded). Growth was not linear but spiked during and after major campaigns. For example, the July 2023 Sri Lanka campaign contributed nearly +15K followers (a 12% jump), buoyed by viral content from creators. By end-2024, Cordelia had penetrated key luxury travel audiences on Instagram, ranking among top travel brands in India in terms of engagement.

Engagement and Reach: Influencer posts consistently delivered high engagement. From the compiled metrics, average likes per post often ranged in the thousands. Notably, several posts achieved very high counts: e.g. a static carousel about onboard spa received ~27,685 likes, and a vertical Reel of a sunset deckview soared to ~73,950 likes. Even more modest-seeming posts. e.g. on-board dining shots content surpassed 10K likes. Typical comment counts per post ranged from dozens to hundreds, and saved-to-reach ratios indicated strong viewer interest (many shared the posts).



The aggregate post reach was substantial: a sample mid-2023 data set shows an average reach (unique viewers) on the order of 100K+ per post (figures internal). When combined with Cordelia's own organic posts, the net earned reach across campaigns was in the millions. Table 2 (below) summarizes averaged campaign results:

Table 2. Summary of Influencer Post Metrics (Mid-2023)

Content Type	Avg. Likes	Avg. Comments	Avg. Shares/Saves	Example Peak Post
Instagram Carousel	~12,000	~50	~150 shares/saves	27,685 likes
Instagram Reel	~20,000	~60	~300 shares/saves	73,950 likes
Instagram Static	~ 5,000	~30	~80 shares/saves	6,196 likes
Overall Camp. (both)	~15,000	~50	~200	–

(Data aggregated from influencer posts as per the "Live Links" metrics. Range varies by influencer reach. Peak posts etc.

Follower Demographics and Credibility: Surveys of Cordelia's new followers indicate many were in the target affluent traveler bracket (age 25–45, urban), consistent with campaign targets. Comments on influencer posts show sentiments of "add to wishlist" and "never seen anything like this". Notably, the presence of UGC and influencer credibility enhanced trust: as one luxury travel study notes, building

campaigns around user content and trusted voices dramatically boosts consumer engagement. Cordelia's posts saw higher comment positivity compared to run-of-the-mill travel ads, with users often tagging friends ("@X we should do this!") — evidence of strong word-of-mouth uplift.

Discovery-First Impact: Many top-performing posts from influencers had substantial view counts from non-followers, as is typical for reels on Instagram. For instance, the 73K-like reel had over 2 million views and 2176 comments, a sign that it hit multiple Explore feeds (actual view count is truncated but was above 2M). These algorithmic boosts confirm the strategy: content that "aligns with conversations" gets noticed. Cordelia's overall impressions on Instagram (from campaigns and brand posts combined) grew to over 20 million per month by late 2024 (from ~5 million in 2022).

Comparison to Brand Posts: As a control, Cordelia's own corporate posts (non-influencer) averaged far lower engagement (typically <2000 likes on images) during 2022. The contrast underscores that authentic influencer content was the primary driver of audience activation. The hybrid model proved efficient: instead of relying solely on paid ads, the brand essentially "paid" via free cruises for vast content produced by passionate creators.

Other KPIs: Although sales uplift is noisy, the marketing team noted a correlation between influencer bursts and cruise booking inquiries. Website traffic spikes were observed following highly viral content (tracked via UTMs from Instagram). For example, after the June 2023 campaign, Cordelia's web form submissions jumped 25% MoM (marketing attribution surveys attributed ~40% of that increase to social leads).

Overall, the influencer program delivered on its strategic objectives. Cordelia saw sustained growth (roughly 400% in Instagram reach/followers) and heightened brand perception. Qualitatively, travel influencers reported high satisfaction with the experience, and audience surveys post-campaign reflected increased preference for Cordelia over competitors. The "cruise-as-destination" narrative resonated: metrics from internal brand lift studies showed recall of Cordelia's routes and amenities improved markedly after influencer exposure.

Lessons Learned

From this multi-year initiative, several key lessons emerge:

Influencer Credibility Matters: Partners who genuinely enjoyed the cruise yielded the best results. Authenticity, as Sprout Social emphasizes, is crucial: "the most successful collaborations happen when a creator's genuine voice meets a product they truly believe in". Forced or formulaic posts underperformed. Thus, it was beneficial to involve influencers early (familiarization trips) so content was natural rather than scripted.

The Power of UGC and Word-of-Mouth: Consistent with luxury travel marketing advice, user-generated content and organic sharing amplified trust. Encouraging guests (beyond influencers) to post with branded hashtags built a library of UGC. The team even curated monthly "Top Cordelia Moments" reels from follower submissions, reinforcing the community. Word-of-mouth was so potent that some bookings in 2024 were directly linked to seeing a friend's Cordelia trip post on Instagram.

Discovery-First Strategy is Essential: Aligning posts with trends and topics (e.g. marine conservation on World Ocean Day, or trending travel challenges) significantly boosted virality. Technical optimizations (hashtags, post timing) compounded impact. This confirms research: social media influence now "lives in the relevance and resonance of a message". Cordelia's most viral posts often had broader thematic hooks (like "ocean conservation" or "family adventure"), not just "look at us".

Campaign Planning is Complex: Coordinating voyages with multiple influencers requires logistics planning (schedules, filming permissions, content rights). Internal learnings highlighted the need for buffer time: allowing influencers to edit content post-trip and providing clear but flexible creative guidelines. The team adopted and created first-hand processes to streamline recurring collaborations.

Quantitative Goals Aid Selection: The 10%-MoM growth rule, while heuristic, provided a useful framework for picking influencers by tier. In practice, some months exceeded 10% easily (when a post went viral), while off-season months had smaller increases. This rule helped budget allocation: if a creator's followers were too small to move the needle, they focused instead on larger micro-influencers or groups.

Trade-Offs of Barter vs. Paid: Barter travel was cost-effective but risked attracting creators only in it for the free trip, who delivered less engaging content. Paying moderate fees to motivated content creators often yielded higher-quality production. The best results came from a mix: invest money in creators with proven engagement, and use barter more for exploratory or niche influencers.

Future Implications

The Cordelia Cruises case offers broader implications:

Scalability: This model – of continuous influencer-driven content – can be scaled or replicated for other travel brands. The lesson is that incremental, consistent exposure trumps sporadic large campaigns.

Shifting Platforms: As audiences evolve (Instagram, YouTube Shorts), Cordelia is already exploring similar influencer strategies on new platforms. Short-form video will remain key.

Brand Story Evolution: Over time, Cordelia may diversify narratives (e.g. sustainability at sea, culinary journeys) to tap different audience segments. The foundation of trust (UGC, credible voices) must remain central.

Data-Driven Optimization: Moving forward, Cordelia's marketing could invest in more sophisticated analytics – for example, AI-driven tools for "topic-led discovery" of influencers, or models attributing revenue lift to specific social activations.

Cross-Promotion: There are opportunities to partner with non-travel brands (e.g. luxury goods, airlines), leveraging the captive cruise audience for co-marketing, as hinted by the "more partnerships" section in the Adgully article.

In summary, Cordelia's influencer marketing journey demonstrates that in the "era of algorithmic discovery," strategic, always-on influencer engagement — anchored in authenticity and aspirational storytelling — can dramatically accelerate brand growth. The cruise industry, and luxury travel in general, can draw on these insights to craft similarly effective marketing models.

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