



THE BUSINESS OF BLOGGING

They might have started out as mere online essays but these days, blogs are big business. We meet five of the UAE's most successful online entrepreneurs to find out how they're turning their diaries into dollars

The days of bloggers being seen as little more than enthusiastic amateur diarists are a long time gone. By October 2017, the social networking site Tumblr alone was hosting an extraordinary 373 million blogging accounts globally while over at WordPress, an astonishing 86.4 million new blog posts are created each month. But when Dubai-based Tala Samman set up My Fash Diary in 2009, the landscape was very different.

"Blogs weren't a thing when I started and they didn't even exist in Dubai," says the fashion blogger and DJ. "Mine was the first to come out of the UAE. I felt the need to start something where I could share my experiences with my friends who actually enjoyed fashion."

The site she created has since evolved to document her loves for everything from fashion and beauty to travel, as well as host interviews with stars such as Khloe Kardashian and now garners 58,000 views per week. Running the site is now very much Samman's full-time job, leading to high-level brand collaborations and a lifestyle that looks nothing short of ludicrously luxurious but she admits running the business is harder than the glossy site might suggest. "Being a full-time blogger sounds exciting and it's definitely an incredible thing to wake up every day and monetise something you love. That being said, it's also a very oversaturated market so building a solid site with good content is not easy. It doesn't hurt that my site was the first but I've always stuck to quality content, which has had its cons." While she admits passing on paid projects with brands she didn't feel were the right fit has been tough at times, "it has definitely kept my integrity and a loyal readership."



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Samantha Wood

Indeed, the multi-tasking nature of making money on the back of a successful blog is a common thread for many of the region's most successful online entrepreneurs. Take lawyer Natalia Shustova, whose successful Shoestova blog (5,000 hits daily and over 132,000 Instagram followers) has seen her gone on to carve out a lucrative career incorporating modelling, styling, digital content creation and high-end collaborations with brands including Burberry, Tiffany, Marc Jacobs and Elisabetta Franchi. "My digital following definitely played a big role in the work I do today," Shustova demurs. "I started as an absolute outsider in the fashion world and today my fashion advice is taken as expert and I'm very flattered to have achieved this. I think the success is due to being honest and very consistent. I produce and distribute high-quality content. I answer the huge amounts of personal messages which are sent to me daily. Sometimes I even advise readers one-on-one on what to wear to a particular event. It's a very well-established dialogue we have. I answer

each and every comment which people send me and am thankful for that. I believe I am establishing more of an online friend platform rather than just being somebody on social media."

But while building something of a celebrity persona online is key to those carving out their success in fashion and beauty, in some other fields, anonymity is key to success. When Samantha Wood set up Foodiva back in 2011, her aim was to be as anonymity as possible, in order to provide truly honest reviews of the UAE's much-lauded restaurants. "Both myself and my guest reviewers have a no-freebies anonymous policy for our restaurant reviews and do not accept invitations in exchange for reviews on the site or app. By paying our own way, we can share honest, constructive feedback of a dining experience and we've been able to build credibility and influence." So much influence that Wood now runs a very successful, multi-pronged business which



Tala Samman

While Samman's site has been a groundbreaker on the UAE scene, there's one local name that dominates globally – Huda. When Hollywood make-up artist Huda Kattan set up her blog in 2010, she admits: "I had no idea it was going to blow up the way it did." Eight years on, her Instagram account alone boasts more than 23 million followers, and her blog videos are rarely less than viral hits. It is this online success and her honesty with her followers – see her video about face shaving for proof – that have led to the enormous success of her own Huda Beauty range of cosmetics. "I am constantly inspired by the comments and requests we see on Instagram," she says of her online reach and how it influences her product line. "When it comes to creating new products, we always take into account what our social family is asking for. Our community really and truly helps with the creation of Huda Beauty products – more than they probably realise. And this is true for every product we create; there must be a need for it or I won't create it."

While Kattan's online profile has undoubtedly been a huge component in the success of her physical product range, she admits that maintaining her site while also running a retail business is challenging. "As our following has grown it has become increasingly difficult to reply to everyone. I spend about four hours a day reading and responding to comments on Instagram as it's super-important to me to build those relationships. I want people to know that I see their posts and want to thank them for buying our products. I only wish there were five of me just to go through all of the comments and show how much we appreciate every single one of them."



Natalia Shustova

also incorporates digital consultancy for the food and drinks industry and a programme of food-based tours entitled Dine Around Dubai.

The result is that Wood is a familiar face on the food scene now, something she admits can occasionally prove difficult when she shows up to review and is unmasked almost immediately. No such problems yet for one of the city's newest up-and-coming foodies, whose true identity remains a closely guarded secret. The Food Sheikh won't even confirm their gender, let alone their nationality or identity but what is known is that he/she has decades of experience across the hospitality industry – something that shines through in the site's witty, honest reviews, now followed avidly by 25,000 subscribers.

"I think initially the anonymity made it easier for me to review places, especially working in the industry as well," the blogger admits. "The Food Sheikh restaurant reviews are sacred and are always without bias. They cannot be bought or influenced and being anonymous helps me maintain this level of credibility. I think the audience that reads the reviews appreciates that I pay for every meal from my own pocket and always post the receipts." But is there room for another wildly successful blog-based business in 2018? FS thinks so. "Moving forward, we aim be the very best platform for original and engaging food stories in Dubai. We want to celebrate the food industry and tell great stories at the same time and we want to do it with credibility and a sense of fun. It's really that simple." Watch this space.