

A website measures online influence, which is more valuable than you think

DAHLIA KURTZ, SPECIAL TO QMI AGENCY

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Why is this woman smiling? Actress Alyssa Milano is one of the Net's heavy hitters, scoring 85 (out of 100) on Klout.com's measure of influence. (HRC/WENN.com)

You thought the popularity contest ended years ago with high school. But it hasn't. It's back in a worldwide forum. And this time there's an official score keeper.

Yes, welcome to Klout.com, the world's biggest popularity contest. Ever.

It is the standard measure of online influence. Online influence is the new standard in popularity. And even if you have never cared to be popular, this brand of popularity is a valuable currency

in the new economy.

Just ask Barack Obama, the first social media campaigning leader of the free world, or Old Spice and Isaiah Mustafa (who is on a horse), or the 10 horribly abused dogs Alyssa Milano helped to save.

Remember when you joined Facebook, back when we never said “social media?” Well, when you joined, you entered the fray by default.

And even if you're on Twitter and LinkedIn, as I am, not only are you part of the contest, but it's also part of your online identity, which will help assess your Klout.

Susan MacTavish Best, a spokesman for Klout explains: “We feel we are just at the beginning of an era where people have become the publishers, and Klout is the first of its kind when it comes to measuring the influence of these micropublishers.

“We believe influence is the ability to drive action, so our algorithm focuses on actions other people take, as opposed to just how many times you tweet.”

Accordingly, the “score keeper” tracks your network, your social web fingerprints, the impact of your opinion, and collects data from all your content, including how people interact with it. Every like, comment, mention, follower and friend is used to analyze your clout. In turn, this determines your score, somewhere between one and 100.

For instance, Calvin Lee (whom you'll soon know) has an impressive score of 76. Alyssa Milano (whom I know as Samantha Micelli) has a serious score of 85. And I have a score of 53 – for now, because it changes every day.

Some argue these metrics are off. William Wolfe-Wylie is the social media manager for Sun Media, and while he admits to using Klout to get a virtual snapshot of potential online friends, he finds it has limitations.

“Klout is a measurement of clout, but it is flawed. It can be a point of reference, possibly even a point of pride. But it is not a point upon which to make any decision whatsoever,” he says.

Wolfe-Wylie finds it can, for example, skew celebrities' scores, attributing more pull than they actually have.

But it can also give unknowns pull, turning them into virtual celebrities.

Calvin Lee, who has the impressive score of 76, is a “design guy” and the principal at Mayhem Studios in Los Angeles – if you can ever find him there – because his Klout sends him on free trips all over the world.

While Lee (@mayhemstudios) agrees Klout may not be perfect, he finds it has been very useful.

In addition to free travel, Lee's influence has earned him many goodies, including a \$6,000 laptop to review and keep, cases of Starbucks coffee, and even a profile in Forbes.

“I know Klout wants to be the standard in metrics on the web. It will happen. The metrics aren't perfect, but it's a good overall indicator,” Lee says.

“I can see it becoming like an ad agency. They have the way to narrow down the influencers.”

Marketers are increasingly looking to Klout scores on their products too. A product's status can steer its marketing strategy. And don't be surprised if you check in at the Palms Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, only to see the front desk check out your Klout score. It can also steer their marketing strategy towards you.

The Palms is just one of many businesses working on benefits for influencers, such as the ones Lee receives. And “Klout Perks,” a program between Klout and brands, can lead to special treatment as well as complimentary products and services.

“I am surprised no one has really tapped into this before, rewarding people who are passionate about whatever they are into,” notes Lee.

Though in its infancy, more and more people are tapping into Klout.

While MacTavish Best has heard of employers checking the scores of potential employees, Lee knows of applicants putting their scores on resumes.

Now, with every tweet you do, every tweet you don't do, every link you post, every link you don't post, you are judged online – whether you like it or not.

Keeping up with the Jones' has become keeping up with the @Jones'. And with it, comes the added pressure of doing it under the microscope of strangers.

But, maybe in the world's greatest popularity competition of all time, the unpopular have the greatest chance ever of being more competitive and wielding influence because we finally have some Klout.

And you've got to like that.

Twitter: @DahliaKurtz

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