

TikTok isn't going anywhere

How brands are finally figuring out the social media phenomenon

By Ilene Lelchuk

Mary Bigham, founder and CEO of **Dish Works** culinary content agency, recently gave us a live laptop tour of her busy studio in Pennsylvania, where nutritionists, chefs, videographers, art directors and editors were creating mouthwatering visuals for brands.

We wandered virtually into a test kitchen filled with the staccato chop-chop-chop of knives on cutting boards and then moved to a table-top set where bakers were prepping a keto-friendly cake. Cameras zoomed in on ingredients and working hands.

Many of these shoots will end up on social media platforms, and not just Instagram, Facebook or YouTube. They are

heading for that unpredictable, hard-to-describe TikTok universe.

“Our clients started asking specifically for TikTok content at the beginning of 2021,” explained Bigham, whose clients’ products include supplements, nut milks, natural sweeteners and CBD products. “A year before, maybe only 10% of our clients asked for it. Today, 70% want TikTok videos.”

What a difference a year makes.

The pandemic rapidly changed the social media landscape. People stuck at home turned to their devices for information, entertainment and community, creating the perfect conditions for a relative newcomer,

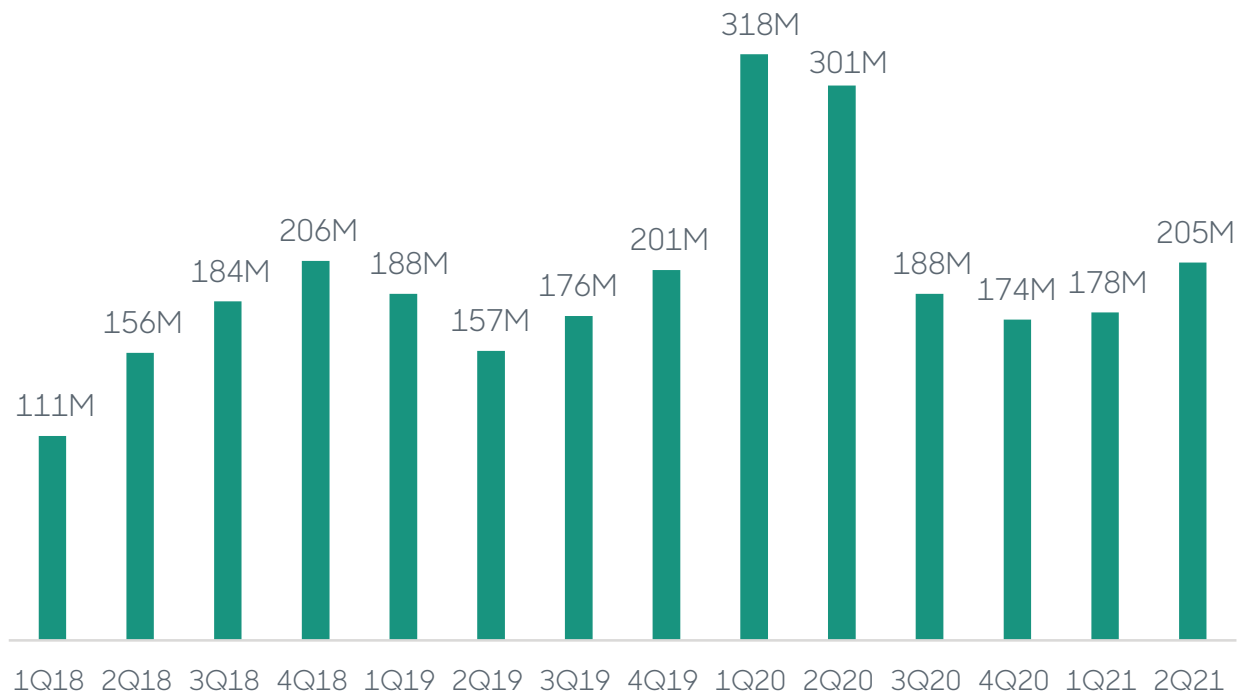
NBJ Takeaways

- » TikTok is big with Gen-Z, but millennials have moved in, and Gen-X is on their heels
- » Over-produced videos can run counter to the authenticity that is foundational to the platform
- » Smart marketers will stay on top of trends and get on the board before the virality fades

TikTok, to gain a vast audience.

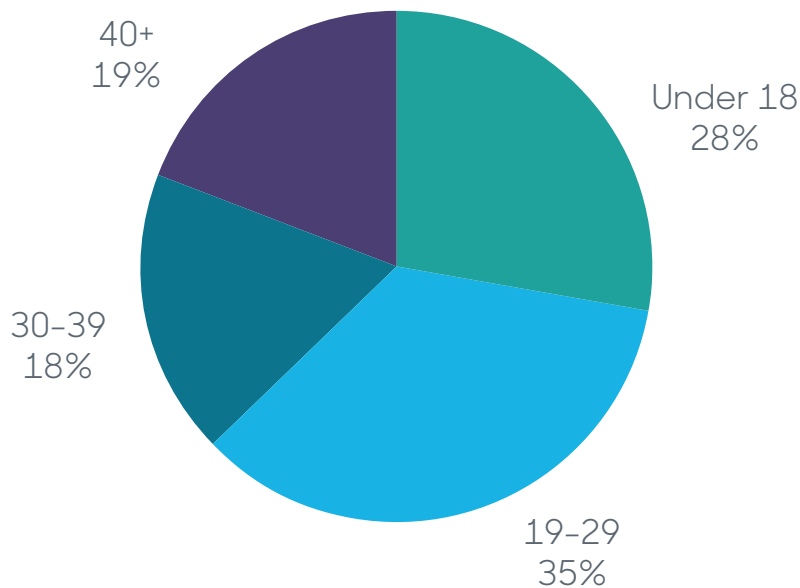
As of July, TikTok had racked up 3 bil-

TIKTOK GLOBAL DOWNLOADS BY QUARTER



Source: Sensor Tower Store Intelligence; Includes Douyin on iOS in China and excludes downloads from third-party Android stores

TIKTOK USERS BY AGE DEMOGRAPHIC, 2020



Source: App Ape

lion downloads, according to the app metrics firm Sensor Tower.

With 689 million active users globally, TikTok could pose one of the biggest opportunities for marketers—if they could just figure out how to leverage it. Today’s adopters advise brands still on the fence to embrace the unknown, the weird, the trendy, the dance challenges, the lip-sync mashups.

Don’t dismiss the platform, they say, because it’s here to stay.

“There are always doubters when it comes to new media. I mean, that’s how people felt about the internet, about Facebook,” said Brian Freeman, founder and CEO of **Heartbeat**, a marketplace that matches brands with social media influencers.

Brendan Ruh, **Santa Cruz Medicinals** co-founder, agrees. The time to get on TikTok is today. Or yesterday.

“If you’re not posting on there and figuring out how to use it, you’re going to be completely left in the dust,” said Ruh,

whose brand produces CBD-infused supplements, tinctures and topicals.

TikTok doesn’t even have to cost much; brands are repurposing videos they shot for Instagram Reels and other platforms.

Why TikTok is more than Tide Pod challenges and dalgona coffee

TikTok is a video-sharing social networking app that allows you to watch, create and share quick vertical videos that can now go as long as three minutes.

As a viewer, you can follow specific

creators or hashtags, but more often TikTok feeds you a seemingly random feast of videos on your “For You” page. A lot of them are duds. Some inexplicably go viral, like a banana peeling video that got 251 million views.

TikTok usage skyrocketed during quarantine:

- In the U.S. alone, active TikTok users grew from 35.6 million in 2019 to nearly 66 million in 2020 to 74 million in 2021.
- As of June 2021, TikTok users were watching more than 24 hours per

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month, according to the app analytics firm App Annie.

- A predicted 88.7 million people will be using TikTok by 2024.

This kind of growth should have every brand rushing to invest in videos. But nearly 70% of marketers across industries said they don't plan to use TikTok in 2021, according to a survey by Social Media Examiner. Facebook and Instagram remain their top go-to platforms.

Maybe the downsides weigh too heavily: too-short videos, a too-young demographic, an unpredictable algorithm, limit-

boarded to work while chugging Ocean Spray juice and lip-syncing to Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams." Ocean Spray sales went through the roof—without the brand having to spend a dime on advertising.

More recently, there was the unexpected boon for World Organic Corp, seller of liquid chlorophyll, after the #chlorophyllwater trend exploded on TikTok with videos of enthusiasts mixing, drinking, and touting chlorophyll's health benefits. World Organic Corp quickly sold out of product.

But what about those brands that are purposefully trying to be seen on and benefit from TikTok?

"I would predict by mid next year, the under 55 audience on TikTok will have to be part of your brand strategy."

— Brian Freeman, Heartbeat

ed ad options, and difficulty linking back to websites, to name a few challenges.

But brands that are active on TikTok are focused on the potential audience growth. While 47% of TikTok users in the U.S. are between the ages 10 and 29 today, similar use by their parents is on the horizon (as happened with Facebook and Instagram).

"I would predict by mid next year, the under 55 audience on TikTok will have to be part of your brand strategy," said Freeman of Heartbeat, whose influencer network includes millennials as well as Gen Z.

Unraveling the mystery of TikTok

TikTok is a mystery to so many and when marketers share their experiences and advice, it becomes clear how experimental it can still be.

"It's unpredictable, but in a good way," Freeman said. "All you need is one post to go viral, and you're Ocean Spray."

He's referring to the viral video shot by @420dogface208 last fall as he long-

Rae Wellness

@raewellness
60.5K Followers
1.1M Likes

Rae Wellness officially joined TikTok in January 2021 "to better connect with our community because we knew they were participating there," said Angie Tebbe, CEO and co-founder.

Rae's entrée to TikTok came a year after an unfortunate experience when under-age teens on TikTok started obsessing over the brand's Metabolism Drops and weight loss. Although they had not promoted the drops for women under 18, Rae and its retail partner Target were bombarded with online criticism. Ultimately, Rae pulled the product off the market.

Taking charge of its brand image on TikTok, Rae Wellness has been enjoying notable success. For one of its most popular TikTok videos, Tebbe said, Rae created an original song, "Shine From Inside," and partnered with several creators aligned with Rae's wellness philosophy to produce

videos to the music. Some garnered more than 700,000 views.

Although the exact return-on-investment is difficult to calculate, Tebbe said she often sees item-level lifts after posting a new video. "Outside of sales, TikTok has helped us build our brand awareness ... by 50% in six months," she said.

Tip for newbies: "We've learned to embrace creator participation over control and perfection, which, for a young brand, can take time to get used to," Tebbe said. "Because TikTok is a very low-fi, high-authenticity platform, we believe it's important to not over-produce content."

Nurish

@nurishbynaturemade
16.7K Followers
71.1K Likes

Nurish, a monthly subscription vitamin and supplement product, began its TikTok journey in 2020 and is benefiting as more millennials—Nurish's key demographic—joined Gen Z on the platform, said Megan O'Connor, divisional vice president of digital at Nurish by Nature Made.

For one of Nurish's most successful TikTok campaigns, the brand partnered with Movers+Shakers creative agency and TikTok star/choreographer Michael Le to create the "Nurishin' Myself" dance challenge with an original song.

"We saw very strong engagement and conversion that confirmed our hypothesis that TikTok would be a rich territory for us to connect with our audience," O'Connor said.

Tip for newbies: "Be nimble," O'Connor said. "TikTok trends move like the wind, so if you take too long going back-and-forth on ideas and revisions, you might miss the boat altogether."

Santa Cruz Medicinals

@santacruzmedicinals
5,632 Followers
84.4K Likes

TikTok is tricky for CBD brands.

While many states legalized recreational marijuana, cannabis is still considered a Schedule I drug at the federal level. That means most financial services providers won't do business with marijuana-related

companies and most social media platforms can't accept paid CBD ads. They also may remove cannabis content.

That hasn't kept Santa Cruz Medicinals CEO Brendan Ruh off TikTok. "I'll just keep building up TikTok until the banking thing changes—because it will—and then they won't take down CBD posts anymore and I'll be in a great position with followers already."

Ruh relies on influencer marketing as "the only way for us to basically do paid advertising."

Because TikTok could remove overt cannabis content, Santa Cruz Medicinals developed a niche with influencers in the keto space. Videos lean into the health benefits, pain relief and anti-anxiety properties of CBD. They use popular hashtags like #paleo #lowcarbrecipes and #biohacking. One of the most popular videos is a chia seed pudding recipe with a smidge of CBD oil, which garnered 100,000 views.

Tip for newbies: "Just start posting," Ruh said. "Watch TikToks for a few days and look up hashtags related to your niche. See what's working well for other people and imitate that."

Bonus advice on hiring influencers: Freeman of Heartbeat says, "Target influencers with 50,000 to 100,000 followers. We see really strong ROI in that category. The price per post is usually \$200-\$500."

Splenda

@splendasweeteners

208 Followers

1,310 likes

Splenda may not be a supplement or even a "natural" product but the lessons the brand is learning have relevance in the nutrition space. For Splenda, TikTok is an experiment.

"We began using it about a year ago," said Matt Thompson, senior manager of social media. "We were starting to ramp up our influencer campaigns—on Instagram, Facebook and others—and noticed a lot of influencers also were offering TikTok videos."

Thompson spent the last year experimenting with different types of content and trying to crack the mysterious TikTok algorithm.

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– Megan O'Connor, Nurish

What he's learned is that TikTok favors videos that people watch to the end and re-watch. When enough viewers do that, TikTok considers your video worth showing to more people, and the algorithm funnels it into more feeds.

"I had this video of a gentleman sitting down to some tea and pouring in our creamer," Thompson said. "It did well on another social media channel but not on TikTok. I added some text to it ('Did you see it?') and all of a sudden people watched it to the end and rewatched it until it became our biggest video at the time with about 4,000 views. And I was just repurposing a video we already had, not a big investment."

feeling some people experience when hearing certain sounds). It garnered hundreds of views.

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Back at Dish Works, Brigham advises brands to stalk the trends on TikTok. Is it pesto eggs? Air fried pasta chips? Baked feta? "Search food trends on TikTok, see what's coming up and then do your own version of it with your product," she said. Don't overthink it, just post content. It's okay if your video looks DIY, Brigham added. That's what lives on TikTok, and it's what viewers expect now. The most important thing for TikTok is to

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Tip for newbies: Don't spam hashtags. Instead, find clever ways to incorporate a few popular ones, Thompson said. For example, he created a video that focused on the sounds of opening a box of Splenda packets, refilling a sweetener bowl, and mixing a packet into a cup of coffee. He posted it with the popular hashtag #ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response, a euphoric calm

post regularly and try various types of content to grow your audience.

"Human behavior has changed," Brigham said. "With so many people still working from home, at the end of the day they want to close their laptops. They aren't staying on computers for entertainment. When they want to chill out, they are reaching for their phones and scrolling for videos." 📺