

Influencer agency Billion Dollar Boy cashes in on marketing revolution

Edward East was such a big fan of Pharrell Williams that when the American rapper launched a fashion label called Billionaire Boys Club, East bought the domain name BillionDollarBoy.com, “with the hope that one day down the line it may catch his attention and lead to an introduction.”

That didn’t happen – but the name stuck, laughs East, 35, who co-founded his influencer marketing agency under that name in 2014, the early days of social media marketing. Billion Dollar Boy now has 110 staff and £18 million turnover.

Inspiration struck whilst East was working at his dad’s film company, Exclusive Media, in Los Angeles. “Whilst there, I was working on a new way to monetise film clips on YouTube,” he explains, “and then realised that whilst brands were obsessing over working with bloggers, it was YouTubers that they needed to connect to.”

East noticed that film studios had started to play YouTubers to promote their work, and talking to his friend – and now BDB co-founder – Permele Doyle, who was working at Estee Lauder, he learnt that the US beauty giant was starting to pay Instagrammers to promote its products too.

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East began spending his evenings and weekends building a database that would connect bloggers to brands, which was the start of BDB. Doyle set up an office in New York, whilst East and another friend, Tom Walters, began working on the start-up in London, launching with four staff in a small office in Percy Street, Fitzrovia – the same room where Ricky Gervais wrote *The Office* in 2014. They used start-up cash of £230,000, raised from friends and family and industry contacts, and began offering 'creator marketing' and 'YouTube Rights Management'. "Unlike most of the businesses in our industry, we've never raised institutional capital," East adds. "Our competitors have raised millions of pounds and given away large swathes of equity to get to the position they are in today but we've done it all organically."

Early work included managing Vine (the now-defunct six second looping video clip) stars Stuggy, Joe Charman and Daz Black. They worked on campaigns for Bentley – BDB had Instagrammers making content driving its cars in Nevada – and McDonald's, promoting a slushy summer drink.

Initial growth was slow: "there were months where I panicked about making payroll. Influencer marketing was a nascent industry and very few people working in brands believed it would work, so getting our slice of their marketing spend was a challenge."

When they did get work, BDB's reputation had to be protected at all costs – which is how East found himself being snapped in skintight shorts in a packed Soho one lunchtime. "During one of our first ever campaigns, for McDonald's, one of our influencers didn't turn up so I had to volunteer to take their

place. It was for McDonald's Facebook page, back in the day, where people would vote for different outfits, and I had to pose in really tight shorts in Soho Square where everyone was having lunch and staring at me. I am definitely not made for modelling! I have removed every image from our shared drive at work so my co-founders can't dig them out and use them against me."

Two years on BDB was signing a £300,000 pitch with skincare giant Garnier; other early brands on board included handbag-maker Coach. BDB now has a proprietary 'creator management' platform, Companion, which includes a large database of influencers and demographic data about each one's audiences, to match brands to their ideal target market.

"Today some creators are executing branded content that's just as creative and high-quality as the big budget production shoots," East claims. BDB now works with brands including Procter & Gamble, Sky, Sainsbury's and Primark, and has offices in New York and New Orleans as well as London.

Turnover tripled from £2.7 million in 2019 to 2020: "spending the first day at home after closing the office due to Covid, the uncertainty was incredibly scary. But fortunately, we didn't have to make any redundancies due to the explosion in popularity of creator marketing. Brands finally recognised their potential to create engaging, effective content that drives [return on investment] even when it's made from the comfort of their own homes.

Revenues are now £18 million – but East reckons they will double over the next 12 months, when BDB is opening a new office in Brazil to add to its London and New York outposts.

"One of the biggest issues advertising agencies face is reputational," he explains. "The industry we work in is controlled by another generation, who have very different concerns, interests and views of the world and they have not

grown up with social media. Our people set us apart, and we're eager to disrupt the traditional, arguably toxic trajectory of the advertising industry."

BGB Staff: 110

Founded: 2014

Turnover: £18 million

HQ: Holborn