



Bulba

Lessons from 300+ D2C brands

THE \$5,000 INFLUENCER BUDGET BREAKDOWN

“If I had \$5,000 to build a creator marketing engine for a DTC brand, this is how I’d allocate it.”

Gifted collabs · Paid creators · Production & rights · Partnership ads · 5 brand case studies

THE CORE IDEA

At \$5,000 you can't buy reach. You can buy proof.

20–30 creator assets

Real people using the product, in their own voice.

Tested with ads

Partnership ads tell you which content sells, fast.

Money follows winners

Budget moves to the creators and hooks that perform.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Agenda

01 The \$5,000 split

02 Gifted vs paid creators

03 Hidden costs: shipping, rights & more

04 Partnership ads & the ad breakdown

05 Reinvesting in what performs

06 Case studies: 5 brands

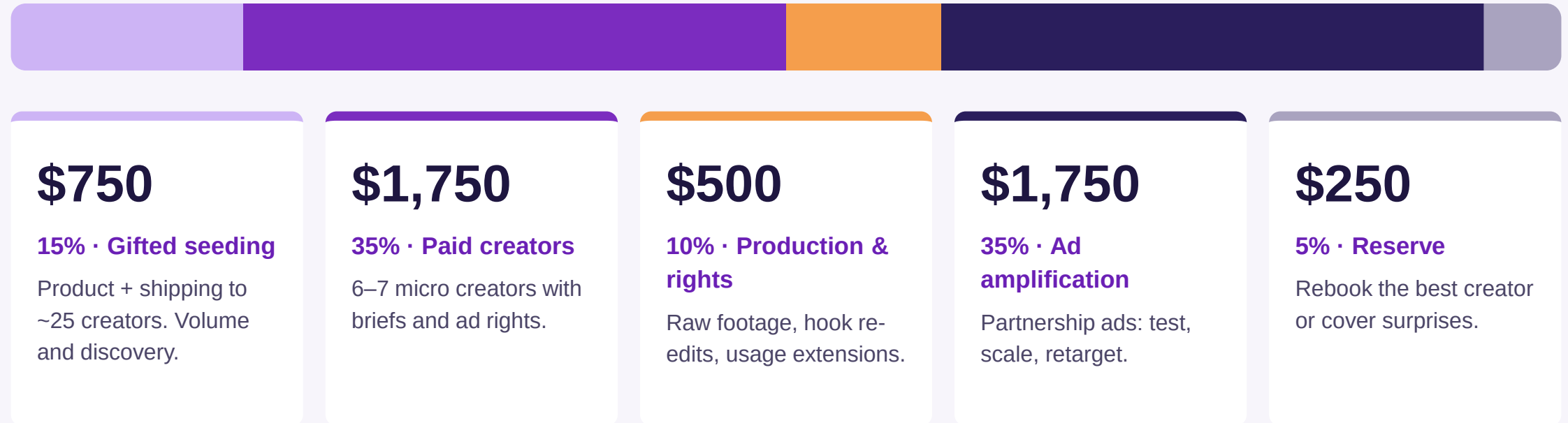
01

The \$5,000 split

Four buckets and a small reserve, planned over 90 days.

EXAMPLE BUDGET ALLOCATION

Where every dollar of the \$5,000 goes



BUCKET BY BUCKET

What each bucket actually buys

Bucket	What it buys	Unit math	Job
Gifted · \$750	Product + shipping to 25 creators	~\$30 landed cost each	Volume, find hidden gems
Paid · \$1,750	6–7 micro creators (10k–100k) with 60-day ad usage	~\$250 each incl. usage	Reliable, briefed hero content
Production · \$500	Raw files, hook re-edits, usage extensions	\$50–100 per asset	Turn 1 video into 4–6 ads
Ads · \$1,750	Partnership ads on creator content	\$700 test / \$750 scale / \$300 retarget	Buy proof, not reach
Reserve · \$250	One rebook of the top creator	1 extra video	Double down on a winner

Benchmark: micro-influencers average about \$198 per collaboration (Collabstr, 2025). Our \$250 includes paid usage.

THE 90-DAY PLAN

Seed, test, then scale

WEEKS 1–4

Seed & brief

- Shortlist ~60 creators
- Ship 25 gifted packages
- Contract 6–7 paid creators
- One-page brief, 3 hook options

Spend: \$2,500

WEEKS 5–8

Test

- Re-edit best videos into variants
- 5 partnership ads at ~\$10/day
- Run 14 days, read the numbers
- Kill losers, keep 2 winners

Spend: \$1,200

WEEKS 9–12

Scale

- Move \$750 to top 2 ads
- \$300 retargeting to engagers
- Rebook the best creator
- Brief round 2 from the data

Spend: \$1,300

02

Gifted vs paid creators

Free product buys volume. Cash buys certainty. A good plan uses both.

THE TRADE-OFFS

Gifted vs paid, side by side

Factor	Gifted	Paid
Cash cost	Product + shipping only	\$100–500+ per micro creator
Will they post?	Not guaranteed: no contract	Contracted deliverables and dates
Creative control	Light: suggest, don't dictate	Brief, hook options, one review
Ad rights	Organic only, unless agreed	Paid usage window in the contract
Content feel	Raw and authentic	Polished, on-message
Best for	Volume, discovery, product tests	Launches, hero ads, deadlines
Hidden cost	Non-posters, chasing time	Rights, exclusivity, revisions

DECISION RULES

When to gift, when to pay

Gift when...

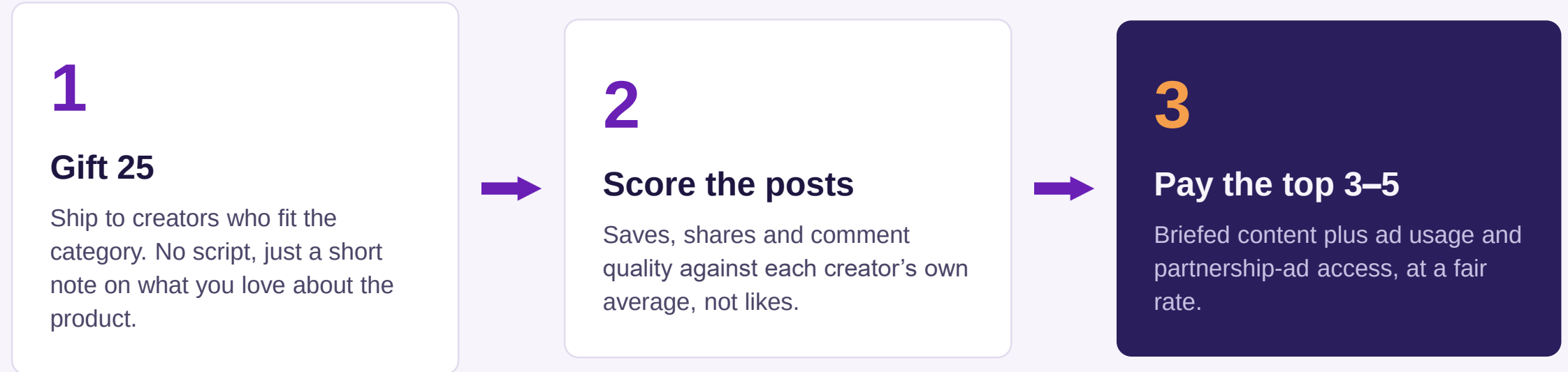
- The product is affordable and photogenic
- The creator already uses your category
- You need volume and variety of angles
- There is no hard launch date
- You are testing which audience bites

Pay when...

- You need ad-ready content by a date
- The product needs explaining (apps, new categories)
- You want ad usage and partnership-ad access
- Nothing physical can be shipped
- The creator is in a high-demand niche

THE HYBRID THAT WORKS

The audition model: gift first, pay the proven



Why it works: you pay for creators whose audience already reacted to your product, not for follower counts.

03

The hidden costs

Shipping, usage rights and team time quietly eat small budgets.

BUDGET FOR THESE UP FRONT

Nine costs brands forget

Cost	Why it bites	Plan for
Product (COGS)	Gifted is not free: units leave inventory	Landed cost per unit
Shipping & packaging	Cross-border, fragile and cold items add up fast	\$8–20 per parcel
Usage rights	Running a creator's video as an ad needs permission	Up to +39% on fee
Partnership-ad access	Ads from the creator's handle are often priced separately	Bundle into usage
Exclusivity	Blocking competitors for 30–90 days raises fees	Avoid at \$5k
Raw footage & edits	Clean files are needed to re-cut hooks for ads	\$50–100 per asset
Revisions & reshoots	A vague brief means paying twice	1 revision in contract
Fees & FX	Payment platforms and international transfers	3–5% of payouts
Team time	Outreach, follow-ups, chasing posts and invoices	Hours per creator

WORKED EXAMPLE

What a “free” gifted post really costs

Product at cost	\$12
Shipping (domestic)	\$9
Packaging & handwritten note	\$3
Outreach & follow-up (30 min at \$20/h)	\$10
Per creator contacted	\$34

If 6 in 10 creators post:

\$57

per published gifted post

Still far cheaper than paid, but only when you track it and follow up.

Four levels of usage rights

LEVEL 1

Organic repost

Brand reshares the creator's post. Usually free.

LEVEL 2

Paid usage 30/60/90 days

Brand runs the video as an ad from its own handle.

LEVEL 3 · OUR PICK

Partnership ads

Ads run with the creator's and brand's handles together.
Creator approves access.

LEVEL 4

Perpetual / buyout

Use forever, anywhere.
Expensive; skip at a \$5k budget.

Rule: ask for 60-day paid usage + partnership-ad access in the first contract. Renegotiating after a video wins always costs more.

04

Partnership ads & the ad breakdown

Creator content becomes a sales engine once money goes behind it.

PARTNERSHIP ADS

Why partnership ads get the biggest share

What they are

Meta ads that show both the creator's and the brand's handle in the header. The brand controls budget and targeting; the creator approves access.

They borrow the creator's trust and engagement signals, so they feel like a recommendation, not an ad.

Brands can now run partnership ads directly from Bulba.

-19%

cost per acquisition vs standard brand ads (Meta research)

+53%

click-through rate vs standard brand ads (Meta research)

+10%

conversion rate vs licensed UGC run from the brand handle (Agentio)

+19%

higher CPM: the trade-off. Judge on CPA, not CPM (Agentio)

ADS BREAKDOWN

How the \$1,750 ad budget is spent

STAGE 1 · TEST · 40%

\$700

- 5 creator ads at ~\$10/day for 14 days
- Broad targeting; let the creative find buyers
- 2–3 hook variants per video

STAGE 2 · SCALE · 43%

\$750

- Top 2 ads only, ~\$25/day for 15 days
- Raise budget 20–30% every few days, not overnight
- Refresh hooks when frequency climbs

RETARGET · 17%

\$300

Video viewers and site visitors, with an offer

Don't start spending until you have at least 5 creator videos to test. One video is a guess; five is an experiment.

READING THE TEST

Keep-or-kill rules for creator ads

Metric	What it tells you	Keep if	Kill if
Hook rate (3-sec views ÷ impressions)	Does the first second stop the scroll?	25%+	Under 15%
Hold rate (ThruPlays ÷ 3-sec views)	Does the story keep people watching?	25%+	Under 10%
Link CTR	Does it make people act?	1%+	Under 0.5%
CPA vs target	Does it make money?	At or below target	2× target spent, no sale

Strong hook, weak hold: keep the first 3 seconds, re-cut the middle.

Strong hold, weak CTR: the story works; fix the call to action or offer.

05

Reinvest in what performs

The engine part: every round of content makes the next one cheaper and better.

THE REINVESTMENT LOOP

Spot, test, scale, rebook, remix



Spot

Find organic posts beating the creator's average saves and shares.



Test

Run them as partnership ads with small, equal budgets.



Scale

Move budget to the ads under target CPA.



Rebook

Pay the winning creators for a 3-video series.



Remix

Brief new creators on the winning hook and angle.

60 / 30 / 10

Round two budget: 60% behind proven winners, 30% on new creators briefed from the data, 10% on wild-card experiments.

SIGNALS WORTH MONEY

How to tell content deserves more budget

Signal	Where to look	Next move
Saves & shares above the creator's average	Creator's insights	Test as a partnership ad
Comments asking "where can I buy?"	Post comments	Retarget engagers with an offer
Hook rate 25%+ in the test	Ads Manager	Move to scale budget
Promo code sales from one creator	Store analytics	Rebook for a series
Same objection in many comments	Post comments	Brief a video that answers it
Ad frequency over 3 and CPA rising	Ads Manager	New hook, same creator

FROM 300+ D2C BRANDS

What worked, and what didn't

✓ What worked

- Many small creators instead of one big one
- Briefing 3 hook options, letting creators keep their voice
- Locking usage + partnership-ad access in the first contract
- Judging content as ads, not by organic reach alone
- Rebooking winners for a series

⚠ What didn't

- Spending the whole budget on one macro creator
- Word-for-word scripts that sound like ads
- Picking creators by follower count and likes
- Forgetting rights, then paying more to renegotiate
- Running ads with only one or two videos to test

06

Case studies

Five brands, five categories: how the \$5,000 playbook flexes for each.

The logo for Eden Perfumes, featuring the word "EDEN" in a bold, sans-serif font with a small red heart above the letter "E", and the word "PERFUMES" in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font below it.

EDEN
PERFUMES

The logo for Britannia Smok'd, featuring the words "BRITANNIA" and "SMOK'D" in a bold, sans-serif font, stacked vertically, with a horizontal line separating the two words.

BRITANNIA
SMOK'D

The logo for Pulp Pantry, featuring the words "PULP" and "PANTRY" in a stylized, cursive font, stacked vertically, inside an orange circle.

PULP
PANTRY





CASE STUDY 1 · FRAGRANCE · UK

Eden Perfumes: selling scent on a screen

The brand

- Family-run perfume house in Brighton, England
- Vegan, cruelty-free “inspired-by” fragrances
- Hundreds of scents; much of the range certified organic
- Refillable bottles; Klarna and Clearpay at checkout

The challenge

- You can’t smell a Reel
- Crowded “dupe” market: trust is the barrier
- A huge catalogue causes choice paralysis
- Needed new customers, not just reach

The Bulba play

- Narrowed the story to 5 hero scents
- “Blind sniff test” format: designer vs Eden
- Gifted 30 UK fragrance and beauty micro creators
- Paid 6 for briefed comparison Reels with ad rights
- Ran the winners as partnership ads

CASE STUDY 1 · EDEN PERFUMES

The \$5,000 plan and the results

Budget split



Hooks we briefed

“Blind test: designer or dupe?”

“Smells like the designer, costs a fraction”

“I asked strangers to guess my perfume”

Results

6.3x

ROAS on partnership ads

£5.0

Cost per new customer

47

Creator videos produced

1.7Mn

Total views



CASE STUDY 2 · RESTAURANT · LONDON

The Britannia SMOK'D: filling midweek tables

The brand

- Independent backstreet smokehouse in Borough, London
- American pit-master BBQ with a modern British touch
- Signature Jacob's Ladder beef rib, whisky and cocktails
- Weekly deals from £13; sites in Battersea and Kingston too

The challenge

- Backstreet location means little walk-by traffic
- Monday–Wednesday covers lag the weekend
- Only diners within a few miles matter
- National reach is wasted spend

The Bulba play

- Hosted tasting nights for 20 London food creators
- Paid 5 for deal-led Reels: Ribfest, Burger Tuesday
- Partnership ads geo-targeted ~3 miles around each site
- Ads scheduled Sunday–Wednesday to fill quiet nights

The \$5,000 plan and the results

Budget split



Hooks we briefed

- “London’s best BBQ is hiding down a backstreet”
- “£13 ribs on a Monday?”
- “The beef rib you need two hands for”

Results





Pulp Pantry: making upcycled taste like a treat

The brand

- Founded by Kaitlin Mogentale in California
- Upcycles juice pulp into snacks
- Pulp Chips made from kale and celery fiber
- Sea Salt, Barbecue, Salt 'N' Vinegar, Jalapeño Lime; sold at Whole Foods

The challenge

- “Upcycled” can sound like “leftovers”
- Must win on taste before mission
- Needs online orders and shelf pickup
- Competes with big chip brands on impulse

The Bulba play

- Taste first, mission second
- “Guess what it’s made of” reveal format
- Gifted 40 US snack and sustainability creators
- Paid 6 for blind taste tests vs mainstream chips
- Partnership ads to the online store and store locator

The \$5,000 plan and the results

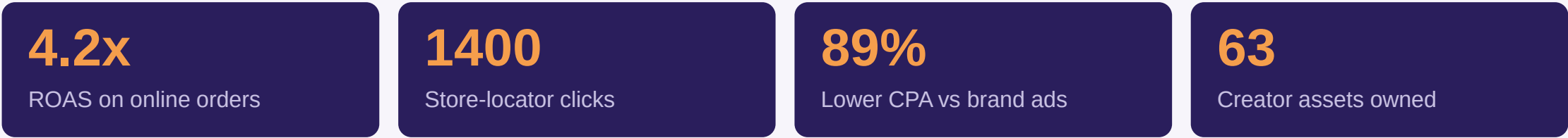
Budget split



Hooks we briefed

- “These chips used to be juice waste”
- “Blind taste test vs my usual chips”
- “Kale chips that don’t taste like kale”

Results





CASE STUDY 4 · FUNCTIONAL SNACKS

GoBeDo: explaining a brand-new category

The brand

- Collagen protein chips
- 10g collagen, 13g protein, 1g carb, 1.5g fat per 18g pack
- Tomato Basil and Sweet Chilli Pepper
- No artificial flavours or colours

The challenge

- “Collagen chips” is a new idea that needs explaining
- Two audiences: beauty and fitness
- Snack price, but shoppers want supplement-level trust
- Must earn repeat orders, not one-off trials

The Bulba play

- Two creator lanes: fitness and beauty
- Gifted 30 creators across both lanes
- Paid 6 (3 fitness, 3 beauty) for label-reading demos
- Separate partnership-ad sets per lane
- Bundle offer to drive repeat orders

The \$5,000 plan and the results

Budget split



Hooks we briefed

- “13g protein in a bag of chips?”
- “My beauty routine now includes a snack”
- “Reading the label so you don’t have to”

Results





CASE STUDY 5 · DATING APP · US & EUROPE

PURE: creator marketing with nothing to ship

The brand

- Anonymous dating app, launched in 2013
- Active in the US, UK, France and Germany
- Privacy-first: auto-deleting chats, screenshot limits
- Reported 350% revenue and user growth over three years (2024)

The challenge

- No physical product to gift
- Dating ads need platform approval
- Creators are careful with the topic
- Installs must turn into subscriptions

The Bulba play

- Paid-first: 8 dating and relationship commentary creators
- Premium memberships instead of gifting
- Story-time and privacy angles, never explicit
- Partnership ads once dating-ad approval is in place
- Optimised for installs, then subscriptions

The \$5,000 plan and the results

Budget split



Hooks we briefed

- “The dating app that deletes your chats”
- “Story time: why I left the swipe apps”
- “Privacy settings every app should have”

Results



Five rules for a \$5,000 creator engine

- | | | |
|----------|------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Spread, don't splurge | 30+ creators beat one big name at this budget. |
| 2 | Buy rights up front | 60-day usage + partnership-ad access in contract one. |
| 3 | Test before you judge | Let ad data, not likes, pick the winners. |
| 4 | Feed the winners | Move budget to proven ads; rebook proven creators. |
| 5 | Keep 5% in reserve | Winners show up mid-campaign. Be ready to pay them. |
-



Build your creator engine with Bulba

The playbook behind 300+ D2C brands, in one self-serve platform.

Find creators with AI

Invite campaign-relevant creators in minutes.

Run partnership ads

Launch them directly from Bulba.

bulba.app

Plans from \$139/month. No demo call needed.