

Creating a Connection: Use Instagram To Communicate Brand Personality

By Bailey Carlin

The purist. The artist. The foot-selfie snapper. Instagram is alive with incredible photographers and brands. Is your brand one of them? There is no better time to become a part of this community. Within the past two years, brands have seen an extreme drop in organic engagement throughout their social networking platforms because of established “pay-to-play” models. It’s not surprising that Instagram has become a new destination for brands, a way to stretch a creative muscle. Instagram delivered brands 58 times more engagement per follower than Facebook and 120 times more engagement per follower than Twitter, a **Forrester** study found.

Before everyone leaves Facebook in droves to the comfortably creative place that is Instagram, there are several things to keep in mind. First, Instagram still is a supporting medium. It helps your social team create content and stake a claim on a network. Also, Instagram is a fairly new medium with limited reporting and paid capabilities. With that in mind, approach Instagram with an open mind.

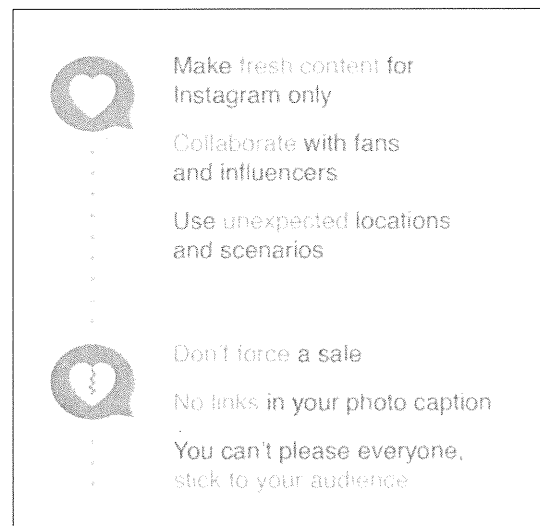
Here are 6 steps to prepare your brand for a successful launch on Instagram.

Audience

Is your brand’s audience on Instagram? Without an established insights tool, it can be difficult to find information regarding

Instagram’s audience and users. Subscribe to several online news sources such as Mashable, Simply Measured and Business Insider to find this information and stay up to date.

Instagram has more than 300 million active users. It is filled with females, 68 percent of its users to be exact, according to **Appdata**. More numbers: 37 percent are ages 18-29, and 17 percent of U.S. adult residents who live in urban areas use it.



Once you have determined if your audience exists on Instagram, you can begin establishing a following. The greater awareness you create about being on Instagram and content you actively post, the more your target audience will tag photos, post photos of your product and follow you back. The biggest hurdle to overcome is making sure the

iPhone Starter Kit

You don't need a \$2,000 camera to create beautiful photos for Instagram. If you have an iPhone or similar smartphone, there are many things you can do to beef up your Instagram feed. Here are apps that will help your brand produce great content.

1. **VSCO Cam:** VSCO Cam is free in the App Store and comes with several filters. It's the filters within their shop you may want to examine. This app is extremely popular. Take a second to go through its hashtag as evidence (#vscocam). Strong recommendation: never use the filters Instagram provides. Instead, edit all of your photos from VSCO Cam and then upload to Instagram.
2. **Regram:** If you wish to add re-grams into your Instagram content strategy, having an app like Regram in your back pocket is a great idea. It allows you to pull any user's post directly from their profile onto yours. Make sure to give the photographer the courtesy of asking first.
3. **Afterlight:** Much like VSCO Cam, Afterlight is packed full of filters and editing tools. The company's mission to create original filters, and "extras" is its best feature. Afterlight offers extra effects like sunbursts and dust moats that can be fun additions to your photos if the look is right. Use these sparingly.

customer is aware that you are actively posting content. Cross-promoting your Instagram on other social mediums is a common tactic. Many brands post on Facebook multiple times each month about their Instagram with a click-through to entice fans. Do a little research about the people who have started following you (if they are spam, if they post frequently, etc.) and follow them back based on that research. As this audience grows, you will garner more insights based on what their lifestyles may look like.

Content

Instagram has a tendency to show lifestyle trends. You should aim to have fans look at your photos and picture your product as an extension of their lifestyle. See **Starbucks**, **Nike** and **Chobani** for examples of brands currently doing this well.

Start small. Fill your feed with photos that depict your product in everyday settings. Places that your audience would bring your product, your product in use, or simply your product where your audience lives, works and plays will be fine to start. You don't need a fancy camera to capture these moments. Your smartphone should be capable of taking crisp, high-quality photos. Your followers are most likely using their phones as well so they will appreciate the realistic content. Using your phone allows you to produce content in real-time on behalf of your brand.

You have an idea of what will resonate with your audience. Now it's time to translate that into photography. This is much easier than it seems but will depend heavily on your brand.

Here's an example. A startup CPG snack brand launched its first Instagram profile less than two years from the time I am writing this essay. After figuring out who and what its audience was doing day-to-day, it was easy for the company to choose scenarios to showcase. Looking to market toward moms and young professionals seeking healthy snacks, the brand determined it should showcase on-the-go scenarios such as hiking, kids playing and picnics. Depending on your brand, settings should be realistic and relatable. Viewers need to relate to where the product is and then picture their lives within that photo. Showcase a human presence but don't let it overshadow your product. Shooting images that crop a model's face out or feature the

State of the User

You have only seconds to impress Instagram users. It's the beauty and curse of the platform. The relationship between users and brands on Instagram is fresh and delicate. We know that users don't want to be overly sold on a product. They come to Instagram to take in beauty and present their own form of beauty. Make sure that within your content strategy is a plan to enlighten and engage users. Your photos and content plan should always follow that logic.

product in a model's hands establishes that real people use the product and allow the viewer to picture him or herself in the photo.



Harvest Snaps uses lifestyle photography to showcase your product in the hands of your consumer where they live, work or play.

Hashtags and Searches

Empower your fans as content creators by leveraging user-generated content. Begin by deploying a tool such as **Iconosquare** to go through hashtag searches aimed at your brand. Iconosquare (formally known as Statigram) is one of the leading providers of Instagram data and insights. It's also a reliable place to go through hashtags and user profiles. The service will not only give you results based on your brand hashtag but also on other hashtags referring to your selected keyword. Start sifting through these searches

and you may discover you didn't know you already had.

The users talking about your brand should also be some of the first people you follow. The CPG brand previously mentioned went through this process before announcing its Instagram account, and it enabled these users to educate consumers about its new snacks and rebranding prior to launch. Before the brand had started to post, it was building a following and finding fans that already loved its product and were willing to post about it.

After you start posting, it's beneficial to align your content with popular hashtags. Don't be afraid to place 3-4 hashtags on your photo. Placing a few hashtags in a comment directly under your post looks cleaner and produces the same result. Hashtags need to relate to the photo in some way, and you should include one that is your brand's name as well. Using popular hashtags will get your content into the search feeds of people who may not know your brand just yet.

Regrams

Once you've started to create a relationship with these "grammers," they will be more open to re-gramming. Re-gramming is the process of taking someone else's Instagram photo and posting it on your own profile. If done correctly, the photo should be credited with the original photographer and tagged with his/her profile. The original photographer should also be asked first. Be courteous.

This is a social media nicety. Ask your fans if they would be OK if you repost their photos onto your Instagram profile. As long as they say yes and you give them the proper credit, you should be able to post such photos onto your own profile.

Other users enjoy this content as well. Posts with an @ mention saw 56 percent more engagement compared to normal brand posts, according to **Simply Measured**. It pays to acknowledge everyone. Be careful not to regram too often. Once per week is effective.



Another example of using lifestyle photography on Harvest Snaps' Instagram account.

Competitive Analysis

Everyone would like to be the next Nike on Instagram. Seeing that Nike is one of the top 10 brands and has millions of followers, comparing your brand to it may not be advisable if you're fresh out of the gate. While it's great to have a healthy understanding of who is at the top, it's more beneficial to have a realistic competitive set of brands that are comparable to your own. A little research will come into play here.

Define your competitors based on things like product, placement in the store, distribution, countries the product is sold in, and existing online audience size. You will want to choose brands that are very similar to your own with these metrics in mind. Start by making a list of 10 other brands. If they are on Instagram, make note of their follower counts, how many times they post per week, the voices they use in captions, and their styles of photography. Update this list at least once per month. It will help to see how your competitors are handling the space when concepting for your own photos.

Reporting and Adapting

To judge how well your content is working, set KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) before launching your profile. Popular Instagram KPIs are average Likes received on photos, average comments received on photos, and follower count. Tools like Iconosquare give three other metrics that are helpful, such as "Love Rate" (how much your followers like your media), "Talk Rate" (how much your followers engage with your content), and "Spread Rate" (engagement beyond your followers). Go through these insights at the end of every month and watch how your followers and engagement levels fluctuate. Based on those findings, you will be able to make decisions about what is and isn't working with your audience. Tweak your content to see what garners more interaction. Test giveaways, regrams and specific campaigns.

When starting out you must realize that everyone is continually adapting to become better. Content is created to entertain for the moment. We learn from the result and create something better. Networks like Instagram were made to help people and brands grow

artistically. This is an opportunity to showcase how brands can be relatable and human. You don't have to be a large untouchable corporation with a huge team and tremendous budget. Your fans will enjoy seeing the human side of the brand that they can relate to in

real time. If you can get your brand to a point where users interact with and enjoy your content, you've had a great success.

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