

The Small Business Owner's Guide to *Instagram*



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If you're not a current Instagram user, chances are you have come across this quirky photo and video sharing app on popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Instagram is a free mobile app that enables users to snap photos from their mobile devices, edit them with a wide variety of unique filters, and then share them with their followers and own personal social networks. The idea behind Instagram is that users can share their life experiences while they happen through images. With the understanding that images themselves are an extremely powerful form of content, Instagram was launched in 2010 and has approximately 150 million active users to date.



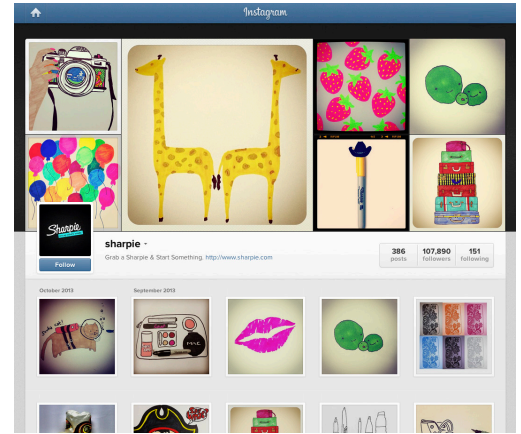
Why is Instagram Such a Valuable Branding Tool?

Businesses have been quick to adopt Instagram, and according to Simply Measured, 59 percent of the world's top brands are now active on the photo sharing app. So why has Instagram spread like wildfire for so many businesses? Well, it's an incredibly valuable and cost effective branding tool for businesses to take advantage of. Here are just a few ways that Instagram can help to brand your business:

- 1. Instagram has the ability to introduce your brand to an entirely new audience.** While you might be spending the majority of your social media marketing efforts on Facebook and Twitter, creating an Instagram account for your business could introduce your brand to an audience that does not "hang out" on some of the other social media sites. Buffer recently shared a helpful infographic that provides an overview of the landscape of social media users. Based on this research, you may find that your target audience spends a lot of time on Instagram, and not having an active presence on the site could prevent you from engaging these prospective customers.
- 2. Images are an incredibly powerful source of content.** According to HubSpot, 40 percent of people will respond to visual content versus written content. Images are more likely to inspire some type of action to be taken and increase engagement. Also, videos generate three times the amount of inbound links than written text posts, helping to boost SEO.
- 3. Instagram makes it easy for users to edit and share their images across a variety of social media platforms.** Users can connect their Instagram accounts to Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Foursquare, and Flickr for the ease of sharing their fun and inspiring images captured and edited with this app. Doing so will not only let your fans on other social networking sites know that you have an active Instagram account, but will increase the opportunities for "likes," comments, and shares to expand your online influence.

Branding Your Business Through Instagram

There are a number of ways that business owners are embracing Instagram as a branding tool. Given engagement data surrounding the use of images online, Instagram is the perfect medium for telling your brand's story via pictures and short videos. Images can help your fans to connect with your brand on a more intimate level and can provide so much more depth than just plain text by itself. **Sharpie** is an excellent example of a company that has embraced Instagram and used the social media channel to show that its brand is so much more than just a collection of boring pens. The brand uses Instagram to constantly share images of funky, eye-catching designs drawn with its product, and as a result, has generated a huge following on the site. All of the designs that Sharpie shares on Instagram have been created in-house, which helps to show followers that Sharpie employees too are passionate about the brand and what they do for a living.



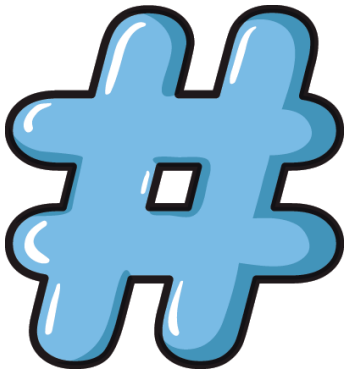
To elaborate on this idea, some smaller businesses and brands are using Instagram to create living portfolios. Doing so can offer your followers a glimpse of how your business runs from behind the scenes, such as your team brainstorming for a new product launch or a conveyor belt running its first load of the day. We often don't have the opportunity to see brands from this angle, and using Instagram to create a living portfolio for your business can function in a way as a story timeline for your brand. Use Instagram to help your followers root for your business and keep them in the loop with each major accomplishment that your brand experiences along the way.

Another way to effectively communicate your brand's story is to use Instagram to share before and after photos. For example, if you own a salon, you could snap a picture of your client's hair before and after her trip to see you. Images of "real life" consumer experiences with your brand can prove to be very useful for converting interested parties into believers in your brand.

How Hashtags Assist with Branding on Instagram and Other Social Media Sites

Similar to sites like Twitter and now Facebook, Instagram users have the ability to utilize hashtags to enhance the overall experience. This especially comes in handy with branding. If you're less than familiar with how hashtags work, the idea behind them is that they allow the site's or app's search engines to categorize your uploads (images in this case) with certain keywords. For instance, if you are searching for images of dogs, you would simply type #dog or #dogs and a plethora of dog pictures on Instagram would appear in front of you. To get the greatest reach on Instagram, your profile should be public (so hashtag searchers can see your pics) and every image should include at least a few relevant hashtags. Instagramers suggests that your user name should be preceded with a hashtag on every image that you upload. It's also a good idea to include a hashtag for the subject and/or location of the picture. For the more advanced Instagram user, you could include a hashtag for the filter or app that you used to edit the image. All of these 'hashtagging' techniques can help to expose your brand to a larger audience on Instagram and other social networking sites.

Statigram is a free and helpful social media marketing tool that your business can use to identify trending and relevant hashtags on Instagram that you can play off of. For example, if your business is located in Albany, discussion of the weather is always a hot topic, making #518WX a trending hashtag. If you own a roofing company and are running a special for the replacement of roofs damaged by hail, this would be a great hashtag to take advantage of for branding your business. Another great resource for finding trending hashtags is TrendingHashtags.com. This website is free to use and is updated several times a day with both the top trending hashtags and the top Instagram pictures.



When it comes to hashtagging, it's important not to go overboard. This means not using more than three hashtags for each image that you share as it can become overwhelming and distracting for your followers. According to Instagramers, "Too much tagging kills the tag."

Bonus: Statigram has a fantastic analytics feature that allows you to dive in to the success of your Instagram pictures. Use their data to see which posts had the most engagement, which filters you use the most often, and even what time of day drew the most likes and comments!

Overview of Instagram Features

Instagram Photo

The latest version of Instagram offers users the ability to edit their images with 17 free custom designed filters as well as to incorporate linear and radial tilt-shift blur effects into their pictures if desired. Even the most amateur of photographers can look like a professional with the help of this app, and we all know how important high quality images are when it comes to branding. If you're having a difficult time trying to find the perfect Instagram filter for your photo, Mashable offers a useful overview of each filter and when to use them.

You should also consider downloading some of these free photo editing apps to enhance your Instagram pictures:

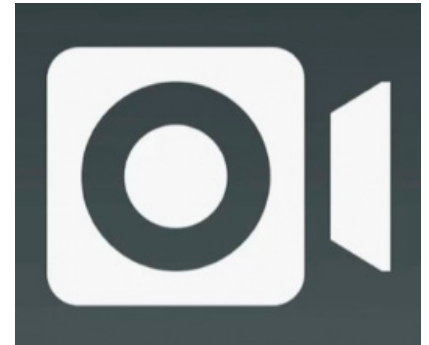
- **Pic Stitch:** This app will allow users to combine several pictures into one Instagram shot. In addition to choosing from 32 different layouts, users can further customize pictures with frames, patterns, shadows, and several other unique options.
- **Vintage Deco:** Instagram pictures already have that cool factor, and this free app allows you to add a vintage effect to your images.
- **Camera360:** If you're looking for some additional filters, this free app has them. This is also a helpful app for fixing any dark or underexposed photos that you may have captured with your mobile device.

Instagram Video

When Instagram first came out in 2010, users only had the ability to share images on the site. However, in June of 2013, Instagram rolled out a video feature, which rivals Twitter's Vine video service. With Instagram's video feature, users are able to create and share a 15 second video versus Vine's more brief

6 second video. Branding on social media sites is all about share-ability, and video is an excellent way to keep your audience engaged. According to comScore, 90 percent of online shoppers find brand videos helpful when making a purchasing decision. In addition, 65 percent of consumers will visit a brand's website after viewing a video to learn more. The power of video marketing is undeniable, and Instagram offers brands a unique way to customize their brief video content.

Although Instagram's video feature is newer than Twitter's Vine video, Search Engine Journal recently shared that twice as many of the top 100 brands prefer Instagram video over Vine, and there are a few reasons for this. First, Instagram video allows brands to utilize filters to make the production look more professional, and its video stabilization feature helps to cover up any unwanted shakiness during recordings. Second, a video created using the Instagram app has the potential to reach a larger audience since Facebook owns the site and has more than 1 billion active users. On the contrary, Twitter's Vine video has a considerably smaller audience with 200 million active members on Twitter. The third reason why brands are choosing Instagram video over Vine is due to the difference in length. While Instagram only allows users 15 seconds of shooting time, Vine videos are even shorter with 6 seconds of recording time. The additional 9 seconds of video that Instagram offers allows brands to include more content without having to stuff it all in.



We've talked about how Instagram can play such a critical role in telling your brand's story, and this is even more effective with Instagram's video feature. Although this feature is still fairly new, several major brands are already embracing it for this very purpose. For example, by watching lululemon athletica's latest Instagram video, you can learn nearly everything there is to know about this creative and playful brand in less than 20 seconds without any narration or product pushing. Another great example is Ben & Jerry's. I mean, who doesn't like ice cream? And if you didn't know much about Ben & Jerry's before you watched this behind the scenes Instagram video, you will run out and pick up a pint of this deliciousness after seeing how this brand whips up a batch.

Getting Your Business Started on Instagram

If you're excited about what you've read so far and have made the decision to create an Instagram account for your business, we wanted to share some easy steps to get you started on the site. Naturally, the first step is to download the latest version of the Instagram app (free) onto your mobile device. Once you've done this, you will need to create an Instagram profile for your business. Marketing Think shares a helpful infographic for building the perfect Instagram profile, and you will want to be sure to complete the following at a minimum:

- **Profile Picture:** If you haven't had a chance to experiment with Instagram yet, a simple image of your company logo will do.
- **Company Name:** You will want your Instagram user name to closely resemble your company name.
- **Profile:** Provide a brief overview of your business and why you have decided to become active on Instagram.

- **URL:** Include your company website.
- **Notifications:** Enable your uploaded images to be found by everyone on Instagram by removing all privacy barriers.
- **Photos of You:** Don't be afraid to upload images of yourself as you are the face behind your brand. This can help to humanize your brand and deepen the connection with your followers.

Once you've created your Instagram profile, there are a few additional settings that you should take into account to enhance your overall experience on the social media channel. First of all, you should opt for push notifications to be sent to you to alert you when followers comment or like pictures that you've uploaded on the site or when your brand is mentioned on Instagram.

Second, when setting up your Instagram account, you will have the option to connect your account with your other social media channels, and you will absolutely want to do this. Simply go to your Instagram profile tab, click on the shared settings tab, and specify the social networks that you want to connect with Instagram.



Before you start uploading images on Instagram, it's a good idea to make yourself familiar with how the site works. Snap some pictures with your mobile device and take some time to play around with the filters and various features that the site offers. Search through hashtags to see which ones are currently trending and gain a better understanding of how other brands are using hashtags.

How to Get More Followers for Your Brand on Instagram

So once you've created a thorough Instagram profile made yourself comfortable with the social media channel, it's time to get some followers for your brand. Since consumers crave third party validation, having a large follower base on Instagram helps to establish credibility for your brand. Here are some useful tips for attracting more followers on Instagram:

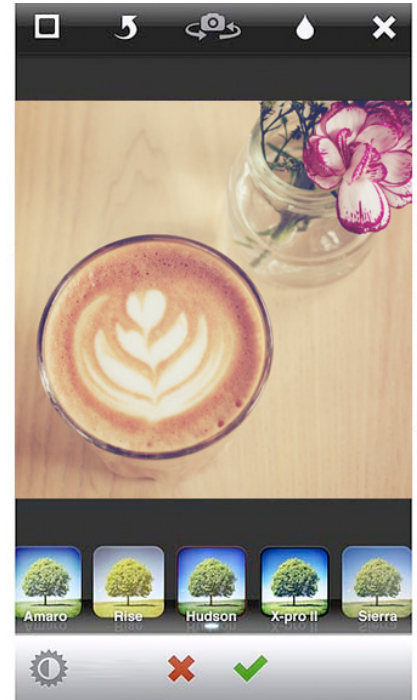
- Keep your profile public for maximum exposure.
- Share images that people can relate and connect to. Social media offers brands a unique opportunity to humanize their brand, and the most successful brands on Instagram are those that share images from a human's perspective versus a corporate one.
- Use relevant, trending hashtags for your images to make it easier for people to find your brand on Instagram.
- Know when your target audience is most likely to be active on Instagram and upload images during those times.
- Include CTAs in your captions to inspire some type of action to be taken.
- Share your Instagram pictures and videos on Facebook to increase the reach and audience engagement.

Embracing these techniques can help to expose your brand to a larger audience of prospective followers on Instagram and ultimately earn you more advocates for your brand.

Best Practices for Using Instagram for Your Business

When it comes to best practices for using Instagram to help brand your business, Social Media Examiner has some great advice:

- Share images that show off your brand's personality. This includes offering a healthy balance of fun images and business pictures.
- Make a habit of following anyone that chooses to follow you, and engage in your followers' uploads by liking and commenting on their images. Your followers are likely to return the favor for you.
- Come up with a schedule for posting regularly on Instagram. An inconsistent posting schedule is one of the biggest mistakes that a brand can make when using social media in general, and Instagram more specifically.
- Don't have just one "go to" filter that you use to edit your images as your followers like to see variety.
- Create engagement among your followers by hosting a photo contest on Instagram. To best monitor photo submissions, you can create a brand relevant hashtag specifically for this contest. This is not only useful for tracking purposes, but can help to create brand awareness.
- Use Statigram to measure and analyze what's working and what isn't. Like everything you do in marketing, 'always be testing' and 'always be analyzing.'



How to Track Your Success on Instagram

One of the great things about social media marketing is that there are a number of free tools available to help you to track and measure your success.

As a best practice, tagging your images with URLs can allow you to track how your uploads are performing with Google Analytics. At the moment, Instagram does not allow clickable URLs in your post description. However, if your post is enticing enough, including a shortened URL has been proven enticing enough for viewers to type it into their browser.

Another free tracking tool that we mentioned earlier in this article is Statigram, which offers the ability to track the number of likes that your brand has received, your highest performing images in terms of engagement, the average number of likes and comments that you receive per image, the growth of your follower base, and much more.

We also like Nitrogram, which is another free analytics tool that offers brands the ability to track follower engagement, monitor hashtags with any relevance to your brand, and be "in the know" of what people are saying about your competition.

Summary

Instagram is an incredibly powerful tool for sharing visual content (both images and video) and could perhaps be the most important branding tool that you use for internet marketing. Like many other social media channels available, it's critical that your business first takes the time to understand how Instagram works before jumping on board. Hopefully, the resources and tips shared in this Small Business Guide to Instagram will prove to be beneficial to you as you use this information to increase your exposure, traffic, and branding on this quickly-growing social network.

To learn more about using Instagram as a branding tool for your business, please contact us at [DigitalSherpa](#).



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