

Social Networks: How Instagram can create a powerful brand with a growing, captivated audience of listeners

Abstract

Social networks online have now become a very powerful way to share information and to effortlessly connect with other people anywhere around the globe. Whether we like it or not, the digital world has transformed how we live our daily lives. In an increasingly busy world, social connectivity through mobile phones and social media has changed how this new generation of people see the world. They are bold, they are aware, and they have a voice. Like sheep who follow each other and stick with each other, the fabric of these online tribes and communities continue to grow exponentially and organically. Whether the realities of the online environment continue to weave itself into the real world remains to be seen. Instagram began as a photo sharing application which let people check in to their location on a smartphone. It quickly grew quickly to become much more than that. It is now a massive global community of hundreds of thousands of people who are visually engaged within their local environments and are excited to tell people about how good it is living in it.

Keywords

Instagram, social networks, social media, online communities, communities, photo sharing, business, followers, fans, information, control

Vast communities within social networks now have the power to push popular opinions towards any direction it chooses. Those, who control the information on social media has the ability to influence it. Instagram is now an integral part of how businesses and communities can market their brand to gain an audience that can be highly stimulated by a visual storyline, creating a community of diligent followers that watch, listen and promote what they stand for. There is now no need for companies to just spend their advertising budget on a specific product anymore. It is now presumed that people will already buy the product as long they buy into the emotional connection of the company itself. For communities, the search for relevance can be done the same way, to promote a lifestyle or a way of living through emotionally connected images.

Social media and the transient world of the online voice represents a powerful opportunity for people to have a say in many aspects of life in today's culture. These connections are now part of a new level of consciousness that are potentially so powerful that it can impact on news headlines, business entrepreneurship, social awareness and even political results on a global level. Visually, Instagram is able to convey a clear message with one picture or photo. It can be instant, and it can quickly capture the attention of the person who sees it. (Miles, 2014) This is the reason why the power of Instagram is increasingly being utilised by small and large brands to create marketing word of mouth campaigns to enhance its reach.(De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017)

The face of business and advertising has been changed forever because of the digital world. People now have an inherent need to be connected with brands that represent their personality or ideology. The power of social media is now considered as a mainstream advertising strategy to connect with others who can feel a connection with the brand and what it stands for. This form of word of mouth advertising is ca create a very powerful voice of opinion. The ability for people to comment on or share their thoughts on it becomes a very important process for businesses to navigate through. (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007)

Online communities are able to reach the masses by connecting with just a handful of networks. The general concept of communities can be defined as a group of people who are bound together by circumstance, social ideals, shared interests or even through connected networks of influence. (Armstrong & Hagel, 2000) This still holds true in this digital age via social media platforms. The internet has the ability to link people together, even though they may not even have direct contact with each other. People are drawn together by many reasons through a similar narrative or principle which binds together the motives why people connect with each other. (Serafinelli, 2017) It is this ease of connecting with others that has the potential to build a powerful community of fans. (Brabazon, 2001) In the past people got together through a physical meeting. Now they can be of a virtual nature through connected technologies. (Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta & David, 2004) From a business perspective, through careful and timely posting, companies have the potential to enter new and specifically targeted markets to increase its brand awareness. (Miles, 2014)

For people who want to develop a start-up business, never before has it been so easy to start one from scratch and look for customers without having much of the overheads of a traditional bricks and mortar business. For the new business owner who is a Giraffe lover that sells coffee mugs with pictures of Giraffes on them, it is now just a matter of finding other Giraffe lovers around the world that might want his product. Once he has a supplier that can produce the item and can deliver directly to the customer, all he needs is to have a basic website, a free social media account and then search for animal lovers to connect with. From a marketing perspective, his story or brand just needs to connect with one person somewhere around the world that loves Giraffes. (Lindgren, 2017) The power of social networks will do the rest. This one person may already be connected with several social groups or be involved with online communities that have an interest with animals. By connecting with just one person, it may inadvertently open the door to hundreds, if not thousands of prospective fans that may end up being customers, (Papacharissi, 2009) The visual nature of Instagram is able to quickly capture the attention of potential followers to convey a message. The message is then able to be shared and liked through sharing and developing hashtag headlines which can appear on relevant search results. (Bergström & Bäckman, 2013)

The key to projecting the messaging of a photo posted on Instagram involves the use of hashtags. This was a way of categorising photos into groups. It is important to note that the hashtags don't necessarily connect with the visual image on its own. It is dependent on the user's ability to be creative with the description of the messaging of the post itself. Instagram itself has functionality that puts similar photos together to capture the interest of potential new followers. There also has been research that suggests that hashtags help create the emotion behind the messaging of the photos. (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016) The power of the use of hashtags and the sequence of hash tagging itself that enables posts to be very targeted and very specific for the intended audience. It is also the combination of the connected hashtag, the image content and the amount of data within the platform itself that has enormous potential for communities and business to get its message across.

The advent of the mobile phone ensured that people are able to react, stimulate and add images on the on the go. (Carah & Shaul, 2016) It makes the most of the ambient awareness of people's relationship with their mobile phones. Social media has created a phenomenon which some people call 'ambient awareness.' (Thompson, 2008) This describes the need of people to actively be connected with the internet and their networks. Whether it is an update feed from Facebook or a Twitter newsfeed, people are increasingly connected digitally. There is an inherent need to check in and find out what is happening around the world and what is happening in the lives of their friends. (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) The quick posting nature of Instagram's feed and the ability for people to quickly understand the back story of one photo hooks people's attention to the messaging behind the post. In doing so people feel connected and invested in people's daily lives. It is this connected feeling that entices people to continue to be involved. There is a sense of vulnerability involved when people open the doors to their world. With this comes a continued connection to be part of everyone's journey. (Papacharissi, 2009)

Everyone that uses social media is in fact using it as a form of marketing in some way. There is a school of thought that Instagram is mostly used for this individual pursuit of showing of one's identity. (Pavica & Bryant, 2015) In contrast with other platforms like Facebook, where connections are more made through direct relationships, Instagram is all about self-promotion. The hashtag functionality within the platform enables people to find tagged photos which enhances the potential audience numbers. The editing and filters that can be applied to the image can also give it an individual touch to capture the uniqueness of the photo. (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016) With the pursuit of individual self-gratification in mind, the aim and the point of Instagram is to gain as many followers as possible. By capturing the attention of the wider community of people who use Instagram, it increases the possibility that the images get heard and seen and liked which leads to more people following the story and the brand . (Pavica, Bryant, 2015)

The impact of Instagram and how it is used to create a fan base can be illustrated by examining how political parties have used it in the past few years. In the 2014 Swedish elections, the parties used Instagram solely to inform people of events or campaign policies rather than just to attract followers. (Munoz & Towner, 2017) It was found that different images impacted on the levels of engagements and likes, and that the platform was an important tool to funnel followers towards other social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. (Munoz & Towner, 2017) It also linked people to the relevant news portals that would benefit them.

In the 2016 US Presidential campaign the political parties started to increase the use of social media as a marketing strategy, in particularly on Instagram. (Enli, 2017). They did this by posting an image or a sequence of images to rally a call to arms to their followers. It was also around this time that strategists and marketers began to experiment more on how to create increased engagement. As they did this, they started to find that engagement did differ depending on whether different filters were being used and also whether captions and text were added. (Ferra, Interdonato & Tagarelli, 2014) Debates and political rallies are now streamed live, and campaigns are able to be digitally driven on many platforms. (Enli, 2017) Images and videos continue to increasingly become an important channel to convey a message or to justify an event or ideology. (Gainous & Wagner, 2013) With the advent of Instagram stories and longer format videos on IGTV, time will tell whether this will increase user engagement within growing digital communities. ("IGTV: How to Take Advantage of Instagram's Bold New Format," 2018)

Instagram is now being utilised in many other areas of society. Such is the power of online social networks, for the first-time indigenous communities around the world are now also connecting with each other from rural and remote geographical locations all over the world. (Dyson, 2011) In the US and Canada, websites, individuals and numerous communities exist which promote native language, heritage and culture. These social networks play an integral part in the development of promoting the country's indigenous heritage for future preservation in the digital world.

In Australia, the social conscience of Indigenous youths in remote locations is now being facilitated through online communities and forums. Their isolation now is not a barrier for networks and communities to grow. An example of this is the Instagram account of two sisters based in Sydney who have created an account to empower the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. ("IGTV: How to Take Advantage of Instagram's Bold New Format," 2018). Marlee and Keely Silva are encouraging young women on Instagram to share their stories and their lives so that young indigenous women can celebrate their achievements with their peers in the Aboriginal community. Luke Pearson who is a Gamilaroi man also started Indigenousx in 2012 to encouraging like-minded young people from Indigenous communities to share their knowledge and experiences to create a large digital community that has a powerful voice to create conversations on a national scale. ("IndigenousX Showcasing & Celebrating Indigenous Diversity," n.d.) There are many other examples of Indigenous Australians who use social media platforms to voice their opinion or just to promote individual achievements, being proud of their Aboriginality and their heritage, showing the world what they are capable of.

It can be argued that Instagram accounts with the largest number of followings have the greatest impact on its audience. In addition, those that are posting regularly and consistently with current and trending content will have the best chance of remaining relevant. (Carah & Shaul, 2016) There is also some research that suggest that the more topical the subject matter that is posted, the more it impacts on the popularity of the user. (Ferrara, Interdonato & Tagarelli, 2014) The users who are bold and are extroverted and who post pictures with a creative a touch, have a better chance of increasing their follower base. (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) The impact of having a large base means that it is possible to stream information that will beneficial to the brand, in turn increasing the probability for their organisation to continue to grow and be relevant to their supporters.

On Instagram, most people are part of a collection of groups, but for the most part, will never comment or like or share, any content at all. Most of these people are watchers or stalkers looking for things that may interest them. The attraction is to see what other people are doing with their lives and in some way feel that they are a part of it. The creativity of peoples messaging on Instagram is endless. These online connections make it easy for businesses and communities to share information and to effortlessly connect with other people. Whether we like it or not, the digital world has transformed how we live our daily lives and to a certain extent the information that we want to receive.

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