

Instagram: from a Social Network to a Marketing Tool

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Abstract: *Communication is the most important aspect of people's lives and it is considered a fundamental need. Human interaction has always happened and it has evolved with society. The evolution of modern media devices has resulted in the shift of interaction to the online environment. Together with the actions of communities, companies and businesses have been constrained to be part of the social media as well. This modern way of showcasing products on social networks has generated a whole new branch of media creators and advertising. Instagram, the platform meant to be a photo sharing album, has soon transformed into a new sales market, including brands and business profiles all over the world. Online creators put a lot of skill and imagination into creating suitable content for this particular social network. Brands invest in quality advertising to reach potential customers and improve their public relationship with their customers. The aim of this paper is to prove that nowadays Instagram is more than a social network, and can be used as a marketing tool as well, with the right communication strategies and visual marketing. Therefore, the proposed topic represents a new approach to marketing communication with the help of digital media.*

Keywords: *communication, Instagram, brands, advertising, marketing, digital media, social network.*

1. Introduction

As smartphones have become part of our lives nowadays, it is no surprise that most people use them to communicate. To facilitate interaction through the internet, developers have come up with social networks for the public. Naturally, humans have started to create virtual communities and share content with their online friends. The need to interact online has resulted in the first platforms created for the public to socialize, such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. From old to young, everyone has found their place in social media and created a virtual profile to reach friends, relatives or to find people with similar interests and hobbies.

Carr and Hayes (2015) define social media as Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others. Social networks therefore allow users to filter their content according to their preferences and this feature helps in creating groups based on similar interests. Among the most used social networks, *Instagram* is based on the visual aspect and is well-known for the quality content shared on the platform. Here, people manage to be creative but also to interact with artistic content; beautiful images are posted, but one also expects innovation and an interesting feed.

With digital media, people have created a whole new life for them, at just one click away. Companies and small or big businesses felt the need to be part of people's lives even online. Wanting to maintain their relation with their customers or looking for attention for their business, brands have started to become visible on social networks. Nowadays, people can interact with their favorite products and companies using *Instagram*, following the activity on the brands' profiles, watching different types of ads or tagging them in photos. This way, companies can easily maintain their relations with the public and can communicate with them through the

mentioned social network. The way a brand chooses to display itself on social media should overlap with the company's ideals and personality. The virtual profile is the online image of a company and consequently, it will count in the buying decision process.

As companies are now part of social media, the content shared on the business profiles interacts with the customers; this is *corporate communication*. The aim of public relations is to create, develop and multiply the relations between organizations and their communities. These relations are characterized as a set of expectations shared by all parties with respect to mutual behavior (Kim & Rader, 2010). Marketing communication on *Instagram* has to adapt to the content shared on this platform and the way companies promote products to the customers has to match the whole content shared. In social media, traditional commerce must be reconsidered and product placement should be more creative than ever. Online filters can help companies gather audiences around them and can also improve user experience.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the degree to which people realize how exposed to advertising they really are on *Instagram* and to determine which type of advertising users prefer. Along with the hypothesis that people interact with companies using social networks, we aim to share some documented proposals for future approaches to the use of *Instagram* as a marketing tool. The last part of the paper provides a series of factors that improve online presence and contribute to the success of a post.

2. Research methods

While the first section of the paper states the reason companies are nowadays part of social networks, this section focuses on different examples of marketing strategies on *Instagram* and on the ways in which people react to online advertising.

2.1 Examples of successful moves

In what follows, a series of examples will be analysed in an attempt to support our research and to determine what can be changed in order to make the public interact with a product. We shall take a look at three different scenarios where the companies have managed to sell the product in a suitable manner, without disturbing the users.

The first ad shows a post of someone well-known in social media, taking a sip of an iconic drink. The picture has got more than 7 million likes and is known to be the first ad that features an *influencer*. Once the singer Selena Gomez shared the photo to her followers and the photo became visible to anyone online, she associated her image with that drink. The popular company gained trust with this post as well as potential customers.

The second example is not a traditional promotional material, but a marketing strategy aimed at drawing people's attention to the brand as well as to the company's profile. Taking advantage of the attention created around the royal wedding and using the event hashtag, the LEGO company shared a photo of the royal couple together with the #RoyalWedding hashtag. This way, they gained more followers and comments compared to a regular post.

To really show the power behind *Instagram*, the last example is actually a world record. The newly created profile @world_record_egg got a huge number of likes and followers faster than anyone. The marketing campaign behind the project invited *Instagram* users to become part of breaking a new world record for likes, by liking a photo showing an egg. Gaining people's attention and making them interact with the account, the creators have revealed the brand behind the marketing campaign and now the account is used to attract members to the platform.

2.2 Market Research questionnaire

In order to succeed in elaborating a reference method for the current market, the questionnaire was chosen as the method of investigation. The survey starts from the premise that social media users make their choices based on the influences from the online environment and aims to find out the most effective way to reach the public. Using 14 questions, the method of approach with which the local market can interact will be determined, in order to later propose a successful *Instagram* marketing strategy.

The results of this study show that well over a third of social network users also follow the activity of public figures, companies or media creators. More than 60% of Instagram users noticed the advertising on Instagram. Among the most popular forms of advertising material exposure are video ads and photo or story ads. Users interact moderately to seldom with ads that send to the location; instead, the most popular posts are those which also contain a link to the purchase site. The research has revealed that the public is largely familiar with the notion of *influencer*. More than half of the respondents claim that they are often influenced by online reviews. This is accompanied by a high percentage of users who choose to research the company on social media before choosing a product. However, the most effective aspect depending on which users choose to interact or not with a post is the discount codes provided to the public on *Instagram*.

The answers provided by the respondents, presented in the table below, helped us determine the way in which they react to different types of advertising methods and what exactly makes users interact with a post:

Table 1 - Interaction with the ad

Type of ad	Interaction with the ad				
	Very often	Often	Moderately	Seldom	Hardly ever
Story ads	6	9	13	5	20
Ads as intuitive pictures	5	12	15	8	13
Video ads	5	10	13	10	15
Referrals to stores	9	11	11	8	14
Links to purchase sites	13	13	10	4	13

(the figures represent the number of respondents)

2.3 Negative example – a case study

In what follows, a negative example will illustrate where poor public relations can lead. This case study will show the impact that companies have through social media and the ways advertisements are displayed to the public.

An *Instagram* profile for cosmetic products is well known in the Romanian online environment. Many public figures and *influencers* have shared images with these products and have organized giveaways for this cosmetic brand. The public realized that all these posts were part of a marketing campaign. Although all these influential people on *Instagram* have shared promotional content about these products, followers have noticed that these creams and lotions were not actually used by the celebrities in the daily routine. Therefore, the lack of trust the users felt towards the brand came as no surprise. The aggressive manner the product was promoted in this case is a negative example and should be avoided.

The content creators chosen to be part of the marketing campaign for a specific brand should be trustworthy but they should also trust the products they are selling. Followers pay much attention to the products promoted and they associate the product with the face that is advertising it.

3. Results

In the results section, we present a series of factors that have been demonstrated to be effective. These tips can improve online presence and can contribute to the success of an *Instagram* post.

For a better interaction with Instagram users, content should be posted regularly on social media. Users tend to share content frequently and react to other content that has been posted recently. Instagram posts should be particularly innovative and the visual features are more appreciated on this media platform. Instagram is currently a platform through which companies manage to promote products in a creative way, emphasizing the visual aspect.

The users of the platform interact constantly with the products advertised online and filter their own results according to their own preferences. Through this platform, individuals can get in touch with new people and products. Freedom of expression and people's access to information has led to Instagram being used as a marketing tool. The quality of the posts and the time invested in them has built trustful relationships between companies and the public, and social media influencers contribute to the final choice of users.

The online personality created through Instagram is one that mirrors reality and does not try to mislead the public. The association of products or companies with certain well-known faces on the internet only reinforces this realistic, human, almost personal image of brands. The way a company chooses to communicate online and the topics around which it operates create a brand's online personality and contributes to its reputation. With each advertising approach or with each image posted for commercial purposes, it can be argued that Instagram, the popular social network, is more than a way of interaction, but a tool through which marketing strategies are put into action.

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