

ADVERTISING

Is Instagram a major contender in mobile social media for brands?

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By LAUREN JOHNSON

Mobile-only social network Instagram is on the fast track to being a hit with brands looking to target iPhone users with visually appealing content. With an anticipated Android version on the way, Instagram is on the verge of making a big splash in the mobile/social space.

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Instagram has carved out a niche place in social media that lets brands post photos to interact with consumers. However, the key with the site, similar with all mobile and social marketing is to treat Instagram as a separate social media channel with relevant, engaging content.

“Instagram, more than other social networks out there, really allows brands to become content creators, not just syndicators,” said Ron Schott, senior strategist at Spring Creek Group, Seattle.

“It is quickly becoming a way for brands to not only showcase products, but to give a behind-the-scenes look at their team, process and culture,” he said.

“That sort of “something more” is exactly what users are looking for.”

Mobile visual

Instagram is an iPhone app that lets users upload and edit photos to post to their accounts.

The company claims to have approximately 25 million users, making the mobile app a goldmine for iPhone users to show off their photos.

From consumer packaged goods companies, such as Coca-Cola and Chobani yogurt, to retailers including Anthropologie and Gap, brands are flocking to Instagram as a way to connect with users.

Publishers and political campaigns have also tapped into the Instagram platform.

For example, Condé Nast-owned Glamour magazine posts fashion and beauty pictures by editors that give users a glance at the inner workings of the publication. President Obama's campaign uses Instagram to show snapshots of his campaign and events that he attends.

Although the obvious incentive of Instagram is to show off a company's products, smart brands use the mobile app to establish a two-way dialogue.

Take Coca-Cola for example. The beverage giant recently used Instagram as part of its Heart Truth campaign to raise awareness of heart health for women. Users could then upload pictures of themselves with the hashtag #ShowYourHeart for a chance to attend a fashion runway show and a shopping spree.

"While it is a niche network – but growing quickly – the users on Instagram are incredibly involved and interact with content at incredibly high rates," Mr. Schott said.

"Mobile and social have been merging together for a while now, but Instagram is really the first mobile-social app that focuses on content rather than something such as location," he said.

"Because of that, Instagram has seen a swell in users from a more mainstream group and not necessarily the early-adopter tech set."

Apple nation

Since Instagram is an iPhone-only app, the social media site gives marketers a very targeted community with which to interact.

At the same time, Instagram excludes brands looking to target a variety of mobile users, most notably on Android devices.

Instagram has announced that the company is working on an Android app, which will help brands reach more consumers.

Making Instagram accessible on as many mobile platforms as possible is a natural extension of the company with its emphasis on photos that takes advantage of a mobile phone's universal camera feature.

Instagram has centered its strategy around apps to give users a rich experience that lives on their devices, and as the company rolls out apps for more platforms, it is expected to become a large vessel in driving mobile traffic.

With the growing number of consumers accessing their social media networks via mobile, the mobile-exclusive angle is an example of how users are switching to their handsets to connect with social media.

“The integration of Instagram with mobile and social marketing is about the cross-platform integration,” said Melissa Castro, digital marketing specialist at iProspect, Boston.

“The more social platforms brands can utilize, the more top-of-mind and relevant they are with their consumers,” she said.

“This platform not only allows the brand to communicate with their followers but also gives them the ability to cultivate relationships with them.”

To help build a multiplatform mobile strategy, brands can take advantage of Instagram to drive traffic to other social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and foursquare.

When uploading a picture, users have the option to share it to their Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr or foursquare account, which can help brands tie together their social media marketing.

For example, Gap uses Instagram to give users an inside look at photo shoots, products and inspiration.

At the end of each week, the retailer creates a photo album on its Facebook page with its uploaded Instagram photos. This not only helps Gap bolster impressions on both platforms but also give users who do not have the Instagram app a chance to participate in the community.

Another big draw of Instagram is its use of hashtags. Users can tag photos with a hashtag so users can search for specific topics, similar to Twitter.

If a users choose to post a photo to Twitter when uploading, the hashtags will also appear across Twitter, which can help a brand gain Twitter followers.

Levi recently hopped aboard the Instagram ship to find pictures for an upcoming campaign. Users could post pictures of themselves in Levi products with the hashtag #Iamlevis for a chance to be featured in the campaign.

Target audience

Although Instagram can be a vessel to help brands kick their mobile and social marketing into gear, it is important for brands to think critically about which types of consumers they are hoping to target.

“Instagram is not for every company – just like any other social channel it is best to only participate when and where it makes sense,” said Kristy Bolsinger, senior social business consultant at Ant’s Eye View, Seattle.

“For companies with a visually interesting story to tell then, yes, I would suggest it would

make sense,” she said.

“It is all about using creatively the tools and platforms that are out there. With apps such as Instagram that consumers are using, brands have a pretty great opportunity to get creative and engage.”

However, brands need to remember that not all social media sites are the same, and Instagram needs to be treated as a separate channel that can then be incorporated into other social media sites.

Because Instagram is visually-driven, the content should give users access to content not available elsewhere.

For example, Starbucks uses its Instagram account to inspire consumers with its products. The company also uses the social media site to introduce new promotions and campaigns, which gives users an incentive for following the brand on Instagram.

“Generally the same approaches that work on Facebook will not work here,” Ms. Bolsinger said.

“Have fun and do not be afraid to show behind the curtain,” she said. “A great use of Instagram could be to showcase a company's culture. Give your consumers something to really relate with and connect to.”

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