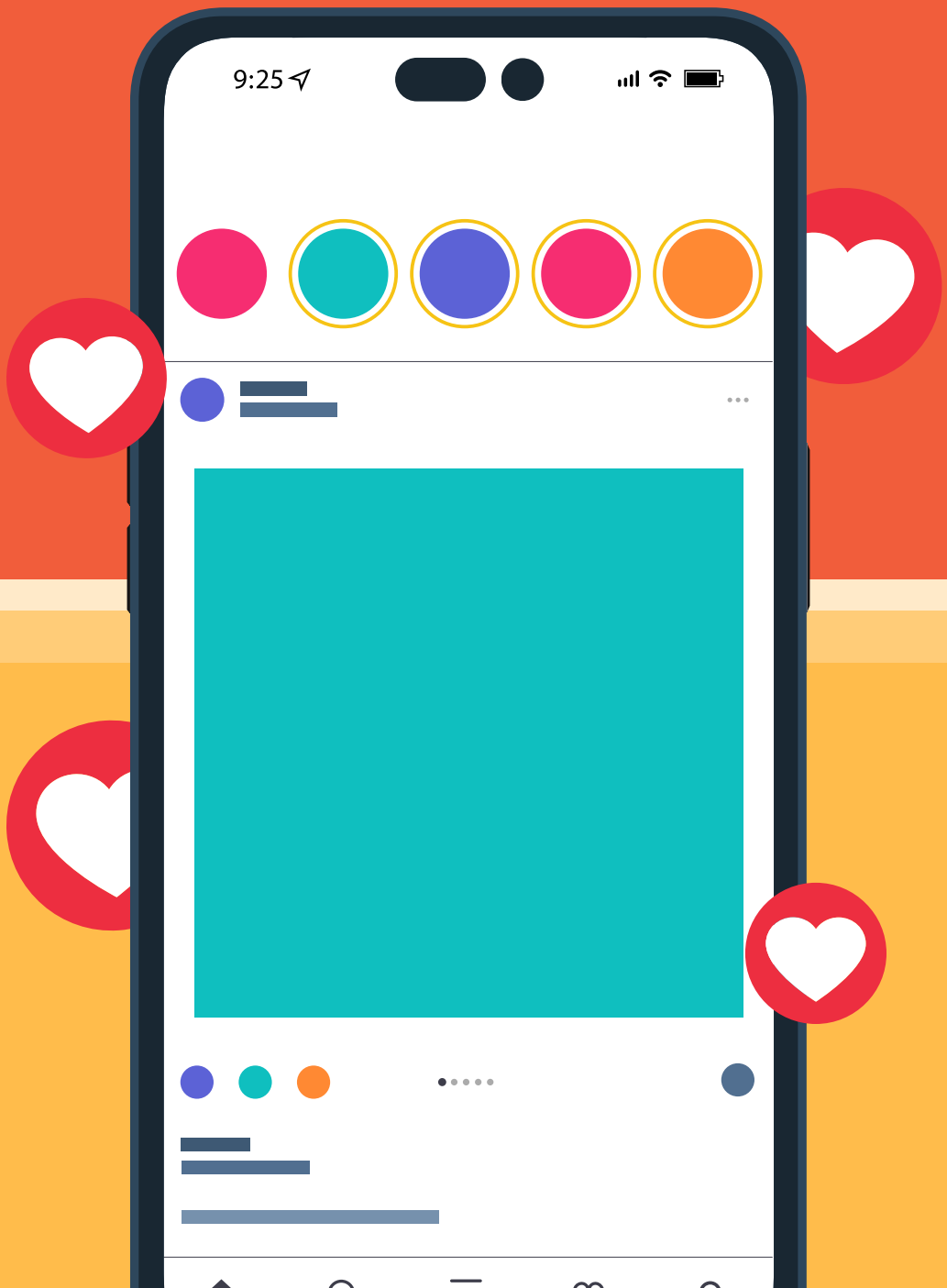
HubSpot x agorapulse

How to Use Instagram for Business



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INTRODUCTION

Doing it for the ‘gram, or is the ‘gram doing it for you?

When you think of Instagram, what comes to mind? Influencers posing with delectably designed food? Sunny beach scenes, nighttime cityscapes, and other wanderlust-inducing photos? Maybe even makeup tutorials, funny memes, and highly stylized fashion shoots.

These common tropes are only scratching the surface of the platform’s potential. Instagram today is a huge social media channel, with an estimated 1.074 billion monthly active users who are each looking for their own niche content to engage with. You can guarantee that your customers are following accounts they love on Instagram, and if you want your brand to be seen then you should be there, too.

There’s not one catch-all strategy for every type of business on Instagram — it’s more complex and nuanced than simply “grow your follower count,” and the platform’s algorithm for success is ever-evolving. A good strategy will help achieve real business outcomes like new revenue, and softer accomplishments that are intangible, but perhaps more valuable, like building a fanbase.



In this guide, you’ll learn the ins and outs of Instagram and how to harness the power of this intricate social media platform. Find out how each feature can be used effectively to reach your ideal audience, and the best practices to make Instagram work for your business.

Identifying goals and creating a strategy

Your Instagram strategy should include specific ways to use the features of the platform to deliver a great experience. That will differ based on your industry, your objectives, and of course, your bandwidth. Are you trying to increase your brand visibility by driving followers to your company profile? Do you want to use Instagram for community building and connecting with existing customers? Is there a product or service you're trying to sell through the platform? Each of these goals requires a holistic approach to ensure success.

Your first priority when setting up Instagram for your business should be to identify your goals for the platform. Set KPIs to track, and build a strategy to get you there. Then test, improve, and iterate until you come up with a repeatable way of achieving those goals month after month.



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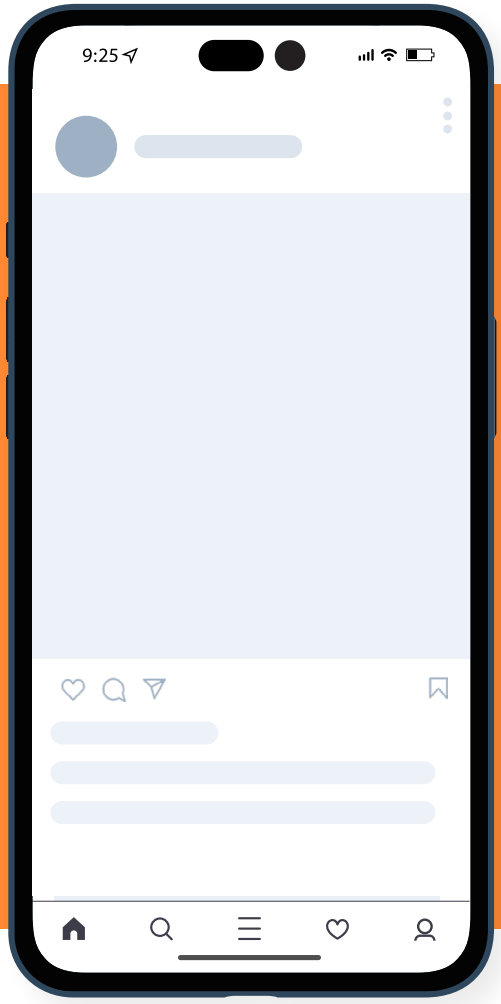
Free Instagram Post and Story Templates

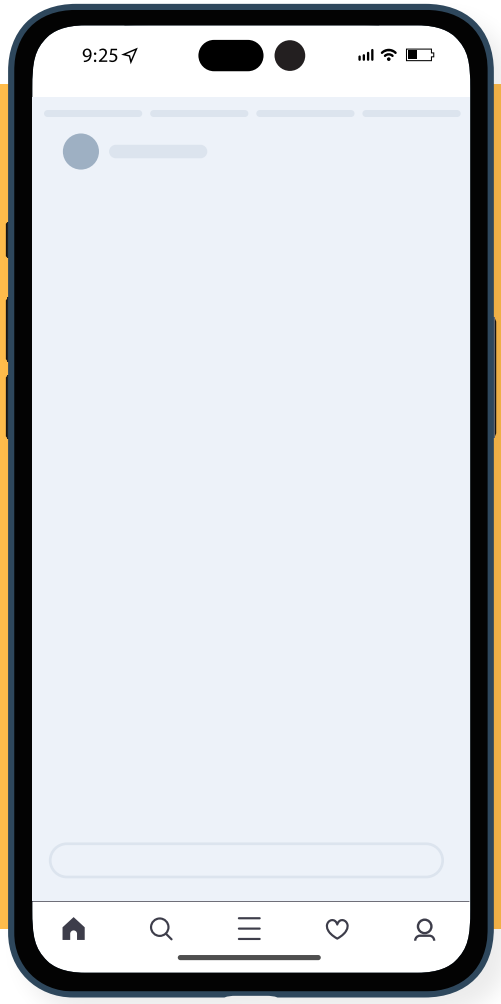
Use these templates to create eye-catching visuals for both Posts and Stories using the best practices outlined in this ebook.

POST TEMPLATES



Post Slides | Post PPT

STORY TEMPLATES



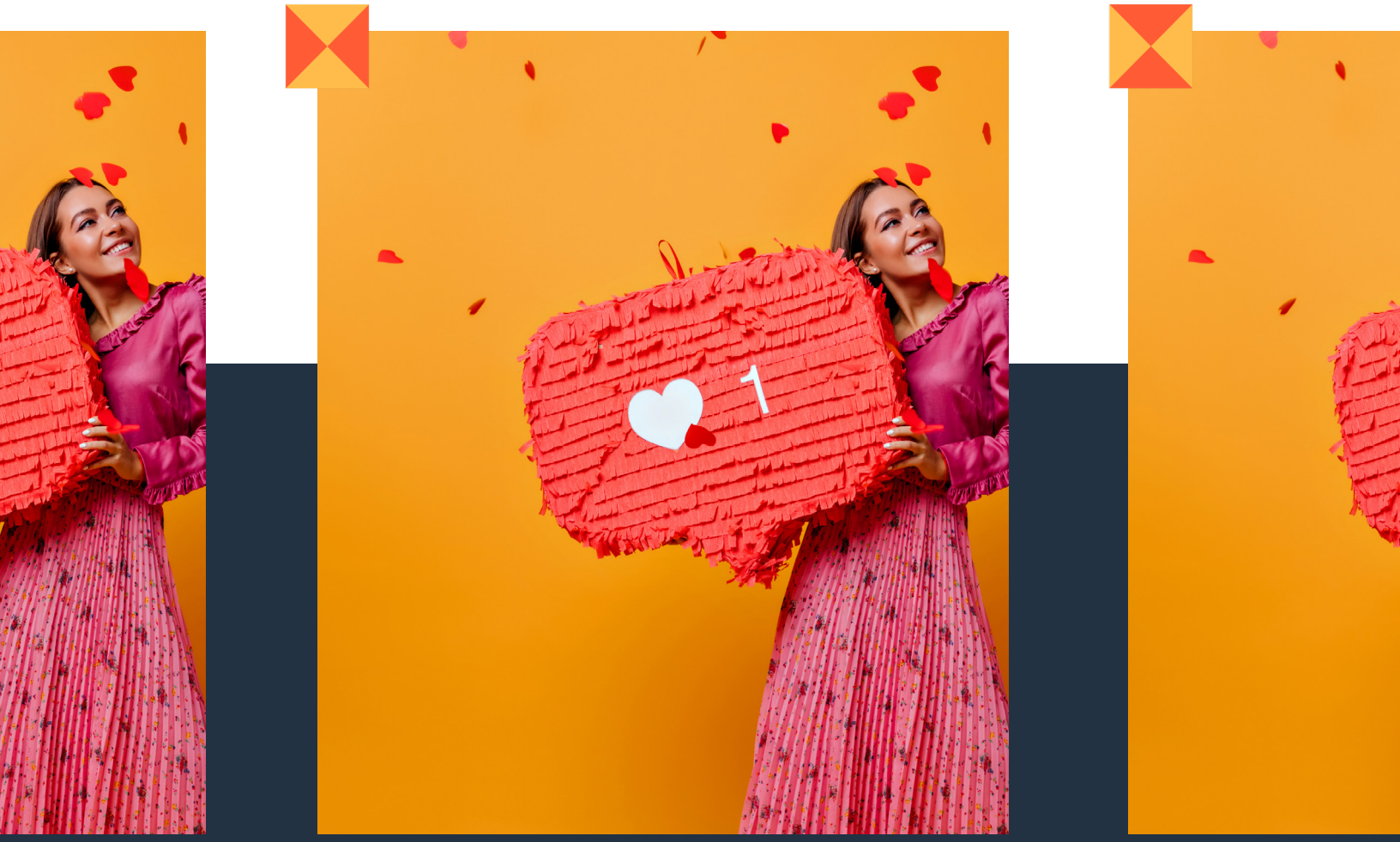
Story Slides | Story PPT

Engagement and followers

Any good social strategy will place a premium on engaging with your followers. That's the secret sauce to social media: When a brand engages with its followers, it creates an itch for more content that users can't scratch quickly enough.

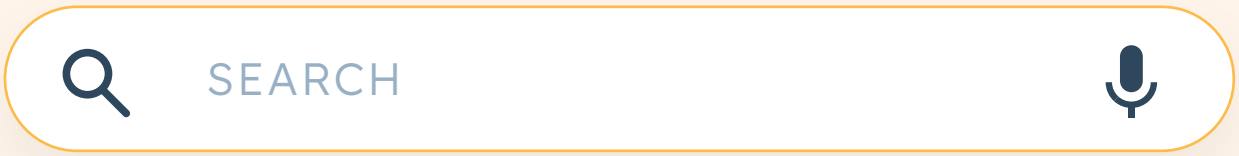
As the creator of the content, you might be tempted to tailor your strategy to how your **followers** are attracted to you. While important, instead think about how **anyone** can find you on the platform.

Besides actively engaging through comments and likes, there are two places on Instagram your brand can be waiting for people to find you: the search bar and the Explore page.



SEARCH BAR

Treat the Instagram search bar like you would any other search engine, like Google or YouTube. Set up your business profile accordingly with the right keywords in your handle, bio, and post content.



Assuming that people aren't searching for your brand on Instagram directly, you can meet them in the Search bar by applying SEO principles to your Instagram profile.

Describe what you do in your Instagram name and bio. This will make your account more likely to appear in searches for similar products and services.

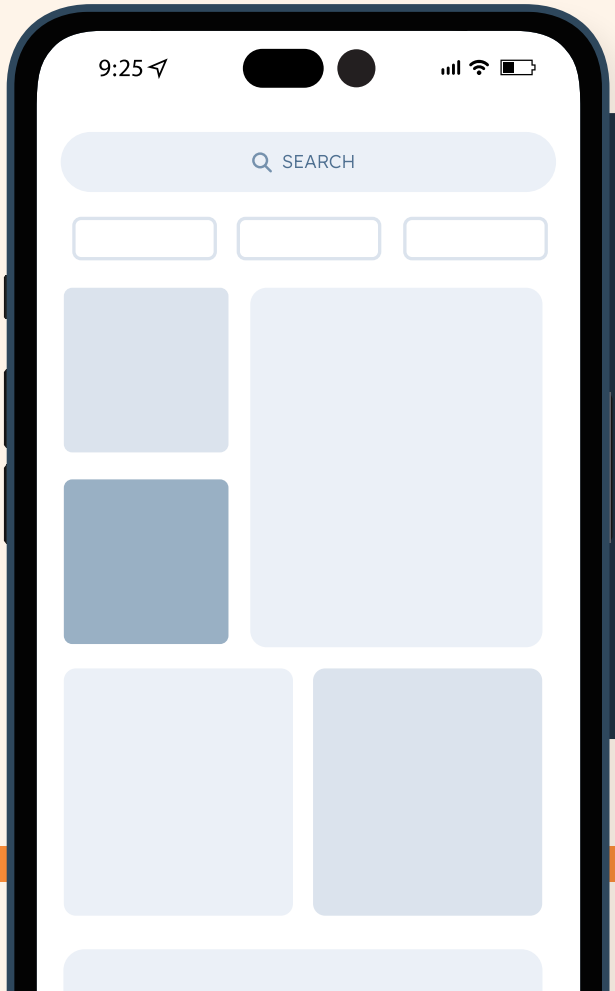
Be active, following, and creating content around the hashtags that are relevant to your brand. That's the next best way for your followers to find you in Search.

EXPLORE

The Explore page is a big bright shining spotlight on some of the best algorithmically curated content on Instagram. If your brand can crack the Explore page within your niche, it's akin to going viral. You'll see a flood of impressions and post saves — and yes, probably a follower bump too.

While the Explore page is a great entry point for your brand to new fans, it shouldn't be viewed as your main method for reaching new audiences. Getting on the Explore page in a crowded category like make-up tutorials or travel is tough. There's a lot of competition, and they're putting out excellent content, too. On the other hand, you might make it onto the Explore page for superfans of an obscure micro-niche like knitted toe rings or Tamagotchis and be none the wiser.

If you aim to create incredible content, the Explore page will reward you as you achieve that goal. If you only aim to make the Explore page, you may never make content worthy of it. In short: Shoot for excellence, not the Explore page.



Insta Biz Tip

Post saves are a good KPI to benchmark - they're similar to a "super like" that validates the value of your content. If followers are saving one of your posts for the future, it's a clear sign that you're serving up the right Instagram content and can help inform your editorial strategy.

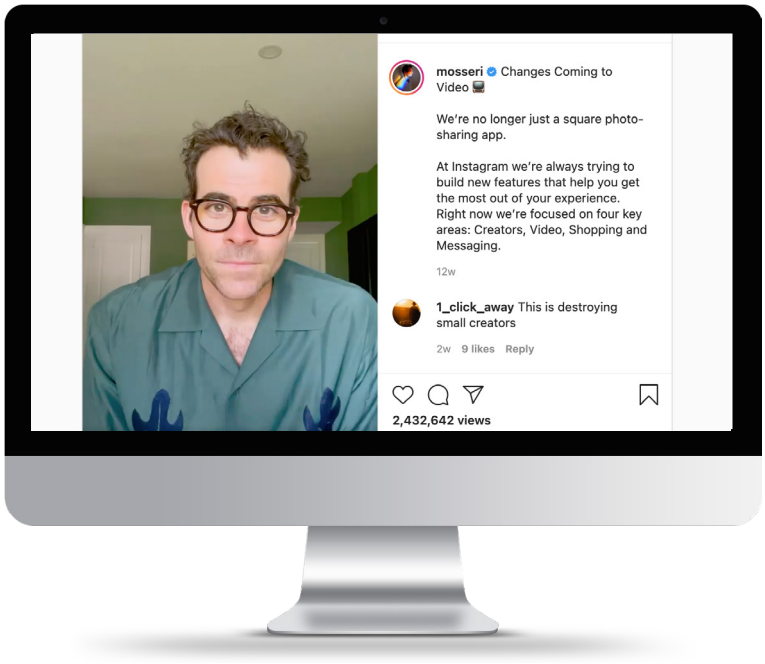
Square pix to video: Insta today

Today's Instagram is a very different animal from the platform Facebook bought back in 2012. In fact, it's a different platform from what it was just a year or two ago. With all sorts of new features, buttons, and ad formats added, it's clear that Instagram is going to keep evolving in the future.

Today's Instagram places a premium on video content. Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram explains it himself in this video:

> "We are no longer a square photo-sharing app,"

he says. According to Mosseri, the number one reason people use Instagram is to "be entertained."



Click the screen capture above to see the full video.

This philosophy should inform your content creation strategy for Instagram. Entertainment can come from viewing something beautiful or funny, something incredible or educational. Your brand must figure out how to entertain your audiences while achieving your business goals.

And of course, nothing online captivates people's attention like video.

INSTAGRAM VIDEO SPECS TABLE

Video Type	Aspect Ratio	Best Size (Pixels)	Other Accepted Sizes (Pixels)	Note
Feed	4:5	1080x1350	1080x1080 1080x608	This dimension gives you maxscreen space
Carousel	4:5	1080x1350	1080x608 1080x1350	Pay extra attention to the thumbnail on your first video of the carousel
Stories	9:16	1080x1920	1920x1080	Good for linking, and always consider - will this play in your Highlights section?
IGTV	9:16	1080x1920	1920x1080 1080x1080 1080x1350	This is your home for longform content
Reels	9:16	1080x1920	--	Made to be shared, so think big for engagement outside your community
Live	9:16	1080x1920	--	In-the-moment content; broadcasts from phone only & must be vertical

Get the essential guide to Instagram advertising

Instagram: the platform in-depth

Let's take a deep dive into all the different things you can do on this wide-ranging social media platform. It's worth your time to experiment with each format and see what your audience responds to. Play with the different stickers and widgets in Stories, and share your results. Make Guides out of your best content. Get loose and post a Reel.

Test and repeat to find the formats that work best for your business objectives.





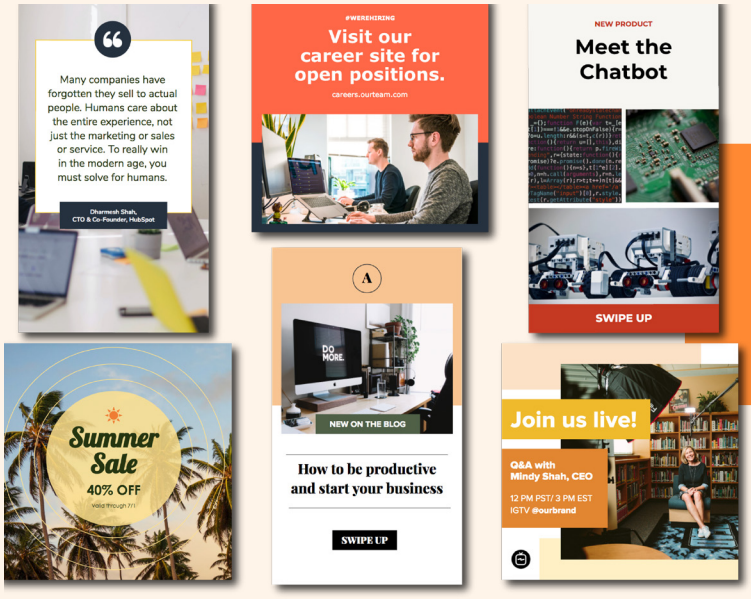


GRID & NEWSFEED

Anything you post to your newsfeed will appear on your profile grid, which shows your nine most recent posts on top. This is the screen equivalent of above the newspaper “fold” — no scroll needed.

Your followers will see this content in their newsfeeds, so keep that positioning in mind when choosing what to post to your account’s grid. We are long past the days of the 3x3 curated profile grid; while artistically appealing, the reality is that the individual pieces of those posts looked awful in the newsfeed. Attention should be paid to the overall look and feel of each post and how it will affect the fluidity of your profile.

What your brand should aim for is a cohesive look and feel that is recognizable to your audience. Also aim to make sure each post is eye-catching enough that someone scrolling on your profile or in their newsfeed would be so interested they’d stop to look, think, and maybe even share your content.



[Check out HubSpot’s Instagram templates for some inspiration]

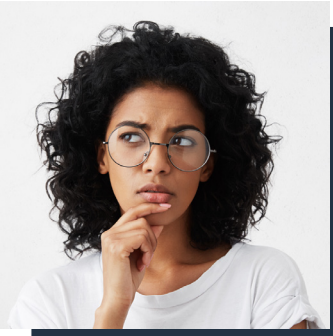
SIZES	1080x1080	1080x608	1080x1350	Aspect ratio 4:5

Videos: Up to 1 minute long, up to 10 per post (Carousel)
Images: Up to 10 per post

Your followers — as well as people who find your content out in the wild — will give you feedback on it in the form of likes, comments, saves, and shares.

WHEN TO POST?

The answer varies based on your business (is your audience busy from 9-5 or living online?), your location (does seasonality play a role?), and your followers' locations (when are they spending leisure time scrolling?). But a good North Star is **in the morning**. This gives your followers just about the whole day to encounter your post, instead of getting crowded in with a flood of posts about peoples' evening plans.



Insta Biz Tip

Consider what time zone your core customers live in when scheduling posts. An international audience will be looking at your content at very different times of day, so plan what you're promoting accordingly.

HASHTAGS: WHERE TO PUT THEM?

There are three general ways to place hashtags. The first is in a comment right after the post. The next is at the bottom of the caption of the post itself. The final method is to incorporate the hashtags into your caption copy.

Each of these methods will allow you to tag relevant topics and products in your posts. However, there are limits to how many characters you can use in captions - choose hashtags wisely if you opt to add them here, and make sure that they clearly represent the message you want to get across with your image. You don't want to appear to be keyword stuffing with hashtags in your posts. Adding hashtags in Instagram post comments gives you the flexibility to add more descriptive tags and text. Comments are hidden under posts, so this method means you also run less of a risk of seeming spammy in people's newsfeeds.

Instagram's algorithm favors hashtags in chronological order, meaning that comments coming after a post that contain a hashtag will get more visibility in search pages. Because of this, you may find that commenting your hashtags immediately after posting draws in the most new users. However, there are no guarantees when it comes to social media.

Again, experimenting here is worth your time. Use your Insights Analysis in the post to see which hashtag method draws the most users to your post.

STORIES

Stories are one of the most popular features of Instagram, and often the first place your followers will go to seek out your content. They provide an opportunity to promote your brand with quick-hit content, get customer feedback, and provide external links to your products or services.

Users consume stories passively because they are auto-served in a stream – people don't even need to scroll. Much like with hashtags and posts, the Instagram algorithm places a premium on new, engaging Story content. So keep your story posts current and use the many features provided to ensure your audience is staying engaged.

SIZES	1080x1920px	1920x1080px	Aspect ratio: 9:16



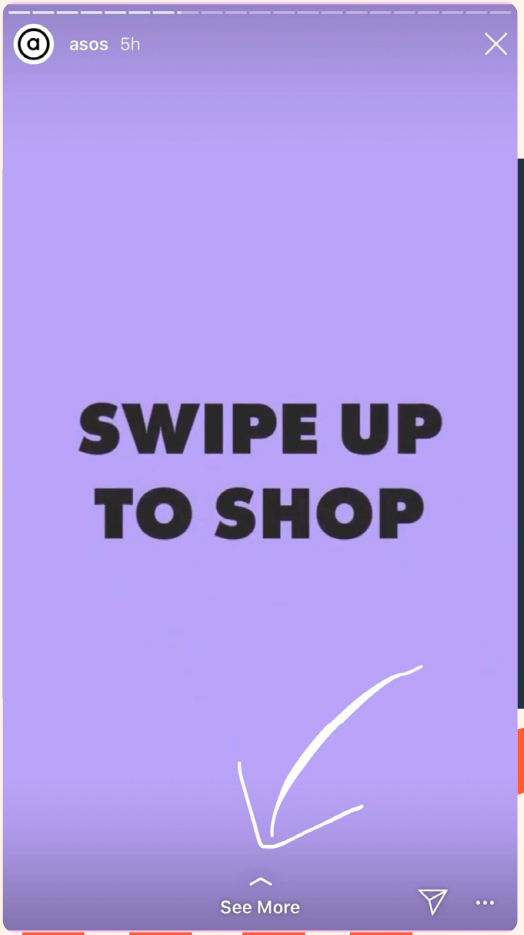


STORY PHILOSOPHY

It's imperative to your Instagram strategy to determine what your brand plans to use Stories for. This ephemeral space deletes the content after 24 hours, so you might feel that your hard work gets wasted by not existing in perpetuity.

Instead, consider approaching your Stories content from a lens of exclusivity, timeliness, and behind-the-scenes access. Stories can be less dressed up than standard posts. They can have some of the raw, unvarnished look that's hard to come by in the newsfeed.

Once you know how your brand will act in Stories, set about creating your content.



Insta Biz Tip

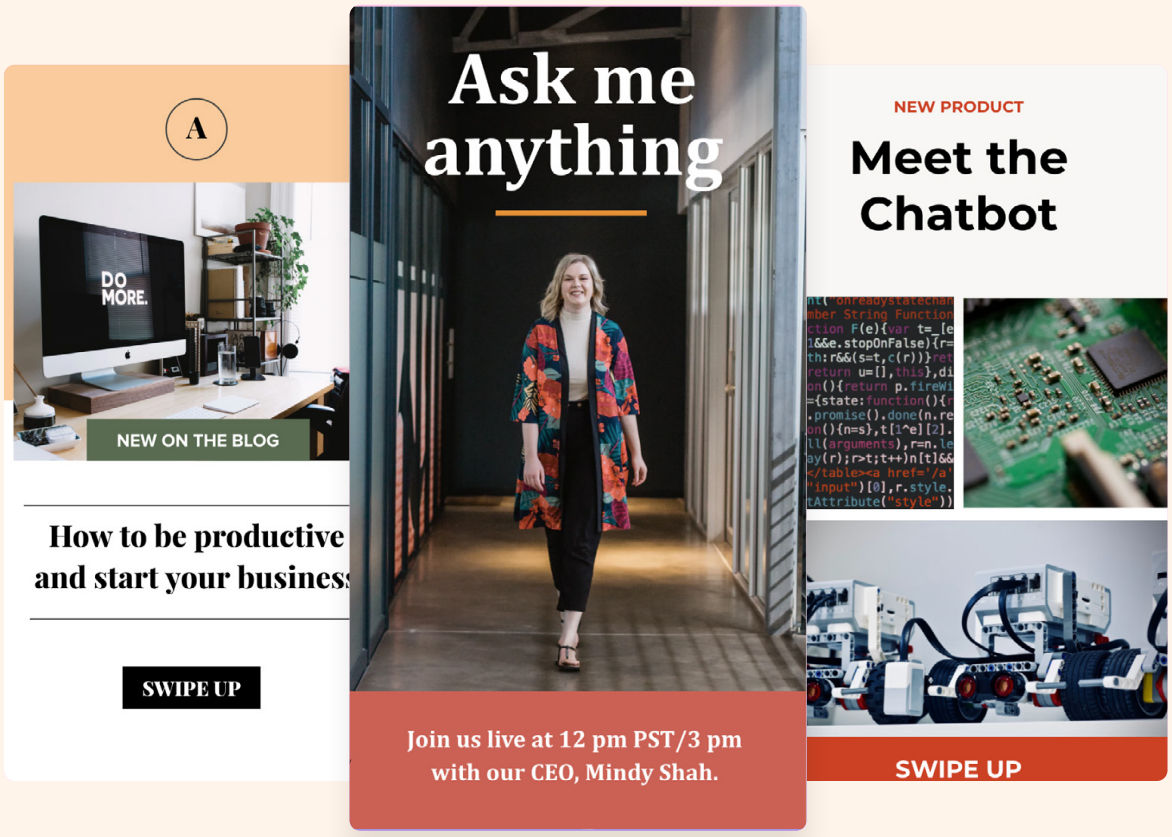
Save your most important Stories in your highlights - this allows you to preserve it publicly and add it to your brand's profile to be seen by anyone at any time. It's also a great way to build your brand story further through your Instagram presence.

STORY LAYOUT

There are 5 layouts you can add to your Stories, depending on how many images you want to share in one image. Because each Story post plays before the following one, you may be best served by creating multiple stories to tell your story instead of cramming too much into a single frame.

Story videos can last up to 15 seconds, and if they're any longer they'll play as a subsequent story. If you are posting multiple Story videos at a time, make sure you apply any stickers and widgets to as many Story segments as relevant.

You can also create videos for your Stories using static images. **Photobooth** is an editing tool within the platform that creates a short clip from multiple shots, like a digital photobooth. It's an easy way to get video mixed in from photo stills. Select it from your options on the left side of your Story canvas, along with other tools like Boomerang, Multi-capture, and Hands-free modes that can add dynamic elements to your photo and video Stories.



CLOSE FRIENDS



Insta Biz Tip

Place followers on your brand's "close friend" list as a prize in contests and promotions. It's a great way to encourage continued engagement after your campaign has gotten them through the door so that you can continue to provide value.

Within the Instagram app you can curate and create a list of "close friends," for whom you can create exclusive Story content that is visible only to them. It's up to you, and your brand, how to use this tool. Think of it like a less programmable dark post.

For today's creators, "close friends" lists provide a space for even more exclusive content for the most rabid fans. Some use it to enact a paywall and create a new revenue stream. Other brands use the "close friends" list to create an employees-only space on the platform. Consider who would value that exclusive content the most amongst your brand's followers.

STICKERS AND WIDGETS

From Giphy™ stickers to location and hashtag buttons, there's a variety of ways to express and show off your brand in Stories. Using these features will place your Story amongst the others with similar tags. For example, if you tag your location as the Eiffel Tower your content will appear amongst other people in the area, on Instagram's map. There are other widgets to encourage charitable giving or to support a cause, too. You can even use stickers to add music and countdowns to build hype. All of these widgets will help boost your user engagement through interactions with them.



Amongst the widgets that encourage interaction are:

• Questions

Which provide a free answer box you can then share the results of.

• Polls

Everyone can see the results, and it's a great way to take the pulse of your community.

• Sliding Emoji Scale

Light the engagement rate on fire by asking a great question.

• Quizzes

Do it for trivia night, share a fun fact, or just do it for the meme. Quizzes ask your audience for brain power but not the same physical commitment that leaving a comment does.

FILTERS AND BACKGROUNDS

The final embellishment on Instagram Stories are the filter and backgrounds. Choose these from the Story "home," your camera, before capturing your shot. You can download custom filters or see what's new seasonally. If your brand's design team has the bandwidth, you can even design and upload your own filter to share with the world.

Use the filters and backgrounds sparingly, unless they really enhance your brand. Filters can certainly enhance a photo that might otherwise be plain or boring, but they can also turn off your audience – distracting from your message and blending in with other content using that same filter.



REELS

Instagram Reels is the home for shortform video on the platform. While videos can be shared in many formats on Instagram, Reels flips the script by making the content easily discoverable through recommendations that are tailored to each user. If you want a video to go viral with your target audience on Instagram, Reels is where you should start. It doesn't hurt that the Instagram algorithm seems to favor Reels content for the first few days after it's been posted - testing out the format could give you a quick follower boost.

Reels allows for remixing audio content, which essentially splits your post into two pieces of content. There's the video itself – including the hashtags and comments it generates. Any performance data you collect around this asset will be straightforward video metrics, and tell you about the overall post engagement.

The other piece of a Reel is the audio you used, and that audio can have its own separate viral life. Many brands have hopped on the latest audio meme trend, and seen great success with their social videos. If you invest the time in creating great sounds or an expressive lyric that is easily relatable, you might find that your audio is used time and again, even if the video originally attached to it is long forgotten.



Insta Biz Tip

You have the choice as to whether a Reel appears in your followers' newsfeeds, or only in the Reels tab of your profile. Choose where you want your Reel to live based on how far you want to spread the word.

Developing a Killer Instagram Reels Strategy

Did you know that 2 billion people watch Instagram Reels every month? And 2.5 billion people will engage with the Reels feature by 2023.

Instagram Reels are a popular and creative way for your business to share content and increase your social media following. But having a killer Instagram Reels strategy is key to your success.

In this chapter, we're running through the basics — plus, some tips to get you started.

3 Questions to Ask Before You Start

01 What are my KPIs?

Without knowing what your KPIs (key performance indicators) are, you'll find it difficult to know what actions to take.

You can measure different metrics, such as **Reach, Engagement, Leads, and Conversions.** For Reels, most social media managers will focus on engagement. Engagement measures the likes, shares, tags, and comments that your Reel receives.

The metric for calculating your engagement looks like this:

Reel engagement % = Total number of Reels liked + shared + commented/total number of reels viewed

02 What resources do I have?

You will often hear brands talking about professional video shoots, makeup artists, studios, and money as necessities to boost Reels.

To succeed on Instagram, you don't need a million-dollar budget.

But you do need to be realistic and work with what you've got. The essential resources you will need are:

- High quality content. You can't compromise on this part!
- An understanding of the tools, templates, and effects available. Also, know the way Instagram's algorithm deciphers quality content.
- Good lighting and a fairly good quality camera or camera phone.
- Time to not only record a great Reel but also edit it and add captions, music, and effects. You will also need time to monitor the comments and interact with fans.

03 How will I achieve my KPIs?

Once you know what your KPIs are and the resources you have to work with, you can start getting creative!

Some hacks for boosting your engagement are:

Use trending audio.
Instagram, like TikTok, uses trending audio on its videos. Top creators stay updated with sounds, soundtracks, and effects that are trending to boost engagement. When you scroll through Reels, look for the arrow next to the sound. The arrow indicates that it's trending!

Include hashtags.
Your Instagram Reel will get more attention if you use 5-8 relevant hashtags. However, avoid low-quality hashtags like #instagramreels or #trending. Instead, choose hashtags specific to your product, topic, or business.

Also, add the hashtags at the end of your caption. Most people only see the first few words, so the hashtags won't spoil your aesthetic.

Share IG Reels to Facebook.
Back in 2021, Meta announced that Reels would also be available on Facebook. Connect your Instagram and Facebook accounts and enable sharing to expand the reach of your Reels.

Be authentic.
Fans will warm to you more if you're authentic and sharing real experiences and honest content as opposed to "salesly" content.

Schedule your Reels.
Yes, you can now schedule Reels! Use a tool like Agorapulse to schedule Reels and other social media posts. The benefits include being able to post consistently, hitting the right time zones for your audience, and taking a vacation.

Split Test.
Creating a winning strategy takes time. Try split testing your content with and without hashtags. With captions and effects or without. You can also vary your content formats by going **behind the scenes, sharing promos, offering tips and reviews, teases and reveals or meet the team features.** You can also boost your Reels to see what impact it will have.

Use Instagram Collabs.
This cool tool allows you to share credit with another creator. They can then share the Reel from their page as if it was native! **For brands working with micro and macro influencers or those with brand partners, this is a must-try.** You can access Collabs by selecting "Tag" and inviting collaborators before you hit publish on your Reel. Once the other user accepts your collaboration request, it will show on their own Reels tab!

DID YOU KNOW?

As part of Instagram's commitment to investing $1 billion+ in creators through 2022, the company is helping creators earn money when people view their reels.

The Reels Play bonus pays eligible creators based on the performance of their Reels and will be available on Facebook and Instagram. This is an added sweetener for influencers teaming up with brands.

Reward your followers. If you can provide a discount code, merchandise, or an exclusive offer for your fans, they will love you for it. But remember to add end dates to offers to increase the FOMO (fear of missing out) appeal for your Reels.

Insta Biz Tip

If you want to create viral Reels, you need to hit the sweet spot of "replayability." You can aim for this by using trending themes and music, providing value, and including humor. Many of the top viewed Reels are just 15 seconds long. That's because short Reels tend to loop, so they will count as multiple views!

INSTAGRAM LIVE

Instagram Live is for in-the-moment content. When you go live, you start a vertical stream that anyone can join into and watch. You act as moderator, and can even share your live space with others following the stream. Live sessions can last up to one hour, during which you can engage directly with your followers by soliciting reactions from the audience, responding to comments, and more.

By scheduling a time to go live, you can share your session with other audiences off the Instagram platform to encourage them to join. Maybe you use it as a way to create a less formal webinar, or maybe it's just time for a big company announcement. Either way, you should make it clear when you are going live by posting about it across your social channels, emailing your clients, and spreading the word about your programming schedule. You'll have a better opportunity to attract more people who might find the content valuable.

One of the biggest benefits of going live is that many of your followers will get a push notification on their phones that you are live streaming. It's a guaranteed boost to your brand visibility – even if few people join the live stream.

While going live and sustaining a stream requires an abundance of creativity and topics to discuss, you also need a savvy host who can think on their feet, have quick comebacks and quips, or at least has an interesting and dynamic background. If you have the skills to ride a bike, skateboard, ski, or captain a boat while also going live, you **will** gain an audience that's drawn to the moving scenery even if what you're saying doesn't apply to them.

In short: A solid live stream on Instagram not only requires interesting and engaging topics to discuss, but it has to capture both the eyes and the ears of your target audience.

Insta Biz Tip

Use widgets & features in story posts to boost visibility and engagement for your next Instagram Live. Add a countdown sticker or a poll to get your audience and customers excited about the event.

GUIDES

If you're ready to make an Instagram Guide, that means you must have created some successful content that engages people and keeps them coming back again and again. Compiling a Guide with these posts makes that content easy to find for your potential customers.

Guides are a compilation of your best newsfeed content. Instead of having your followers scroll through all your content to find the best-performing posts or what's most relevant to them, Guides give you the option to title various posts and compile them in one section on your profile. It's a curated view of thematic Instagram content.





Insta Biz Tip

Create Guides that highlight both your offering and your customers' experience to give audiences a 360-view of your business. Make a Guide on how to use your product. Generate another consisting of customer reviews. Make one for FAQs or UGC (user-generated content), and curate a Guide about new and creative ways people are using your products. Each presents an opportunity to showcase your brand and its impact.

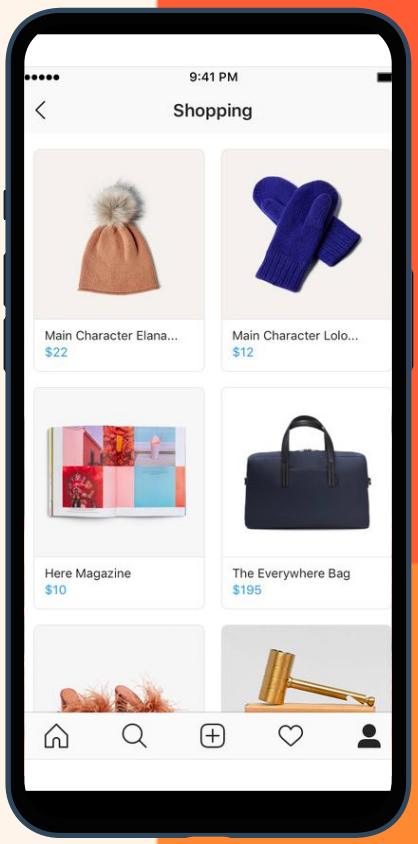
IGTV



IGTV is a video space where you can schedule and share programmatic content. From a mobile device, you can upload 15 minute “episodes”. Using a desktop browser, that limit increases to 60 minutes.

If the on-the-fly, free-wheeling creativity needed for going live is too much to bear, a scripted performance can be shared with Instagram on IGTV. It also plays an important role in shopping on Instagram because it allows you to tag products in your brand’s Facebook Shop within your IGTV episode.

SHOPPING ON INSTAGRAM



Instagram has turned itself, in some regards, into the glossy and beautiful magazine it always was compared to – now featuring products you can buy without leaving the platform. The addition of two stylized arrows >> in the Instagram brand colors on posts now indicate to users that products being pictured can be purchased right there. By integrating shoppable posts into your Instagram strategy, you’ll give followers a way to buy your products inspired by your content.

In July 2020, Instagram reformatted their UI and moved the Notifications icon to the top right of the platform. In the space formerly occupied by notifications on the

bottom of the screen – a spot still seared into users' muscle memory – Instagram added a Shop icon, and their e-commerce plans became clear. In this new tab, users can equally find products from brands whose accounts they follow and scroll through suggested shoppable posts to discover new favorites.

There are three key components to how shopping works on Instagram; if you plan to use the platform for e-commerce, take them all into account when creating shoppable posts:



WISH LISTS

This is a personal list where users can add the products of interest to them. It makes it easy for them to come back and select products from their wishlist to buy immediately. Like the "Save" feature on a newsfeed post, adding a product to a wishlist keeps the purchase link easily available for when someone is ready to buy from you. Items that are removed from the store they're sold in are also removed from a personal wishlist, so they can help followers keep track of your inventory.



PRODUCT TAGS

Instagram debuted product tags in 2016. These helpful links create mini-profiles for business accounts' products. These profiles can then be tagged by the business across the spectrum of Instagram post choices (Stories, Posts, IGTV, Live, Reels).

This makes it seamless to purchase the tagged product in-app, creating a one-click buying experience for customers and streamlining payments through Instagram. It also makes it easy for a business profile to create content around their own products.

Insta Biz Tip

In order to generate a product tag, the product must first exist in your Facebook Store and be configured to receive sales via Facebook Pay. Make sure that your Facebook Store is fully set up before rolling out an Instagram shopping experience to ensure a great user experience.



CHECKOUT

The checkout line is where Instagram has really innovated the purchasing experience in the platform. Users have the option to add a tagged product to their cart, or check-out immediately. Payment information can be stored so check-out is even quicker next time around. Payments are handled through Facebook Pay and some can even qualify for a purchase protection agreement.

Insta Biz Tip

While the checkout feature makes purchasing through the platform easy for users, it also makes Instagram a middleman between a merchant and their end customer with them holding valuable first-party data. If you do plan to use Instagram Shop, make sure to have a strategy in place for follow-up messaging with customers so that you establish communication with them and can get their details in your CRM.

DIRECT MESSAGES

There's one last place your brand can interact with followers, strangers, potential customers, and soon-to-be fans on Instagram, and that is through Direct Messages.

Some brand accounts set up an auto-message to send to new followers explaining what their page is about and how they can benefit from it. If that's actually what your message contains, it might work. But some users may think of these "you followed me, learn more" messages as simply spam, and links to other websites or products will be a turn-off to audiences. A brand that starts a DM conversation must truly have something valuable to say to the recipient.

Wait for your audience to come to you with their questions, concerns and problems. Then you are given a one-onone forum where your customer service and brand excellence can really shine. It's an opportunity for you to show off the brand personality and deliver dedicated support. It also allows you to establish a personal connection with your followers, and can improve their perception of your products and services.



INSIGHTS

Find metrics and performance data on your Instagram posts in the Insights tab. Here you'll get info on post engagement to understand whether your audience prefers things like video to static images, the times of day that see the most successful posts, or if people are clicking on your hashtags. While metrics provided by Instagram can be limited, any amount of data and reporting you can generate around your business' social media presence can help you strategize your next campaign or product launch.

You have two ways to access insights:



From your profile

This will give you a 7- and 30-day view on all of your content, outlining overall engagement trends, follower increases & decreases, and your profile reach.

On an individual post

Find out how many engagements, saves, DMs, and comments your post generated. You can see if the post is driving people to your profile, or if they're clicking through on the link to your website embedded in your profile. You can also see the accounts reached by this post and whether they were following you or not beforehand. You can even find out where the audience is finding your content from.

Your ad budget, reputation, or follower count don't entitle you to any more information in Insights than a business account that was created yesterday with four followers. So do what the data shows you will deliver success, and you can optimize the resources that you have available.

For example, many B2B brands on Instagram find that the weekends are not a good time to post. It makes sense, logically, since many businesses are closed on the weekends. Don't fight against your audience's tendencies in an effort to post every day - if you don't think you'll get engagement on a Saturday post, then skip it. Conversely, consumer facing brands on Instagram might find the weekends are when a majority of their sales are happening via the platform because that's when their audience has free time to go shopping.

Either way, there's data in the platform that can make your decisions feel easier - so seek out that data, distill it into actionable insights, and then execute according to your goals.

Insta Biz Tip

Supplement the narrow data structures given to you in the Insights tab with an open-data consumer intelligence platform. Taking the same commoditized metrics from the Instagram insights tab, a good consumer intelligence platform is able to "squeeze" out and then visualize much more information than what's available in Instagram insights. Find out how frequently groups of words are clustered together in a comment thread, what the main themes of a post are in commenters eyes, or maybe you just want a comparison of your most recent post's engagement rate to the brand's historical average.

How to Use Instagram Algorithms to Your Advantage



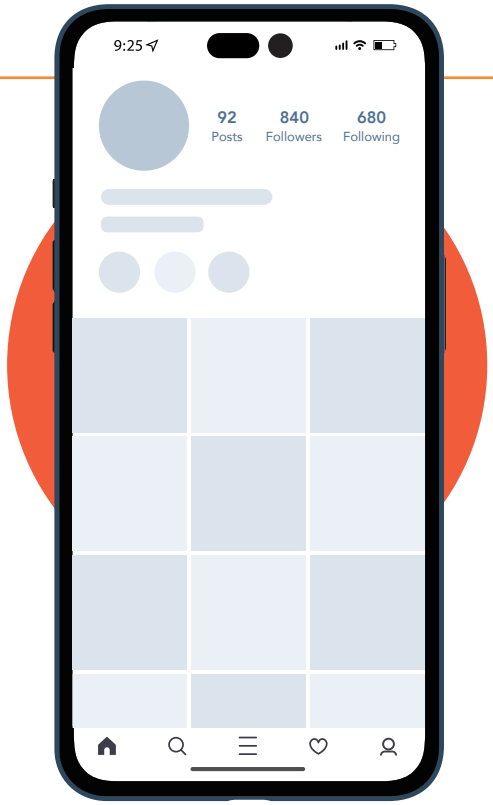
Jenn Herman is a social media consultant, speaker, and globally recognized Instagram expert. She has been featured in Inc., Fox News, BBC News, Yahoo Finance, Entrepreneur, HuffPost, The Verge, CBS Radio LA, and numerous other podcasts and publications. She is the author of "Instagram for Dummies", "Instagram for Business for Dummies", and "The Ultimate Guide to Social Media Marketing".

Algorithms may sound confusing and complicated, but they're designed to enhance the experience of users on the platform. When you keep that in mind, you can create content that uses the algorithm to reach more people and generate more engagement.

All the Instagram algorithms (yes, plural!) work on two main concepts:

01. Personal user preference over popularity
02. Showing users content that will keep them active and stay longer on the platform

Algorithms are designed to give users a better, personalized experience. If you tap into the right data, you can increase how many people see your content.



FEED ALGORITHM

In general, the feed algorithm is based primarily on personal preferences. The more a user interacts with a certain type of content (e.g., photos of dogs, rock bands, or home remodeling tips), the more Instagram will provide that type of content. That is determined based on a variety of factors including artificial intelligence (AI) scraping data off post content as well as keywords in captions and hashtags.

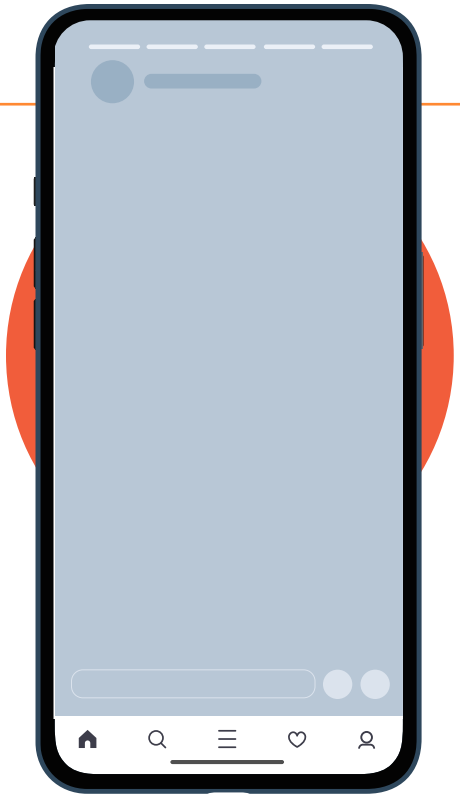
Additionally, the more a user interacts with content from a certain account, the higher in the feed that account will appear when they post new content.

It should also be noted that a variety of interactions are considered "positive" engagement, and we have no metrics on those. If someone scrolls back up to see your content, swipes through a carousel, taps on "...more" to read your caption, or just pauses to look longer at your post — that is ALL positive ranking algorithmically.

So, how do you optimize for this?

You need to create scroll-stopping content. Focus on some of these tips:

- Have a clear focal point without a busy background.
- Consider using the color blue somewhere in your content, which can increase engagement by 20% or more.
- Add a human component – even if just a hand holding something in the photo.
- Keep the images "Instagrammy" and visually appealing – not graphics and text heavy posts.



STORY ALGORITHM

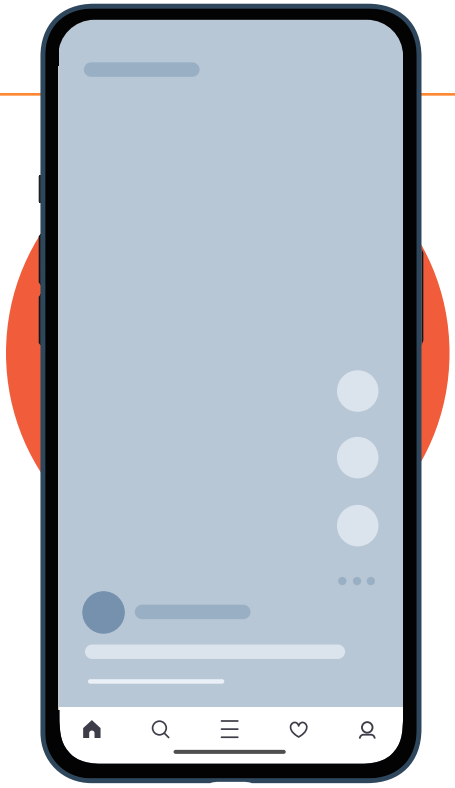
The Story algorithm also puts a dominant focus on personal interactions. The Stories you see at the front of the list are going to be new Stories from those you are most likely to watch. Those are the accounts you most regularly interact with via Stories, NOT feed posts.

The two feeds are mutually exclusive of each other. Just because you interact with a lot of feed content from one account does not mean that account will appear high in the Stories feed.

While passive engagement (only watching Stories) is engagement, active engagement ranks higher and moves that account's content higher in the feed of the viewer. Active engagement in Stories includes actions like clicking on stickers, tapping back to watch again, or responding with quick replies or messages.

You can take advantage of this for your brand by including actionable prompts for your viewers. Consider these methods:

- Use stickers that invite engagement. Add Yours, Questions, Poll, Quiz, and Countdown stickers are all great ways to get your audience to click and participate.
- Use the link sticker to drive clicks and show active interest in your content on and off Instagram.
- Add text to the Story that requires viewers to hold and pause to read the whole story or tap back to finish reading.
- Use GIFs or doodles to draw attention to stickers, calls to action, or other aspects of the post.



REELS ALGORITHM

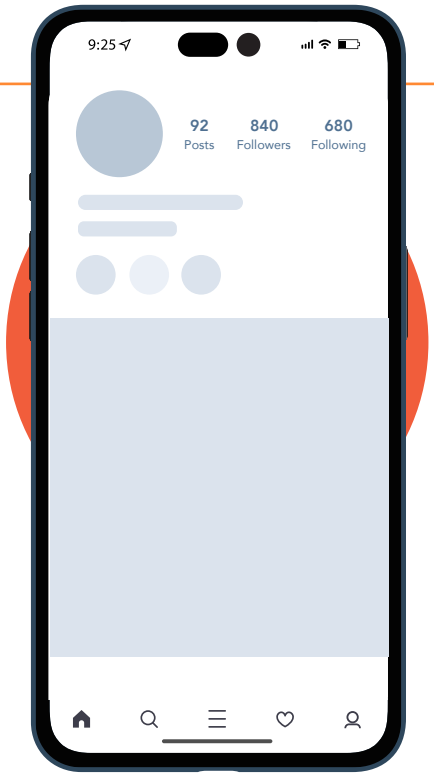
While Reels are still heavily canted towards personal preference, there is a heavier weight on popularity of these posts.

The more a Reel has performed well with others, the greater the chance a user will see it—especially if it's in line with that user's individual content preferences.

The more likely a user is to "like" a Reel or watch the whole video, the higher it will appear in their feed. If a user is likely to watch videos with a certain trending audio, other videos with that audio will likely appear for them. If the video is about a topic that the user is likely to consume, it will place higher in the feed

To take advantage of this:

- When trending audio is relevant to your brand and messaging, use it!
- Create timely content related to news and updates in your industry.
- Focus on shorter videos (under 15 seconds) for reaching new viewers who don't have the relationship with you to watch longer videos.
- Save longer Reels (over 30 seconds) for providing value to your existing audience.



FOCUS ON HIGH-PERFORMING CONTENT

The key to better reach and engagement on Instagram is giving your audience what they want for content. Pay attention to your insights and the types of content that drive higher reach and individual metrics such as likes, shares, link clicks, etc.

Then, map your content strategy around the content format and styles that achieve those results.

Remember that what works for your competitors or other companies may not be what works for your brand.

Test, test, test, and do more of what drives results for you.

Conclusion

Instagram is a big platform, and there are many different ways that brands can use it to go about making their mark on the app. If you make it your goal to deliver excellence, value, and entertainment in your Instagram content, audiences will reward you by engaging with the content, returning to it and asking for more. They'll share your content in DMs and Stories, in screenshots and reactions. Reward these kinds of engagements by lifting your audience up, making them the hero of the story, and your business will reap the rewards.



Additional resources

- "Instagram Provides New Overview of How its Reels Algorithm Works" (Social Media Today)
- "Create Social Media Reports That People Will Actually Read (and Like)" (Agorapulse)
- "Social Media Marketing: What Every Smart Social Media Manager Needs to Know" (Agorapulse)
- "Social Media Metrics That You Need to Track Carefully Every Month" (Agorapulse)