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marginmedia

# An intro to instagram

Instagram. The photo and video-sharing social network had humble beginnings back in 2010. The purpose of the social network was simple: to offer users an easy and unique way to share their photos with the world. From there, it evolved to introduce video-sharing functionality, expanded image size/dimension options, improved account and image discoverability, direct messaging, user-tagging, advertising, and more.

Now sitting at 400 million users strong globally, Instagram is more than just a place to look at user-generated media. It's one of the largest social networks in the world, and undoubtedly one of the most successful to ever have its start exclusively as a mobile app.

For businesses, there are plenty of opportunities to utilise Instagram to increase their reach, leads and, by extension, sales. In this eBook, I'll be discussing the fundamentals of the platform and how your business can take advantage of it as part of your digital marketing efforts.



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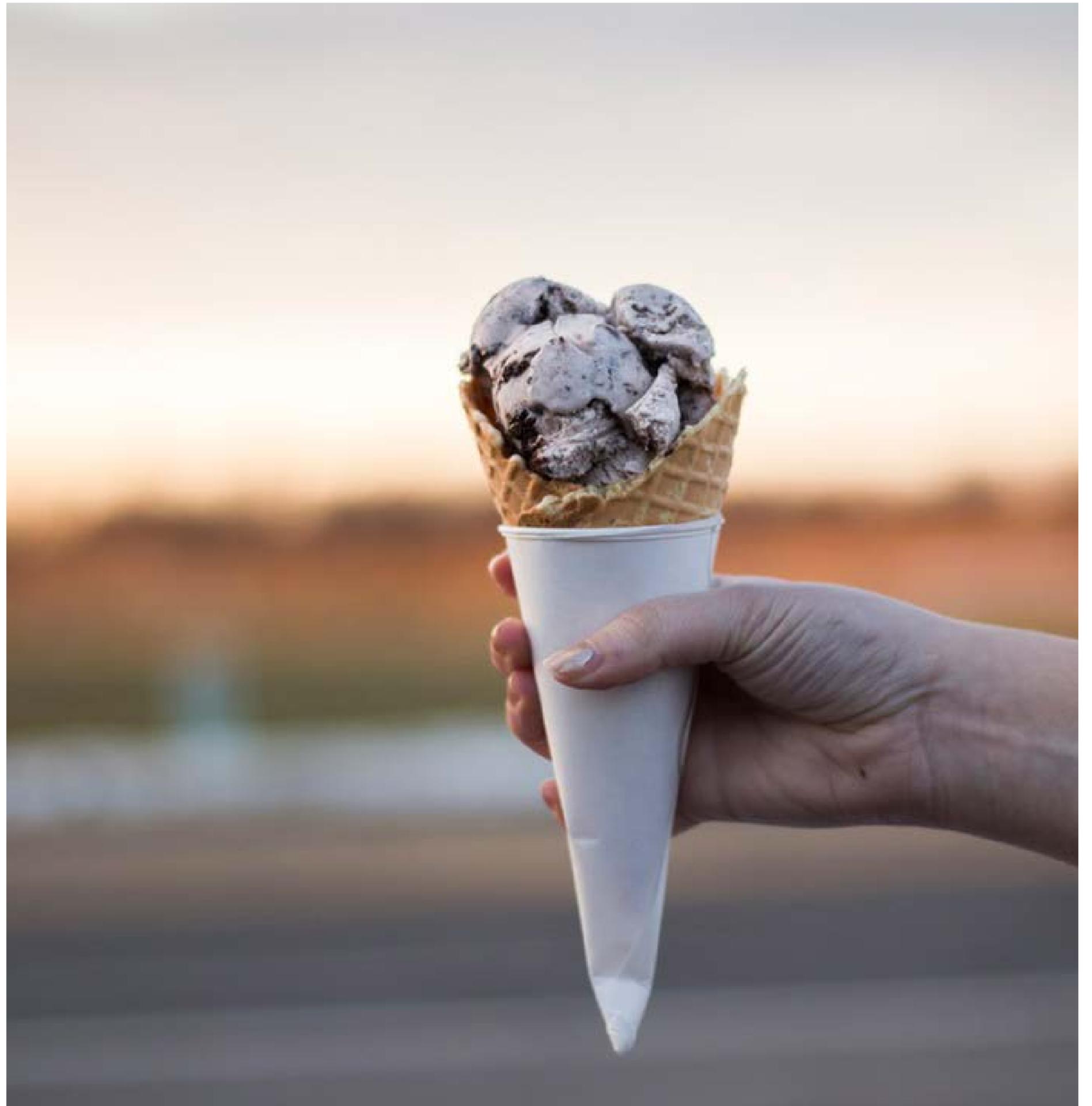
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# Photos & Instagram

Photos are synonymous with Instagram, with the social network having started with this as its primary function/feature. Given Instagram has been around since 2010, users have had a little over 5 years to refine and perfect how they capture and edit pictures for the platform. As a brand, you want your photos to be engaging and of a high quality. In other words, a grainy selfie of you in some dark club at midnight isn't exactly the kind of quality you should aspire to. But before you embrace the aspiring photographer within, it's worth making note of how photos on Instagram work.



# Photo layout

@kmartaus

For most of its life, Instagram kept the dimensions/layout of photos restricted to a 1:1 square. This look became iconic on the platform, be it good or bad. One of the problems that emerged from this restriction is that any photo that was taken in landscape often had to be aggressively cropped. The only solution was typically to use a third-party app so you could edit a landscape image by placing letterboxing on the top and bottom within the 1:1 layout of an Instagram photo.

In 2015, Instagram finally addressed this by adjusting the app to allow for landscape images without any cropping and portrait images with little-to-no cropping (depending on your device's screen size/length). This has allowed for a more extensive range of images to be uploaded, which is certainly a good thing.

However, it's worth noting that landscape photos are still subject to fitting within the width of your phone's screen. So if you have a smartphone that has a respectable screen width to it (more commonplace with larger phones/tablets such as the Galaxy Note or iPhone 6S Plus), then landscape photos will work. On smartphones with a smaller-sized screen, however, you may find that the fidelity of landscape photos are lost somewhat. While it's not a deal breaker, it's better that landscape photos be used to capture simpler, grandiose scenes and avoid congested imagery. So a widescreen team photo crowded by 30 employees may not be the best idea, but a landscape photo of a beautiful stretch of mountains probably will work.

With portrait images, regardless of the device you're using, you should find you'll at least be able to fit in more of the photo than you used to (of course) be able to when Instagram limited you to its traditional square dimensions. As mentioned before, how much of a portrait image fits in depends on the size of your screen and, by extension, how tall its portrait images are by default. The taller the portrait images are, the more they will need to be cropped to still fit into the Instagram feed without requiring you to scroll to see the entire image. Even though some cropping may be required, it at least offers more real estate than you once had.



# composition & editing



@cottononbody

While you can essentially post any type of photo you want on Instagram (with the exception of images that include nudity or inappropriate material - e.g. hate speech, violent imagery, etc.), Instagram users tend to find photos with a strong sense of character far more interesting than some haphazard photo that feels overly amateur. Simply put, you need to invest genuine effort into the photos you take and upload on the platform. This doesn't mean you have to take hundreds of photos for a single post and painstakingly separate the wheat for the chaff. But it does mean you should take a few moments to make sure everything you want is in the shot, that the lighting will work to illuminate the focal point of your photo, and that you avoid any blur. From there you can then make some minor edits to it if you want, be it on a separate app or via Instagram's included editing features.

For landscape or portrait photos, you need to take these through your phone's own camera and then select to upload on Instagram. The reason being is that Instagram's own camera doesn't yet account for these different layouts - it will still take a shot in the default 1:1 dimensions. Depending on the phone's camera, the fidelity of your photos could be somewhat impacted negatively by Instagram's image compression. If you find your 16 megapixel photos are coming out a little too pixelated or blurred, then try reducing the megapixel count.

**“Invest genuine effort into the photos you take and upload on the platform... Take a few moments to make sure everything you want is in the shot, that the lighting will work to illuminate the focal point of your photo, and that you avoid any blur.”**

you're shooting at. The smaller the megapixel count, the less significant the compression should be. Though, for the most part, Instagram tends to handle image compression quite well these days, which means image fidelity shouldn't be too heavily affected. But it still remains a factor worth accounting for.

In terms of editing images, remember that Instagram has far more editing tools built into the app nowadays than it did a couple of years ago. It's no longer just filters, but the ability to choose how intense the filter is; being able to alter brightness, contrast levels, saturation, colours, shadows, etc.; tilt shift; adjusting the image's position/angle; and so on. Even if you want to create an image comprising several photos in a layout (e.g. three photos separated into a collage), Instagram has an app for that - I will talk about this more later.

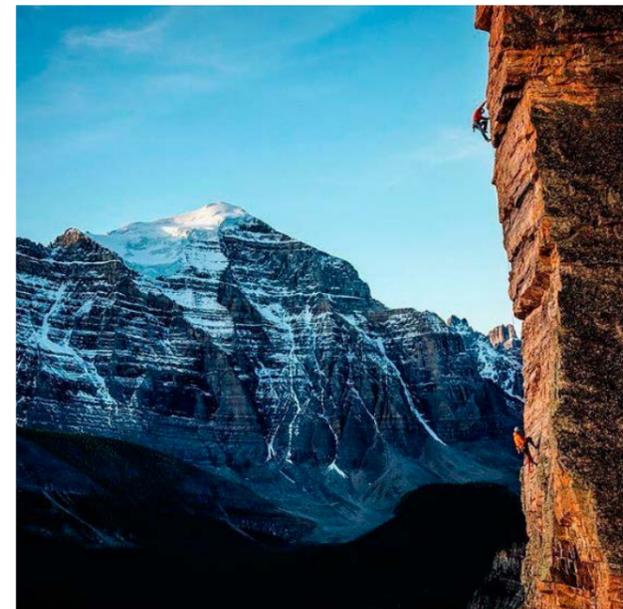
You can edit more, if you want, by using third-party apps or extensive editing programs. But most of what you would want to achieve for an Instagram post can usually be done through free app downloads on your phone - e.g. photo editors that allow you to add text.

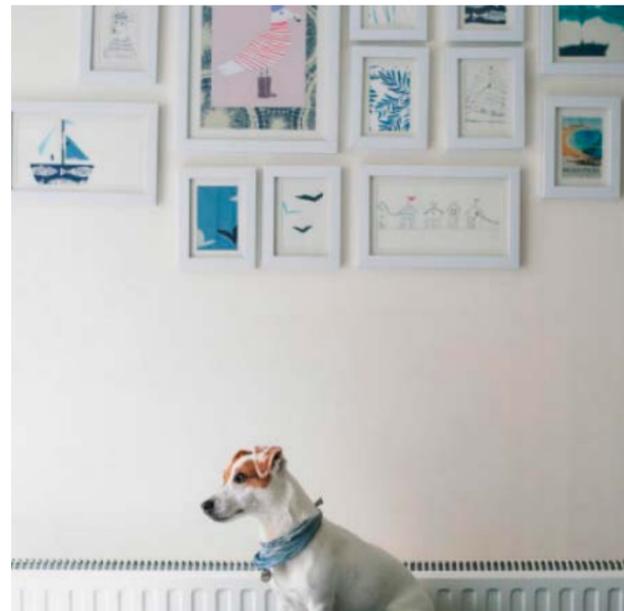
# composition & editing 2.0

To the right are examples from @airbnb that focus on capturing breathtaking landscapes and cityscapes from all over the world. Every image placed on this account seeks to inspire a sense of awe and wonderment, which all three of these accounts achieve on a consistent basis. The Travel Alberta account is the official Instagram account for the tourism marketing agency of the Alberta province of Canada. They know that to make people want to visit the province, they need to show it at its very best. A large portion of Travel Alberta's photos are of the province's natural wonder, which is a huge drawcard for many tourists.

Here are a few more examples of great Instagram photos, with the below coming exclusively from brands. First up, we have fashion and design brand Country Road.

Overall, the Country Road Instagram utilises a minimalist, clean style to its photos. The first image is representative of how many Country Road photos look - a model (or two) sitting in front of a light coloured background, wearing or carrying Country Road apparel/accessories that easily become the focal point of each photo. There are photos of accessories and other products by themselves without models, but these also tend to maintain a clean look with a form of minimalism. While this approach may not work for all brands, it does for Country Road, ensuring its fashionable clothing and accessories remain the point of focus. Even with the post that's promoting a Qantas travel voucher manages to somehow keep your eye drawn on Country Road.





ikea aus.

@ikea\_australia

IKEA is an example of a company that knows how to promote its products on Instagram. When you're all about flat pack furniture and want to show how your products can give someone's home or business a real sense of character, you need photos that are going to reflect that. But along with the company's focus on showing how a certain piece of furniture looks in real world settings, IKEA Australia also occasionally uploads candid photos of IKEA customers, fans and employees, helping the brand connect on a fundamentally human level. Here is the examples of some of its product shots and then one showing two customers who got engaged in an IKEA store.

# boost juice.

@boost\_juice

Last but not least, there's Boost Juice. Much like the company's branding, photos and videos on its Instagram account are bright and cheerful in style. Along with shots of the now-iconic Boost cups, its Instagram account is packed full of images of fresh fruits, people leading active lives, and shots of sunny Australian days. Given Boost is all about healthy living and positivity, the images used on its Instagram account are perfectly fitting.





# Videos & Instagram

@gopro

Videos came to Instagram in 2013 as a way to compete with the Twitter-owned video sharing platform Vine. During its initial rollout, Instagram opted to allow users to create videos that ran for up to 60 seconds with a minimum run time of 3 seconds. During the feature's infancy, videos would auto-play on mute and only play once. Since then, Instagram has made a slight change by having the videos loop much akin to Vine's ever-looping 6-second videos. A user simply presses on a video to listen to the audio and then tap it again to mute it - a good feature considering some may not be as big on having a video loop over and over with audio playing every single time.

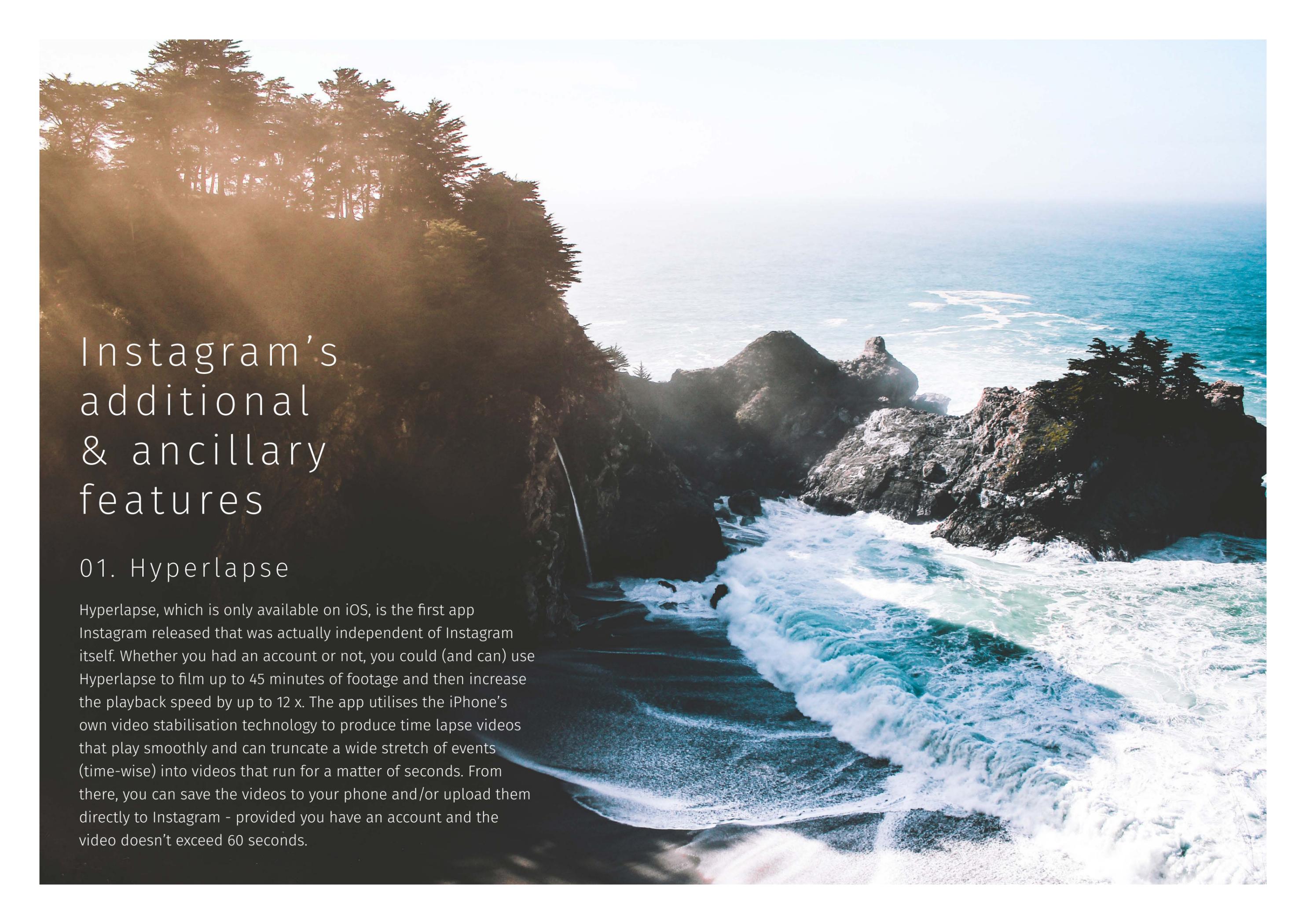
Along with the revisions made to photos last year, Instagram also expanded videos so that they could be uploaded in landscape and portrait along with the default square look. And as with photos, if you want to utilise landscape or portrait, you will need to do this by recording natively through your phone's camera and then uploading it to Instagram. Shooting directly through Instagram will yield the same square look by default.

Now that Instagram videos loop in the same way as Vines, this does mean that users, including your brand account, can get even more creative. If you want to create a video that works as standalone piece, that's perfectly

fine; but if you can craft a video that cleverly utilises the looping nature of Instagram videos, there's the possibility of creating something people will enjoy watching over and over again. Unfortunately, Instagram doesn't have a play/loop count like Vine does, but 60 seconds is a good window to create something engrossing and certainly offers more opportunities to build a video that can create the illusion of perpetuity.

Videos are a little tougher to provide explicit advice on as what you film and publish on Instagram can depend largely on the nature of your business. Safe bets do include videos of the city or town in which you're based. A lot of people on Instagram certainly find photos and videos of places they haven't visited (or have and intend to visit again) interesting. It's a way for people to gain an impression of a place before they experience it for themselves. So if there is an iconic sign, structure or area where your business resides, you can start off with videos of those and see what kind of response you get.

With all of that said, being able to create videos that have a unique quality to them is often a great way to capture people's attention, which is certainly a key objective for any business.



# Instagram's additional & ancillary features

## 01. Hyperlapse

Hyperlapse, which is only available on iOS, is the first app Instagram released that was actually independent of Instagram itself. Whether you had an account or not, you could (and can) use Hyperlapse to film up to 45 minutes of footage and then increase the playback speed by up to 12 x. The app utilises the iPhone's own video stabilisation technology to produce time lapse videos that play smoothly and can truncate a wide stretch of events (time-wise) into videos that run for a matter of seconds. From there, you can save the videos to your phone and/or upload them directly to Instagram - provided you have an account and the video doesn't exceed 60 seconds.



## 02. Boomerang

Boomerang came out towards the end of last year, and works by taking a burst of photos in quick succession and then turning them into a 1-second GIF-like moving photo that plays backwards and forwards. You don't need an Instagram account to use Boomerang, and you can shoot them in portrait or landscape. Of course, if you do have an Instagram account, you can then easily share a Boomerang you've shot onto Instagram.

## 03. Layout

Layout is essentially Instagram's collage maker. Again, as Layout is a standalone app, you don't need Instagram to use it; but it's been built with Instagram in mind. If you've used other collage makers, then Layout will be relatively straightforward for you. Even for newbies, it's easy to figure out. Layout is certainly useful if you want to create a collage for your post, but it's not necessarily more extensive than other comparable apps out there. Still worth a try, especially if you want to quickly launch into a image collage editor directly from Instagram.

## 04. Multi-account

Multi-account support has long been a requested feature on Instagram, one which would allow users to have multiple accounts logged in at once and be able to switch between them on the fly. Last year, the platform delivered the good news that it was working on this very feature, with Android devices being the first to receive it. At the time of writing, I can confirm that my Android device now supports multi-account sign in, which you can see from the below

screenshot. If your device supports multi-account sign ins, you'll find the option to 'Add Account' near 'Logout' in the Options section of the app. When you have multiple accounts, the profile tab in the bottom-right corner of the app will change to show the profile photo of whatever account you're currently using, helping ensure you don't post a photo or video in the wrong account.

# Text & Instagram

@countryroad



When it comes to the text accompanying your photo or video, there are few limitations on how much text you can include, but Instagram has made changes recently that mean descriptions with a notable amount of text are truncated at first glance. If someone is viewing a post of yours on their main feed, typically after the second or third line of text, a tappable 'More' prompt will appear. For brands, this is worth taking note of.

The main reason is because while you can put in a big description, it's wise to put your most important copy first. What text do you want standing out to your followers? More importantly, are you promoting a particular hashtag for an Instagram-based contest? Then make sure that this copy (and key hashtags) are written to appear within the first line or two. Otherwise they will be buried behind a 'More' prompt, of which not everyone will tap on.

In terms of hashtags, you can use up to 30 in an individual Instagram post. So besides the important ones you may want to keep above the 'more' fold, you can include the others elsewhere in the description and they will still take effect - it doesn't matter whether they're hidden behind the 'more' prompt or not.

With hashtags, just be mindful of which ones you use. While a lot of hashtags tend to be a bit more timeless on Instagram, some can still emerge as the result of a contemporary event. While some of these events can be perfectly fine to hijack, others that could be related to more tragic incidents (such as those associated with showing support for victims of terrorist attacks) could be your undoing if you use them in a self-serving manner or use them without even knowing what they're in relation to.

Along with that, certain hashtags can be blacklisted by Instagram. While a social network like Twitter isn't as militant at cracking down on potentially inappropriate hashtags, Instagram tends to be far more discerning and active at shutting down hashtags that could be connected to adult content or any content that breaches the social network's community guidelines. So if a hashtag strikes you as having possible links to explicit content, it's probably best to do a search on Instagram yourself first. If it does, it's best to not bother with it. Because soon enough, you can be sure it'll be removed.



## Direct Messaging & Content Sharing

Direct messaging has been on Instagram for a while now, but it remains one of those features that is primarily popular among users who have some form of a personal relationship with one another - friends, family members, etc. But this feature, along with the more recent ability to share Instagram posts directly with other users both have the potential of being beneficial to your business.



## Direct Messaging & your business

On the Direct Messaging front, you can think of it as being the same as private messaging on Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networks. Instead of having to converse with a user in a comments section, you can talk directly to them away from the public eye. So in the event a user begins posting complaints about your business on your Instagram posts, you can be proactive and either ask them to contact you via Direct Message or you can take the first step and select them as the recipient of a Direct Message.

This option is easy to find as it sits towards the top of the screen on the main feed page of Instagram. Clicking on the icon (inbox tray) will allow you to access Direct Messaging. From there, you can enter a username - whether they're someone you follow/are followed by or not - and message them. Given that Instagram is a visually-driven social network, you can send photos, but you can also send straight text-based messages as well - a useful feature when you're looking to resolve a complaint away from the eyes of the public.

Direct Messaging doesn't just have to be used for conflict resolution, however. You can also use it to privately inform winners of Instagram-based competitions and even thank brand evangelists personally for the support they show towards your brand.

## Content Sharing

The ability to directly share an Instagram post to other users was a more recent addition to Instagram, and it's a great way for general users and brands alike to create a message-based log of their favourite types of posts with one another. Yes, you can also like Instagram posts and see them in your own 'like' section, but the content sharing approach allows you to consistently share great posts you've found across multiple accounts to the one brand account. So maybe you see a great post while logged in as your brand, but then you see another great one when logged into your personal account. Instead of saving it in your personal account and having to log in and out of accounts (or switch between them if you have the feature) to find it again, you can just share the post to your brand account and have immediate access to anything you've found inspiring. Click on the elipsis to share a photo/video you like with another account via Direct Messaging. Note that you will not be able to share posts that were uploaded by private accounts.

So why would you do this? Well, it all comes down to idea generation. Sometimes we think of great ideas ourselves, sometimes our ideas are inspired by something specific. If you're going through an Instagram feed and see a photo or video that gives you your own great idea, then you'll want to make sure to keep that post on file. For the general user, they may just share a post because they think a friend will like it. For your business, sharing any great posts you see with your brand account could become the grounds on which you can refine your own style and Instagram voice.





## Instagram & Third-Party Platforms

Unlike many other social networks, Instagram held off on providing access to its application-programming interface (API) for a notable stretch of time. By doing so, it meant that the only functional way of posting on Instagram was through the app itself. Around August last year, however, Instagram allowed select third party partners access to its advertising API. One of these partners was Hootsuite, a renowned online social media monitoring and management tool. Unlike other partners, however, Hootsuite's partnership was not to offer Instagram advertising to its clients, but rather to allow users to schedule Instagram posts through Hootsuite itself.

This meant (and continues to mean) Instagram posts could be crafted in Hootsuite and set to send out at a specific time. At the very least, this feature allows owners of multiple Instagram accounts to better manage their posts and consciously schedule them for different times if need be. But Hootsuite's partnership also serves as a reminder of some limitations that still exist in how open Instagram is to third party platforms/software.

### Limitations

One of the key limitations Instagram imposes on third party partners/software that tends to impact on them being considered a viable alternative to using the app natively is this: you can't actually post through a third party.

If this statement is somewhat perplexing given I noted that you can schedule Instagram posts through Hootsuite (and other third parties), don't worry; you're unlikely to be alone. The way scheduling Instagram posts on Hootsuite works is that you can upload the photo ready for publishing, include a description and set a time for when the post should go out. However, the post still requires a manual step on your behalf. At the time when you "scheduled" the Instagram post to go out, you'll receive a notification on your phone. By clicking on that, you can then log into the respective Instagram account and complete the post - the image and description will all be there pre-populated, but you still have to physically post it.

This makes Instagram an anomaly compared to other social networks. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+ allow you to not only compose your messages through approved third party software, but they allow this software to publish the content automatically when scheduled. While it's nice that posts can be prepared to send out ready-made, it's still somewhat disappointing that Instagram continues to force users to execute the actual act of posting directly through the app itself.

# Advertising on Instagram

Self-serve ads were rolled out globally on Instagram towards the end of September 2015, with brands being able to set up ads on the platform through Facebook, which acquired Instagram back in 2012. As ad creation is done through Facebook, it requires that you have a Facebook Page (so a page for your brand), which you can then tie to your Instagram account. Once you've done this, you can either set up Instagram ads through Facebook's ad creator or Power Editor.

Facebook offers some general recommendations/requirements pertaining to Instagram ads, which include the following:

## Image Size

The recommended image size for an Instagram ad in the square or landscape format is 1080 x 1080 pixels. When you're creating your ad in Power Editor, you can use Crop Image to help ensure your Instagram ad looks the way you want it to.

## Video Size

Your video ad should be no more than 30MB in size.

## Caption Length

The caption you use for your Instagram ad will appear below the image and may include up to 300 characters.

## Aspect Ratio

The aspect ratio for an Instagram ad in the square format is 1:1. If you use the landscape format, your image or video should have an aspect ratio of 1.9:1.



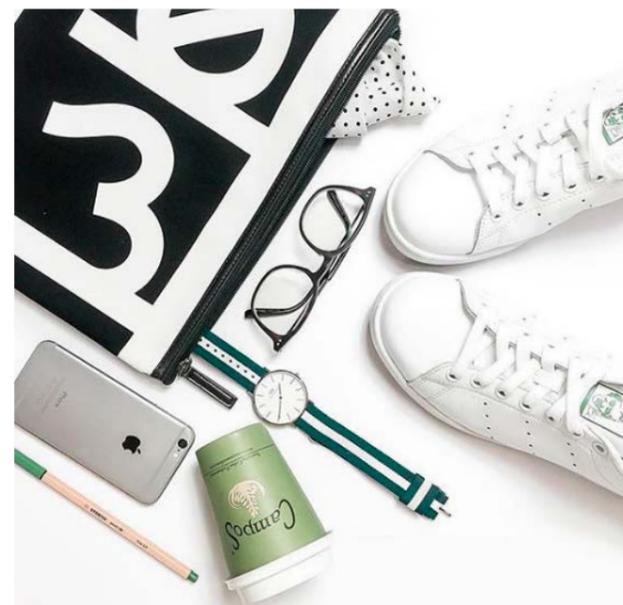
## Website URLs in Captions

As a best practice, we recommend you avoid using URLs in your Instagram ad's text. URLs will not be clickable from your ad's text field.

In terms of look, Instagram ads come in two varieties. Whether it's a photo or a video, you can either have a square format image/video or a landscape one. Portrait is not offered for ads as the height of a portrait ad would not make it possible for users to see the ad in its entirety - by this I mean you wouldn't be able to see the account name, 'Sponsored' tag, image/video, call-to-action and description in the one go.

With the square and landscape formats, however, you can. As it's important that users can discern between paid content and organic content, an ad must be completely viewable in the one window.

Most of Instagram's ad targeting is achieved through Facebook. In other words, you can set targeting parameters, but most of these are based off the Instagram users who have linked their Instagram accounts to their Facebook accounts. From personal experience, I have found that I don't come across many ads due to not having my Facebook and Instagram linked. But friends and fellow co-workers who do have their accounts linked tend to be exposed to more ads.



# Final Note

Now that you've seen what Instagram offers and how brands can utilise these features, both free and paid, it's time to try out the photo- and video-sharing network for yourself. When establishing your brand presence on a network for the first time, it may take a little bit of trial and error to find out exactly what works for you. But as with any form of marketing, you won't be able to see the benefit until you give it a go.

I hope you have found this eBook informative and helpful, and wish you the best of luck with all of your future marketing efforts on Instagram.

*good luck!  
from the team  
at margin media*

