

INSTAGRAM BRANDS

Success on Instagram

A data primer for brands from Union Metrics

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At Union Metrics, Instagram is one of our favorite social media platforms. And we've been fortunate to have spent a great deal of time on Instagram lately.

Over the past few months, we monitored 55 brands on Instagram, including some of the platform's most active and popular accounts. The technology we've built to pull data from Instagram's API for our Union Metrics for Instagram analytics product has ensured full coverage* of these brands' content and the engagement those posts have received.

Based on data from these 55 brands, we've learned quite a bit about Instagram and what it means to be successful on the platform. How does content typically perform? What can we learn from the early attempts brands already on Instagram have made? How can you apply these lessons to your own brand or account on Instagram? It's these questions and more we hope to unravel in the following pages.

Time and Instagram

First, we have quite a bit of data around engagement and time on Instagram. Some of the first questions brands ask us about any social network revolve often around time, including the best time to post to Instagram, when users are most active and how often a brand should post.

What's the best time to post to Instagram?

Well, of course there's no single best time to post to a particular social media channel. Different audiences will be around - and active - at different times, and content will perform differently depending on a variety of factors in addition to time. In general, however, Instagram is very active at night and on the weekends, and is used all around the world. So first, *we advise brands to post outside typical US business hours* when possible. Take advantage of when Instagram users are checking their phones - after work or school, on the weekends, before they go to sleep.

To demonstrate this, take a look at the two following Instagram activity heatmaps, taken from a Union Metrics for Instagram Tracker for a popular fashion brand. The first heatmap ("Posting Behavior") shows when this brand posts its content to Instagram; the darker color represents more activity during that hour over the course of a month. You can see this brand is very consistent, posting once every day, almost always in the 6 p.m. EDT hour.

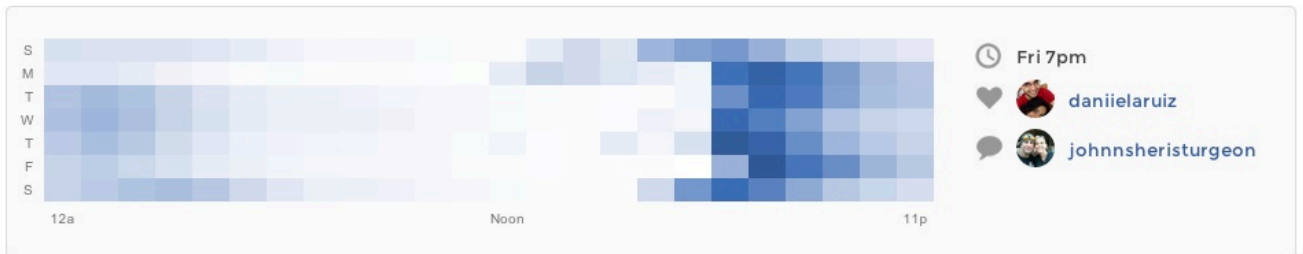
The second heatmap ("Engagement Behavior") shows fan engagement with this brand's content. Likes and comments begin immediately after the post goes up in the 6 p.m. hour, and activity continues for hours after, slowly decreasing over time. This slow-decay activity smear is a very typical engagement pattern on Instagram.

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POSTING BEHAVIOR



ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOR



In this particular case, the brand is most active on Mondays at 6 p.m., but fans are most active on Fridays at 7 p.m.

Then the best time to post to your own Instagram account is going to depend entirely on when the people you want to reach are active. To learn when that is, you should look for trends in their activity rates on your content, your competitors' content, and hashtags they are interested in.

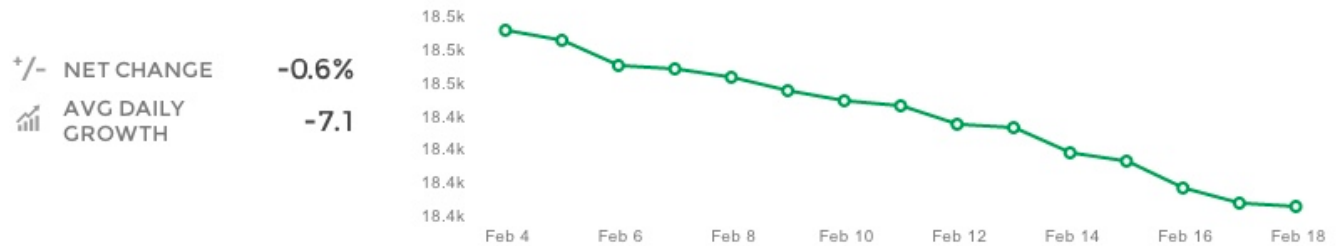
How often should I post on Instagram?

Brands post on average 1.5 times a day; most accounts post once or twice every day. But we've seen a number of brand accounts that post 100 or more times a month - some up to 10 times a day. Our initial assumption about those high-frequency posters was that the more often a brand posts, the lower their engagement rates would be on the subsequent posts. But that does not seem to be true. So far, we haven't seen any relationship between the amount of content a brand posts each day and the engagement rates those posts receive, and definitely not a negative one. We've monitored accounts that post once an hour, all day long, and they see above-average engagement rates on almost all their content, no matter when it occurs in the one-post-an-hour sequence. Later posts do not decline in engagement.

However, this does not mean that you should immediately start posting 10 or more times a day to boost your daily engagement rates. Most brands will not have cultivated the kind of audience that's ready or willing to see that many new photos from the same account every day, not to mention the time it would take your team to create enough content to keep that tempo going. *Stick to a regular posting schedule, but generally don't post more than a few times a day. One or two great posts a day is better than 10 mediocre posts.*

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And finally, *don't stop posting entirely* unless you want to lose followers. We have actually seen some brands' follower growth flatten or even decline due to a lack of consistent posting. The graph below shows daily follower counts of the Instagram account of a popular TV show that stopped posting new content to Instagram after a recent season finale. And after a short time with no new content, this account started losing followers every day, resulting in an overall decline.

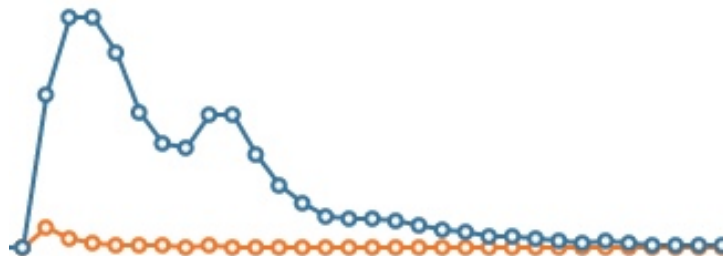


This doesn't mean you will lose followers if you don't post for a few days, but if you fail to post for weeks or a month at a time, your followers may abandon you for more active pastures. *If you're going to start an Instagram account, be prepared to commit to it - don't let it stagnate.*

How long does content live on Instagram?

Content on Instagram can live a pretty long time - longer than many people realize. We've found that in many cases, 90% of a post's likes and comments happen in the first 10 hours after posting. But many posts continue to receive low-level engagement for days and weeks after posting. Instagram is a lot more evergreen than many people give it credit for.

The following graph shows hourly activities on a post from a large fashion brand (blue represents likes, orange comments), for the first day of the post's life.



In this case, the photo was shared halfway through the first hour on the graph. You can see how activity increases for an hour or two, then slows down, then gets one final surge around 1-2 a.m. ET, right around the time West Coast followers are checking Instagram one last time before bed. Activity then decreases steadily after that, but continues to receive engagement days later.

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Most brand posts continue to receive likes and comments 18-24 hours after posting, just at a slower clip than the initial fast pace. The post above is just one example, but this happens again and again for this brand's content, and for others. This is a fairly typical pattern.

Engagement

Engagement works differently on all social platforms. On Instagram, users can like or comment on a photo. While these are pretty common actions on other networks, they have different patterns and significance on Instagram than they do elsewhere. We're often asked what "typical" engagement metrics are for a post; brands often want to know how they measure up to a general average for the platform.

What kind of engagement rates can I expect?

One of the first questions we hear from brands is about engagement rates, as defined as the ratio between the actual engaged Instagram users on a post and post deliveries (followers at the time of posting). For the several thousand brand posts we analyzed in this sample, the average engagement rate is 4.3% and the median is 3.5%. That means that the average post in this sample saw 4.3 activities (a like or a comment) per 100 followers. Phrased another way, to get 100 likes and comments on a post, a brand would need approximately 2,325 followers.

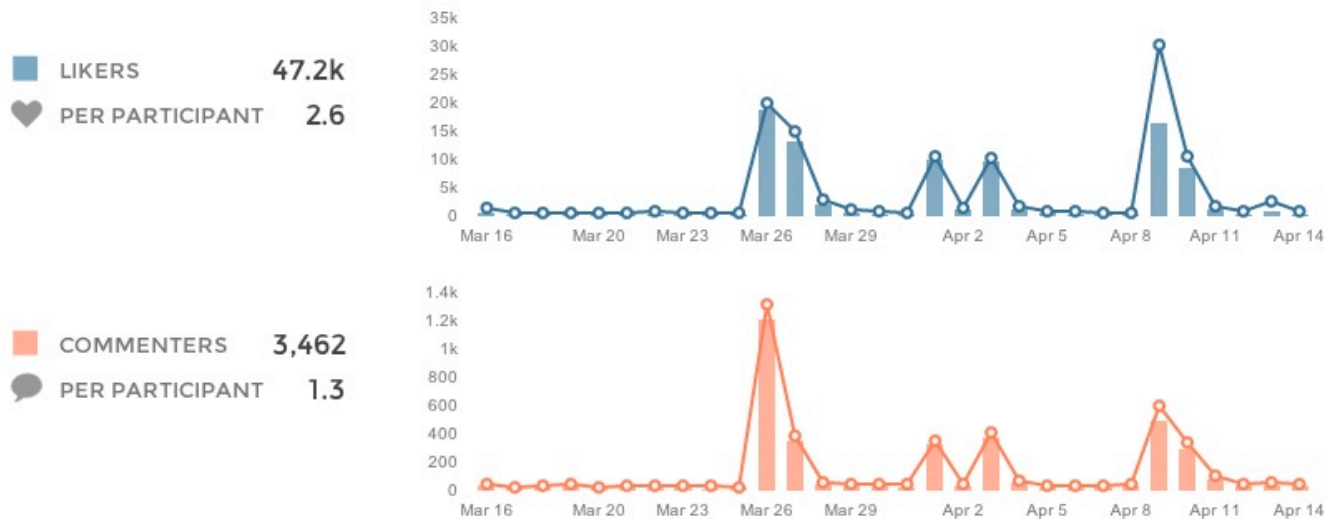
Those are very broad generalizations, so you should pay close attention to what your accounts, your competitors' accounts, and others in your industry see. And when your posts see higher engagement rates than comparable accounts, you're doing great. *Decide what about those posts is resonating more with your audience, and do more of it.*

Another way to think about engagement is the type of engagement a post gets. On Instagram, there are currently two supported ways fans can engage with a particular piece of content - a like and a comment. And nearly all posts receive far more likes than comments. Is there a standard likes:comments ratio? For the posts we analyzed here, the mean likes:comments ratio is 136.5 and the median is 105.8. So, most brands can expect to see somewhere between 100 and 150 likes per comment on a typical post. But since this is just a small sample, the true ratio will vary significantly for brands. We've seen some as low as 5 or 10 likes to every comment on a post, which is extraordinarily rare at this scale (and far more likely for lower follower and personal accounts than large brands). And we've seen ratios as high as 1000 likes per comment or more, which is again, quite rare. However, if you're seeing continued higher ratios, you may want to consider why more people aren't commenting on your content, if that's a goal.

The behavior of likes and comments follow very similar patterns, as you can see in the graphs on the next page. These graphs show activities with a brand's account over the course of a month. This brand only posts a few times a month, and receives continuous low-level activity (a few hundred likes and a few dozen comments each day), until it posts new content, when both likes and comments spike accordingly.

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The likes and comments spikes mimic each other in shape, but not in scope. The first large spike, March 26, represents 20k likes from 19k people (in blue) and 1.3k comments from 1.2k people (in orange).



In these graphs, you can also see that the rate of likes per person over the month (2.6) is higher than the rate of comments per person (1.3). A like is a far lower-commitment activity than a comment, so followers are more likely to like more often than comment. In fact, most brands should expect to see similar numbers for their own accounts; we've seen that most brand accounts receive around 1.3 - 1.4 comments per commenter each month, and that stays pretty consistent across brands. The number of likes per liker is quite a bit higher, usually around 3.1 - 3.5 likes per liker each month.

Paid content on Instagram

Advertising is still fairly new on Instagram, so most brands are still trying to determine how effective it is and whether or not it's worth the cost. While it's still far too early to say much conclusively, we have seen some very impressive numbers around the impact paid content has on organic content on Instagram.

How does organic content compare to paid content?

We've been exploring some of the data around both organic and paid content on Instagram, particularly how it relates to post engagement and account follower growth.

Take, for example, a large consumer brand that recently ran a set of sponsored posts on Instagram. Over a four-day period when the ads were running, the account's followers increased by 18.15%. Before the ads ran, the account typically saw a .5% increase in followers over a comparable 4-day period. This brand added 36x its typical number of new followers each day during the run.

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Take a look at the following graph. We've removed the axes from this graph to protect the brand's identity, but it shows daily follower growth for a brand's Instagram account. You can see the sharp increase in followers over several days, which coincides with the advertising period. In the 30-day period around the ads, the account's followers increased by 32.7% overall.



The increase in followers for this account is clearly quite large. But the big question for brands is, does this increase in followers translate to a comparable increase in engagement? For this brand, yes. For this account, median post-ad engagement rates are higher than median pre-ad engagement rates (based on the ratio of post likes and comments to overall deliveries for that post). Not only does the brand now have tens of thousands of additional followers, but since the ad ran, the brand has seen a nearly 10% increase in engagement rates across the board, increasing the total activities received per organic post by 25% on average.

It's still too early to say how long this increase in engagement will last, but it has had a compelling short-term impact on this brand's lift, that's for sure.

Conclusions

Based on these data, there are a variety of takeaways and basic data benchmarks for brands. But the best advice we can give to any brand on Instagram is to be authentic while embracing the medium's particular characteristics, measure your efforts, listen to the community, and continue to improve your content strategy.

**And finally, a bit about our methodology... The technology we've built to pull data from Instagram's API is one of the most sophisticated, robust systems in the industry. However, since this is a public API and not a commercial firehose, this data is by nature not entirely full-fidelity. It's pretty damn close, though.*

Are you interested in learning more about how to analyze the conversations, accounts and hashtags that matter to you on Instagram? At Union Metrics, we offer a variety of analytics solutions to help you understand and improve your content across social media channels.

Want to learn more? Let's talk! Email us at sales@unionmetrics.com or go to unionmetrics.com.