

Show me a story: How visual content is transforming social media

digital media

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When communicating an idea, the perfect picture can make words obsolete. Images tell stories that even pages of text could never fully capture.

Research shows that today's world is infographic-obsessed and visually focused. Every day, on Instagram, the popular mobile photo-sharing app, iPhone users upload nearly 4.5 million photos. The company also recently made headlines for expanding to the Android platform and because Facebook purchased it for \$1 billion on April 9 — so that number is sure to increase even more. And Facebook users, in general, upload more than 250 million photos per day.

If a picture really is worth a thousand words, as the old adage says, then we are saying more now than at any point in our history.

This photo-sharing frenzy has helped fuel the rise of several image-based social media platforms. Pinterest, which boasts more than 12 million users, now outpaces LinkedIn, YouTube and Google+ in driving referral traffic to retailers. Tumblr has seen more than 20 billion user posts since its inception. And even social networking titans Facebook and Twitter recently changed their formats to place a heavier emphasis on image-driven content.

This shift in consumer behavior must inform the way that companies connect with their audiences. The days of text-only online posts are over.

Instead, more brands must learn to visually engage with consumers and tell their story one image — or a thousand words — at a time. Today, companies need to show, through compelling illustrative content, that their products and services fit into a consumer's life and lifestyle.

When crafting a social media project that leverages visual storytelling, brands should consider where, what and how they share their story. Consider the following examples:

1. Choose a platform where your consumers already actively participate and focus your approach around a common topic.

Huggies connected with its audience of millennial moms by leveraging a common interest — celebrity babies — on its Tumblr microblog "Highchair Critics." The brand posts photos of celebrities and their kids along with short captions from a "baby blogger's" point of view. These bite-sized pieces provide compelling con-



tent for moms to share. By building on mutual interests with a visual message, the brand has established a relationship with mothers that will carry over when Huggies has new product information to share.

2. Create or curate content in the brand's voice that appeals to the visual aesthetic of your audience.

Dunkin' Donuts has seen success on Pinterest with artistic shots of its core products. The company created virtual pinboards on its page that contain not only pictures of donuts and coffee, but also feature quirky sayings about the coffee drinker's lifestyle. Using only its products, playful sayings and a bit of creativity, Dunkin' has created branded visual content that fans love to repin.

3. Capitalize on the brand's personality and lifestyle to share photos beyond product images. (In

other words, have fun.)

Red Bull uses Instagram to share a variety of photos with its fans — far-flung locations, stunts, athletes, sports or any occasion when someone might want one of its energy drinks. The company also stays true to its brand personality by adding humorous captions below each photo. One recent picture showed a space shuttle with the Red Bull logo on the back and a caption that read, "How to save NASA?" These offbeat, entertaining types of images carry this unique voice and offer fans something to share.

Today's consumers have progressed from sharing information to image-driven information. Brands must recognize and respond to this trend to maintain their place in consumer conversations. It's not enough anymore to simply use photos as support for a product launch or celebrity event. PR professionals must learn to visually tell their own brand story or risk getting left behind.



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