

'Insta-Communities' Change The Rules For Marketers

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What constitutes a community has fundamentally shifted in the **Instagram** era. In our visually-driven **social** media marketplace, marketers must get to grips with “communities of disconnection,” where disparate groups of consumers alight briefly around shared ideas.

These new waves of Insta-Communities do not operate in the same way as traditional communities built over time and bonded by shared geography, life experiences, goals, or ideals. Global and visually-driven, Insta-Communities focus on movements and causes, and are in equal parts passionate and fleeting. They present a significant opportunity for marketers, who must reappraise how they connect with and galvanise these disparate groups of consumers.

From **Always'** ground-breaking #likeagirl to the way **Dove** is harnessing **social** media activism with its #mybeautymysay activity, brands are increasingly pitching their social activity above the tightly defined parameters of traditional consumer segmentations based on demographic segment or product category.

Understanding The Fundamentals

Connecting with these communities starts with the fundamentals of understanding what brought them together in the first place or what ideas would galvanise them. James Quarles, global head of business and **brand** development at **Instagram**, says consumers come to Instagram for a myriad of different reasons, from visually experiencing places they have never visited, to more practical pursuits such as DIY inspiration. He explained: “The brands that have the most success on **Instagram** are the ones that recognise that diversity and connect to that community through relevant content that appeals to their interests.”

This involves brands truly immersing themselves in these communities, as opposed to simply broadcasting traditional marketing messages at them. **David Coombs**, director of strategy and social at **advertising** agency Cheil London, believes that what community means for brands and marketers has changed over the last few years.

“The days of building large groups of fans or followers and then **marketing** to them are over. With algorithms making the decisions on what people see in their feeds, it is harder and harder for brands to find a way through the noise without having to resort to paying for every impression or engagement,” he said. This shift means **social** media effectively ceases to be social and simply becomes another media platform, making true community engagement increasingly vital to gain cut-through in a cluttered and commoditised marketplace.

Open-Sourced Communication

The keys to engaging with these new communities are openness, and a willingness to embrace their aesthetics and their spirit. Dan Evans, associate creative director at social media agency We Are **Social**, says the visual economy is moving from locked-down rules to fluid interpretations. In line with this, brands need to help the audience interpret the **brand** in a way that is respectful and authentic.

“In essence, we are helping the community to create better content by being open with them. Particularly with channels like **Instagram**, where success is about personal expression, brands need to create a topic or conversation that will inspire their audience,” he said.

In practice this means that brands must cede control to the community, so they are not simply participating in **marketing** campaigns but co-creating them and making the voice of the community heard. This demands a significant shift among marketers who have historically closely guarded and protected their brand image through complex and constricting brand guidelines.

Yet letting the community truly participate in your brand is often the vital component of success. **Brands** including adidas and Sport England—through its #ThisGirlCan campaign—have made campaign toolkits available to consumers. While this move effectively empowers consumers to subvert campaign messages, it also drives authenticity and engagement, which form the lynchpin of successfully connecting with the Insta-Community.

The online toolkit for #ThisGirlCan has been used by 8,000 stakeholder supporters, from small local sports clubs and individual fitness classes to large sporting organisations such as the FA. It now has an active **social** media community of 500,000 and there have been 660,000 tweets about it.

Social platforms such as Instagram are also attempting to provide new ways for brands to connect with consumers on their platforms. This month Audi became one of the first **brands** to use Instagram Stories to chart the creation of a 3D painting on London's Southbank as part of its #A3LookAgain campaign. The Stories function, while by no means a shortcut to community engagement, allows users to share multiple videos and photos in a slideshow format.

Communities Of Disconnection

To better connect with these instant communities, marketers must also let go of long-held beliefs about how brand loyalty is built. Pete Jackson, strategy director at creative agency Exposure **Digital**, points to research from **Professor Byron Sharp** and the **Ehrenberg-Bass** Institute in Australia, which argues that community and loyalty are the biggest myths of our time. Sharp's book, *Brand Genetics*, cites the fact that seventy two per cent of UK **Coca-Cola** drinkers also drink **Pepsi**, reflecting the fact that consumers are promiscuous across brands and sectors regardless of market share.

Jackson believes this creates an opportunity for instant communities: "Brands creating instantaneous, impromptu, short-lived communities around a campaign or idea of cultural significance can capitalise on consumer promiscuity, as they are more likely to flock to you around an idea of cultural significance, even if it's only for the duration of a campaign."

There is no shortage of examples of the fruits of this strategy. From #LikeAGirl to Nike's #MakeItCount, brands have successfully captured the attention of disparate communities.

“The result is online flash-mobs of impassioned conversation and debate. And while they’re not your community for keeps, they’re yours for that small window of time,” added Exposure Digital’s Jackson.

Beyond Segmentation

Embracing the power of Insta-Communities demands that brands move beyond traditional demographics and lifestyle segmentations to focus on the things that actually get people up in the morning. It is a shift that demands a new approach to consumer segmentation.

Tom Brandhorst, creative strategist at specialist football YouTube channel Copa90, explained: “It means hitting people because they actually care about something, as opposed to because they simply fulfil a certain age or location profile. Theoretically, it provides a much more meaningful **marketing** connection.”

Ultimately, it is social relevancy not segmentation which is the biggest route to successfully engaging with Insta-Communities. The world’s biggest brands are built on engagement that is deeper than their advertising messages. Conversation, whether visual, video, text, or face-to-face, remains at the heart of community. To be part of this conversation, brands need to engage in something bigger than their **brand**.

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