How to optimize for the Instagram algorithm in 2020

30-second summary:

- Instagram uses an ever-changing, machine learning-powered algorithm to customize and arrange posts in user feeds.
- Ever since the platform left the chronological feed behind and moved to the algorithmic feed years ago, marketers, content creators, and users alike have been speculating on what exactly determines which posts make it to the top.
- There are six key factors that the Instagram algorithm relies on to determine which posts should appear first: interest, relationship, recency, frequency, following, and usage.
- These six key factors are backed by performance metrics and patterns of user behaviors.
- Optimizing for the Instagram algorithm requires an understanding of key ranking factors and compliance with key metrics.

“Show me your Instagram feed and I’ll tell you who you are” – is a beautiful sentiment but it’s not actually the case. What’s closer to the truth is, show me your Instagram feed and I’ll tell you what the Instagram algorithm thinks is good for you.

It’s no secret that the content you see in your Instagram feed and the way it’s arranged is customized for you. Ever since the platform left the chronological feed behind and moved to the algorithmic feed years ago, marketers, content creators,

and users alike have been speculating on what exactly determines which posts make it to the top. Why is it that some posts, however recent and relevant, never appear first in the feed? Likewise, what makes some content rank high regardless of its relevance and recency?

Although Instagram's chronological feed might make a comeback one day, for the time being, what we're working with is the algorithmic feed powered by machine learning. As confirmed by Instagram itself (well, the creators behind it), feed ranking is evolving and changing all the time based on user data. This brings about both good and bad news for the people and businesses aiming to win the Instagram ranking game.

The bad news is, there'll always be something to catch up with. Working with an ever-changing algorithm means accepting the fact that it's ever-changing and keeping an eye on all social media updates. The good news is, ranking factors – and this goes both for search engines and social media algorithmic feeds – can still be discerned and optimized for. In this post, we'll take a closer look at what makes and breaks Instagram content.

Instagram ranking factors

There's been a lot of buzz around what helps the Instagram algorithm determine which posts deserve each user's immediate attention and should be therefore placed at the top of the feed. What we're looking at in 2020 and beyond it seems, are six key factors Instagram's ranking algorithm relies on when arranging posts.

1. **Interest** – how much a user is expected to care about the post
2. **Relationship** – how a user is related to the authors of the posts in social media terms and literally, that is accounts from the "friends and family" category are prioritized

3. **Recency** – how recently the content was posted
4. **Frequency** – how often a user opens Instagram, that is, the best posts since the user's last visit will be displayed first
5. **Following** – how many accounts a user follows, that means, the more posts there are to rank, the harder it is to display all of them
6. **Usage** – how much time a user spends on Instagram per session

As you can see, the six factors all help paint a decent picture of what type of behaviors any user displays and what type of content simply must get into the user's radar, however rare and short their visits to the app. Ultimately, all factors belong to three types of ranking signals:

1. Interest
2. Timeliness
3. Relationship

Naturally, the factors per se only give us a general idea of what kind of framework the algorithm operates within. To understand what it is that impacts Instagram rankings, we need to dive deeper and take a look at the metrics behind the key factors.

Instagram ranking metrics

If you think about it, every metric on the ranking algorithm's radar makes sense because it corresponds to the 6 key factors that determine Instagram ranking gains and losses. Let's revisit the factors and see what kind of metrics they translate into.

1. Interest = Engagement

It's very difficult to determine which posts will be of the most interest to the user. To do that accurately, the

algorithm needs to analyze every type of engagement in the book, recognizing the patterns and making predictions about future behaviors. The types of engagement Instagram recognizes are:

- Comments (of all shapes and sizes!)
- Likes
- Reshares
- Views (for video content)

In addition to those, creators need to aim for saves – a type of engagement that's likely to be valued the most in a likes-free world dreaded by some and anticipated by others. Saves reflect an even stronger likelihood of further engagement as users are expected to go back to the posts they saved and interact with the content multiple times.

2. Relationship = Engagement + Real-life connections

Before you get weirded out, consider this: Instagram doesn't have to run actual surveillance and dig up records to establish your real-life connections and prioritize posts in your feed. It doesn't need to, as users provide multiple hints as to which of their Instagram interactions might fall into the "friends and family" category:

- Frequent likes and other types of engagement with posts
- Accounts users search for
- Accounts users send messages to
- Posts that get shared a lot
- Any type of behavior that signifies a real-life connection

It's therefore perfectly doable to establish a friend or relative, seeing how people tend to interact the most with content from their actual friends and family members. However, once an account has been flagged as a close relation to a

user, it doesn’t stay in the top place for long. Consistency of posting is also key to staying Instagram-relevant, hence the need to be visible and active to remain in users’ sight.

3. Recency = Time of posting

By now, it’s been established that engagement is “the metric” to look out for when trying to crack Instagram’s ranking algorithm. However, the content has an expiration date – therefore, the recency of posts also counts. The intention is simple: Instagram is determined to serve only relevant content to its users. Posts that have been out there for a good minute may no longer be relevant, that’s why recency is a ranking condition too.

It was once thought that in order to be ranked high, content creators needed to strive for absolute maximum user engagement within 30 minutes since their posts went live. As confirmed by Instagram, there’s no such requirement. That said, it helps to know the best time for posting, that is, the time when the account’s audience is online and most likely to interact with posts and give them a timely engagement boost.

4. Frequency, following, usage = user data

The three factors that have nothing to do with the content or technology behind posting and everything to do with user behaviors are frequency, following, and usage. They all help Instagram’s ranking algorithm learn more about each user’s habits and mode of using the app: how often, for how long, and to what extent any given individual uses Instagram.

More active users of the app will for obvious reasons see more content as they spend more time browsing Instagram and explore more posts in total. *The* most active users might even see a chronological feed of sorts, as there are only so many relevant posts, and the feed gets populated with all of the

available content eventually.

Meanwhile, users who follow a lot of accounts, even if they choose to spend hours browsing Instagram, are unlikely to see every single post as there are just too many to fit into one person’s feed.

How to optimize for the Instagram algorithm

Now that we’ve gone through the basics of Instagram’s ranking system, let’s see what can be done to help content rise in Instagram’s eyes and user feeds.

1. Research your audience

Seeing how Instagram seems to have users’ best interests in mind (or at least that’s what’s being projected via personalizing feeds), it makes all the sense to strive for top audience engagement and maximum relevance. This can only be done by running a thorough audience analysis – a full scan of an audience segment that reveals, among other things, preferences, interests, alliances, and even stances in public debates.

Employing social media listening in researching the Instagram environment means monitoring Instagram conversations and drawing data-powered insights for every move. Content curation to hashtag analysis – knowing what’s buzzing around your brand, what’s trending and can be amplified on, and what resonates best with your audience empowers you to craft your best Instagram posts and please the algorithm, too.

2. Be present

In social media terms, being present means posting consistently while staying relevant. Although the 30-minute-

rule to getting engagement has been busted, it definitely helps to know your best posting time and post consistently. Maintaining a consistent Instagram presence, especially when you're striving for maximum user engagement, can be exhausting. Luckily, there are always Instagram content ideas you can borrow from fellow marketers in pursuit of getting the most out of brands' social profiles.

To boost brand visibility and secure a top spot on the screen, do not neglect posting to Instagram Stories. As long as the content is engaging, diversifying the formats it comes in will only get you more ranking points.

3. Incorporate IGTV videos

While it has been confirmed that Instagram does not discriminate between photo and video content as users simply see more of the type of content they already interact with the most, incorporating videos can do no harm to your Instagram rankings.

For one, video content gets a longer viewing period, which means you boost user retention and prolong the interaction people have with your content. In addition to that, IGTV video content can take up four times as much screen space as photos in Instagram's Explore section, i.e. putting IGTV videos out there increases your chances to be discovered and interacted with.

4. Do not hesitate to move to a business profile if you need to

On the same myth-busting spree, Instagram confirmed that the way posts are arranged in user feeds is not determined by the type of accounts creators hold. Whether you post as a business or individual and whether or not your account is verified – what determines your position in the feed is engagement and genuine interest in the content you put out. Which brings us

to the final tip.

5. Keep it real

Authenticity and transparency come first and second. Striving to replicate the human world, Instagram operates by the rules of likability and genuine engagement. To achieve that, content creators need to appeal to their audiences like never before, working on building unique brand personalities, collaborating with Instagram influencers in favor of celebrities, and staying authentic above promotional.

When it’s machine learning that determines authenticity or the lack thereof, appearing genuine is a game-changer. More often than not, authenticity means engagement, and engagement is the gold of the Instagram ranking game.

Wrapping up

Instagram ranking signals come and go, user behaviors keep changing, new formats emerge and fade away – combined, things to keep up with may appear overwhelming.

However, behind the smartest social media algorithms are solid logic and good intentions. Understanding how Instagram content is ranked and acting on the patterns is the least you can do to help people discover and engage with your content. From there, winning the Instagram game boils down to playing by the rules and keeping it real.

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