

Instagram Satisfaction

Spa and salon owners sing the praises of this photo-based app and its ability to attract a wider online audience.

By Carrie Borzillo

The power of Instagram is undeniable. The photo-sharing social app has surpassed 200 million users, with more than 20 billion photos uploaded since its 2010 inception. And, it shows no signs of slowing down. With 63% of social media now made up of images alone, the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words has never been truer.

All this is great news for day spas, whose beautiful images of relaxation rooms and exotic treatments can do much to lure clients. Therefore, it makes sense that for many spa owners, Instagram is the second most important social media outlet (Facebook is No. 1) when it comes to showcasing their brand.

But like any other business tool, Instagram only does its job when users fully understand the most effective ways to take advantage of it. Fortunately, there are some fairly simple principles to call upon when you decide to rev up the marketing machine that is Instagram. And the first one is to understand that it is *not* a “hard sell” vehicle. Rather, the real key to success with Instagram lies in taking a “show, don’t tell”, “less is more” and “subtle selling” approach.

“We want to promote a way of life—not necessarily push our spa directly,” explains Lauren Grant, assistant spa director at The Dragontree Holistic Day Spa (thedragontree.com) in Boulder, Colorado. “Part of our stated mission is to create a soothing environment to help people feel more peaceful. So we share a lot of images that represent tranquility, peace and calm, such as nature photos. It’s about visually creating that discussion.”

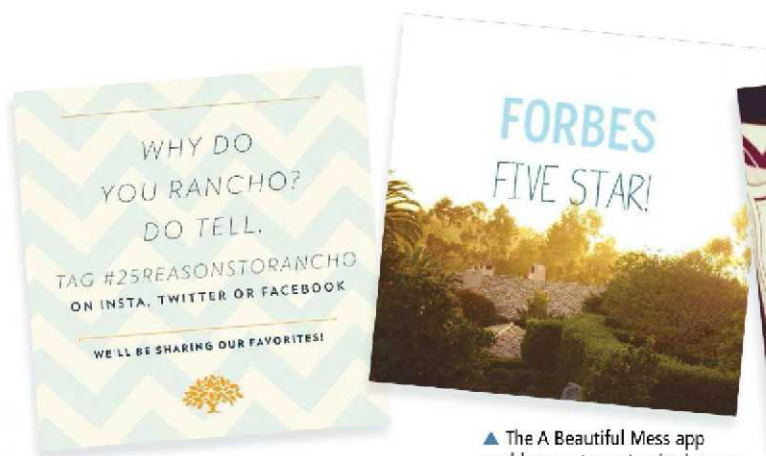
“Instagram isn’t the place to flat-out sell,” concurs



Piper De Young, media and marketing manager at Live Love Spa (livelovespa.com). “People can really tell when you’re trying to sell them and it makes them not want to follow you. It isn’t like Facebook or even Twitter; it’s a very low-key tool, but a very powerful one.” Adds Diana Robbins, marketing manager at Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa (ranchovalencia.com) in Rancho Santa Fe, California, “You want to be subtle and just show the ambiance, vibe and atmosphere of your spa or resort. It’s more about inspiring the user. It’s really an indirect sell.”

Unlike other social media sites, Instagram doesn’t require users to be über-professional—especially when it comes to completing the “About” section, which is one of the first things you need to do when setting up an account. “Keep it short, but put something fun or kooky in there. One day spa I know wrote, ‘follow our adventures’—that’s a great example,” says De Young. Or consider these understated descriptions: “Far from ordinary. Simply perfect.” (Rancho Valencia); “Your source for all things Spa & Wellness” (Live Love Spa) and “A peaceful world begins with a peaceful you” (The Dragontree).

Another part of the set-up process is to add the



▲ The right hashtag can inspire months' worth of participation from Instagram users.

▲ The A Beautiful Mess app enables you to customize images with carefully chosen copy.



▲ Peaceful images subtly communicate The Dragontree Spa's message.

Instagram badge to your website's homepage and announce that you've joined it on your other social media sites, your newsletter, blog and any other place you communicate with your clients. Kick off your Instagram journey by following some like-minded accounts, such as your vendors, the product lines you carry, wellness companies, and any local companies that fit your brand.

GETTING IT PICTURE-PERFECT

With Instagram, it's really all about the image. Most agree that posting one great image a day is ideal, but if that's too hard to squeeze into your schedule, shoot for three to four posts a week. Better yet, hire a social media manager or delegate the duties to an employee. "Empower your employees to contribute their best photos. Employees are brand ambassadors. Find the ones who are already social—your receptionist, for instance, who can do it in her down time," says De Young. That said, it's a good idea to have the employees send you the photos first for approval before posting, at least to start with.

What constitutes a great photo? Consider composition, texture and sharpness. Of course, make sure it's an interesting shot (the more creative or artsy, the better). And, most important, it should match the tone of your spa.

Gloss Nail Spa (gloss-nailspa.com) in Silver Lake, California, received 184 "likes" for a photo of the spa's nail polish bottles arranged in the shape of a heart for Valentine's Day. It included a few emoticon hearts, which is acceptable on Instagram but deemed a bit

too casual for other social sites. The poster tagged the nail polish brand, and added hashtags such as #nailpolish, #glossnailspa, #valentine, #silverlake, #heart and #chemicalfree.

The Dragontree Spa made good use of the 15-second video option that Instagram offers with a glimpse of live musicians playing the sitar and drums for a product launch party that took place at the spa. The caption: "Why yes, we know how to party!" There were more than a dozen hashtags, including #livemusic, #magiccarpet, #sitar, #thedragontree and #party. "It was a fun way to illustrate the vibe of our spa," says Grant.

"You can pack a powerful message into just 15 seconds," points out De Young. "You can have your lead esthetician apply a masque on a client and explain why it's great for the complexion, or give a tip on how to hydrate the skin. These brief videos show what's going on at your spa, humanize your brand and supply the user with helpful information."

#BonusApps

You can enhance your Instagram presentation by adding a few apps to the mix:

- **Regram** (regram.me) to repost a photo
- **VSCO Cam** (vsco.co) for editing tools and filters for your photos
- **A Beautiful Mess** (abeautifulmessapp.com) for personalizing photos by placing copy over images (see above example)
- **Statigram** (statigram.com) to view your Instagram account and key metrics info online

ENTER TO WIN!

Giveaways and contests are a valuable tool in growing your Instagram audience. Even a small idea can yield huge results: "We asked our followers to use our hash tag, tag us in their photo, and repost the photo to win a nail polish or a candle," says Tina Nguyen, owner of Gloss Nail Spa. "Clients reposting images is the most powerful thing. That's how our audience has grown to thousands in just six months."

Live Love Spa has fun with its ongoing #FreebieFriendshipFriday contests, in which users who tag their friends in the comments section are



▲ Giveaways like Live Love Spa's Freebie Friendship Fridays are a good bet for drumming up activity.



◀ For Gloss Nail Spa, Instagram pictures speak much louder than words.

automatically entered to win beauty products. A winner is picked at random and both she and her friend win the prize. "When you enable both people to be winners, it's more of an incentive for followers to participate, and it's a win-win for them," explains De Young, adding, "This is something that any spa can do."

To help spread the word that it had joined Instagram, The Dragontree Spa ran a photo contest. The copy read: "The Dragontree Spa March Instagram Photo Contest. Show us how you relax to win a \$50 Gift Card! Just tag your Instagram photos with #relax and #TheDragontreeSpa to be entered to win." The spa's phone number and website address were included at the end. "This was the one example in which we were really promoting the spa because we were new to Instagram and wanted to get our name out there," notes Grant. "We asked our staff to promote the contest on their pages and share it with their friends so we could start growing our audience. But in general, we really try to think of images to post that will inspire people to live well, go for a hike or eat healthily—not necessarily go to the spa. We're about creating a visual dialogue on health and wellness."

#SmartMarketing

The right hashtag can serve as a springboard for lasting promotion power. Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa in Rancho Santa Fe, California, came up with a hashtag it uses successfully year round to encourage user participation. The spa posted a word-board that read, "Why do you Rancho? Do tell. Tag #25REASONSTORANCHO on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. We'll be sharing our favorites!"

"We started this for our 25th anniversary, but we use it a lot because it really has legs," shares marketing manager Diana Robbins. "We've used the hashtag in photos of our food, our drinks, and parts of the property. Our guests take photos while they're here and use the hashtag too. It isn't a contest, but it's good for participation, engagement and creating a cool community."

INSTA-GROWING THE AUDIENCE

Gaining followers—and subsequently, more clients—is your ultimate goal with Instagram. Using hashtags wisely, getting your clients to post photos from your spa and following your business neighbors (and liking, reposting and commenting on their posts) are the most effective ways to do this.

Gloss Nail Spa's Nguyen largely credits her 6,000-plus followers to customers who share photos of their freshly painted nails on Instagram. "We always take a photo of clients' finished nails and post it, and then they post their own photos as well and hashtag us—that's how our audience is growing so quickly," she says. "Many new clients come in because of photos they saw on Instagram—they show me one of our photos and say, 'That's the design I want.'"

Rancho Valencia's picturesque resort has lent itself to spontaneous posting by guests, and this, says marketing manager Robbins, accounts for the rising number of followers on the spa's Instagram account. It has also been helpful to have journalists visit and post photos to their users. "We had a well-known blogger stay here and after she posted photos of her stay, we gained a very nice chunk of new followers," she reports.

Another useful tactic: follow your business neighbors to tap into their client base. "Target specific local companies, like an organic food store or restaurant, with whom your vision aligns," suggests The Dragontree's Grant. "Repost their photos to create a relationship, repost their followers' photos as well and credit them."

The social world is an ever-growing beast and keeping up on the latest options can seem like a full-time job. However, once you get the hang of apps like Instagram, you realize that they have nearly limitless potential. Some final advice from Robbins: "Just remember to have fun, be creative and share things that fit your brand. And don't just sell!" ■

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