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Inspiring Travel with Instagram ^[1]

Instagram has fast become an integral part of the travel experience. From waves of people sharing their travels, to the growing number of travel influencers who make a living inspiring people to visit new destinations, the platform has developed into the medium of choice for people to discover, select and share travel experiences.

Its use in the field of digital diplomacy is also increasing. Recently, we saw this demonstrated with Instagram in Japan. The Japanese government has a goal to advance a positive global image for the country as part of their goal to draw 40 million inbound tourists annually by 2020. With over five million visitors to Japan posting on Instagram from March 2017 to March 2018, Instagram was a natural place to inspire audiences to visit.

To achieve this, Instagram developed the #UnknownJapan campaign in collaboration with the Japan National Tourism Organization. The campaign was designed to highlight and celebrate the lesser-known places and stories throughout every prefecture in Japan.

Instagram worked with local organizations to run in-person meetups (InstaMeets) around the country to help educate local users about how they could contribute to the campaign. This empowered diverse groups of content creators from across Japan, meaning the campaign was able to crowdsource user-generated content from areas of Japanese culture, landscape and history that are regularly overlooked.

For the diplomatic community, campaigns such as this demonstrate the potential of online platforms, such as Instagram, to bring together public diplomacy, country branding and economic objectives.

Ranging from personal shots of Japan's most beautiful landscapes; to videos from renowned festivals such as Rural and Labyrinth; illuminating stories about Tokyo's audiophile dive-bars; and intimate shots of dozens of sub-cultures and hobbies, the content served to highlight the cultural richness of Japan to users around the world, while shifting perceptions away from usual stereotypes.


This benefited the campaign by eliciting unique and esoteric content that piqued interest among the global travel community; an audience who are increasingly discerning in their search for new experiences.

It also put the focus on authentic content created by the peers of younger international audiences who generally use the platform, rather than from professional agencies. Doing so encouraged building genuine connections between creators and users. While surrendering control over the creative process was, in many ways, a leap of faith, it positioned the campaign as a legitimate platform to bring audiences together, as opposed to being just another tourism marketing campaign.

With over 152,000 photos and videos shared by the community, the campaign proved to be a massive success. Inbound tourism figures have also continued to increase, with over 2.9 million international travelers visiting Japan in April 2018—12.5 percent higher from the previous year. Furthermore, the campaign was highly cost effective, with no major production costs or media buys required.

For the diplomatic community, campaigns such as this demonstrate the potential of online platforms, such as Instagram, to bring together public diplomacy, country branding and economic objectives. The reach and efficiency of digital platforms provide great opportunities for those who can leverage them effectively. However, the ever-changing nature of platforms and the increasingly strategic requirements that come with moving into an area that has traditionally been the preserve of communications and advertising professionals means that diplomats need to focus on raising their digital and creative skillsets.

An example of this has been the explosion of ephemeral content. Now one of Instagram's most popular features, the effective use of Stories necessitates an understanding of narrative development, creative production and oftentimes, presenting skills. In this new context, with the lines blurring between public diplomacy and marketing, it is vital that diplomats learn lessons from other sectors to place strategy and creativity at the heart of their engagement efforts.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: This piece, written by Max Kellett, originally appeared in the 2018 Soft Power 30  report.

Max Kellett is a Senior Account Manager at Portland, where he advises clients across Asia and the Middle East on integrated communications activity. He has particular experience in digital communications and crisis management and has spent time embedded within government units. He also has a strong interest in how soft power and digital technology can be leveraged in pursuit of foreign policy priorities.
