Data, analytics and creative intuition: An analysis of how to optimise return on social media investment on Instagram

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Abstract   Instagram is not just a brand-marketing tool. This in-depth analysis highlights the power of Instagram storytelling tactics in driving conversions and website traffic for content marketers, exemplified by the successes of global media brands such as *the Guardian* and *Vice*. This article explains how both *the Guardian* and *Vice* reformat their on-site content offering for mobile to appeal to their Instagram audiences, and also publish episodic series to attract new and existing audiences into regularly 'tuning in' to their content in a bid to boost on-platform engagement and on-site traffic. From these strategies, *the Guardian* has grown 79 per cent in Instagram followers in 12 months, while *Vice*'s Instagram Stories now sit at a 50 per cent retention rate. Additionally, this article emphasises the effectiveness of combining content strategies with social media strategies, and why it is imperative to be able to distinguish the differences between the two. The article also further educates content marketers on how to build-out a lucrative Instagram strategy and boost return on investment via data and analytics platforms, and campaign optimisation.

KEYWORDS: Instagram, social media, social media strategy, content marketing

INTRODUCTION

Globally, 1 billion people use Instagram each month, making it the third biggest social media platform in the world (following Facebook and YouTube, respectively).[1] It is the second most downloaded app in the Apple App Store, with 63 per cent of users logging into this social media platform each day. It is predicted that users will spend an average of 28 minutes on Instagram daily in 2020.[2]

Growing at an exponential rate since its inception in 2010, Instagram is clearly important for brand marketing and audience reach. Instagram's platform is a vehicle for driving brand awareness, so the more
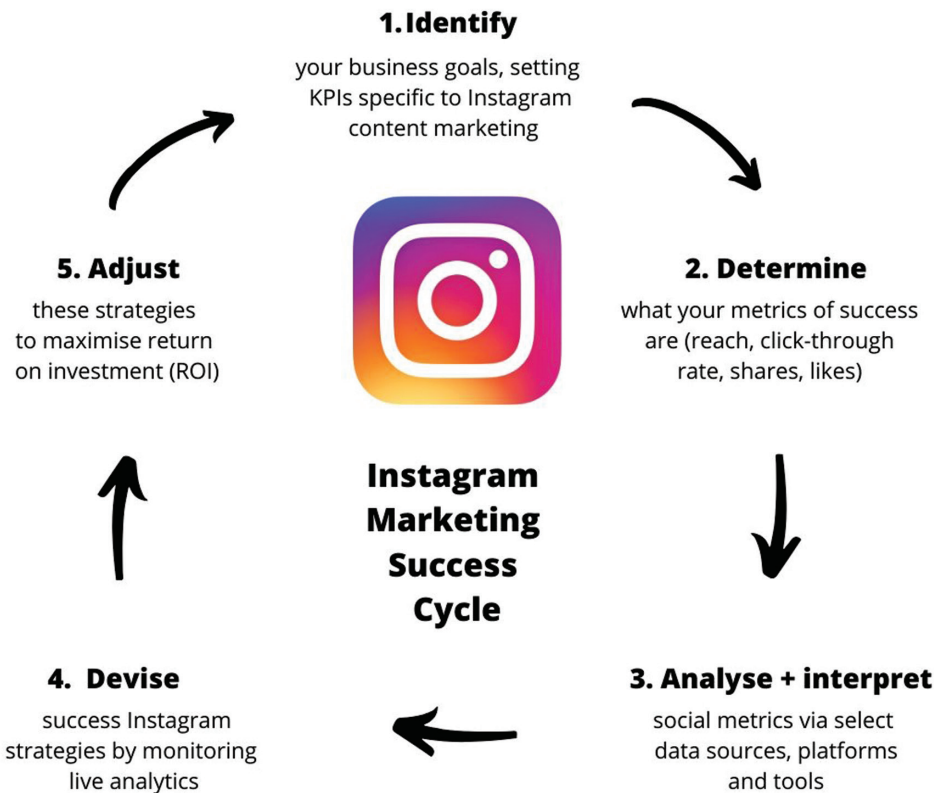
people engage meaningfully with branded content, the more visibility and, ultimately, conversions that brand will receive.

What marketers may grapple with, however, is how to convert new, often younger audiences on this ever-evolving picture and video–sharing social media channel (65 per cent of users on Instagram are under the age of 34; 31 per cent are aged between 18–24).[3]

So, where to start? Outlining clear business objectives, then combining creative intuition with data and analytics to achieve the desired results via the Instagram marketing success cycle (Figure 1) can help kick-start a structured, successful Instagram strategy.

By identifying and pairing a brand's metrics of success (engagement, conversions) with relevant social media analytical tools, marketers will effectively be able to sieve through the data they need to inform their content strategy and ultimately increase their social media return on investment (ROI).

Increasing a brand's social media ROI comes down to defining what the brand wants to achieve from its social media marketing beyond vanity metrics like likes and followers. Knowing *why* a social campaign is important and understanding its performance allows a brand to strategise around how to meet those goals and ultimately maximise reach while optimising the campaign's spend.

1. Identify
your business goals, setting KPIs specific to Instagram content marketing

2. Determine
what your metrics of success are (reach, click-through rate, shares, likes)

3. Analyse + interpret
social metrics via select data sources, platforms and tools

4. Devise
success Instagram strategies by monitoring live analytics

5. Adjust
these strategies to maximise return on investment (ROI)

Instagram Marketing Success Cycle

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Figure 1: The Instagram marketing success cycle
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DIFFERENTIATING CONTENT STRATEGIES FROM SOCIAL BEST PRACTICES

With as many as 500 million[4] users scrolling through their Instagram Feed daily, it has never been more important for marketers to combine their business objectives with content strategies and social media strategies in a bid to reach younger audiences.

So, in this context of Instagram storytelling, what is the difference between a content strategy and a social media strategy?

Content marketing looks to creative thought and the distribution of creative content.[5] The purpose of content marketing is to promote a product or business by building brand awareness.

Social media marketing, on the other hand, refers to the tools, strategies and platforms that drive people — existing or potential customers — to view and engage with that content.

When combining the two, think of content as a tactic and social media as the channel.[6]

Distinguishing the differences between these two marketing methods is what leads to higher engagement and the likelihood of conversions; someone could create an engaging Instagram post, but if they fail to adopt social media marketing techniques to optimise and amplify that post, the likelihood of that post being seen decreases. So, too, does the post's ROI.

Case study 1: *The Guardian* — Episodic Instagram Stories and IGTV content

Adopting Instagram-specific audience growth strategies, long-heralded news publisher *the Guardian* has seen a 79 per cent increase in Instagram followers in 12 months (November 2018–2019). This comes down to reshaping the brand's unique sales point — local and international journalism, news and current affairs — into episodic, strategically planned content, told by *Guardian* journalists, on the Instagram Stories and IGTV surfaces.

The Guardian's audience growth strategy focuses on prioritising video content; video content increases brand discoverability on the platform 38 per cent more than a static image post.[7] Through reskinning its on-site content for the mobile audience on

Figure 2: *The Guardian*'s top-performing, politically driven IGTV video

Source: @guardian/Instagram

Figure 3: *The Guardian*'s episodic Instagram Stories video series, Fake Or Real, shining a new, Instagram-optimised light on British politics

Source: @guardian/Instagram

Instagram, prioritising video as a growth strategy, *the Guardian*'s Instagram following now consists of new-time *Guardian* readers, who only ever discovered the brand's content offering via its Instagram channel.

Not only that, but through the introduction of its themed Instagram Stories and longer IGTV series content, *the Guardian* has also managed to more than double its Instagram video views year on year (November 2018–November 2019).

Additionally, building this loyal, new, younger community plays to the publisher's content membership model; *the Guardian* now targets new users (those who only accessed the brand via Instagram and none of the other digital touch points) with membership offers to the pay-walled site through Instagram.

Case Study 2: *Vice* — Storyboarding Instagram content

Similar to *the Guardian*, youth media brand *Vice* has seen high audience retention on its Instagram Stories — a testament to the impact that repurposing content to play to the Instagram platform has had on overall post performance.

According to the Facebook Journalism Project's interview with *Vice*'s Senior Director of Multiplatform, Youyoung Lee, storyboarding the brand's Instagram content allows *Vice* to keep audiences engaged and users moving forward through their users moving forward through their Stories — one of the brand's metrics of success: 'Our Stories hover around a 50 per cent retention rate, but the Stories with the highest retention are the ones we've really planned', she told Facebook.[8]

Moreover, *Vice* also uses Instagram Stories to AB test the efficacy of new content types, thus boosting social media ROI. 'Creating a video can cost tens of thousands of dollars, so [we] use Instagram to pilot concepts and social franchises', said Lee. 'We use Instagram Stories for instant data — what the audience likes and what they want to see more of'.

By tailoring their Instagram storytelling strategies to work in synergy with a targeted social media strategy built on follower growth and conversion techniques that play to the Instagram platform, these brands are experiencing a high return for the resource and production that goes into their posts — an increased ROI.

Figure 4: *Vice*'s Instagram Stories series on climate change, saved as a Highlight on the *Vice* Instagram page

Source: @vice/Instagram

CONTENT OPTIMISATION AND DISCOVERABILITY

> 'If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?'[9]

George Berkeley's thoughts on observation and perception might very well be applied to social media marketing: if someone posts an image or video to Instagram without content optimisation strategies in place, will it ever be discovered by the audience it was intended to reach?

Anecdotally, it is safe to say that *someone* will see the post; had that content been optimised for engagement and/or conversions, however, it is a certainty that more people would see it. This is why it is important to ensure that every Instagram post not only has a purpose, but is optimised for discoverability.

In this respect, key audience growth and engagement tactics can be summarised as follows:

- *Strategic hashtagging:* Hashtags are no longer superfluous; they are instrumental in propelling post discoverability and reaching new, untapped audiences. Where applicable, assimilate trending hashtags into post captions. Use the Explore feed to identify tags that have been used between 20,000 and 300,000 times; hashtags that have been used over 1 million times, and those that have been used less than 10,000 times, decrease the chance of the post being discovered in the Explore feed.

- *Prioritising video:* According to a 2019 report, engagement numbers for videos posted to top media publisher accounts worldwide increased by 53 per cent year over year in May, surpassing the 46 per cent growth rate seen for photos over the same timeframe.[10] But it is not all about growth rates; videos allow brands to share more content, emotion and messaging than a static image. Experiment with the Instagram video capabilities — Grid, Stories, IGTV and Live — to identify which surface resonates best with the brand.

- *Third-party amplification:* A brand's Instagram account is not the only tool that can drive engagement and traffic numbers. When employing the services of (unpaid) creators, subject matter experts or people of 'influence' to enhance a content offering, utilise *their* audiences to achieve key performance indicators (KPIs).

If the metric of success is traffic or conversions, request the influencer uses a custom Urchin Tracking Module (UTM)

parameter on the URL they are sharing (for UTM parameter purposes and suggestions, see below).

If the metric of success is brand awareness and follower growth, utilise Instagram Insights to track peak audience growth periods and see if they align with the third–party amplification date range the campaign is set to run on their account.

Competing with the algorithm

In 2016, Instagram removed the time-chronological feature of the platform, making it *non*-time-chronological. The reason for this change, according to Instagram, is that, due to the sheer volume of content uploaded to the platform, users were missing as much as 70 per cent of posts in their feeds.[11]

What this meant for creators, brands and publishers alike is that content relevancy and efficacy would become more and more valuable, and the time when that post was posted would become less and less relevant.

In an interview with *ELLE Australia* in November 2019, head of beauty and lifestyle partnerships at Instagram, Kristie Dash, said that there is no mathematical solution for 'beating' the algorithm — rather, it is all about targeting the platform's engagement triggers to boost the brand's probability of ranking high in a user's feed. According to Dash:

> 'There are over 500 signals which determine exactly how your feed is ranked … If you're engaging with posts, or you're engaging with people that you care about by liking, commenting and watching their Stories, they'll be ranked higher in your feed the next time you enter your app'.[12]

This is how and why engagement tactics like strategic hashtagging, video prioritisation and third–party amplification can set a brand apart from its market competitors; algorithmic-driven engagement holds the key to campaign success.

SOCIAL MEDIA METRICS AND ANALYTICS

Question: Can you form a successful social media strategy without data and analytics? *Answer*: No. The same could be said for not mapping out a customer journey roadmap when strategising the online growth of the brand. This is why building a social media marketing funnel, in tandem with synthesising data using a 360° social-reporting method, is instrumental in achieving business goals via Instagram storytelling.

Building a social media marketing funnel

A marketing funnel refers to the process of tracking the customer's journey from first becoming aware of the brand/campaign to converting, engaging and/or purchasing. A successful social media marketing funnel works not only to convert customers for one specific social campaign, but to build loyal audiences to convert across future campaigns.

Start by mapping out the customer journey by combining the marketing funnel with the awareness, interest, desire and action (AIDA) framework established by Elias St. Elmo Lewis (Figure 5):

- *Build awareness*: Utilise content strategies to make people aware of what the brand is trying to draw attention to. To optimise the campaign, lean on Instagram discoverability techniques (like strategic hashtagging and video prioritisation) and social media listening tools like Instagram Insights, CrowdTangle (for publishers) and Google Supermetrics to identify what content resonates with the audience.
- *Accelerate interest*: When posting follow-up posts, pique user interest by using data-driven creative assets that align with the first post. Keep the campaign messaging clear, concise and consistent to edge out competitors who may be posting about a similar campaign. Experiment with format output to gage interest; AB

test image performance versus video performance, then optimise the campaign based on the results.

- *Increase desire*: Drive the user to want the product through creative assets built on what has received high engagement for the brand in the past.
- *Monitor action*: If the AIDA framework is well planned, optimised and executed, and the conversion method is simple, the user will engage with the campaign, and purchase or convert to the brand/product — now *and* in the future.
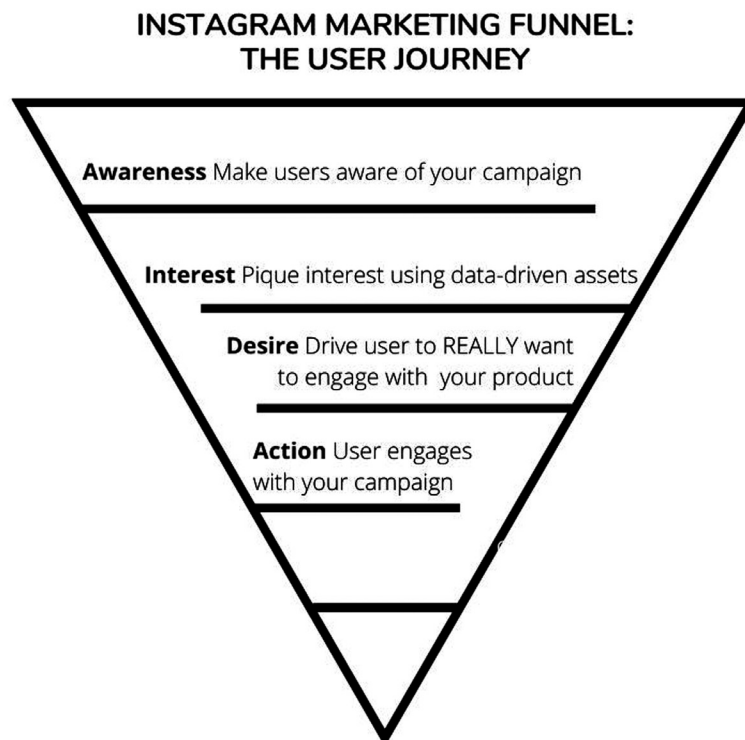
Social media return on investment

As brands like *Vice* and the *Guardian* have demonstrated, social media marketing is much more than just 'posting' to Instagram and waiting to see if a post gets traction; it is impossible to measure social media success, or shape a lucrative platform strategy, without data and analytics. A successful social media strategy is built on extracting the relevant metrics within one's social media analytics to set KPIs and maximise ROI.

Increasing social media ROI on Instagram comes down to two things: identifying business objectives and understanding the role played by social media in achieving these goals.

Ultimately, to drive up the ROI and to keep production costs of creating a campaign low (video and shoots, image usage, staff resources), optimise content by learning from what has worked in the past — and what has not.

For example, if the objective is to market the brand/build brand recognition on Instagram, shares, saves, comments and follower growth would be the metrics of success. On the other hand, if the objective is driving traffic or conversions to the brand

INSTAGRAM MARKETING FUNNEL: THE USER JOURNEY

Awareness Make users aware of your campaign

Interest Pique interest using data-driven assets

Desire Drive user to REALLY want to engage with your product

Action User engages with your campaign

Figure 5: Instagram marketing funnel — The user journey (AIDA framework)

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website, reach, impressions, Link In Bio clicks, swipe-ups and conversions would be the metrics of success.

Then, when reporting on the overall effectiveness of a campaign, calculate social media ROI by dividing the profit made over the money spent on the campaign in its entirety as follows:

Investment = $1,000 on production and campaign post

Profit = $1,500

ROI = $1,500 / $1,000 × 100 = 50%

360° social-media reporting

No one platform, free or paid, holds the key to social success; by extrapolating and interpreting data from multiple social media listening and data analysis tools, it is possible to better inform the overarching strategy. This is called 360° social-media reporting.

The method of 360° social-media reporting allows marketers to compare and contrast content approaches, measuring

success based on reoccurring engagement and/or click-through rate (CTR). In addition, it is these omni-channel insights that make it possible to drill down on what organic content and talent resonates with the target audience.

Extracting relevant metrics from myriad sources, then acting upon such data, will ultimately result in a well-rounded, lucrative social media strategy.

Instagram Insights

Using in-app data from Instagram Insights helps to measure success on top-performing posts, zooming in on reach, engagement (shares, comments, likes) against day posted and time of day posted. Analyse these insights to identify the high-engagement posts, then build organic or paid campaigns around these content types.

For example, say the brand has 40,000 followers on Instagram and receives an average of 100 likes per post and 25 Link in Bio clicks to the website. Instagram Insights

Figure 6: Instagram Insights user interface

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shows that whenever the brand features a person laughing in a feed post image, the engagement doubles. This insight can then be used as a strategy to optimise ROI — whether paid or organic.

Tracking pixels

Without a tracking pixel, it is only possible to collect data around content optimised for link clicks; *with* a tracking pixel, however, it is possible to optimise for conversions more tailored to business goals (e-mail sign-ups, purchases and conversions).

Build targeted audiences and remarket to those who have already taken an action on the campaign; optimising content, again organic or paid, via pixels will result in a higher ROI.

CrowdTangle

This Facebook-owned social-monitoring platform is instrumental in tracking organic and branded content social successes against competitors. While this tool is currently only available to publishers, it can shine a light on the data that existing social media listening tools may be missing, and data extrapolation approaches that can be replicated.

CrowdTangle Dashboards make it possible to draw on data from both owned social channels, as well as those of competitors, making it possible to compare how their organic and paid posts perform in comparison to yours (historical data based on these dashboards can be downloaded via the Instagram public application programming interface [API]).

The platform also uses Dashboards to set up Live Displays based on the data being collected. Live Displays provide a cross-platform view for Dashboards, featuring content updates in real time. Through Live Displays, it is possible to pull in post streams, leaderboards, Facebook's Trending Topics and Google Trends.[13]

CrowdTangle's Intelligence reports also makes it possible to compare your audience growth against that of your competitors (this is particularly useful for analysing Instagram audiences broadly). Here, it is possible compare total post count, follower growth/ reduction by numbers and percentages, as well as video posts and views across 1–12 months (daily, weekly, monthly).

For example, when it comes to using Intelligence to measure *ELLE Australia* against it local competitors on Instagram, it is possible to look at how often video posts are posted and what kind of videos are getting traction (based on the fact that videos surface more than static images).

Using Intelligence this way, it is then possible to identify which competitors are threats to *ELLE Australia*'s Instagram audience growth, and learn from their successful video strategies to maximise the resource and investment the *ELLE Australia* editorial team puts into its own Instagram video posts.

UTM tracking parameters

Marketers are well acquainted with Google Analytics, specifically when it comes to tracking the time social conversions spend onsite. This is because content with high time-on-site figures and a low bounce rate is optimal for social conversion rates.

However, when tracking the efficacy of a third-party amplification of a post — when someone of social influence shares the site content — UTM parameters can provide less polluted reporting.

For example, if the brand allocated a sizeable amount of campaign budget on influencer marketing and needed to see how much traffic, engagement or conversions one specific influencer was driving from their Instagram account to the brand site, Google Analytics Campaign URL Builder can be used to create a custom UTM tag for the influencer, which can be tracked in Google Analytics.

If the influencer drove high conversions to the brand site, the ROI would be high; if the conversion rate was low, the obvious next step would be to reassess the influencer
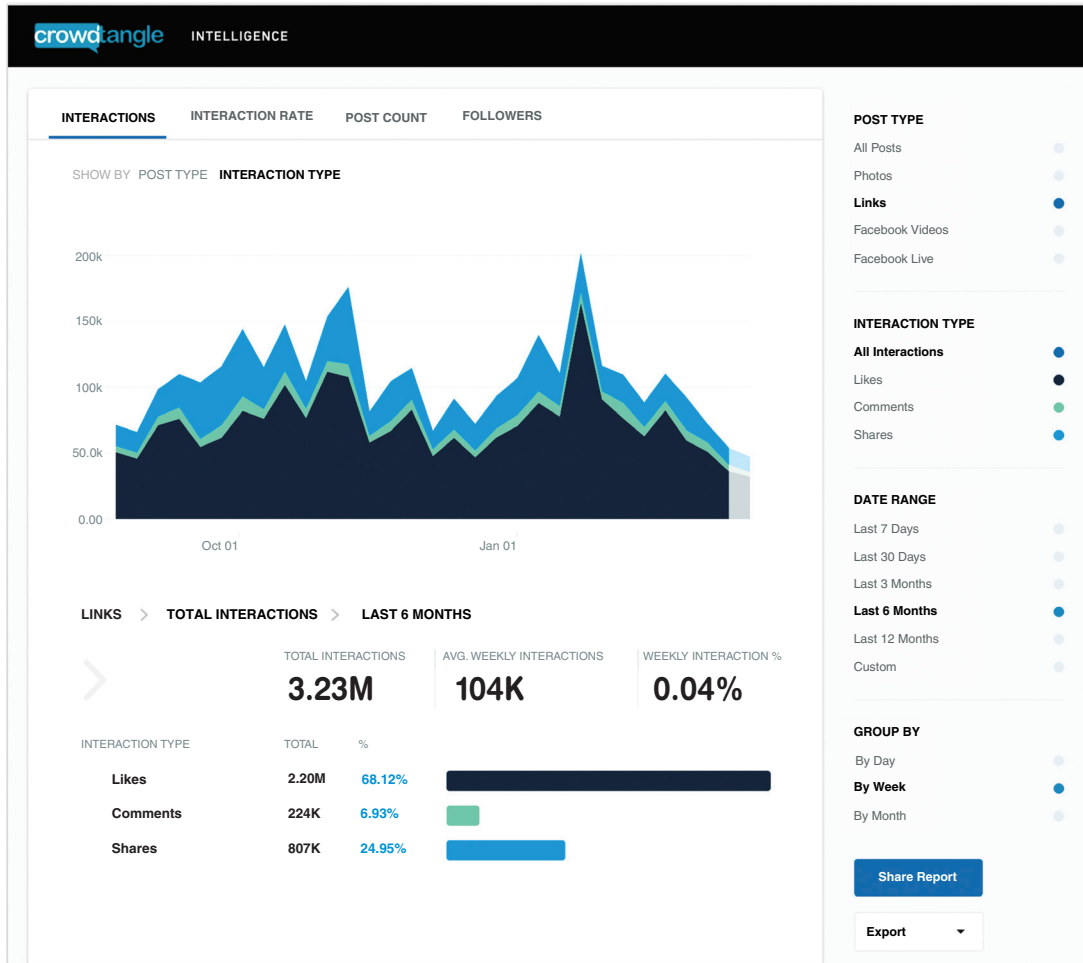
Figure 7: CrowdTangle Intelligence reporting, tracking interaction rate

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marketing strategy to feature only influencers who drive high conversions.

Supermetrics and Google Data Studio

Supermetrics automates the manual work of sifting through pages and pages of data, collating Instagram Insights into Google Sheets via the Instagram API.

This tool is useful in setting metrics and dimensions according to the data being extracted, with data pulling into a spreadsheet within minutes.

Connect the Supermetrics report to Google Data Studio, then create live reports and dashboards to monitor social campaigns as they are posted.

CONCLUSION

What once was a digital scrapbook where brands would upload images and memes that they *thought* represented their brand online, today, Instagram is a highly strategic, lucrative tool that content marketers use to create loyal communities, who they can retarget via analysis and pixel tracking in a bid to convert them to customers.

By analysing other brands' wins (and losses) on the platform, building campaign-specific social media marketing funnels to align with business objectives utilising the AIDA framework, as well as the Instagram marketing success cycle, extrapolating and synthesising data from
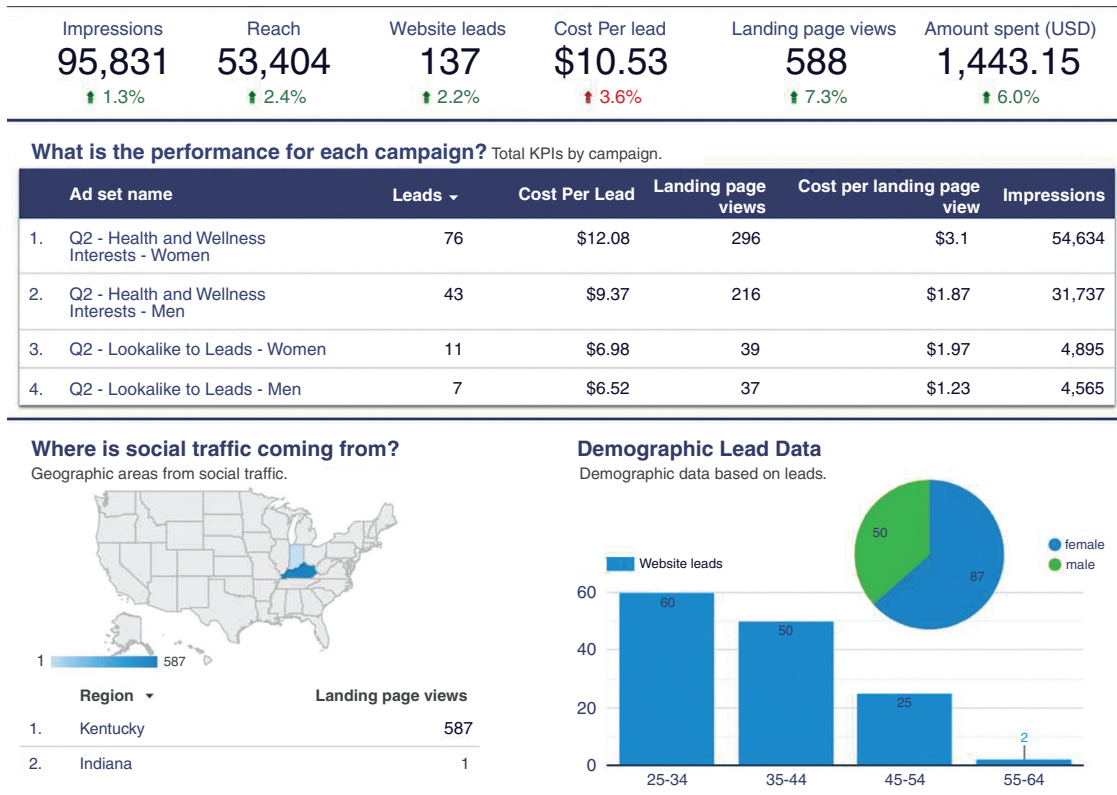
Figure 8: Social Media Examiner's example of visualising data extrapolated from Google Sheets into Google Data Studio

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numerous data sources, then strategically optimising posts based on what metrics of success will lead to higher engagement, ROI and conversions.

The final recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Identify business goals, set clear benchmarks and KPIs.
- Determine metrics of success (reach, CTR, shares).
- Analyse and interpret social metrics via select data sources, platforms and tools, then devise strategy.
- Implement and monitor live analytics. Adjust strategy to maximise social media ROI on Instagram.

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