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USING Instagram TO BOOST BUSINESS

If “a picture is worth 1,000 words,” then lighting showrooms better get onboard the Instagram train.

BY MARK OKUN

In my opinion, Instagram is the new billboard of our time. How many times have you seen passengers in cars speeding down the road phone in hand, eyes down, never noticing the billboards on the side of the road? The way we reach our market has changed.

Lighting showrooms are visual environments and Instagram is the ideal platform for building your brand, showcasing your products, your staff, and your store. The Instagram app connects to the very core of the brand that showrooms want to develop when building recognition in a “Glocal” economy.

Instagram allows you to share a brief glimpse of your store to the world with the ultimate goal of being inviting and unique to your followers. The Instagram app provides a snapshot of the experience, the fun, and the vibe people will get when they visit your showroom. Whether you are posting recently added merchandise, new product releases, or showcasing a project/special service, post all of them on Instagram. This is a great venue to take advantage of the ability to tell your story and represent your product or service in a whole host of different ways that will inspire consumers to think of you.

As the owner or manager of a brick-and-mortar store, Instagram can be an easy way to increase your exposure to the potential customers in your community. It becomes a visual story that is based in show with a little bit of tell. This takes more than posting pictures and hoping for a result; it takes a strategy.

The bedrock to success in utilizing the Instagram platform is consistency. Post early and post often — unlike other platforms, there is no drop off of engagement with followers when there is a high rate of picture posting. And, like any other form of advertising media, to get the best use from Instagram, you must plan your postings.

Take a page from the steadfast idea of an advertising calendar and lay it out by day, date, and time for the entire year. This doesn't mean that you can't be spontaneous and post a happy customer picture or the latest installation; of course you can, and you are encouraged to do so, but it must be *in addition* to your planned scheduled posts.

As you look at your advertising calendar, think about the campaigns for your store and how Instagram can be used to supplement that exposure.

WHERE DO THE IMAGES COME FROM?

Most of the pictures posted on your Instagram account will be taken by yourself, if you are a small company. A larger organization can dedicate the resources, time, money, and people to the job. No special equipment is needed, only a good cell-phone camera, a steady hand, plus the desire and basic understanding of how to take pictures.

Over time, you will discover that your organic posting of images that strike your fancy won't be enough to maintain a dedicated posting schedule. For that reason, you should also include “User Generated Content” and applicable pictures that your vendors post.

The process of taking good pictures is important, but you don't need to be a film director of J.J. Abrams caliber when it comes to setting up some great image scenes. The pictures you take should be interesting and grab the attention of your followers. Use color and product positioning to create visual drama. Every chandelier is a potential star, and every accessory is a supporting member in this visual story you are putting together.

USE HASHTAGS CORRECTLY

The hashtag (#) is used as an easy way to categorize and follow topics. What does it do? It highlights keywords or topics and can be used anywhere within an Instagram post. Be wary of overdoing it or being too vague. If you have too many hashtags, you might look desperate in your posting. Keep hashtags relevant to your brand and business.

Your brand hashtag must be included in all of your social media posts. Hashtags are also good if you want to connect with your local community by tagging your city, town, or local event. Think of it as hitching a ride to the eyes that have not yet connected with you.

BE ENGAGING

Once you have a good following on Instagram, you can poll your followers with pictures of new styles or colors you want to offer. This will give you a pre-purchase feel for how the items will appeal to your customers.

There are some great ideas floating around about posting for engagement on the various

INSTAGRAM FACTS

75 million
daily users

400 million
worldwide users



20% of adult
females in the U.S.
are on Instagram

26% of U.S.
adults use
Instagram



20% of all Internet users have
an Instagram account

There is 38%
more engagement
with photos that
feature a face



96% of all fashion
brands use Instagram



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social media platforms. Some of the ideas are pretty pedestrian while others will be inspiring. For example, you want to post new products and store displays, but how about showing employees having fun with customers or posting an invitation to a store-held event? You can even alert customers to flash sales or a change in operating hours for a holiday.

Of course there are contests. One way to increase engagement is to run contests. How about an “Ugly Lamp” contest where people post pictures of “ugly” lamps or lighting fixtures to Instagram using the hashtag #UglyLampContest? Your followers then vote on the winner.

We all want to drive traffic into our stores and Web sites and Instagram offers a great vehicle for doing that. Another great way to get your followers to interact is to ask specific questions on a relative subject or product. For instance, post a picture of the 2016 Pantone Color of the Year and ask for their opinions.

Why not post a photo of an LED lamp and asked for the group’s opinion of LED as a light source? I’ve seen a long list of comments following posts like that and I believe this is an immediate

opportunity for solidifying your expert status in the lighting category.

When engagement occurs – and I mean *any* engagement – be sure to respond. Every time there is a comment posted, you must – I repeat, *must* – engage the customer. If the comment is positive, thank them and continue the thread by asking a question. If it is a negative comment, it’s time to shine and turn a mishap into a positive that all of your followers can witness. This type of post will do more for building your good will than you can imagine.

Instagram is a powerhouse in the world of social media apps, and I believe it is the workhorse of all the social media platforms. There are 400+ million active users on Instagram and its sharing feature makes it easy to post content to Facebook, Twitter, and other networks. That way, you can populate these platforms while focusing on being expert in one! The powerful addition of visual content appeals to your followers’ emotions in a way that text alone cannot do.

I believe Instagram is the best way we have, as retailers, to tell our emotional stories – and we can do it in pictures. ❖

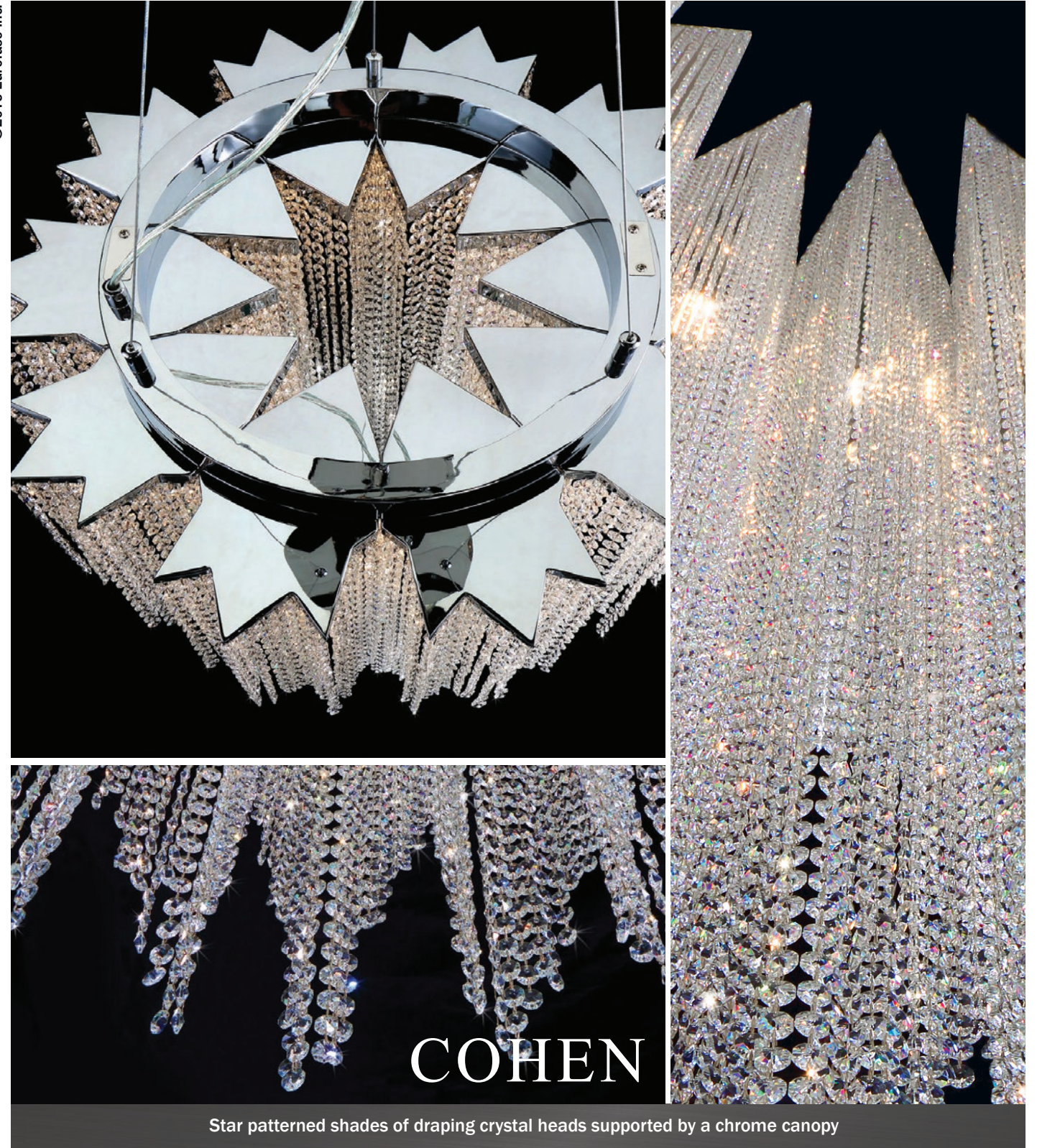
SOME IMPORTANT TIPS

- ➔ Your phone’s camera is better at taking pictures than the Instagram app is because it is more versatile and controllable.
- ➔ Instagram now posts in both portrait and landscape. You are no longer limited to using only square pictures. This applies to both images and video.
- ➔ Plan your shot. You will get some great pictures off the cuff, but taking a moment to lay out the look will help their appearance. Avoid the use of a white background when taking product pictures. Why? It creates a cold and impersonal feeling.
- ➔ Keep the shot natural. You want the object of the picture to appear as it would in a home, business, or showroom.

Let’s remember that Instagram also supports video and the same rules apply. Video content can get as much as *three times the interaction* with followers as an image does. It is valuable to mix up your posts between pictures and video, always keeping the story flowing.

One surefire way to increase your Instagram engagement is to include people in your pictures with your product. The best responses to posts are those that have pictures of people, hands, and faces. Adding the human touch will increase the interaction.

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Star patterned shades of draping crystal heads supported by a chrome canopy



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