"We're always looking for great content" – Customer Interaction via Instagram

Marie-Louise Brunner & Stefan Diemer (Trier University of Applied Sciences)

The paper examines customer communication via Instagram in selected companies. Instagram is a key company advertising and webcare channel, particularly for companies that address an international and young customer base. Our aim is to document existing practice that can help to optimize channel-specific customer communication for an international and plurilingual audience.

Starting from a documentation of existing interactional practices in Instagram (Lee & Chau 2018, Mapes 2018, Tuten & Solomon 2017), our approach aims at extending this research to a multilingual, cross-border setting, focusing in particular on how companies can address global audiences and how success in social media communication can be evaluated. For the study, public Instagram interactions of selected internationally active companies (e.g. MyMuesli, Yves Rocher, SAP, Adidas, Bitburger) and self-marketing influencers (e.g. Kylie Cosmetics, Jamie Oliver) were collected, analyzed and classified. Documented communication includes branding, advertising, sales, customer engagement, and complaint management. Successful interactions are used to create a baseline of how Instagram 'best practice' works linguistically, based on likes, reach, and customer engagement as criteria.

A qualitative analysis provides an overview of interactional strategies used in Instagram. We expand and support the qualitative findings with a limited quantitative analysis of general thread sentiment and company tone.

Instagram affordances include features such as hashtag clouds, Instastories, and visual interaction. Results indicate that Instagram communication showcases a distinct company tone and media-specific content as part of strategic posting concepts. Hashtags are used to extend messages and portray social media identity while introducing a personal, authentic and humorous tone. Customer interaction also reflects these affordances and the intended company tone. While the key medium for reaching multilingual audiences is English, companies also establish multiple monolingual channels to reach audiences with specific language backgrounds. Even in monolingual settings, plurilingual customer engagement is achieved by multilingual hashtags, automated translation, and hybrid advertising. Customer feedback and interaction is also frequently plurilingual. Culture-specific images may prompt intercultural negotiations in comments, engaging customers further. Instagram Stories have speedily become an efficient marketing tool, re-establishing traditional time-bound and temporary advertising channels in a low-cost and opt-in social medium setting (Hu et al. 2014).

In general, Instagram provides an ideal platform for valorizing customer testimonials and outsourcing webcare, with customers themselves serving as disseminators and troubleshooters. In sum, the study provides insights into Instagram customer interactions and illustrates how companies create an authentic and effective social media presence for a national and international customer base, how they engage customers and build rapport across borders, and how they maintain their brand identity.

References

Hu, Y, Manikonda, L. and Kambhampati, S., 2014. What we instagram: A first analysis of instagram photo content and user types. Eighth International AAAI conference on weblogs and social media.

Lee, C. and Chau, D., 2018. Language as pride, love, and hate: Archiving emotions through multilingual Instagram hashtags. Discourse, context & media 22 (2018): 21-29.

Mapes, G., 2018. "(De) constructing distinction: Class inequality and elite authenticity in mediatized food discourse." Journal of sociolinguistics.

Tuten, T. L., and Solomon, M.R., 2017. Social media marketing. London: Sage.