

Iterate Social Presents

the Boss Babe's Guide to Social Media

Introduction

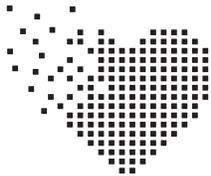
Hello Boss Babe!

I am Elizabeth Fein, the Boss at [Iterate Social](#) and I am a social media manager, [blogger](#), and creator of the course [Quietly Unstoppable: Digital Marketing for Introverts](#). I am very excited to present this eBook to you that was born out of the idea that collaboration is far more productive than competition. All of the authors of this book do similar things, but just like you we all have our own unique brand and way of approaching social media. It's very exciting that we can all come together to share our best tips and tricks, together, in one place.

This eBook is set up in three sections-branding, growing your following, and photo styling. These three topics are important topics to keep in mind and master when it comes to perfecting your social media marketing.

Social media can feel really overwhelming, but with a little know how, planning, and tenacity you can have a social media presence that is as awesome as you are.

We hope you enjoy this eBook as much as we enjoyed making it for you!



Elizabeth Fein

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Branding Your Social Media



#BossBabeGuide



Branding Your Social Media

Your social media accounts are an extension of your brand, and it is really important to keep them in line and consistent. Creating a brand that people can relate to and fall in love with will have you booking clients and making money like a boss. This chapter covers everything from creating a brand experience to staying true to your brand on social media.

Elizabeth Fein

Iteratesocial.com | @iteratesocial

Creating an Experience

Branding your social media is important for brands and boss babes alike. Your brand is about more than just your product. It's a lifestyle, and you want to invite your target consumers to be part of that lifestyle. The lifestyle you create for your brand is what makes people spend more for the experience. In return for the great experience, your social media followers will share your photos, tag their friends and become a returning customer or fan.

Here are three keys to effectively branding your social media profiles.

1. Be Authentic

The most important aspect of branding your social media is being authentic to your brand. It's okay to draw inspiration from other brands you like, but copying posts won't resonate with your audience if it's forced. If you don't like avocado toast, don't post a picture of avocado toast just because everyone else is doing it.

2. Determine Your Target Audience

Finding your voice and determining your target audience is crucial to any business strategy, including social media. When figuring out who your target audience is, consider the following: age, income, where they live, what they do for fun, their active social media platforms, where they read their info (what info?), and more. Once you know your target audience, you'll know how to create posts that resonate with their interests.

3. Don't Oversell

Social media is a great tool for bringing awareness to your brand and increasing your customer base and sales. Followers enjoy business profiles that aren't forcing them make a purchase. People follow accounts that are aesthetically pleasing and have a good, strong voice. As a result, brands should not simply post a product with a price and a link to buy a product in the caption. That just doesn't work. Yes, include your products in your post, but do so creatively.

For example, promote your brand's newly released facial moisturizer with SPF and include a fun post of the product in the sand at the beach, or on a colorful picnic blanket at the park with some other creative visuals that will resonate with your reader much more than a price tag. Also, give a behind-the-scenes look and interject some personal posts in your feed. This will help give your brand a face.

For bloggers and personalities working with brands, this same rule applies. Find a way to creatively sell the brands you're featuring so that your followers don't feel like your entire feed is a sales pitch.

I'd love to hear some additional tips that you have for branding your social media. Tweet me @DanikaDalyPR.

Danika Daly | Founder of Danika Daly PR and Fashion PR Confidential
danikadalypr.com | @DanikaDalyPR



Creating a Solid Social Strategy to Elevate Your Brand

Having a solid social strategy is the best thing you can do to elevate your brand. If it's done with focus and intention, you can develop brand recognition by creating a community of loyal followers who will begin to indirectly sell for you through tagging, testimonial and word of mouth.

Brand consistency throughout each platform is very important; each social platform should complement the next. They don't have to be exact replicas, but a well-designed cover photo, logo and brand message can go a long way. If you don't have a graphic designer and consider yourself creative, give canva.com a try. They have pre-sized templates for most social media platforms.

My Rule of Thumb is Less is More

Don't try and get too fancy with fonts, colored text and designs. Simple sells! Brand consistency is not just focused on the design of your pages; it's the pattern you create with your branded content. I like to think of social media branding as a Cosmo. (Yes, the cocktail) Everyone knows what a Cosmo is; it's probably the most well known cocktail on the planet. A Cosmo has four ingredients and a garnish. Your social strategy should be the same way, with your garnish being a sale or special offer.

Here is my recipe for a well-branded social media campaign. Cheers and happy marketing!

The Cosmo of Social Media Recipe

Vodka = The Fun!

Let your audience see the culture of your company by introducing yourself with a fun photo from time to time, featuring fun behind-the-scenes moments and giving your business some personality.

Gin = Your Classy Sophisticated Side.

This is where your business-related quotes and examples of your best work come into play.

Splash of Cranberry = Networking!

Align your business with brands that have similar audiences but don't personally compete with you or cross-promote. Contests, giveaways, event sharing, etc.

Splash of Lime Juice = Charity.

Choose a local charity and start engaging, pushing out initiatives, volunteering and donating to a good cause.

Garnish = Sale, Sale, Sale.

Here is where you get to self-promoting. Once every 10 posts or so, share a blog post, special offer or something that will drive traffic back to your website.

Lauren Edvalson | Owner of Edvalson Marketing

Edvalsonmarketing.com | @edvalson_marketing

Make It Yours! Customizing Your Social Media Content to Fit Your Brand

When it comes to your social media content, it has to be yours. It must reflect you because you are your brand. It must be authentic, real and true to who you are at your core—your values and your why. If you want to dominate social media, you have to post straight from your heart.

When posting on your social media platforms, you want to make sure that your content is consistent to your brand in every way. This includes color (for example, to make photo styling my own I try to use a black background instead of white), voice, tone and topic. Your content should also evoke emotion. Pull on those heartstrings!

As an entrepreneur, it's very common and completely natural for us to look around at others in our industry, be drawn to (and in my case, fall in love with) the way they do things and then find ourselves doing the same thing. Imitation is the greatest form of flattery. I get it and trust me, I do it. But I also challenge myself to take what may be working for someone else and make it unique in my own way. I continually ask myself, "Is this really me?"

Seven Questions to Ask Yourself Before Posting on Social Media

1. Does this really represent me or am I unknowingly copying someone else's style?
2. How can I leverage the existing knowledge of others while tapping into my own unique background/experience using storytelling?
3. What personal story can I share in relation to the topic that will make the content more memorable?
4. In what ways can I add my own personal stamp on this post? Visually, audibly or conceptually?
5. Is there a unique twist or spin I can put on it to make it ownable to my brand?
6. What can I add that will be unexpected in this topic area or am I just playing it safe?
7. Will people look at this post and say to themselves, "That was totally ____ (enter your name)!"

When you apply your unique secret sauce to what you do and make it your own, you have to be prepared for the results. The right people will fall madly in love with you and your brand, and the right people will be completely turned off by your personality. Remember, if they don't LOVE you they are not your audience!

Olivia Omega | Personal Branding Strategist and Author of Beautifully Branded

Oliviaomega.com | @oliviaomega

To gain access to the first chapter and 40% off the book, go to www.oliviaomega.com/bossbabe.

Picking an Avatar that Represents Your Brand

Branding your social media is not just about using your logo or text that you post on a daily basis. It is about the overall look, feel and voice that you are communicating with your customer. The best way to find your unique voice is to create an avatar for your page or the person tweeting about your brand.

Take a few moments to write down a great description of this avatar.

- + What is he or she like?
- + What do they wear, eat or do for hobbies?
- + What are adjectives the avatar uses often?

These are just a few questions to get your started—there are an endless number of ways to describe your social media avatar. Once you have created a good description of your avatar, try imagining this person speaking as you plan your posts, tweets or pins.

Creating a unique social media voice for your brand will help your customers and potential customers identify with you, as well as help you attract your ideal customers.

Whitney Presley | Design, Branding & Social Media Consultant

whitneypresley.com | @whitneycreates



Three Ways Branded Social Media Will Work for You

Humans are wired for stories. We use stories to understand the world around us. And the greatest challenge with sharing our stories is editing.

Because social media moves so quickly, an edited story of intentional branded posts and photos is crucial. It needs to be told again and again. It must represent the best in you and the difference that you are making in the world.

By branding your social media, those around you can understand who you are, what you are doing, where you are going, and how they can be involved.

When you brand your social media, you're doing three things.

1. Advertising Confidence.

Branded or intentional social media explicitly advertises what you do best. You're saying no to everything else.

Showcasing your strengths makes them obvious to the world. People see what you do and know you can do it well for them or with them. People want reassurance in their choices.

2. Making a Consistent First Impression

When you're consistent, people know what to expect. If you're all over the place, strangers will be less likely to invite you into their house.

A consistent first impression gets someone to take action, such as signing up for your newsletter or buying from you.

3. Attracting What You Want More of

Social media is the highlight reel of your life and your work. Right or wrong, people assume you're sharing your best work. They know what you do and what they can expect if they work with you.

Don't save your best work for your website. Unless people know about you, your work won't get seen.

An inspiring and informative feed creates opportunities. Strangers become fans. Fans hire you, work with you, or tell others about you.

Eden Hensley Silverstein | Brand Consulting, Community Engagement Planning, Editor of *The Road to the Good Life*

EdenHensley.com | @EdenHensley

Staying Consistent

The key to social media branding is having consistency in all of your brand elements. Consistency helps establish your brand and communicates the right message (and same message) in every touch point that you have with your audience.

Social media is one of the biggest components of this because it is the first place that you interact with your audience and where they come back for more. It is key that your brand is being portrayed through your images and your content. Being consistent across the board is how followers will begin to recognize and connect with your brand.

The best way to brand your social media is to first establish a strong brand and solid brand elements. You have to know your brand style and your writing voice. Once you develop your brand style and aesthetic, your social media will naturally follow those brand guidelines. Keep your images and content consistent with your brand message by always using the same image style and voice in your writing.

The biggest takeaway is to maintain a consistent brand message across all of your social media accounts. Inconsistent messaging can confuse your audience and can keep you from building a strong, recognizable brand.

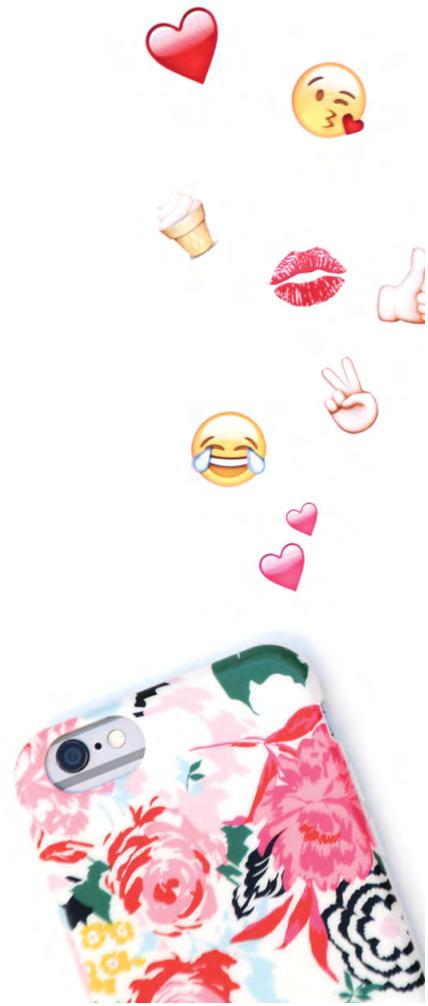
Rachel Green | Owner/Designer of Printed Ink Designs

printedinkdesigns.com | [@printedinkdesigns](https://www.instagram.com/printedinkdesigns)

Growing Your Social Media Following



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Growing Your Social Media Following

Gaining more followers is a legitimate measure of success on social media, but it's important to remember that followers are not the only metric of success we need to be looking at. It's also important to create communities that will support our businesses. You're probably wondering how to do this. This chapter covers everything from why you want to grow your following to being of value to your audience.

Elizabeth Fein

[Iteratesocial.com](http://iteratesocial.com) | @iteratesocial

Understanding the “Why” of Gaining Followers

In order to make informed, intelligent business decisions and to save yourself both time and effort when growing your social media following, you need to know what you're doing and why you're doing it. Only then can you grow!

How do you sail toward the coast if you don't know which coast to sail to?

Four words for you: goals, metrics, KPIs (Key Point Indicators), review.

1. Set goals. What do you want to achieve?
2. Set metrics. How do you measure success?
3. List KPIs. What tasks are there? How often do you need to do them to achieve the metrics?
4. Review. Execute, measure, analyze, refine and repeat.

An illustration:

Katniss sells trendy sports clothes to businesswomen who focus on healthy lifestyles that fit their busy schedules. Her online store is doing fairly well, but she isn't reaching new customers. How can she make this happen?

Katniss's first stop is Pinterest because it's so easy to visually share outfits, recipes and information, all of which interest her perfect client. She also knows her client hangs out on Pinterest!

1. Goals. Katniss's ultimate goal is to create a larger social media community.
2. Metrics. She can measure her success by: number of new followers; number of times her Pins are liked or repinned.

3. KPIs. Katniss does some research and finds that she needs to optimally:

- a. Create original, beautiful Pins, two per week
- b. Repin five existing Pins, one per day, 3-5 p.m.
- c. Repin her own content, two per week

4. Review. Katniss makes a spreadsheet to track all the data. She begins to notice trends; what Pins are most shared and what days and times are better. She experiments with KPIs, makes adjustments and watches her metrics rise.

This is just a taste of creating your own digital strategy and a nudge in the right direction. Hit me up @MaggieGiele if you have any questions!

Maggie Giele | Digital Marketing Strategist

maggiegiele.com | @MaggieGiele



Offering Value to Your Community

The key to social media success is in the relationships. When you provide ongoing valuable information, you become the person (or brand) that people look to for information. You become the trusted expert.

When people know, like and trust you, they are much more likely to buy from you and refer you to their friends and family. I call this the KLT factor (Know, Like, Trust).

So with my own social media, I prefer to foster relationships. I focus on quality, not quantity.

How do you do this? It's simple.

Think about your audience. How do you connect with them? Are you hanging out where your customers are? Are you speaking their language through channels that are familiar to them? Are you listening to them and talking to them? Are you providing value?

That's what matters most. Before you post anything, ask yourself if the content does one of these three things for your target audience:

1. Does it save them time?
2. Does it save them money?
3. Does it make them smile?

What kind of value are you offering your readers? If there's no value, don't bother posting it because it will just add to the noise.

And most importantly, do this:

1. Be genuinely helpful
2. Be friendly
3. Be yourself

Lisa Wood | Web Designer/Developer & Digital Marketing
sproutnewmedia.com | @lisawood



Building Strong Customer Relationships

We all know relationships take time and investment, and this process shouldn't be any different when it comes to developing a growth strategy for your social media channels. Customer relationships on social media are what translate a follower into an advocate that's loyal to your brand.

Below are three quick tips to help transform your social media engagement efforts into trusted relationships.

1. Humanize your brand and let them know who you are.

You can't build a relationship with someone if you don't know who he or she is. Brands are not excluded from this. Be sure to promote the faces behind your team so they know who you are and that you're unique. In my own experience, I found that people want to know who is behind the brand both online and offline.

2. Be authentic. Don't automate responses and comments with software.

Take the time to personally respond and comment with both existing and potential customers. The time spent genuinely responding to comments will pay off much more than a generic response that doesn't fit within the context of their post.

3. Create exclusivity with your ambassadors.

Everyone loves VIP treatment, and your ambassadors deserve it the most. Try implementing a private Facebook group to manage ongoing communications, promotions and feedback with your most loyal advocates. In addition, promote and highlight your ambassadors on your public social channels to show your appreciation and motivate others to get involved in the conversation.

Always keep in mind what remains important to you in your personal relationships, and then place the same values into growing your social community.

Amy Chait | VP of Marketing

tagspire.com | @tagspire



Just Because You Build It Doesn't Mean They Will Come

Ah, social media. The seemingly magical potion responsible for the success of bloggers, brands and businesses everywhere. It's like the famous saying, "If you build it, they will come," right? Unfortunately, it just doesn't work that way.

However, if you are willing to roll up your sleeves and put in a little effort, social media can be huge for your business. Here are my favorite tips for building an engaged audience and getting results from social media.

1. Start Small

Just like blogging and writing your website content, social media requires a little bit of strategy. It all becomes easier when you don't try to do too much at once. If you're just starting out (and even if you're a seasoned Boss Babe), it's okay if you aren't on every single social media channel. Do a little research, find one or two platforms that feel most natural to you and go from there.

2. Don't Be Sleazy

Social media isn't a place to promote yourself 24/7. Imagine meeting someone in real life for the first time. You wouldn't try to sell them on your business during the first conversation, would you? Focus more on meeting people and creating connections. The business opportunities will present themselves, and when they do you'll have an authentic relationship as a foundation. No need to come off like a sleazy used car salesperson.

3. Publicize Your Social Media Presence

Want to know the best way to get people to follow you on social media? Let them know where you are! Include social media icons on your website, email signature, business card, newsletter and anywhere else you interact with people. You'll be surprised what a huge difference this makes.

There are many simple and creative strategies that you can use to grow your social media following. I hope these tips will help you get started in building an awesome community and take your social media to the next level.

Adria Valdes Greenhauff | Creative Copywriter & Content Coach

TheWordFox.com | @Adria0185



Using the Power of Social Media to Increase Brand Awareness

Social media is obviously the here and now for online businesses. Here at Spray Pal, we've been taking advantage of this movement since 2011 to help promote our brand and increase awareness about our cloth diapering community geared toward eco-friendly parents.

The social community we've fostered has been instrumental in the success of our growing business, and interacting with our customers is actually the most fun part of running a business!

When done correctly, social media can be an easy and FREE form of advertising for your business. While it may seem that Facebook is only worthwhile if you pay to play, I'm here to tell you that we never boost or promote our posts and we get a ton of engagement. This is pretty awesome considering our product is so niche. And don't even get me started on the power of Instagram and Pinterest!

So you're on board with creating a social media community around your brand, but how do you go about it? Here are a few tried-and-true tips that Spray Pal has used successfully:

1. Find ways to grow your audience. You can't create engagement if you don't have people to engage with! If you sell a product or service, giveaways are a great way to start.
2. Be original and be yourself. People like to see some personal, behind-the-scenes type stuff. Don't be spammy with sales and promotions all the time.
3. Collaborate! Teaming up with other brands, even those similar to yours, can be mutually beneficial.
4. Be personable and positive. We get enough negativity just watching the news. A brand's social media page should be both upbeat and fun. And if you want engagement, be sure to interact back when someone comments!
5. Start a Facebook group. This is a great way to interact with your most loyal customers on a personal level.
6. Create a hashtag. We started the #makeclothmainstream hashtag in 2013 and now there are over 45,000 posts using our hashtag! It's a great way to connect with others.

Jennifer Aprea | Co-Founder of Spray Pal

spray-pal.com | @spraypal



3 Tips on Growing Your Followers Through Targeting

1. Set aside some time every day to find people to follow.

Every day, I set aside 3-10 minute periods where I go follow people. I look for people who have a colorful profile, who are makers (usually with 0-2,000 followers) and who are trying to up their Instagram presence. I will go "Like" a couple of their best pictures and follow them. Usually people look at who's following their feed and follow back if they find your feed enticing. Keeping your feed looking beautiful will help engage both new current followers.

2. Target Local Events

If you want to sell at local events, craft fairs or have a commodity that relies on local traffic, it's really important to hashtag your location.

For example, if I'm a photographer and I want local clients to see my work, I will tag my city (for me this would be #yyc for Calgary). I am a blogger, and I try to always use #utahblogger. Using that hashtag has helped me gain a tribe, and it has led to some awesome collaboration projects.

3. Stay Engaged

I cannot stress this enough. Answer questions and comment back. Show your followers that you care. Find out what they need and help fix their problems. It's a good idea to not only engage with your own followers, but also comment on other's feeds. I have had a lot of people follow me because they found me on someone else's comment thread.

Bree Johnson | Blogger & Photo Stylist

www.breejohnson.ca/ | @classicallyquarky



Using Facebook to Grow Your Social Media Community

Do you remember the good ol' days when social media was easy? You could put up a Facebook post and people would just find it and flock to your page?

Now, it's much harder to reach your audience without paying for ads on Facebook. Many small business owners are even wondering if they should focus their efforts on Facebook at all.

My answer is YES! But maybe not in the way we have been in the past.

With the drop in post reach for pages, many entrepreneurs are joining groups to connect with their people.

How do you use Facebook groups to grow your social media community? In three easy steps!

1. Find the Facebook groups where your people hang out. Join and introduce yourself.
2. Make sure your personal profile has a link to your business page so people can find your page and website from your profile.
3. Participate! Join conversations that are happening within the group. Be helpful and share your expertise with the community. The more you participate, the more your name will get out there and people will want to follow you on other social media channels.

Some groups encourage sharing your blog posts and offers, which is a fantastic way to get visitors to go to your other channels. Once they are there, be sure to have enticing content and offers for them to join your community.

Facebook groups present a huge opportunity for both entrepreneurs and bloggers to grow their communities and connect with potential clients. In the last month, I have personally signed a new client, beta tested a branding program, made referrals and connected with Elizabeth to write this very article! All of this happened from me participating and interacting with one Facebook group, and it didn't cost a penny.

Kayli Barth | Founder of The Freelance Hustle

thefreelancehustle.com | @thefreelancehustle (instagram) | @kaylibarth (twitter)

Photo Styling



#BossBabeGuide



Photo Styling

Your photos on social media are an extension of your brand, and it's really important to treat them as such. Styling your photos in a way that's uniquely you across your website and social media platforms will create brand recognition. Every component matters when it comes to how you portray your brand on social media. Whether it's a picture of your morning coffee, your product or your service, when your photo pops up in someone's feed they should recognize your unique aesthetic. This chapter covers everything from branded imagery to prop styling.

Elizabeth Fein

[Iteratesocial.com](http://iteratesocial.com) | @iteratesocial

Using Photos to Effectively Communicate Your Brand

Images on social media are everything. And what more effective way to get your image across than through visuals.

Visual media is instant and an automatic judgment. Think of the speed at which you scroll through your Instagram feed. What is it going to take for you to stop and take the time to double tap?

Your followers want to be inspired by what you communicate through your images. They also want to follow a story and more often want your story. Good photo styling allows you to do this effectively.

It's a good idea to create a formula to your styling and what it is you post. For example, as a fashion stylist you may utilize the flatlay effect and a lot of white space with minimal styling because you know your fan base loves this look. Throughout the week, you tell a story of what you're working on, where you've been and what you love, while keeping within your consistent flat lay photo style. Your fans would get confused if all of sudden you threw in a dark sepia, indie-looking photo.

Here are a few tips on using photos to effectively communicate your brand:

1. Be Real! Don't use stock photos or filters. Yes, you can edit your images. After all, this is all about presenting your images in the best way possible. Be sure to be authentic in your delivery.
2. Be consistent and have a formula. Adopt one style and stick with it. For example, all square-fixed frames or all black-and-white images.
3. Don't be afraid to add a selfie every now and then. People want to know who you are and, well, it is social media so let's not take ourselves too seriously!

Nina Dee | Owner/Interior Designer + Stylist of Nina Dee

ninadee.co | @_ninadee_

Finding the Right Styling Approach for Your Brand

Stop comparing yourself to the established, big name feeds that crank out amazing photos every day. Photo styling isn't only about having perfectly composed, high-production value photographs, it's about bringing thought, personality and creative voice into your shared social media imagery. Here are some tips to nail down the right approach for you.

Do what feels natural. For some, photo styling does translate into a stylized, minimalist flat lay. But you don't need to be a carbon copy to have your styling connect with your audience. Part of the thought process in styling the photo is giving your audience a glimpse at how your mind works. Play up certain elements of your aesthetic or personality, and don't try to force yourself into a style just because you think it'll be more appealing!

Use what you have. You don't need to have a prop warehouse at your disposal to style some nice images. I like to shoot all of my styled images on my desk because there's a good light source and that's where I'm usually at. It's as simple as that. Sometimes my styled shots end up being a current snapshot of my workspace with a couple of cute knick-knacks thrown in, and other times I get more creative with fun things like cards, quotes and office supplies. Hint: People like when the same thing pops up in different shots! It starts to create a nice level of familiarity.

Find a few angles and editing styles that work for you and stick to them! The best way to highlight your styling is through consistency. You might need to experiment a bit to find the backgrounds and compositions that you like the best. But once you nail down an approach, just GO with it! You don't need to reinvent the wheel every time you do this. By providing a consistent approach, people will know what they can expect from your feed and are more likely to come back!

Phyllis SA | Owner + Designer

phyllissadesign.com | [@phyllissadesign](https://www.instagram.com/phyllissadesign)



Using Color to Brand Your Social Media Photos

Color is one of the most important elements of styling your social media photos. If you want a clean, cohesive Instagram feed and strong blog post images, you need to post photos with a similar color palette.

For example, if your brand uses soft hues of blue and natural, earthy tones, you will want to be sure the photos you're taking match that aesthetic. Sandy beaches with blue water, tan buildings against blue skies and brown sandals with blue jeans are all photos that would fit perfectly within your brand and make a beautiful composition on Instagram.

Once you've determined your color scheme, stick to it! If your community is used to seeing natural tones and blue hues, they're going to be confused—or think someone else took over your social media account—if you suddenly post a photo with shocking colors like hot pink and lime green.

Be consistent with your social media and always stay true to your brand.

Devan Danielle | Branding Designer + Owner of Devan Danielle LLC

devandanielle.com | @devan_danielle



3 Steps to Create Well-Rounded Images

When you think photo styling, you might be thinking how to arrange props and photos for a shoot, but I like to think of it as the process of making images suitable for sharing online and representing your brand. It's important to view the process from many different perspectives to be sure you have a well-rounded image.

1. Plan

Some lucky creatives go with the flow and make gorgeous images by diving in and seeing what comes naturally. That approach can frustrate some creatives, so I suggest asking yourself a few questions.

What's your goal for the image? There might be some action you want people to take, idea you want to convey or emotion you want them to feel.

Do you envision a photo, text or illustration?

Photo styling can encompass any or all of these aspects. Once you've thought through these things, make a Pinterest board to keep track of your ideas.

2. Curate

This is what I find the most fun. Look for stock images (remember to mind usage rights—no grabbing photos from Google without permission) or photographs of your own. Play with different arrangements of the items and different lighting. Don't be afraid to try something unique because you never know what will come of it. Find stock graphics or grab a pen and paper and sketch it out. It's so much fun to mix digital art with traditional art—you can scan the results into your image.

3. Put it Together

Once you have a base image or plan started, enhance your main image with styled text and complimentary graphics. Be careful not to overpower images. Pictures speak louder than words! The best rule of thumb is to keep it simple.

Sometimes, it's just not worth your time and energy to make everything you share online. Online tool results start to look unoriginal and boring. If you're looking for something unique, try Beyond Easy Graphic Packs (get a free graphic each month—see link). It's a simple, inexpensive way to get some great graphics to share as your brand.

Kelly Garrett | Founder, Designer, Developer & Strategist

beyondlovely.com/bossguide | @kagarrett



Prop It Like Its Hot: Tips and Tricks for Prop Styling

Why do you need props? Because you want to tell an authentic story with your image and props create an atmosphere and environment that is more inviting to your viewers and readers, draws them in, and evokes an emotion. So in order to figure out which props to use, you need to determine what story you are trying to tell and which emotions you are trying to evoke.

The first thing to do when determining your photography props is to identify your style. Is your style rustic, vintage, modern, minimal, or bright and playful? While keeping your brand and your audience in mind, determine which style makes you happy. Then, pick a color palette that compliments your style and brand. This doesn't mean that every photo you take has to have the color pink in it, but by sticking within a determined style and color palette, you will create a cohesive branded look.

Next is the fun part: prop shopping! You can find props almost anywhere! I am always on the hunt for a useful prop when out shopping. I find my favorite commercial props at Cost Plus World Market, Target, Anthropologie, West Elm, and Crate and Barrel.

TIP: Remember, you don't have to purchase full sets. I have several "one-offs" – one napkin, one plate, one glass, one flatware place setting, etc.

One of a kind, vintage treasures can be found at thrift stores, antique shops, flea markets, garage sales, and even online on eBay and Etsy. Look for that perfect worn patina and don't forget to haggle for the best price! But you don't always have to purchase props. Don't forget to shop your own home, or your friends' and families' houses. Just don't forget to return what you've borrowed.

TIP: Photograph a prop when you purchase it and add it to your prop album. This way, if you store your props in a drawer or bin, you can simply scroll through your prop album to determine which props you want to pull for a certain shoot.

Next, I'm going to break it down into a few subsections of typical bloggers and include tips specific to each section including food, crafts, fashion, and lifestyle.

Food: Remember, the food is the star! When setting up your shot, think in layers: you have your surface (table, tablecloth, and background), your fabric (tablecloth, napkin, dish towel), your dish (plate, bowl, glass), your food, and your related prop. White plates and dishes work best to keep the focus on the food, but colored dishes can be fun and add color! Use small plates (salad or dessert sized plates) so the food fills the plate. Remember, side props should be relevant and add value. For example: an ice cream scoop for an ice cream recipe.

TIP: Don't forget your garnish! A garnish can make the dish look finished, such as grated cheese on top of pasta. Or a garnish can add a much-needed pop of color such as basil, green onions, or parsley on top of an orange, red, or yellow dish. But only add a garnish if you would actually eat that garnish on that dish. Don't add a garnish for the garnish's sake.

And be messy! Practice wabi sabi, the Japanese art of imperfect beauty. Use herbs and spices, crumbs, sliced fruits and vegetables, or flour and sugar to add movement to your photograph.

Crafts & DIY: Just like with food, your craft is the star! When crafting, remember to save bits and pieces of your materials to use as props. Other fun props can include fancy scissors or colorful paints. It's also nice to set up your craft in its environment, which becomes more of a lifestyle shot with who might use the craft, or where it will reside (on a shelf, on a frosted cake, as a place setting on a table, with clothes or jewelry, as part of an outfit, etc.).

Lifestyle: Lifestyle is so all encompassing that you almost have to be on the lookout for a useful prop at all times. It could be the perfect keychain, a vintage telephone, a brass or ceramic dish, sunglasses, a wallet, party supplies, the perfectly sprinkled donut, etc. Just keep in mind that when photographing a lifestyle shot that flowers or a plant can make a photo more appealing.

TIP: If you purchase flowers for a photo shoot, be sure to photograph the flowers by themselves in order to have a “filler photo” for Instagram on a day when you have nothing to post.

Fashion: You wouldn't leave the house wearing only a pair of shoes, so don't photograph your shoes by themselves. Instead, create an outfit, or, at the very least, part of an outfit with a top or bottom, purse, jewelry, lipstick, nail polish, etc. Don't forget to steam or iron any clothes as wrinkles really stand out and look bad. Other useful tools: armature wire, T-pins, and tissue paper! Tissue paper can easily be torn and wadded up to create fullness within a shirt or scarf if needed.

TIP: The three tools I couldn't live without are white foam core boards, glue dots to keep round or cylindrical objects from rolling off my board or rolling so I can't see the logo, and marshmallows. Marshmallows?!? Strange, right? I've recently started using marshmallows to prop up parts of objects that might otherwise slope, such as sunglasses or the handle of an object, or even clothes! They have a great pillow-y aspect to them, so the object perfectly sinks into place. Plus, if the marshmallow is too tall, I simply break part of it off. And if I break part of it off, it becomes a natural glue dot with one sticky side.

Practice and experimentation is key! Remember, no one was a perfect prop stylist, food photographer, or blogger overnight. Keep playing with your props and you will develop your own style in time. And be creative! Don't limit yourself to what I've suggested. The possibilities and props are limitless!

Andrea Ament | Blogger + Event Stylist

LegalMissSunshine.com | @LegalMissSunshine!

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