



Checklist: How to Grow from 0 to 110,000 Instagram Followers

Hootsuite interviewed Emanuel Smedbøl, an adventure photographer and freelance graphic designer who grew his Instagram audience from zero to 110,000 followers.



You can see a few of the successful Instagram Takeover campaigns he has run for brands [here](#). And of course follow him on Instagram [here](#).

We've left his words unedited as Emanuel is very smart, well-spoken, and honest about what you need to do to grow your followers on Instagram.

1. Only post 2-3% of your photos

Let's say that I just opened an Instagram account. I want to grow to 10,000 followers. Beyond hashtags, follow-back schemes, and other marketing tricks—what really grows Instagram followers?

Focus on content. Good, quality, varied content. It can take a while to become good at photography, to know what works and what doesn't, to learn the limits of your camera and get an eye for composition, so take a lot of photos and post a very limited selection of your favorites.

YOUR ACTION

Talent works. Create a lot of content to find the gems. Only two to five percent of Emanuel's photos end up on his Instagram feed.



emanuelsmedbol • 9 months ago

+ Follow



The @littlebrownfox plying the cold mountain waters. Destination: swimming beach

8,171 likes 141 comments

Instagram

2) Cultivate Your Fascinations

Your popular Instagram posts regularly get upwards of 5,000 likes. It seems like everything—from parking lots to an odd-looking doorway—can inspire a great photo from you. How do you find these places? How do you spot symmetry or a perfect shot that most people miss?

I do keep my eyes open for such things, yes. I'm pretty certain it's a skill that can be developed. Just look around you when you walk.

But don't push it too hard, don't take photos for the sake of taking photos. Take your time, be curious.

Eventually there will be something that just pops out at you, makes you stop in your tracks. It will be something different for everyone.

For me, it is patterns and shapes, or late afternoon light. You have to cultivate your fascinations—let them grow and develop and spread out onto other things. If you aren't a naturally observant or curious person then I'm not sure. But if you at least value those traits it is possible.

YOUR ACTION

You can't take the same steps as everyone else and expect original work to emerge. "Cultivate your fascinations—let them grow and develop and spread out onto other things," says Emanuel.



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3) When Selling, Paint A Mood

You and your equally talented partner [Megan McLellan](#) are often hired by brands to run Instagram influencer campaigns. What makes a good piece of branded content on Instagram?

It's really about evocation, about painting a mood. You have to ask yourself what are you wanting to share? That this place has some nice mountains? OK. That's cool. A photo of a nice mountain can get you pretty far.

But you'll make an even better impression if it's a nice photo of a nice mountain. Wait for some dramatic weather if you can, or try create a feeling of being there, of being dwarfed by the landscape, struck in awe by the power of the place. It's important to create that aspirational feeling of being there, of wanting to be there.

Lighting is important, scale is important, composition is great, but being able to imagine yourself there is absolutely essential.

YOUR ACTION

For brands, keep it casual and give consumers an emotional context to identify with. "There's nothing wrong with featuring your products, but give them a nice little scene to live in, a story," says Emanuel. Focus on answering questions such as "What will I feel if I own this thing? What will it say about me?"



Toolbox: filters and gear

What do you currently use to take your Instagram photos?

Combination of an iPhone 5 and a Fuji X-T1. I love the ease of the iPhone but once the sun goes down or the light gets difficult it can be too grainy and the larger camera definitely shines.

Filters? Yes, no?

I like filters. I edit almost all my mobile photos with an app called VSCOcam. I'll only occasionally adjust a photo in Instagram itself, using the new tools and filters at around 25 to 50 percent strength for a subtler and more natural look.

What are the three best Instagram filters?

I like the dreaminess of Lark and the punchy contrast and clarity of Juno. It depends on the photo though, as sometimes these filters can just ruin it.

With VSCOcam I really love the subdued analog feel of A6, and the straightforward look of S2. I usually play a bit with the edit though, rarely using just a filter alone. These days I've been increasing saturation just a tad to make the photos feel more like an idealized and vivid memory.

I think the edit is really important and with smaller images like these you need a stronger edit to make it stand out.

YOUR ACTION

An iPhone 5, a few filters, and a Fuji X-T1—that's all the gear you need to take amazing shots that hundreds of thousands of people love. Use VSCOcam to edit your photos.

See more from Emanuel

Emanuel has done amazing work for brands, helping them connect with audiences on Instagram. You can see his Instagram and travel campaigns [here](#). He is also a [freelance graphic designer living in Vancouver BC](#).