

big story



Bahrain shops on Instagram

Bahrainis and others in the Middle East are revolutionising the idea of shopping by setting their shops on Instagram, while the platform itself is yet to make that move in the Middle East or in many other countries around the globe

TDT | Manama

If in Bahrain, you will remain as an anonymous entity, if you don't have an Instagram account

This is not the opinion of *Tribune*, but of those who visit Bahrain or doing business in the Kingdom.

But, if you feel what's so special about that, we would say, "It's special."

Because what's happening right here in Bahrain and in the greater Middle East is not something the creators of the platform have probably imagined.

Yes, people in Bahrain and its neighbouring countries are utilising Instagram as a digital store-front.

Which means, the Middle East has given the platform an additional capability, which the app is yet to officially allow here, even though they have done it for select businesses in some other parts of the world.

Something Bahrainis have been doing for a long time!

Yes, it's quite amazing to find out how Bahrainis, and of course much of the Middle East, have changed the platform to give it a different incarnation.

As Neal Schaffer, a consultant, trainer for SMEs on social media marketing strategy, said, "While there are many success stories of e-commerce companies that have targeted young and often female demographics that have found success on Instagram in some parts of the world, they pale in comparison to the seemingly widespread success of physical or virtual local stores from many industries on Instagram in the Middle East."

"The Instagram account, where people prefer the simple engagement and direct message capabilities, goes hand in hand with the widespread popularity of WhatsApp here for mass messaging and communication."

So, now the question is:

How Instagram is being used as store-front here?

To know, all you need is an Instagram account.

In case you don't, create one. It won't take much time.

Electronics to edible goods

After logging in just type Bahrain shops. You will be amazed in finding the number of results that pop up offering anything and everything from electronics to edible.

Now, click on a product you like. It will take to a pop-up image which features all information including a WhatsApp number to contact.

Yes, it's as simple as that. Bahrainis have managed to find a workaround, instead of complaining about the lack of Instagram's ability to gain from impulsive purchases.

As of now, if one has to make a purchase on Instagram, the user should leave the platform, which, according to experts, only results in "losing many users in the process."

In Bahrain, Instagram performs as a catalogue where business owners list their products and ordering information, which also makes it easy for a user to find a product.

Once a decision is made, the user can place the order by using a WhatsApp number - often given in the photo. Wait for the product to arrive and make the payment.

According to inc., "There's even a company working on a cryptocurrency to make the financial end of the transaction even more simple."

Now, you know how people here in the Middle East have managed to change Instagram to Instagram-commerce.

'mom and pop'

The method also opened tremendous opportunities especially for small business owners in the Kingdom, which according to Neal Schaffer are "mainly local 'mom and pop' type businesses, some with a storefront and others being run from people's homes."

As discussed above, the idea is simple. Log on, find out what you need, - even if it is a cake or something second hand- and use the WhatsApp number to order.

Latest news, however, is that Instagram, which has the

highest level of engagement (time spent on the app) is working on shoppable images for all to feature products in posts and stories.

They are now allowing users in the US to buy products from more than 20 brands without ever leaving the app. In fact, the Facebook-owned platform has given brands the option to include "product tags" on their posts since 2017, which, however, was not enough as Bahrain example has proved.

The experience is also rolled out to users in Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK. Interesting!

Here's how it works: When users tap on a product to look at the details, they'll see the option to "Checkout on Instagram." From there, they can enter their billing and shipping information, which is stored for future purchases, and track their order.

22 brands now

As of now, the feature is available only for some 22 brands including Prada, Balmain, Oscar de la Renta - and fast-fashion companies like H&M and Zara. Seven of the 22 sell only makeup, including Kylie Cosmetics and Anastasia Beverly Hills.

Reports also say that the app, which has more than 25 million business accounts, is working on a new standalone app dedi-

cated to shopping.

Verge said, in September last year, it may be called IG shopping, which lets users browse collections of goods from merchants that they follow and purchase them directly within the app. However, it is not clear if the project is still alive.

Instagram, most probably, will be interested, as shown by the Bahrainis, in letting users check out directly from its platform, rather than asking them to step out.

As Instagram's product management director, Vishal Shah, has said, "Shopping on the platform is a serendipitous shopping experience where people can stumble upon a product - it's like seeing something in the store window in the real world: You really didn't set out to shop."

In the meantime, as Instagram scrambles to go from inspiration to information and purchase, people and shops here in Bahrain will continue to enjoy their Insta selling and buying experience, which is also an important model for local businesses in other parts of the world to emulate.

Happy Insta shopping!

