

A Stream of Postcards Shot by Phone

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Digital camera sales may be weak, but thanks to cellphones, picture-taking has never been more of an everyday thing. Now a wave of mobile applications is letting people tweak their cellphone snapshots and share them with friends and strangers.

The rising star of these is Instagram, a start-up in San Francisco with just four employees. In eight months, the company has attracted close to five million users to its iPhone-only service — no doubt earning the envy of its more established rivals. And Instagram is steadily growing, adding about a million users a month.

The app emphasizes simplicity. Users can choose from a variety of special effects to layer over photos, sharpening the contrast or applying a vintage, weathered look. Then they upload the photo to their Instagram feed, forming a river of pictures, not unlike a photo-only version of Twitter.

As on Twitter, users can follow others to see what they are posting. They can also tap to “like” pictures and comment on them, making Instagram a slimmed-down social network. People snap and post pictures of anything, like pretty wallpaper at a restaurant or artsy close-ups of their cat climbing on the bed in the morning, offering a behind-the-scenes look at their lives.

Those who study the way people socialize online say cellphone photos are becoming an integral part of sharing and communicating.

“It’s another way to start a conversation online, and so much easier than sitting in front of a computer because it’s mobile,” said S. Shyam Sundar, the co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University.

Professor Sundar said people once tended to take photos on special occasions, like birthdays and vacations, then post a big batch on services like Picasa and Flickr and share a link with friends. But with the introduction of smartphones with improved cameras, coupled with the rise of services like Facebook and Twitter, people are more accustomed to constantly documenting moments and sharing throughout the day.

“Instagram came on the scene right when people were beginning to work that into their regular broadcasting routine,” he said. “The convenience of a way to do it from your mobile phone — very easy.”

Kevin Systrom, a founder and the chief executive of Instagram, said the service’s early traction stemmed from its ability to make casual cellphone pictures look like works of art, with the help of filters.

“We set out to solve the main problem with taking pictures on a mobile phone,” he said, which is that they are often blurry or poorly composed. “We fixed that.”

The service has benefited from being easier to use than some of its rivals, said Brian Blau, a research director at Gartner. “You take a photo, add a filter, post it online,” he said. “It’s the equivalent of firing off a tweet; it doesn’t require much thought or effort.”

Mr. Blau said Instagram’s early emphasis on opening its service to outside developers had helped it spread. For example, the service has given rise to a healthy network of companies and applications that offer ways to turn your shared photos into photobooks, framed prints and postcards. “You have a whole work force of software developers and entrepreneurs building products on top of your product,” he said.

The service is also attracting celebrities, brands and news organizations that see it as a new and nuanced way to interact with an audience. News outlets including NPR, ABC News, National Geographic, MTV and NBC are using Instagram to share picture updates and give audiences an insider’s view of their operations.

Joe Ruffalo, a senior vice president at ABC News Digital, said the company was experimenting with delivering news photos on Instagram as a way to reach people on a more intimate level.

“It provides a very different perspective to our followers than what they encounter on the Web or TV,” he said. ABC News has about 26,000 followers on Instagram, far fewer than on Facebook and Twitter.

Snoop Dogg and Rosie O’Donnell are Instagrammers, and Jamie Oliver, the British chef, uploads pictures of the meals he makes at home, as well as reminders to watch his TV show.

Brands like Oscar de la Renta, Brisk Iced Tea, Kate Spade, Starbucks and Red Bull are also on the service. Cecilia Liu, digital marketing manager at Kate Spade, said the company added Instagram to its social media lineup this year. She said it was appealing because the company could mix in a little more personality and behind-the-scenes glimpses than it would on Facebook and Twitter.

“We’re such a visual company,” she said. “This is a way to show people what we’re doing rather than just talk about it.”

Instagram is free to anyone who wants to create an account, from a regular user to a giant company. Mr. Systrom said the company was not in a huge hurry to figure out how to make money from the service, since it has already attracted an impressive roster of investors who have put in \$7.5 million in venture financing. They include Andreessen Horowitz, Baseline Ventures, Benchmark Capital and Jack Dorsey, a co-founder of Twitter and Square.

For now, the company is focusing on expanding its team — which has held steady at four members despite the explosive growth. Three are developers and one is a community manager; the service runs on server space rented from Amazon.

“We just hired a recruiting manager to focus entirely on that,” Mr. Systrom said. He declined to discuss specifics of how Instagram might turn itself into a business. But it’s not hard to imagine that it could work with a fashion label or company to showcase a new line of clothing or hardware, then offer Instagram users a way to buy through the application.

There are plenty of other services vying for a space on the smartphone screen, including PicPlz, Lightbox, Pixable, Mobli and Path. And investors are scrambling to jump on the mobile-photo-sharing trend. Earlier this year a service and app called Color received \$41 million in financing from Sequoia Capital, Bain Capital and Silicon Valley Bank — before it had a single user.

This week, Twitter announced a partnership with Photobucket to introduce its own photo-sharing feature that will let users swiftly post photographs. Until now it has relied on outside photo services.

The early king of online photo sharing was Flickr, a popular photo community owned by Yahoo that has 63 million registered members and more than five billion photos. But Flickr has not generated as much excitement in the mobile world as services like Instagram.

Markus Spiering, the head of product design at Flickr, said it initially focused its efforts on making sure members could upload pictures to Flickr from outside applications and sites, instead of building its own app. But over the last few years the company has watched as smartphones have become the most popular cameras used by its members.

“It’s definitely the future of photo-sharing,” Mr. Spiering said. “It’s a huge priority for us.”

Recently the company has decided to pour more resources into mobile, he said, and it is working on applications geared toward photo sharing. But he said Flickr was not worried about the competition. “A lot of people using these apps are sharing them on Flickr,” he said. “We are still in the game, definitely.”