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BREAKDANCING, TRAVEL, AND INSTAGRAM

HOW GLOBETROTTING DANCE INSTRUCTOR ZACH BENSON GREW HIS PERSONAL BRAND AND IS NOW HELPING OTHERS DO THE SAME.

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ach Benson didn't always have such a big following, on Instagram, or in person. You might be surprised to learn that Benson was a pretty shy guy, at least growing up. The turning point came when he discovered dance.

Breakdancing, and the community and fame it brought, helped Benson, well, break out of his shell. From auditioning for *So You Think You Can Dance* to teaching at studios in 50 countries, Benson has become an international name in dance and travel. And he's helping other brands learn how to do the same thing.

Benson runs Assistagram, an Instagram marketing agency that helps over 50 clients create content, gain real followers, and boost engagement and sales using the social network. He pulls most of his guidance from his own experience running an international travel account with over 139,000 followers.



Discovering Dance

Early on in life, Zach Benson just did not fit in. “I looked different, and I spoke different,” Benson says. “I couldn’t say my Rs until my 20s.”

His South Korean heritage didn’t exactly help him fit in while growing up in rural Iowa, either. He craved something to help him fit in, something he could be a part of. A dancing DVD gave him just that.

“I was 15, and my friend gifted me this breakdance DVD. It was called *How to Breakdance* by Mike Garcia,” Benson says.

He fell in love and found a community, forming a crew in high school and later joining one as a student at Central College in Iowa. He also applied his love of physical activity to his studies, majoring in Spanish and Health Promotion.

After college, Benson followed a few different passions. He performed a year of service, living off of just two dollars a day for food. He created an intentional community with his refugee neighbors, helping them find jobs and homes through a resettlement agency. He also traveled back to South Korea to find his birth mother. “Eventually I used my college degree and became a personal trainer for a year,” Benson says.

In 2013, Benson rerouted his career to focus more on dance. “It was always one of my dreams to travel and teach dance,” he says. That dream took him in an unorthodox direction that nearly sabotaged his progress.

Benson became determined to appear on *So You Think You Can Dance*, a popular American television show featuring hundreds of dancers competing for 20 top spots. In order to even get onto the show, though, he had to try out among thousands of others with the same dream. “It was very competitive,” Benson says.

He auditioned four times in four years. Finally, he was chosen. He competed in the last season and made it into the the final 100—before the show’s producer cut him.

“[He] was like, ‘You just don’t have what it takes. Don’t put your eggs all in one basket. Go out, make a name for yourself. ... You just can’t make it all the way on the show,’” Benson said.

The producer’s words hurt, but Benson ultimately knew it was the truth. By focusing on *So You Think You Can Dance*, he was missing out on other opportunities, and his actual dream of teaching dance worldwide.

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Building the Benson Brand

Benson ran with his producer's advice and started creating his personal brand. The first thing he did was call up Nestle. "My b-boy name was Nesquik because I drink their chocolate milk before battles," Benson says.

With the help of a friend, Benson shot a breakdancing promotional video and sent it in. Nestle loved it. They gave him some free products and promoted him on a few channels.

The promotional video and brand collaboration served Benson well. With both on his resume, he was able to leverage himself as a dance instructor and start reaching out to studios.

"I heard a lot of 'no's' before I got a 'yes,'" Benson says. But eventually, he started getting positive responses and bookings across the world.

At first, he used videos to promote his brand and teaching services. Then he transitioned to Instagram. Because he taught at so many studios, he quickly grew his following to 15,000 and beyond. He also took Foundr's Instagram Domination course and improved his page from there.

Things were going well and business was booming, until one terrible day almost three years ago. "I was teaching in India a few years ago and injured my back," Benson says.

"It basically ended my career." Benson had no plan B. Dancing was his main source of income, and without it, he wasn't sure what to do.

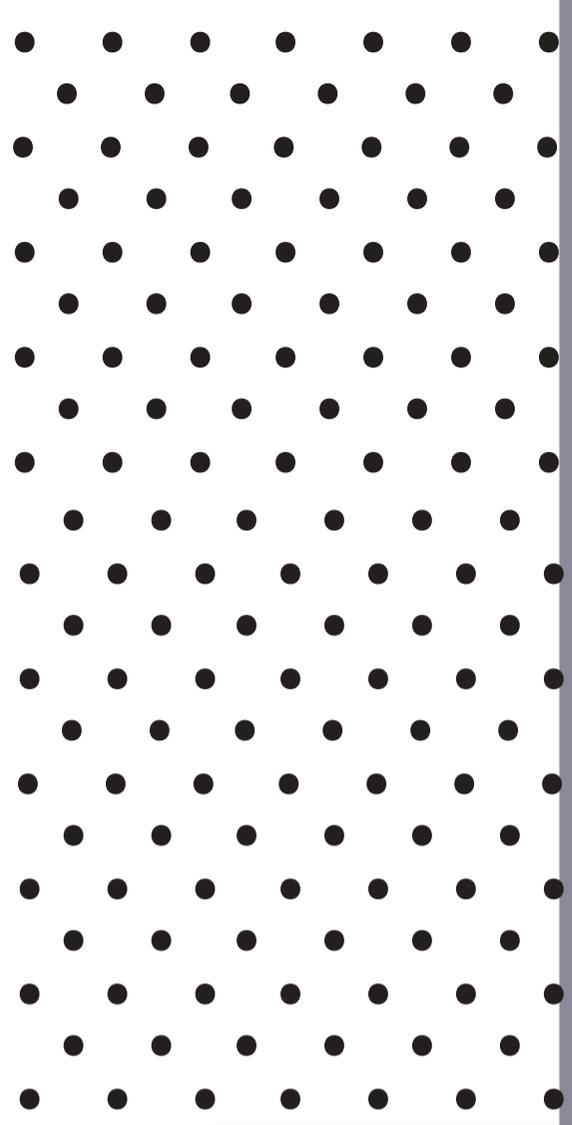
Then, a friend reached out with a new idea. "My same friend who gave me that [breakdancing] DVD was the one who encouraged me to invest in his Instagram account. He explained that we could make passive income from selling shoutouts and growing people's accounts," Benson says.

So that's what he started to do. Benson pivoted his dance Instagram page into a travel page, since his dance had inspired so much world travel.

That same friend had purchased an Instagram account for about \$10,000 and was growing accounts every day, sometimes by as much as 12,000 followers. (Purchasing Instagram accounts is similar to buying a domain name; valuable accounts typically have a strong following, good engagement, and relevant content.) Benson followed suit, continuing to learn about Instagram by taking courses, paying for consultations, and tapping into the community he formed through Instagram Domination.

"I saw a lot of [Instagram Domination] students dropping massive value into the community," Benson says. He eventually decided to start an agency, Assistagram. Today, Benson and his team have grown their business to over 50 clients.

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Using Instagram to Drive Traffic and Travel...for Free

The more time Benson spent on Instagram, the more he noticed how influencers were able to travel for free. He'd done a lot of traveling during his teaching career, and he was familiar with the costs associated. How were these Instagrammers doing it? Benson took it upon himself to learn.

Through his travel Instagram page, he offered hotels posts, reviews, and high-

quality photos in exchange for a free stay. Over time, he learned that hotels had availability during the off-season and wanted to stay full. They'd pay—using allocated “influencer” funds—for Instagram personalities to stay, create content, and promote the experience to their followers, audiences the hotel couldn't otherwise reach.

“That's how I've stayed more than 170 nights free

over the last one-and-a-half years,” Benson says. He's been sponsored by five-star hotels and a few hostels, too.

So, how does Benson help other people do this? He encourages his clients to build “hub pages.” “Hub pages, like my travel page, repost content within a niche,” Benson says. “They're easy to build up fast and then leverage for free hotel stays and other things.”

He wanted to create a system that worked, and hub pages were the key. He says that users don't need a personal account or a big network, simply a hub page dedicated to a particular passion.

From there, businesses or individuals can create lead magnets and share it on their hub page. The lead magnet drives free traffic and builds an email list, from which businesses can promote a course or product.

“Instagram is more fun and interesting when building up a page around a passion,” Benson says. “Then, you can use that page to drive traffic to your business.”

To businesses looking to follow this model, Benson says to create content that's relevant to your hub page. "What is epic content?" he asks. "And why is this content going viral?" Emulate that content, he encourages. Look at competitors and take either inspiration from them, or learn how to set yourself apart.

"Too many times, brands will start creating content and aren't sure how to grow their accounts because their page isn't unique," Benson says.

He also encourages a combination of both photos and videos. "People love good videos, especially those that capture attention in the first seven seconds."

As for the creation process, Benson says you can either build one from

scratch or buy an existing account. The prices vary based on engagement and following. He recommends checking out FameSwap or working with an expert Instagrammer. "It can be a complicated process."

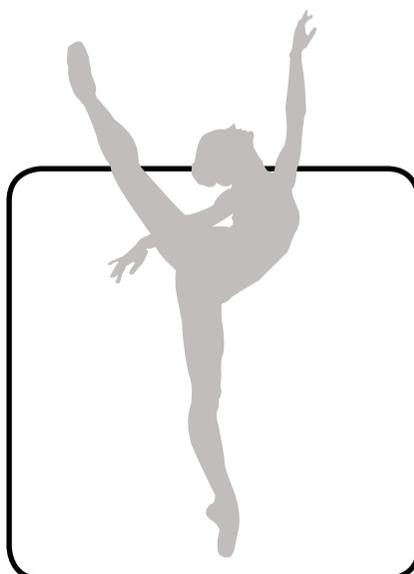
Should all businesses be on Instagram? Benson's answer is simple and immediate:

"Yes. The shift from Facebook to Instagram is happening faster than ever. If you're not on Instagram, you need to go on now so you don't get left behind. The opportunity is huge."

As for what's next, Benson is continuing to focus on growing Assistagram, from the road. Next up, a weeklong stay at a resort in the Maldives.



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