

How Iceland Writers Retreat Markets Itself as an International Writers Event

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Abstract

The first Iceland Writers Retreat (IWR) was held in 2014. It has since grown to be an annual event that boasts participants from around the globe, who travel to Iceland to learn from internationally renowned faculty, immerse themselves in the literary traditions of Iceland, and explore an unforgettable setting. This report outlines and examines Iceland Writers Retreat marketing efforts, particularly online. Further, it historicizes the beginning and inspirations of IWR, and delineates IWR's role within both the landscape of international writing events and the liminal space it occupies between the Icelandic tourism industry and cultural sphere. It aims to outline marketing best practices that can be useful not only to other writing retreats and events, but also to any cultural organization that is moving their marketing efforts primarily online. Finally, it attempts to highlight opportunities for IWR to continue to grow their audience—both online and at the event.

Keywords: Iceland Writers Retreat; Iceland; writing retreats; online marketing; social media

Dedication

To Carol Myhre, Joy Gugeler, and all the amazing teachers I have had whose passions encouraged me to chase my own.

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Introduction

Iceland Writers Retreat (colloquially known as IWR) is an annual event held in Reykjavik, Iceland every April. The week-long Retreat offers workshops with internationally recognized authors, cultural tours, and dedicated writing time to their 100+ participants, as well as ample time to network with faculty and other participants.

2018 marked the fifth year of IWR, and in that time it has seen growth in not only enrollment—up from 52 participants in the first year to over 100 in the fifth¹—but also in the caliber of faculty members that are travelling to Reykjavik to teach. The fifth-annual IWR’s faculty an American author who was a two-time National Book Award finalist, the editor of the New York Times Book Review, a two-time Stephen Leacock Award winner, and an author recently shortlisted for both the Scotiabank Giller Prize and Canada Reads.² It additionally hosted participants from seventeen countries who ranged from hobbyist writers to authors who have published multiple books. Included in those participants were five recipients of the Iceland Writers Retreat Alumni Award, which provides full or partial funding to attend. Full means that the entire cost of IWR is covered, including airfare, and partial covers everything excluding airfare and accommodation. The Award is funded and judged by selected alumni of IWR. Additionally, one winner of a writing contest sponsored by tourism company Iceland Travel received partial funding to attend.

The main component of Iceland Writers Retreat is a five-day event. Participants arrive to the hotel on the first day to check in to the hotel and attend a welcome dinner which features readings from all of the faculty members. The second, third, and fourth days are when participants attend five small-group workshops (with a maximum of 15 participants), enjoy dedicated writing time, and attend one full-day cultural tour of the Icelandic countryside. Every evening also features some sort of reception, including a visit to Iceland’s presidential home, Bessastaðir, a literary walking tour, and a pub social

¹ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

² Iceland Writers Retreat. “IWR 2018.” Iceland Writers Retreat. Accessed August 6, 2018. www.icelandwritersretreat.com/iwr-2018/

night with local musicians and writers. The fifth and final day of the main Retreat includes a question and answer panel with the faculty members, and the opportunity for participants to give the organizers feedback via a written survey. Many participants—in 2018, 40%—also stay for the optional two-day Relax & Write extension, which gives them the opportunity to have dedicated writing time to use what they learned in the workshops, more social and networking time via dinner receptions, and an open mic night.³

As the marketing and social media intern for the 2018 Retreat, I spent eight months (September 2017–April 2018) under the direct supervision of co-founders Erica Green and Eliza Reid, as well as volunteer coordinators Lisa Shannen and Elizabeth Nunberg. I was responsible for creating or curating social media posts for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as creating content for the blog. Our content focused on key areas of: news about IWR; news about faculty and alumni; general interest writing posts; and general interest posts about Iceland—particularly in regards to the Icelandic publishing industry. My job further involved pitching IWR to media outlets, writers’ centres, and other educational institutions to drive participant sign-ups. As the person running our three major social media channels I was on the front line of the organization for answering questions, piquing our audiences’ interest, and maintaining the consistent narrative of our brand. I worked primarily from home in Canada, but I travelled to attend the Retreat in April 2018.

This report will focus on how Iceland Writers Retreat reaches their current audience, and works to expand their potential audience, primarily through digital platforms. It will also discuss the difficulty of maintaining consistent content and a consistent narrative throughout the year while IWR is not in session, given that the event itself is only one week long. As such, the report will outline Iceland Writers Retreat’s social media strategies during and immediately post-event, as well as the strategies they use in the following months.

³ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

Chapter 1: A Brief History of Iceland Writers Retreat

As with many great ideas, the concept of Iceland Writers Retreat was spawned at a kitchen table between friends. Co-founders Erica Green and Eliza Reid were writers and editors living in Iceland. They met through Reid's business—she offered English-language writing and editing and would hire Green when she needed additional help. Green received a grant to attend a writers conference in California, USA, and returned to Iceland excited about the event, and musing about the possibility of starting something similar in Iceland.⁴

From Green's recollection: "When I returned to Reykjavik and saw Eliza, I told her how great it was to be a part of this event. She went on to say, 'Reykjavik is a UNESCO City of Literature (first non-English speaking), one in 10 people here publishes a book, we have the famous Christmas Book Flood, if ever there was a place to hold a writer's conference it should be here!'"

Within a week, the two began planning the Retreat. With the knowledge that they would need the support of the various literary and publishing organizations within Reykjavik to be successful, they drafted a business plan, a budget, a presentation, and a list of the supporting organizations they needed to contact. Their original pitching document included:

- Why Iceland
- How they wanted the event to operate
- How this was an untapped part of the tourism market
- What the budget looked like
- How it was scalable for growth
- Why and How they wanted the particular party to be involved

⁴ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

Their original pitches were to Icelandair—where Reid had connections as the then-editor of the inflight magazine—as well as UNESCO City of Literature, Icelandair Hotels, and Promote Iceland.⁵

“We wanted the literary community to understand that this was a new event and in no way would compete with the Literary Festival or any other programs currently running,” said Green. “Once we had support from Icelandair and Icelandair Hotels as founding sponsors, we knew we were going to make it happen.”

Further meetings included representatives from the City of Reykjavik, the Tourism Board of Iceland, the publishers’ union, the writers’ union, and the mayor’s office, as well as the Embassies of the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom—which were the English-speaking embassies of the countries the majority of the faculty would hail from.

Examining these original pitching documents in 2018, many of the same marketing and sales strategies are still exceptionally relevant: promoting Iceland as a destination and profiling high-calibre authors; seeking sponsorships and partnerships; and taking out select advertising in industry publications; and creating and maintaining a professional and welcoming presence through social media channels and hub—which in IWR’s case is the website and blog. Arguably more importantly, Green and Reid’s original mission and vision remains true:

To organize and host an international writers retreat for current and aspiring authors and create an friendly and intimate environment for delegates and instructors to have a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas, all in the inspiring environment of Iceland. Delegates should leave the retreat feeling encouraged about their writing, having learned something about it, made good connections (both professionally and personally), and at the same time enjoyed a taste of what Iceland has to offer.⁶

How the Icelandic Publishing and Tourism Industries Intersect at IWR

Despite the fact that IWR itself is international—both in faculty and participants—the organizers make a concerted effort to showcase Icelandic authors both as faculty

⁵ Eliza Reid (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

⁶ Iceland Writers Retreat. “Business Plan Draft 1.” Internal document, November 2012.

members who lead workshops and also as readers who perform at social events like the pub social evening or on the cultural tours offered. Further, Icelandic attitudes towards books and book-publishing are relevant to their success.

The Icelandic publishing industry and the perception of Iceland as a “writer’s utopia” is one of the main marketing aspects of IWR. The content IWR shares about Icelanders’ relationship with books and writers is in general among the posts that boast the highest engagement. Examples of this includes posts about: Jólabókaflóð (the Icelandic book flood, a pre-Christmas tradition); authors and translators speaking about the importance of the Icelandic language; insights to why Iceland is full of creatives; and Icelandic folktales. On average, posts about the above topics did two- to three-times better than IWR’s average engagement when checking Facebook’s Insights feature, even without being boosted.

Erica Green expanded on this, saying:

People love Iceland and are intrigued by it as a country and a destination. Part of this intrigue [is] into the rich literary traditions—land of the sagas!—is definitely one reason people are attracted to this nation. More and more Icelandic authors are being translated and offered to North American and other English-speaking markets. But this is still a small part of what you find in bookstores. The popularity of the crime fiction genre has helped people learn about Icelandic literature but as the country, and Icelandair, does such phenomenal marketing across the US, more people want to visit and have become curious about Iceland. If this is a land that creates musicians like Bjork and Sigur Rós, and has this ‘otherworldly landscape’ one can just imagine what their authors can do.⁷

While not directly related to publishing, Iceland’s tourism industry is a driving force behind the success of IWR. Reports by the Icelandic Tourism Board, Ferðamálastofa, in early 2018 estimated foreign visitors in 2018 to be in excess of 2.3 million, which is over five-times the number of Iceland’s 2017 population of 338,349.⁸ This is largely due to assertive advertising campaigns by tourism companies like Icelandair—which promise that while your stay in Iceland will be expensive, getting there is relatively inexpensive,

⁷ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

⁸ Óladóttir, Oddný Þóra. Tourism in Iceland in Figures 2018. Report. Reykjavík, IS: Ferðamálastofa. Accessed November 10, 2018.

and Icelandair gives you the option of staying as a stop-over enroute to your final destination. Further, Instagram travel culture has made it easier than ever before to see the natural wonders of Iceland, from the many roaring waterfalls to the iconic Reynisfjara black sand beach.

National Geographic published a 2017 article called “How Instagram Is Changing Travel” which cited Wanaka, New Zealand as an example of the phenomenon:

The proof is in the numbers. For example, in 2015, the tourism board of the small alpine town of Wanaka, New Zealand, began inviting and hosting “influencers”—social media trendsetters with large followings—to post about their adventures. The result was the fastest tourism growth in the country: a 14 percent increase.⁹

That same article cited Instagram’s effectiveness as a marketing tool, as “People engage with Instagram 10 times more than with Facebook[.]” This statistic was corroborated by Brandwatch in 2018, which states that “engagement with brands on Instagram is 10 times higher than Facebook, 54 times higher than Pinterest, and 84 times higher than Twitter.”¹⁰ For Iceland, specifically, the hashtag #iceland boasts 9.3 million posts to date. Oh, plus, it helps that television-ratings juggernaut *Game of Thrones* used Iceland as a filming location. The popularity of the show and its draw to Iceland has led to large travel companies like Iceland Travel and Grayline Iceland offering *Game of Thrones* tours.

The strength of Iceland as a location was a driving point in Green and Reid’s preliminary business plans, with “the location of Iceland” being listed as the first “Strength” in their SWOT analysis. Further, the original business plan touched upon that Iceland’s attraction as a tourist destination, in part due to the fact that it is a meeting point between Europe and North America. At the time IWR was pitched, Reykjavík had the distinction of being the only non-native English speaking UNESCO City of Literature in the world,¹¹ and an

⁹ Miller, Carrie. “How Instagram Is Changing Travel.” *National Geographic*, January 26, 2017. Accessed October 17, 2018. www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/travel-interests/arts-and-culture/how-instagram-is-changing-travel/.

¹⁰ Smith, Kit. “41 Incredible Instagram Statistics.” *Brandwatch*, April 25, 2018. Accessed October 20, 2018. www.brandwatch.com/blog/instagram-stats/.

¹¹ Bókmenntaborgin. “About Us: City of Literature and Literature Web.” *Bókmenntaborgin*. Accessed August 6, 2018. bokmenntaborgin.is/en/about-us/city-of-literature-and-literatureweb

event such as IWR coincided with the mission UNESCO set out in establishing these cities. Explicitly, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network mission statement states it aims to “strengthen cooperation with and among cities that have recognized creativity as a strategic factor of sustainable development as regards economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects.”¹² IWR’s international audience, while also featuring local authors, plays to multiple aspects of that mission by sharing Icelandic culture while also appealing to potential tourists.

Green expanded on how Icelandic tourism has impacted IWR with her personal experience:

When I was living in Washington, DC, there were Icelandair ads on all the metros and bus stops. It was impossible to cross town without seeing a breathtaking photo paired with an intriguing phrase about visiting Iceland. Each time I visit the US, I’m surprised with the reach of the Icelandair and Iceland Naturally campaigns. California and certainly the hub (flight) cities have so many ads for visiting Iceland. Without this marketing in North America, we would not have so many people interested in visiting Iceland. So to that end, the tourism industry plays an enormous role.¹³

The participants at IWR are diverse, representing a wide range of ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities. The event is open to anyone who loves to write, with a particular focus on those who are pursuing book-length work in fiction and/or non-fiction. Green cites years that have included participants as young as 21 as well as people well into their 80s. In 2018 seventeen countries were represented, with the largest number of participants from the United States. Further, the 2018 Retreat had attendees from Bangladesh, Nigeria, South Africa, Australia, Malta, and beyond.¹⁴ Aside from being English-speaking and interested in the craft of writing, the most common thread is that attendees tend to be affluent, as the cost of IWR and the trip to Iceland is a barrier for some. The knowledge that participants have money to spend in Iceland is a draw for tourism companies. For 2019, the “Complete” package, which includes all the activities, the hotel stay, and most

¹² UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Mission Statement, 2004, Paris France. Accessed October 17, 2018. en.unesco.org/creative-cities/sites/creative-cities/files/Mission_Statement_UNESCO_Creative_Cities_Network.pdf

¹³ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

¹⁴ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

meals, costs 283,500 ISK (which would be the equivalent of \$3062.71 Canadian).¹⁵ This is by far the most commonly purchased package, with 40% of participants also opting to stay for the two day Relax & Write extension, at a cost of 58,000 ISK, or \$626.59 Canadian. These packages do not include the cost of airfare to Iceland. “Standard” and “Economy” packages are also offered, as are scholarships and a writing contest, but the vast majority of participants register for the “complete” package.

When reaching out to pitch sponsorships and partnerships to large tourism companies in Iceland, such as founding sponsor Icelandair, Icelandair Hotels, and Grayline Iceland, Reid focused on both her pre-existing relationships and the value IWR could add to their businesses:

To me it was a no brainer because we were offering something different and sustainable and attracted a different type of tourist to Iceland, a group that would return in the off-seasons, didn’t depend on weather, etcetera.¹⁶

When originally pitching to founding sponsors, Reid and Green highlighted the direct business they would receive from participants, as people will book flights, tours, or bus transportation to and from the Keflavik airport and/or the popular Blue Lagoon. Further, it is not only delegates bringing business but their spouses too, who will have more free time to spend exploring Reykjavik and the surrounding areas.

Over the past five years, the organizers have been able to collect more data to appeal to current and potential partners. The organizers do their best to collect as many yearly statistics as they can to use when pitching local companies, largely through the use of a post-Retreat survey (see appendix) that is handed out on the final day of IWR proper (prior to the Relax & Write extension).

Important statistics from 2018 that were used when showing value to sponsors for the 2019 Retreat include that more than 10% of participants were returning, some of them for the fifth time, and, as mentioned, almost 40% of participants stayed for the two-day Relax & Write extension. Particularly of interest for tourism companies, 69% of

¹⁵ Iceland Writers Retreat. “2019 Registration Details.” *Iceland Writers Retreat*. Accessed September 8, 2018. <http://www.icelandwritersretreat.com/iwr-2018/>

¹⁶ Eliza Reid (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

participants were visiting Iceland for the first time (of the remaining 31%, 37% were IWR returnees). 85% stayed longer than the (basic) duration of the IWR, an average of 4 days, which would mean that they were exploring Iceland even beyond the Relax & Write extension. Therefore, they were likely spending money in restaurants or grocery stores, renting cars or using tour bus services, and visiting local attractions like the Golden Circle and Blue Lagoon.

“[Our partners] recognize that we have grown each year and that we bring tourists who want cultural and historical experiences unlike those seeking an athletic or solely outdoor trip,” said Green. “We’ve always been able to attract tourists beyond those who come to Iceland only for the scenery or the outdoor recreation. These are tourists who may not want to climb a volcano or ride an Icelandic horse (though plenty do!), but they are all very interested in learning about the culture and history of Iceland.” Further, by-the-numbers, IWR is attracting many first-time visitors who will extend their stay past the event and also likely return.

An additional selling point to sponsors is the international media coverage IWR receives, especially in outlets that may not have covered Iceland in the same way without it. Since April 2017, IWR has been featured in *The Washington Post*, *Wimbledon Travel & Leisure*, *Luxury 2017 Edition Business World India*, the *Toronto Star*, *Travel + Leisure*, the *Monocle Weekly* podcast, The Hindu.com (in India), and numerous media outlets in conjunction with co-founder Eliza Reid’s panel contributions at the Taste of Iceland & Spectra Aberdeen festivals, where she spoke about Icelandic literature and publishing industry.

Particular to social media, many Icelandic organizations are exceptionally supportive online, even those who do not directly partner with or sponsor IWR. IWR’s content is frequently shared or retweeted by Iceland Naturally, Shop Iceland, Iceland Magazine, Reykjavik City of Literature, and Cool Iceland, among others, and IWR actively tries to share relevant content from them to their followers as well. As numbers show, foreign visitors in 2017 spent 376.6 billion ISK (the equivalent of 4.15 million Canadian), so it is in all Icelandic businesses’ best interest to promote visitors to Iceland—particularly in the

slower spring season. Per the 2018 report by the Icelandic Tourism Board, in 2017 over two-thirds of visitors to Iceland came in either the summer or winter seasons (35.4% and 33.3% respectively), with only 13.6% visiting in the spring months.¹⁷

¹⁷ Óladóttir, Oddný Þóra. Tourism in Iceland in Figures 2018. Report. Reykjavík, IS: Ferðamálastofa. Accessed November 10, 2018.

Chapter 2: Marketing IWR Leading Up to the Event

IWR's Marketing and Publicity Process

When IWR first began marketing in 2014, Green put considerable effort into marketing the event in person, visiting bookstores and other locations in both Iceland and the United States to promote IWR through fliers and in-stores events where she would give presentations and talk about the experience of IWR. Green and Reid both continue to promote IWR in person through larger events—in 2018 Green introduced events at the Icelandic embassy in Washington, DC, while Reid spoke on panels at Iceland Naturally's *Taste of Iceland* events around Canada and the USA, the Spectra Festival in Aberdeen, Iceland Noir in Reykjavik, and on a panel regarding "The Future of the Icelandic Language" in New York. However, with the closing of many of the independent bookstores Green used to frequent and the shrinking of print media, IWR has increasingly relied on social media to reach their audience.¹⁸

Due to attempts to keep IWR as affordable as possible, the organizers have to grapple with a relatively small marketing budget given the stature of the event. The marketing budget for the event is between 1,500,000–2,000,000 ISK per year, or the equivalent of \$16,000–20,000 Canadian dollars. This budget includes website expenses and travel costs for promotional trips. As such, social media even more important because of the reach in relation to the cost. Of the marketing budget in 2018/2019, approximately \$500–1,000 is dedicated to boosting social media posts and/or running online ads.

IWR uses social media to drive conversion through a funnel approach. A "Marketing Funnel" is defined by Unbounce as "a model describing the various stages of a prospect's journey from the first interaction with your brand to the ultimate goal: conversion. Conversion rate optimization is about moving people through your marketing funnel, turning them from prospects into raving, repeat customers."¹⁹ The typical marketing funnel includes five stages. The first, awareness, is the moment a potential consumer

¹⁸ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

¹⁹ Unbounce. "Marketing Funnel." *Unbounce*. Accessed October 17, 2018.
<https://unbounce.com/conversion-glossary/definition/marketing-funnel/>

discovers the brand. IWR uses discoverability aids like hashtags and geotagging, as well as earned, owned, and paid media to reach new audiences. The next phase, consideration, is when an audience has discovered your brand and committed to following you on one or more social channels. For IWR, this may also include applying for the Alumni Award or participating in the writing contest, which are opportunities to attend IWR at low- or no-cost. The third stage, conversion, can be the end of the funnel. It is the moment a customer invests in your product or service, which for IWR it would be ultimately paying the full price for the “Complete” package at IWR. However, IWR tries to guide participants through the two additional phases which are: loyalty and advocacy. Loyalty means they are happy customers who return, while advocacy is happy customers who actively recommend IWR to others through social media posts, in-person recommendations, leaving reviews on Google and Facebook, or writing about it for other media.²⁰

While there are seemingly infinite platforms in operation, IWR focuses primarily on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as their blog which is attached to the website to move their audience through the marketing funnel. Of the benefit of the different platforms, Green says: “I think Twitter hooks people in, the blog allows curious potential clients to read more, and Facebook targets some people as well.” The next sections of the report will break down IWR’s strategies during the year while leading up to the event, as well as how the priorities shift during the week the event is in session and those directly after.

Developing Voice

When developing the brand voice for Iceland Writers Retreat, Green and Reid looked to their mission to see what the most important sentiments to communicate to their audience. For Green:

²⁰ VentureHarbour. "Marketing Funnel Strategies: 5 Steps to Increase Sales in 2018." *VentureHarbour*. Accessed October 17, 2018. www.ventureharbour.com/5-strategies-to-build-a-marketing-funnel-that-converts/

The most important thing to communicate is: This is a retreat for writers by writers. This is a place where writers can work on our craft. We want to expose our participants to the rich literary traditions of Iceland through literary tourism and numerous events with contemporary Icelandic authors.

These three tenets are key to who we are and influence everything we do. We've shied away from being the kind of event that focuses on 'how to get published' or 'how to find an agent.' Rather we are here to inspire and develop writers amidst a magnificent setting. We focus on the literary aspect of literary tourism, each tour is led by or includes readings by an Icelandic author—even our pub night! Everything about this event comes back to the love of the written word and developing the craft of writing.²¹

For Reid, her point of view on IWR's online voice is simple:

We want to be friendly and welcoming and of high quality. I want people to feel like attending the IWR is just the beginning of being connected to this group of people who love writing in some capacity or another. We see our event as international, inclusive, friendly, informal, but of very high quality in terms of service, faculty, content, [and] accommodation.²²

When attending IWR it is immediately apparent that is very much a community, with participants encouraged to interact not only about their writing while in workshops, but also during cultural tours and nightly social events. It was not uncommon to come back from dinner in downtown Reykjavik to find groups of participants sharing stories in the hotel until late in the evening. As such, IWR aims to extend that community online—giving participants a way to keep up with the event and each other during the other 51 weeks of the year, while also educating prospective participants about IWR.

In trying to communicate these principles while also remaining brief for social media attention spans, the tone of IWR posts is conversational, approachable, and enthusiastic while instilling a sense of aspiration in our audience—communicating that IWR is special and unique and worth spending time and money on. IWR also follows the “BASIC” mnemonic for online writing outlined in *Magazine Editing: In Print and Online* by John Morrish and Paul Bradshaw. While IWR is not a magazine, the mnemonic is equally relevant to how we aim to communicate online. In short, BASIC breaks down to be

²¹ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

²² Eliza Reid (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

Brevity, Adaptability, Scannability, Interactivity, and Community/Conversation.²³ These concepts will be further broken down below.

In attempting to convey an approachable and enthusiastic tone, the language IWR uses in social media postings is relatively simple, since some of our followers and participants speak English as a second or third language. Further, IWR tends to favour punctuation such as exclamation marks (within reason) and the very-occasional emoji. When possible, the posts pose questions to encourage followers to comment or share the post to start discussion. The goal of this is twofold: it welcomes them into the conversation and fosters the feeling of community, and it also extends IWR's reach into their own networks. IWR also focuses on featuring high quality images and utilizing proper grammar to communicate clearly with followers and to establish a professional reputation.

Logistically, keeping the brand voice of IWR simple and approachable also helps with transition planning. Like many arts organizations, IWR relies on an intern who needs to work with an organization as part of their educational requirements to do the bulk of their social media posting. Up until the 2018/2019 Retreats, that internship has gone to a different person every year. The language and tone used online is easy to replicate, and therefore prevents a dramatically shifting brand voice every September.

Posting Schedule

The consistency of IWR's posting also plays into this community building. They aim to post on Facebook once per day, Twitter one to four times per day, and Instagram at least once per week although they aim for every five days or so. In a post on CoSchedule's blog "How Often To Post On Social Media?" the brand compiled research from 14 different studies done by companies like Buffer, Adobe, and Quick Sprout.²⁴ For

²³ Morrish, John, and Paul Bradshaw. *Magazine Editing: In Print and Online*. London: Routledge, 2011.

²⁴ Ellering, Nathan. "How Often To Post On Social Media? [Proven Research From 14 Studies]." *CoSchedule*, October 18, 2017. Accessed October 17, 2018. coschedule.com/blog/how-often-to-post-on-social-media/.

Facebook, most studies lead to the recommendation of posting once per day. This allows us to remain a regular presence on our follower's feeds, without seeming "spammy" or resorting to posting content without value to them. The same blog post from CoSchedule recommends tweeting about 15 times per day as the optimal amount. However, without a full-time marketing and social media position, IWR aims to post one to five times per day, with at least one of those tweets to be content coming from our account rather than retweets. The recommendation for Instagram was to post two times per day. IWR currently posts about one to two times per week, and is looking to expand our Instagram presence. To preschedule posts, IWR uses Facebook publishing tools and Twitter's TweetDeck.

Balancing Discoverability and Voice

For Instagram, IWR uses a consistent hashtag: #icelandwriters in the main text of all Instagram posts in an effort to create name recognition, while embedding additional hashtags in the first comment. Those other hashtags aid in discoverability, but aren't meant for anyone to look as closely at—hence embedding them in the first comment as opposed to the main text. IWR developed a list of hashtags that appeal to book lovers and writers, as well as hashtags that appeal to travellers. These hashtags are revisited every few months to see how active and engaged with they are, and adjust as necessary. In the case of IWR's Instagram, posts without hashtags generally boast about a 5% engagement rate, while those that are hashtagged generally have between 8-12% engagement.

Brandwatch's 2018 Article "41 Incredible Instagram Statistics" cited that "posts that include another handle gain 56% more engagement" while "posts with at least one hashtag gain 12.6% more engagement" than posts that do not include a handle or hashtag. Further, "posts with a location receive 79% more engagement."²⁵ As such, IWR has implemented using hashtags on every Instagram post as well as location tagging, and tags other Instagram accounts as appropriate.

²⁵ Smith, Kit. "41 Incredible Instagram Statistics." *Brandwatch*, April 25, 2018. Accessed October 20, 2018. www.brandwatch.com/blog/instagram-stats/.

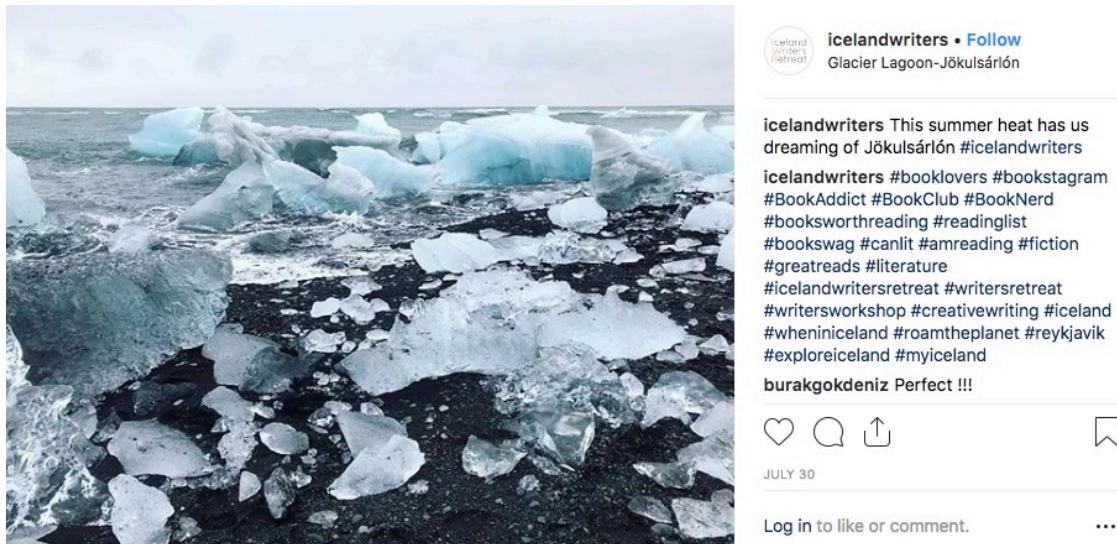


Figure 2.1 – Example of How IWR Uses Hashtags and Location Tags²⁶

Creating Conversations

Another observation from the @icelandwriters Instagram is that posts that ask questions and encourage interaction in the comments section tend to have higher engagement than those which do not—with Instagram’s current algorithm, the sooner more followers interact with your post, the more likely it is to be shown to other followers. This is because one of the main factors in the algorithm is based on “interest”—the app displays content higher that its users are more likely to be interested in.²⁷ How do users show interest in a brand or account? By interacting with their posts more often. Hootsuite recommends this tactic in their June 2018 blog post “How the Instagram Algorithm Works in 2018” listing “write captions that encourage engagement” as one of the ways to make the algorithm work for businesses, along with creating great content, knowing your followers, being engaged, and letting followers know to turn on post notifications.

²⁶ Iceland Writers Retreat. “Photo of Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon.” *Instagram*, July 30, 2018. Accessed November 28, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B13kokbggvp/>

²⁷ Newberry, Christina. “How the Instagram Algorithm Works in 2018.” *Hootsuite*, June 19, 2018. Accessed October 20, 2018. blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-algorithm/



Figure 2.2 – Example of Online Conversation Starting²⁸

Marketing IWR as a High-End Destination

The aspirational nature of IWR is relatively easy to convey: it is a rare opportunity to learn from celebrated international authors and also to visit a gorgeous country. IWR's social media does make sure to promote the newsy-ness of our faculty, particularly when they are nominated for awards or featured in high-profile publications. Examples of this in 2018's social media postings include Lauren Groff (IWR faculty in 2018) being shortlisted for the National Book Award in the United States and Esi Edugyan (IWR faculty in 2016) being shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and the Man Booker Prize. Participants who have participated in workshops or events with those authors are often keen to share content about them on their own social media feeds, even when they

²⁸ Iceland Writers Retreat. "Photo of City Lights Bookstore." *Instagram*, October 13, 2018. Accessed November 28, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bo4qQ2BAZ1-/>

attended two years ago, thus furthering the reach of our posts. Further, the recent review of upcoming faculty member Sarah Moss' newest book in *The Guardian* helps to introduce her to potential participants outside of the United Kingdom who may not be familiar with her work. By posting a review from an acclaimed publication like *The Guardian*, IWR is helping to establish her authority to their audience.

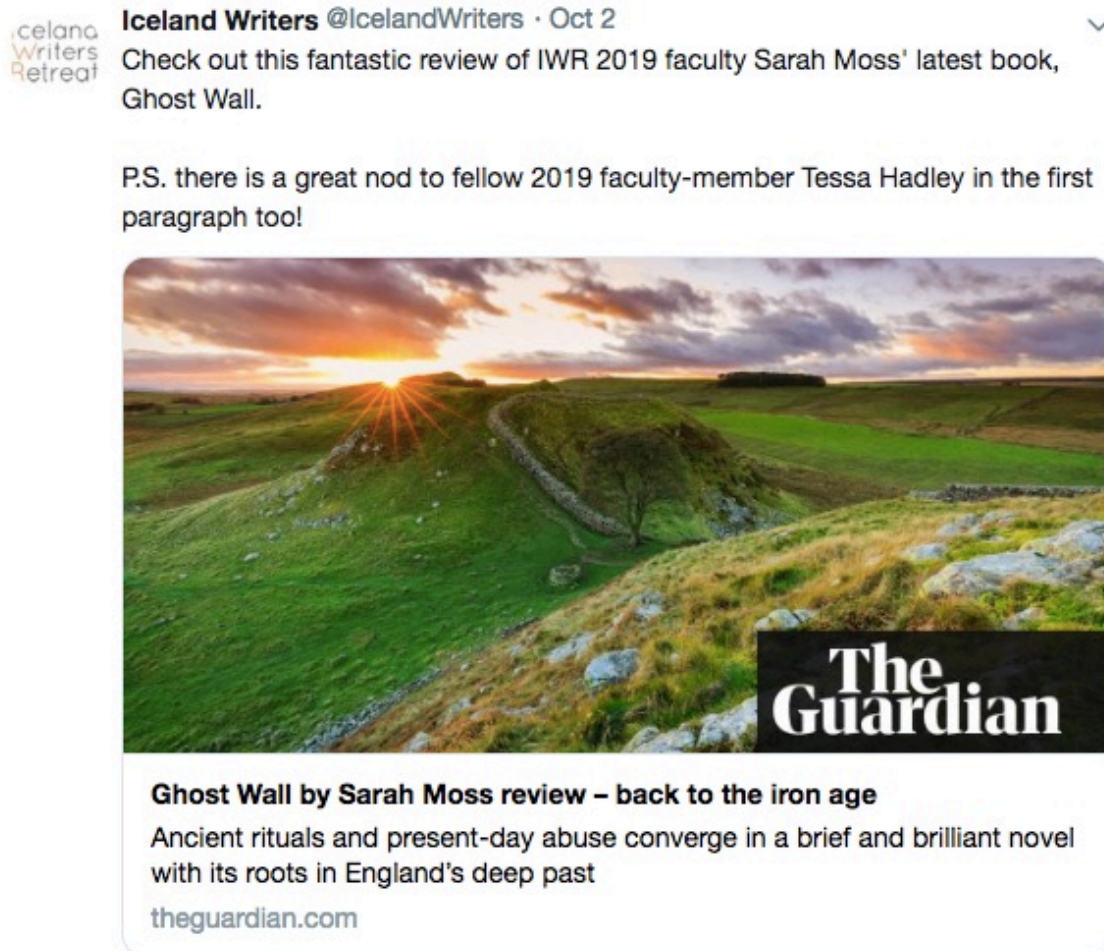


Figure 2.3 – Sarah Moss' Review in The Guardian²⁹

However, despite the importance of social media in marketing Iceland Writers Retreat as an event, Reid and Green are adamant that social media followings is ranked as relatively low importance when selecting faculty for the event. While the authors that have

²⁹ Iceland Writers Retreat. Twitter Post. October 2, 2018, 7:22 PM.
<https://twitter.com/IcelandWriters/status/1047190186885492736>

household-name recognition or large social media followings—with recent examples being Barbara Kingsolver, Adam Gopnik, and Lauren Groff—have a tendency to be shared more by our followers on social media than is only one consideration when selecting the faculty. Green and Reid aim to have faculty that are diverse across gender, nationality, ethnicity, and age, as well as representing the many genres people write about. Most importantly, they want them to be a good teacher.³⁰

In further promoting the aspirational nature of IWR, the social media plan also seizes on Instagram to post photos from around Iceland—taken both at IWR and at other destinations that are within a day or two’s travel, since many participants extend their trip by an average of two to four days. The photos chosen from Instagram are largely taken by staff, as well as using photos taken by Roman Gerasymenko, a photographer who documents the week-long Retreat. The fact that the majority of Instagram content is taken by the staff of IWR is limiting, as two of the three who have access to the Instagram account do not live in Iceland year-round.

Key Areas of Content

Key areas of content that IWR promotes on both Facebook and Twitter, the other two main social media platforms, include: news about IWR, which includes faculty announcements, tour announcements, and information about the Alumni Awards and writing contest; news about past and upcoming faculty, including awards nominations and press; articles about Iceland, particularly in regards to the publishing industry and tourism; and general interest news and articles about the craft of writing. In addition to this largely curated content, I was responsible for creating content via interviews with past participants, past and upcoming faculty, and news about Icelandic publishing to publish on the blog. The blog is important and useful in many ways: generally, it is evergreen content that can be reposted throughout the year during slower news times; it drives traffic to the website; and it gives prospective attendees more information about the specific experience of IWR compared to other writers retreats. The Alumni Award scholarships are a huge selling point for IWR, as they give the opportunity for talented

³⁰ Eliza Reid (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, September 2018.

writers who could otherwise not afford the trip to participate. Blog posts that include first-person narratives from past Alumni Award winners boasted an average reach of 2.6 thousand with 176 click-throughs when looking at Facebook insights. This is relatively high compared to IWR's average click-through rate.

Going Forward

Noha Bashir was an attendee in 2018 who works in education for Facebook and Instagram. She reached out to IWR to sit down with the team after the workshops finished for an informal social media consultation, since Facebook and Instagram support in helping small businesses that their employees are interested in and proud of.

Meeting with Bashir was incredibly useful for assessing IWR's social media plan—she was able to tell us what we were doing well and what we can improve, but also, we were able to get in-depth feedback from a participant on how they found us that went beyond the short feedback forms that are handed out on the final day of IWR.

Bashir found IWR searching using hashtags (mentioning that she uses hashtags across platforms) while she was searching for writers workshops. She found multiple compilation lists and IWR consistently showed up on these lists. “Learn how to write” was her original search, followed by “Not only for beginner writers.” Other common searches she explored were “writers conferences,” “writers workshops,” “writers retreats.”³¹

One of the main concepts she stressed during our meeting is that in general on social media, people follow people, not brands. People want to see people telling stories and being brand ambassadors. Prior to this meeting, IWR was already actively encouraging participants to write about their experiences, primarily through asking the winners of the alumni awards to write a blog post afterwards as well as reaching out to alumni who had publishing success after attending. Before the retreat starts, Green and Reid create a closed Facebook group for participants to interact in in addition to IWR's main social media platforms. Several people talk together before attending and arrange dinners

³¹ Noha Bashir (Education, Facebook), interviewed by Author, April 2018.

together or tours when in Reykjavik. Sometimes people in the same city even meet up in advance of their trip. Immediately post-retreat Green and Reid also advertise there that any alumni who wish to write about their experience could have the platform of the IWR blog. The conversation with Bashir solidified that this is an angle worth continuing to pursue and promote moving forward, perhaps using more advertising funds to boost posts that offer this first-person perspective.

Marketing Beyond Social

While IWR generally dedicates most of its marketing hours towards social media, time is also focused in the fall towards directly pitching to writers centres; universities with English, Publishing, or Creative Writing programs; and media. Multiple rounds of pitching are done, concentrated around the announcements of the Alumni Award scholarships and the annual writing contest, as well as to pitch advertising space in our program. In general, the ask is small—to advertise the opportunity to their community in-person and on social media—and we have had success with having others share the call on social media. Further, they create listings for the contest and scholarships (as well as IWR itself) on every free-listing website for writers, such as *Narrative*, *New Pages*, and *Poets & Writers*.

Chapter 3: During and Immediately After the Event

As an annual event, IWR must maximize what they do during the week it is in session. This includes pitching ramping up social media posting; creating content for the blog; and faculty to media while they are in Iceland—2018's Iceland Writers Retreat had two authors featured in *Kiljan*, a popular Icelandic television show about books. IWR also aims to make connections with participants to become “brand ambassadors” for Iceland Writers Retreat by posting on social media using the dedicated #icelandwriters hashtag and potentially writing content for the blog.

During most of the year, IWR aims to post content on Facebook once per day, Twitter one to five times per day, and every three to five days on Instagram. This posting schedule ramps up considerably during the week IWR is in session, with four to 10 posts going up per day across platform. This is for a variety of reasons, but primarily because it gives those following along at home an in-depth view of how the Retreat operates and hopefully piques their interest to become involved themselves the next year.

The Importance of Word of Mouth Marketing

Word of Mouth Marketing (WOMM) is a form of earned media. Hubspot.com defines earned media as “media exposure you’ve earned through word-of-mouth. Whether it was the fantastic content you’ve distributed, the influence of your SEO efforts, the customer experience you’ve delivered, or a combination of all three, earned media refers to the recognition you receive as a result.”³² IWR also focuses energy on creating owned media, which is content created in-house via posts on the blog or social media. *Hubspot* stresses the importance of owned media as “providing value to leads as they move down the funnel. These assets offer a more controlled — but not overly promotional — message about your company.”

³² Meyer, Kelsey. "The Difference Between Earned, Owned & Paid Media (And Why It Matters for Lead Gen)." *HubSpot*, July 28, 2017. Accessed October 20, 2018. blog.hubspot.com/marketing/earned-owned-paid-media-lead-generation.

Of the power of social, Green explained “Word of mouth is always the best way to get new participants. So, if someone sees a friend or author they love endorse the retreat, it helps the most.” WOMM pre-dates social media, but remains relevant in the digital age. In a blog post titled “Word of Mouth Marketing in 2018: How to Create a Strategy for Social Media Buzz & Skyrocket Referral Sales” for BigCommerce.com, Matt Warren quoted statistics from a 2012 Nielsen report that cited that 92% of consumers would trust referrals from friends and family more than traditional advertising from a company. Further, 88% of consumers trust online reviews as much as they trust recommendations from their friends and family. Altogether, 74% of customers identified word of mouth as an influence in their decisions on what to purchase. Research has shown a 10% increase in word-of-mouth—whether on or offline, from personal contacts or not—translated into between 0.2 – 1.5% of an increase in sales.³³ In short, WOMM is a way to drive sales without an advertising spend, and consumers are more likely to trust reviews—even from a stranger—than they are to trust traditional advertising. WOMM is where the Advocacy stage of the marketing funnel becomes important.

Participants and faculty are the most likely to enthusiastically endorse IWR while they are still in Iceland, or directly after they return home and are ruminating on their experience. A September 2018 article for Forbes titled “Want Customers To Leave Reviews? Here's How To (Politely) Nudge Them” cited the most likely time to get reviews from consumers as 3-5 days after purchase or—in the case of IWR—experience.³⁴ Anecdotally, IWR has found the timeframe of 1–7 days to be when the vast majority of reviews and other endorsements are posted.

³³ Warren, Matt. "Word of Mouth Marketing in 2018: How to Create a Strategy for Social Media Buzz & Skyrocket Referral Sales." *BigCommerce*. Accessed November 10, 2018.
www.bigcommerce.com/blog/word-of-mouth-marketing/#womm-executive-summary

³⁴ Zhang, Yan. "Want Customers To Leave Reviews? Here's How To (Politely) Nudge Them." *Forbes*, September 13, 2018. Accessed November 10, 2018.
www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/09/13/want-customers-to-leave-reviews-heres-how-to-politely-nudge-them/#1f26abfe53ea

How IWR Uses WOMM

IWR hopes that participants enjoy their experience so much that they will become enthusiastic brand ambassadors by posting on social media using dedicated hashtags and potentially writing about their experience. On the final day of the 2018 retreat, faculty member Lauren Groff, who to date has 23,5000 followers, Tweeted “I’m sad to leave Iceland, where poets and writers can get salaries from the state, where the prime minister has a literature degree, where writers at the @IcelandWriters meet the President at a private reception...” and “...where the average book sells 1000 copies, the per-capital equivalent of 1,000,000 in the US. If you have the chance to do the @IcelandWriters Retreat, leap at it roaring.” The first Tweet boasted 40 comments, 269 Retweets, and 1,800 likes, which translated to the @icelandwriters Twitter account gaining approximately 40 followers.

IWR also uses these social media posts to curate content and show value to sponsors. On Instagram, they ask participants to use the dedicated hashtag #icelandwriters, as well as tagging sponsors. They also reach out to those who post photos on the hashtag to repost with credit on the @icelandwriters page, which helps keep up with a consistent posting schedule without constantly having to create original content in-house.



Figure 3.1 – Example of Reposted Content on Instagram³⁵

For participants wishing to write about their experience in longer-form than a social media post, IWR offers them the platform of the blog to publish on, but also suggests other avenues they could pursue such as Lithub, Electric Literature, Time Blend, We Are Travel Girls, Novelicious, etcetera.

As mentioned by Noha Bashir in her social media consultation, people like to follow *people* on social media, as opposed to *brands*.³⁶ Seth Godin spoke of this in his book *All Marketers Are Liars* as well saying “Personal interaction cuts through all the filters. That’s why it was so hard for the dot-coms to build a loyal following—they couldn’t afford to provide the interactions that are built into the retail experience.”³⁷ IWR, like a dot-com, does not have a traditional “retail” experience, but by posting authentic content from employees and participants, they create a personal experience for potential

³⁵ Iceland Writers Retreat. “Photo of IWR tote bag by Nora Shychuk.” *Instagram*, April 2018. Accessed November 28, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BiFGBOegmG2/>

³⁶ Noha Bashir (Education, Facebook), interviewed by Author, April 2018.

³⁷ Godin, Seth. *All Marketers Are Liars: The Underground Classic That Explains How Marketing Really Works and Why Authenticity Is the Best Marketing of All*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2009.

customers to interact with. The content IWR posts that features first-person narratives of the experience of the Retreat tends to boast high engagement, partially since the participants are likely to share the published blog posts on their own social media feeds as well.

In the case of IWR, these blog posts also make for good evergreen content—things IWR can post and re-post throughout the year during the lulls between large announcements such as faculty reveals and the results of the Alumni Awards and writing contest. They are new, in-depth personal experiences for new followers to read, while followers who may have already seen the blogs posted may recognize friends or be prompted to write something themselves. These blog posts are examples of both earned and owned media—that is, content IWR created or received in recognition of creating an experience participants willingly rave about—which can transition into paid media via boosting, promoting posts, or running social ad campaigns using that content.

Chapter 4: Expecting the Unexpected and Controlling the Uncontrollable—How IWR Deals with Challenges

This section looks at specific examples of the kinds of challenges Iceland Writers Retreat faces in marketing the event. These challenges include: creating year-round content for an annual event; the rising strength of the Icelandic krona (ISK); and finding a way for content to be seen on increasingly “pay-for-play” platforms with a small marketing budget.

The Rising Strength of the Krona

Typical to most publishing and publishing-adjacent organizations, the overriding sentiment from both Green and Reid when asked about challenges to running IWR came down to money. The high-cost of participating, despite Green and Reid’s best efforts to keep prices low, can be prohibitive to many writers.

From Reid: “[the] biggest challenge I would say is keeping the costs as low as possible.” She also noted the power of social media in helping with that, because of it being a cost-effective way of advertising.

Also speaking to costs, Green used the example of the cost of the participant’s hotel stay, which is included in the cost of the complete package, saying: “there are not enough hotels to accommodate all the tourists in Iceland. As a result we can’t always get the exact type of spaces or even pricing we’d really like. It’s a hotels market now, and we have to play into that.”

Some aspects of Icelandic tourism cannot be haggled with however, such as the rising strength of the krona due to the recent boom in tourism. Back in May 2017, Icelandic finance minister Benedikt Johannesson spoke to Reuters via a phone interview saying the strength of the krona: “is certainly a problem for all the export sectors, for the fisheries, for the tourist industry, for the food industry etcetera.”³⁸ While certain solutions had been

³⁸ Jensen, Teis. “Iceland's strong currency is a problem -finance minister.” *Reuters*, May 22, 2017. Accessed September 28, 2018. www.reuters.com/article/iceland-currency/icelands-strong-currency-is-a-problem-finance-minister-idUSL8N1IO5CF.

promoted, in 2017 and 2018 the krona remained at a nearly unprecedented strength when compared to the US dollar, Canadian dollar, and Euro. According to XE currency converter which reports live market rates, over the past five years, the krona went from being worth 0.0086 of 1 Canadian dollar to being worth 0.014 in June 2017 and 0.013 in May 2018. In late 2018, these numbers are trending slightly downward, at 0.011 as of November 2018, but are still significantly higher than the 0.0099 rate of April 2014—when the Retreat first launched.³⁹

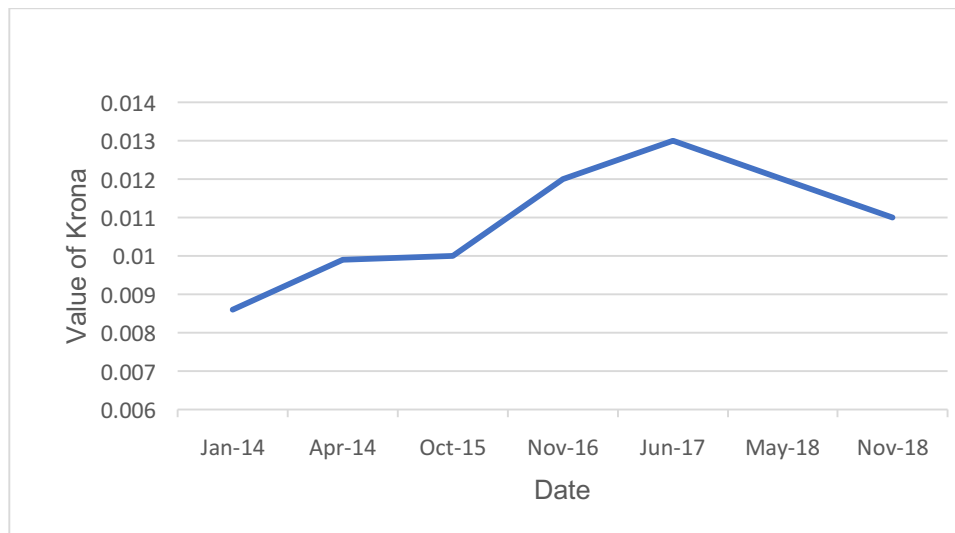


Figure 4.1 – Change in Krona Value in Relation to Canadian Dollar⁴⁰

For 2019, IWR has introduced an additional “Economy” tier to the Retreat—joining the previous “Standard” and “Complete” options. The Complete Package covers everything involved in IWR, minus airfare to and from Iceland. The Standard Package covers the workshops, tours, and social events, but does not include accommodation or transportation to and from event not held at the hotel. The new Economy Package includes only the workshops and receptions, and with savings of approximately \$1,000

³⁹ XE Currency. “ISK to CAD Chart.” *XE Currency*. Accessed October 12, 2018. www.xe.com/currencycharts/?from=ISK&to=CAD&view=5Y

⁴⁰ XE Currency. “ISK to CAD Chart.” *XE Currency*. Accessed October 12, 2018. www.xe.com/currencycharts/?from=ISK&to=CAD&view=5Y

Canadian, allows participants who would otherwise be priced out of the Retreat to attend.⁴¹

Communicating Disappointments

Green expanded further on what, in her opinion, are the largest difficulties towards running the IWR. In her words:

The hardest things are those we cannot control. We don't own the hotel nor do we run it, so if something goes wrong with a room or a workshop space, or the food, we can only do so much. The same is true for the people. If an author cannot attend at the last minute, we have to do a LOT of scrambling. Unfortunately, we've dealt with this twice, but fortunately we know now steps we can take and what needs to happen when something goes amiss so that we can make everyone's experience worthwhile even when things go wrong.

While most of what Green was talking about are challenges from an organizational and logistical standpoint, the organizers also have to deal with communicating these issues with their participants when they arise. In general, dealing with disappointed customers is not as different for a writer's retreat as for any other customer service business as one might think. In a blog post on LinkedIn, a Culinary Arts Educator named Ryan Parker broke down "Disappointed Customers: How To handle them artfully (and how not to)". His three steps included: identifying the customer's needs, "be cool about it", and to give the customer a reason to come back.⁴² This advice was supported in an article for Entrepreneur titled "How to Break Bad News to Clients" where writer Nadia Goodman interviewed Deborah Bosley, owner of the Plain Language Group, a communications consulting firm. Goodman and Bosley cited the three most important steps as: acknowledging the impact, being honest and direct, and providing an alternative.⁴³

⁴¹ Iceland Writers Retreat. "IWR 2018." *Iceland Writers Retreat*. Accessed August 6, 2018. www.icelandwritersretreat.com/iwr-2018/

⁴² Parker, Ryan. "Disappointed Customers: How To handle them artfully (and how not to)." *LinkedIn Pulse*, November 29, 2014. Accessed November 10, 2018. www.linkedin.com/pulse/20141129151410-1299315-disappointed-customers-how-to-handle-them-artfully-and-how-not-to/

⁴³ Goodman, Nadia. "How to Break Bad News to Clients." *Entrepreneur*, November 6, 2012. Accessed November 10, 2018. www.entrepreneur.com/article/224884

An example that IWR recently dealt with is that for 2019's IWR, author Emma Straub pulled out in September 2018 after being announced in July 2018. When communicating issues like faculty cancelling, particularly last minute, Green and Reid begin by identifying what their participant's needs are or why that particular author would be a draw for them. In general, the Retreat does not announce disappointing news like an author pulling out until a replacement has been found—someone who will equally fulfill the participants' needs. In the particular case of Emma Straub, the announcement was included in a newsletter announcing two additional faculty members. While it is disappointing to lose her as a faculty member, it is up to the brand's tone on social media to put a positive spin on the situation when announcing the author who will be replacing her. Enthusiasm is contagious as they say and IWR is creating trust in the participants that despite small disappointments they will still be getting value for their money.

Stretching One Week into a Full Year

As mentioned previously, stretching a one-week event into a full year of content is a major difficulty IWR contends with. IWR has developed many strategies for this, including: reaching out to alumni and faculty to create content for the blog; encouraging participants to write about their experience; staying apprised of industry news; and following other Icelandic organizations whose content can be reposted for IWR's followers.

Finding Space on Pay-for-Play Platforms

During the meeting with Noha Bashir, she also brought up Facebook's ability to boost posts. Facebook—and since Facebook's 2012 acquisition, Instagram as well—increasingly leans towards being a “pay-for-play” platform.⁴⁴ In short, Facebook's algorithm changes prioritize content from those who you interact with the most—which, in general, is your family and friends as opposed to brands.⁴⁵ As such, businesses are relying on paying for ads, promoting posts, and other Facebook paid media. As a

⁴⁴ Noha Bashir (Education, Facebook), interviewed by Author, April 2018.

⁴⁵ Newberry, Christina. "How the Instagram Algorithm Works in 2018." *Hootsuite*, June 19, 2018. Accessed October 20, 2018. blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-algorithm/

relatively small company with a limited marketing budget, IWR currently focusses the majority of their advertising budget on boosting posts as opposed to conventional print media ads or sponsored content on influencer's blogs. While IWR strives to have all of the content they share to be of educational or entertainment value to their audience, they focus their limited marketing funds on boosting posts with the largest perceived value—for example, posts about the Iceland Writers Retreat Alumni Award applications and the annual writing contest. By the numbers, the Facebook page currently has 3,551 followers and an organic reach which varies from about 500-2,000 views. Comparatively, a recent boosted post regarding the IWR 2019 Alumni Awards had a reach of 31,000, with 40,000 impressions. Bashir suggested boosting more posts than the current average of one to three per year to truly make an impact in Facebook's increasingly pay-for-play market and grow IWR's following, ideally at least one post per month. IWR has increased the section of the marketing budget reserved for boosting posts or paying for social advertising since that meeting up to \$500–1,000 Canadian.



Iceland Writers Retreat

Published by Jessica Key [?] · September 1 ·

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The 2019 Iceland Writers Retreat Alumni Awards are now open for applications!

The Alumni Award offers talented writers in need of financial support an opportunity to attend the Iceland Writers Retreat in Reykjavík, Iceland in April 2019.

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32,144

People Reached

891

Engagements

[Boost Again](#)

Figure 4.2 – Example of a Boosted Post on Facebook⁴⁶

Speaking to the benefits of boosting on Instagram specifically, Bashir mentioned during her consultation that boosting on Instagram tends to lead to a lot more visits to websites

⁴⁶ Iceland Writers Retreat's Facebook page. Accessed 28 November, 2018.
<https://www.facebook.com/IcelandWritersRetreat/>

listed in a page's bio. She also talked about Instagram's benefit of being "inspiring" and suggested diversifying the IWR content on that platform by posting more stories—small, temporary posts that don't need to be quite as "perfect" as what is posted on the feed, but keep the IWR name continually on follower's feeds. She suggested posting small pieces of writerly advice and quotes, as well as using Instagram's new-at-the-time poll feature to encourage engagement.

The conversations around paid reach can sometimes feel demoralizing for small brands who lack the budget to compete with larger events. Luckily, in the case of IWR, the effort towards creating a community and promoting discussion, as well as relative frequency of posting, means that IWR is creating meaningful interaction with their audience, which leads to them organically coming across IWR's content as well. Further, the authenticity of the content—posting what staff truly are excited by or feel that participants would be interested in—helps IWR's social media presence avoid what Madden Media calls "engagement-bait" which is "where you're encouraging likes, shares, and comments without any real engagement or substance."⁴⁷

Smartphones in a Writers Utopia

One final potential challenge actually is to do with one of the IWR's main selling points. As far as Icelandic attitudes towards books and book publishing, increased internet and smartphone usage has had an impact on the Icelandic publishing industry. While their industry appears to be much more thriving than many other markets, it is still facing a significant downturn. Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV), the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, has reported that since 2010, book sales in Iceland have decreased by 43 percent—particularly affecting the beloved Christmas book flood.⁴⁸ This appears to correlate with data usage during the same period, which has increased 19-fold. While these statistics do not as of yet affect IWR, these are certainly trends worth keeping an eye on for the organizers.

⁴⁷ Madden Media. "Pay to Play—the new Facebook algorithm." *Madden Media*. Accessed October 12, 2018. maddenmedia.com/pay-to-play-the-new-facebook-algorithm/

⁴⁸ Iceland Monitor, "Book sales continue to drop," August 13, 2018. Accessed October 12, 2018. icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/news/2018/08/13/book_sales_continue_to_drop/

Chapter 5: Suss Out the Competition and Find Your Niche—An In-Depth Look at IWR’s Competitors and Opportunities

It is important to regularly check in with the marketplace and evaluate where your business is situated. When looking externally, organizations like *BigCommerce*, *Forbes*, and *Entrepreneur Magazine* suggest completing competitor analyses. These include identifying competitors, determining their market positioning through what makes them unique, and then examining how they move their customers through their funnel from awareness to purchasing and beyond.⁴⁹ From a marketing-specific standpoint, *BigCommerce* suggests assessing competitors’ websites to look for calls to action; reviews to assess if there are weaknesses to capitalize on and/or appetites for similar products; and social media to see which of their channels are the most successful, what frequency they are posting with, and what content their audiences are interacting with the most.⁵⁰

Internally, a SWOT analysis is an important tool regardless of industry. *Business News Daily* defines it as “a planning process that allows your company to overcome challenges and determine what new leads to pursue.”⁵¹ From a marketing standpoint, the positive aspects of a SWOT may seem the most important—these are the points that can be used to sell to potential audiences. However, a thorough understanding of a company’s weaknesses and threats helps businesses foresee potential problems and not be left behind by their competition. When IWR was in the planning stages, Green and Reid created a SWOT analysis to see if IWR had the potential to be a viable business.⁵² Earlier sections of this report discussed IWR’s strengths and challenges (both internal and external), while this section will discuss its competitors and opportunities.

⁴⁹ Tubis, Nick. "How To Study Your Competition To See Business Success." *Forbes*, March 1, 2018. Accessed November 10, 2018. www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2018/03/01/how-to-study-your-competition-to-see-business-success/#2be93ae3559e

⁵⁰ Ferenzi, Katey. "How to Conduct a Competitive Analysis for Your Online Business." *BigCommerce*. Accessed November 9, 2018. <https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/how-perform-competitive-analysis/#undefined>

⁵¹ Fallon, Nicole. "SWOT Analysis: What It Is and When to Use It." *Business News Daily*, March 2, 2018. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/4245-swot-analysis.html>

⁵² Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

International Competitors

As mentioned in the introduction, the idea for IWR began when co-founder Erica Green attended a Retreat in California. With the amount of retreats, conferences, and writers festivals that exist, are there any that are directly comparable and/or competitive with IWR? Per the co-founders, not exactly.

“Honestly, we haven’t found one exactly like it. Many retreats are simply residential offerings where an author can ‘escape’ to find solace to write but there are few if any workshops. Of course too, some other retreats focus primarily ‘how to get published’—speed dating with agents, query letter writing, etcetera,” said Green.

Reid added: “I guess other ones that take place in an “exotic” location and have workshops, but really there are such a variety that we feel what we offer is unique.”

The co-founders added that the retreats that they follow closely include the San Miguel de Allende Retreat, the Sewanee retreat, Breadloaf Writers Conference, Sun Valley Writers Conference, and Algonkian Writers Conference, as well as handful of small ones in Italy. They also make sure to stay in touch with writer’s centres in the USA (where the bulk of their participants hail from) that offer weekends away or in-town retreats. Examples of these include Politics and Prose Bookstore retreat in Washington, DC and the Writer’s Center based in Bethesda, Maryland. Additionally, they make sure to read trade magazines, like *Poets and Writers*, to keep apprised of other Retreats.⁵³

Icelandic Competitors

When first pitching IWR, Green and Reid assured partners and the literary community that it would not be competing with the Reykjavik International Literary Festival.⁵⁴ The Festival is a biennial week-long, free event that boasts similarly accomplished authors to IWR.⁵⁵ Per their website, to date they have hosted “Nobel-prize winners, novelists,

⁵³ Erica Green (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

⁵⁴ Eliza Reid (Co-founder, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, August 2018.

⁵⁵ Reykjavik International Literary Festival. “About.” *Bokmenntahatid*. Accessed November 3, 2018. bokmenntahatid.is/en/#summary.

historians, political activists, philosophers, cartoonists and more.” Despite the similarities in authors and location, the events are vastly different from each other, with the Literary Festival operating more similarly to events like Vancouver Writers Fest, hosting large readings and panel discussions as opposed to the small group workshops and cultural tours IWR offers.

Similarly, Iceland Noir is a crime writing festival that runs every November in Reykjavik, and also focuses on panels and readings as opposed to workshops. IWR co-founder Eliza Reid was a featured presenter in 2018, interviewing her brother, Canadian author Iain Reid. Similarly, Iceland Noir co-founder Yrsa Sigurðardóttir was a featured local author at IWR 2018. Despite this congenial relationship, Iceland Noir remains an indirect competitor, as most potential international attendees for IWR and Iceland Noir would likely only be able to afford to travel to one event or the other.

As well as seeing what these businesses are posting, another way that IWR keeps apprised of competitors is by making the most of Facebook’s insights by “watching” similar pages to see how their reach and engagement compares. IWR also “watches” other Icelandic organizations and tourism brands such as Visit Reykjavik, What’s On in Iceland, and The Golden Circle.

Opportunities

IWR has had rapid growth within five years, but there remains room to grow even further. The next sections of this chapter will assess IWR’s potential growth in the areas of finances, awareness, and expansion.

FINANCIAL

As of the 2018 Retreat, IWR began selling advertising space in their program, which is a slim but beautiful pamphlet handed out to all participants, faculty, and volunteers on the first day. The program started when the Vermont College of Fine Arts reached out to IWR with interest in advertising their Master of Fine Arts in Writing program. Volunteer Coordinator Lisa Shannen managed the ad sales, reaching out to similar MFA and

publishing programs as well as Icelandic businesses to sell ad space.

The advertising program is currently under review leading into the 2019 Iceland Writers Retreat and beyond, as the organizers found the advertising sales to be time and energy intensive between pitching, chasing down artwork, redesigning the program, invoicing, and collecting payments. In 2018, the program only netted the Retreat approximately \$500.⁵⁶

When pitching the advertising space to potential advertisers, they focused on the high-profile caliber of faculty and the dedication of the participants, who are willing to invest time and money in furthering their careers. Further, they cited the collectable nature of the program, as many participants hold on to theirs as keepsakes.

If the advertising program continues, they believe it should be appealing to universities, particularly those with MFA programs. When pitching Icelandic businesses, they stress that many of their participants spend additional time exploring Iceland and will likely be investing more money into the economy.

AWARENESS

IWR is actively looking at ways to expand their social media presence, in an effort to create more brand awareness online.

IWR created an Instagram account in mid-2015, but posting has always been sporadic. Further, they were unable to login to the account for almost a year due to difficulties with multiple people accessing the account. Since that issue has been resolved, IWR has made a concerted effort to create a consistent posting schedule, as well as researching popular hashtags to reach different writing communities on the platform. With this increased effort in created a visual brand for the company, they have also begun to consider expanding into creating content for Pinterest, another highly visual platform.

To expand upon the effort they have put into Word of Mouth Marketing, IWR could host

⁵⁶ Lisa Shannen (Volunteer Coordinator, Iceland Writers Retreat), interviewed by Author, November 2018.

social media takeovers by faculty or accomplished alumni. These could be in the form of “day in the life” content on Instagram and/or Q&A sessions on a live Facebook feed or on Twitter. The goal of these takeovers would be twofold: the person doing the takeover would likely share the content on their personal social channels, thereby endorsing the Retreat, and it would also contribute to the approachable tone IWR strives for online.

Leading into IWR 2019, they also hope to use some of Instagram and Facebook’s newer features such as live recordings, stories, and polls, particularly while the event is in session, but also to canvas followers to see what kinds of content they are most interested in seeing and interact with the most.

IWR follows SEO best practices when posting on the blog. IWR uses the Yoast SEO Premium plug-in which suggests minimum word counts, alt attributes for images, and adding links, as well as allowing the user to set meta descriptions and focus keywords. Continually assessing and updating this blog content to allow greater discoverability should be a priority moving forward.

EXPANSION

Green and Reid are always looking for ways to continue growing IWR. In addition to offering different tiers—for 2019: Economy, Standard, and Complete, as well as the Relax and Write Extension—they are also looking at ways to add additional value for the participants. For example, during the meeting with Bashir, the idea of adding “office hours” with the faculty was proposed, to give participants even more face time with well-known authors who can influence their careers. This could also potentially include brief manuscript consultations, such as those often done by Writers-in-Residence at other writers retreats or conferences.

Further, Green and Reid mentioned the potential to expand IWR into a twice-yearly event, as proposed in their initial business plan. The additional event could potentially be focused on writing for children and young adults, or on crime fiction—something that Nordic literature is renowned for. Expanding into a twice-yearly event would appeal to new demographics who feel their writing may not feel represented in the current

workshop offerings. From a social media perspective, it would also increase and diversify the kinds content the Retreat shares online.

Summary and Conclusion

The past five years have marked tremendous growth for Iceland Writers Retreat. From a small event with 52 participants to an internationally renowned destination for 100+ writers who are serious and dedicated to their craft, all while staying true to the founder's original vision. Iceland Writers Retreat celebrates writing and writers while creating a space for the exchange of ideas, all against the starkly beautiful landscape of Iceland. Further, IWR is more than just a series of workshops—it has become a community, one that has inspired some participants to return for multiple years straight and one that has also crossed the boundary from the physical onto the online world.

Social media has become integral to promoting the event for many reasons, particularly in fostering that sense of community and extending it to new potential participants. It also allows the founders to keep costs as affordable as possible to prospective participants, due to its ability to reach a larger amount of people than traditional print advertising, for a fraction of the cost—even when factoring in the cost of boosting posts.

Despite the obvious benefits to social media, it can occasionally feel like shouting into the void. IWR has worked to create a clearly defined brand voice and to build a community of people who are actively engaging with, and looking forward to, their content. It allows IWR to foster goodwill among their Icelandic partners, sponsors, and contemporaries through cross-promoting their content while also providing additional content for their audience.

The goal of this report was to provide an analysis of Iceland Writers Retreats marketing efforts within the global market, particularly online, and to provide a guideline of best practices for similar arts organizations. Further, it intends to provide an educational resource for Iceland Writers Retreat to use for future marketing and publicity assistants.

Unfortunately, due to the swiftly evolving world of social media, where algorithms may change multiple times per year and platforms may become obsolete as quickly as they are created, some of the data and recommendations that informs this report will become outdated. However, it is hoped that this report is more than the sum of its data.

Working for Iceland Writers Retreat gave me unparalleled experience with adapting to and continuing an established brand voice; managing multiple social media networks; creating unique content including blog posts and slide shows; and pitching to media and advertisers. It also introduced me to the unique Nordic literary culture—something that seems incredibly crucial and wonderful. It was easy to maintain the enthusiastic tone that IWR strives for on their social media when most of the things I was posting about did, indeed, interest and delight me.

Despite facing challenges relevant to both the global publishing industry and the Icelandic tourism industry, IWR continues to thrive and faces the potential for even more growth and expansion in the next five years. In the years to come, Iceland Writers Retreat will continue to be a crucial and unique space for both established and emerging voices.

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