

**NO FILTER:  
THE INSIDE STORY  
OF INSTAGRAM**  
*by Sarah Frier*

*Summary & Worksheet*

*durmonski.com*

## The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

As the title suggests, *No Filter* is an attempt, extremely engaging I must say, to tell the story of Instagram with no filter applied. Technology reporter Sarah Frier, is taking us behind the scenes of now the most-used app that allows you to polish your virtual identity hoping that your real identity will benefit from this too. How the app came to be? What was the main goal of the founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger when they created the company? Why was Instagram later sold to Facebook and how the product is changing people's lives? These are just some of the questions the book tackles.

## The Core Idea:

Apart from the lessons that can be useful for entrepreneurs. The applauding storytelling tracking the progress of the founders till their departure from their own company. The book also covers a lot of ground regarding how Instagram (negatively) affects us. While the filter-making app has helped some to leave their jobs and devote their lives to their interests, it has also made our lives a race for popularity. People are so obsessed with sharing the best version of their lives that they don't actually live them.

### *Highlights:*

- *An app, to be successful, should infiltrate the daily lives of its users. Make its use a habit.*
- *People feel both good and bad about using Instagram: Good because it allows them to create a well-crafted online persona. Bad because there are always others with seemingly better profiles.*
- *Focusing on doing good things and setting values should be prioritized above growth and making more money.*

## 7 Key Lessons from No Filter:

- *Lesson #1: Don't Give Everything up For Someone Else's Vision*
- *Lesson #2: Prioritize Creating Useful Product Over Creating Fun Product*
- *Lesson #3: Figure Out What Problems You Are Solving For Your Users*
- *Lesson #4: To Stay Competitive, You Should Either Buy or Copy Competitors*
- *Lesson #5: While Popular and Widely Used, Instagram Negatively Affects People's Lives*
- *Lesson #6: Is Your Company Doing Good for The World?*
- *Lesson #7: Create Simple, Habitual Products People Love to Use*

### **Lesson #1: Don't Give Everything up For Someone Else's Vision**

Kevin Systrom, the person who co-founded Instagram that will later become the largest photo-sharing website, was approached by Mark Zuckerberg.

Way before Instagram was invented, in 2005, Zuckerberg tried to recruit Systrom to work for him, so he can create for Facebook a way for users to add photos.

Systrom declined the offer. He was pleased that the Facebook founder was interested in his skills, but he wasn't so interested in getting involved in the hustle hype mentality the Silicon Valley firms were so obsessed with.

What made his mind was his mentor on campus, Fern Mandelbaum. She was worried, as mentioned in the book, that "Systrom would waste his potential if he gave everything up for somebody else's vision."

And even though he didn't consider himself a skilled programmer, he was obsessed with making quality stuff. He was constantly striving to make things perfect. Always pushing himself and trying to find the best solution for the current problem.

This restless desire to produce quality products along with his main passion: photography. Inspired him to create a mobile website – the first iteration of Instagram – called Burbn.

While the app wasn't that sophisticated in the beginning, it was good enough to enter the Silicon Valley apps race and seek funding. But

since VCs were not interested in investing money in solo founders, he had to find someone else who can help him create the company he aspired to create – a medium where you can show your outlook on the world to everyone. That’s how he started looking for a co-founder. And that’s how he found Mike Krieger.

*“The biggest risk for you is you’re a sole founder,” Anderson told Systrom. “I usually don’t invest in sole founders.” He argued that without someone else at the top, nobody would tell Systrom when he was wrong, or push his ideas to be better.”*  
Sarah Frier

## **Lesson #2: Prioritize Creating Useful Product Over Creating Fun Product**

If you want to make money, a product should be useful, and then be fun. That’s what Systrom and Krieger learned, the hard way, after talking with investors and after working on their Burbn app for several months.

The founders were quickly spending money but making little progress. If they wanted to succeed in the highly-competitive market of mobile apps, they had to make an app that wasn’t only with an addictive effect, it had to be also somehow useful and potentially monetizable.

So, to find “What was their Twitter?” they brainstormed what should be their philosophy when building the tool.

They figured out that one day, people won’t carry their big cameras with them and instead use their phones to snap pictures – once the quality of the camera was better. Based on this idea, they outlined the biggest problems users in early 2010 faced when wanting to share a photo:

- Images took a lot of time to load on a 3G network.
- People were embarrassed to share their low-quality photos.
- It was annoying to share photos on all currently available social networks.

With these three in mind, they created Scotch. An app that was all about easily sharing square photos on other platforms. The constraint was not only based on the character limit Twitter had, it was created to solve the other problem – the time it took for a photo to load. The square frame reduced the size of the photo which improved the upload speed.

These two, however, were not solving the main issue: the problem with low-quality pictures. After all, if a person is not happy with the quality, the framing, and the overall look of the picture, he'll be embarrassed to show it to the world. But one day, after talking with his back-then-girlfriend, Nicole Schuetz. They figured it out! Filters will make all the difference.

By adding filters, you could alter your photos so they can look better and also make you look like a pro photographer. Even if you don't have an idea of what you're doing.

This, as later turned out, was a game-changer.

*“Neither Rise nor the founders thought there was a downside to the fact that filters, when used en masse, would give Instagrammers permission to present their reality as more interesting and beautiful than it actually was. That was exactly what would help make the product popular. Instagram posts would be art, and art was a form of commentary on life. The app would give people the gift of expression, but also escapism.” Sarah Frier*

## **Lesson #3: Figure Out What Problems You Are Solving For Your Users**

The name Instagram was born after considerable discussion. Since most photo-related names were already occupied by other startups, they came up with the name which is a combination of the words “instant” and “telegram.”

But what kind of problems was Instagram solving for its users?

According to the founders, the main advantages of their app compared to other existing programs were the following:

- A luxury brand that was for creative people and designers who can express themselves.
- Perfecting smartphone photography and helping people share, immediately, their experiences with the world.

For the users though, the advantages were a bit different...

In short, it made people feel good about their lives. People become obsessed with fine-tuning their online profiles in order to attract the adoration of an audience.

Initially, it was meant for mainly photographers, or photographer wannabes who wanted to share how they view the world. But later, when the popularity of the app skyrocketed, it was about something else.

Users were able to express themselves and create a faultless online persona. It made people feel good about what they created and about who they were online. And, eventually, also about who they ought to be offline.

Compared to other apps, sharing on Instagram was easy. It didn't feel like work. After all, it was much harder to share something on Twitter because there was this pressure about what you're going to say. In contrast, posting a photo was super easy.

Ironically, the thing that contributed to the growth of the company – the easy way to make your photo look beautiful thanks to the filters – was later the thing that ceased their continuous growth. Yes, it was easy to enhance your photo thanks to all the options available, but it was getting harder to compose a well-crafted scene others will like because the bar was constantly rising.

As stated in the book, “the modern pressure Instagram would introduce—the pressure to post only the best photos, making life seem more perfect than it actually was.”

People were starting to post less often because they were pressured by the demand Instagram created for sharing only high-quality photos. To be perfect on Instagram was the norm. And people were getting tired of being perfect.

*“Instagram was still growing fast. The app reached 400 million monthly users that September, now way past Twitter. But because of the high bar for posting, the rate of posts per user was on the decline. Less content being posted indicated that Instagram was becoming less important in people's lives. It also could mean fewer potential slots in the feed for advertisements.”*  
Sarah Frier

## **Lesson #4: To Stay Competitive, You Should Either Buy or Copy Competitors**

Everyone was shocked when Facebook bought Instagram for \$1 billion dollars in 2012. Not only the people working at Instagram – they were worried about their careers – but also the people working for Mark Zuckerberg.

One billion dollars for an app was unheard of back then. Especially a program that wasn't making any money. But Zuckerberg knew what he was doing. He knew that the hardest thing about making money online is making people use your app. Making it a habit. And Instagram has already occupied a large portion of the user's daily blind spots.

But why the founders sold the company? They were growing insanely fast and new investors were eager to give them money.

When questioned by his first angel-investor, Steve Anderson, Systrom gave the following arguments:

The stock value of Facebook will grow over time making them more money; They won't have to compete with Facebook; Instagram would directly benefit from the infrastructure Facebook has; And finally, he and Krieger would run their company independently.

Zuckerberg offered the most valuable thing one founder can offer to another – independence. Something Twitter, who were also trying to acquire the company but never made a real offer didn't quite get.

And the two co-founders did receive their independence. Instagram wasn't integrated into the Facebook product and Systrom and Krieger were calling all the shots (at least to a point). Something that would become an important precedent in the technology market.

On the Facebook end, things were also not quite clear in terms of making the merge work. This, however, wasn't important for the paranoid Zuckerberg. His desire to buy Instagram was motivated by something far more important (for him) than money. He feared that someone else will build a better product than his precious app and slow them down. And if there was an emerging app that looked better, it had to be either copied or acquired.

*“If we don't create the thing that kills Facebook, someone else will. The internet is not a friendly place. Things that don't stay relevant don't even get the luxury of leaving ruins. They disappear.” Mark Zuckerberg*

## **Lesson #5: While Popular and Widely Used, Instagram Negatively Affects People's Lives**

The bigger Instagram grew, the more people were competing for likes and followers. The virtual validations weren't only meaningless counts, if what you did was noticed by a lot of people, your financial

situation was going to positively change as well.

Brands were starting to give money to people with a large following so they can mention their product in their feeds. Coffee shops were re-designing their spaces to make them look share-worthy. Other online programs created filter sets to help people make their pictures even better. Even the iPhone contributed to Instagram's growth by allowing users to take photos in a square format without having to additionally crop the image.

The app was adopted by people around the world. And even more, a word was created to capture the Instagrammable movement: Insta-bae. As stated in the book, "The more Insta-bae something is, whether it's an outfit or a sandwich, the more socially and commercially successful it has the potential to be."

But this wasn't without consequences – especially for the regular users.

Sure, taking a photo, adding a filter, and sharing it didn't feel like work. That's actually why people were so maniacally-obsessed with the app (and still are). But the more curated the feeds became, and with the increasing amount of money being involved in the whole Instagram-type lifestyle, the more people started to feel inadequate about what to share.

Since everything in the world of Instagram was perfect, to feel good about your online profile – the main desire of every breathing individual surfing the web – you had to spend hours taking the perfect shot and later even further improving it. This created a lot of pressure for the users.

As reported in the book, "Seeing friends constantly on holiday or enjoying nights out can make young people feel like they are missing out while others enjoy life."

Some were able to quit their jobs and start dream-like businesses, but others were struggling. Instagram, by promoting a "compare and despair" attitude in the life of the young and not only, was also instilling a "feeling miserable" mindset for the ones who were not having a good time all the time.

The goal of Instagram was to "inspire creativity" but the adopted goal by its users eventually became a quest for constant competition for popularity.

*"The more you give up who you are to be liked by other people, it's a formula for chipping away at your soul. You become a product of what everyone else wants, and not who you're sup-*



*posed to be.” Janelle Bull*

## **Lesson #6: Is Your Company Doing Good for The World?**

The two co-founders, after working independently from Facebook for more than 6 years, decided to resign.

It wasn't because the company was performing poorly. It wasn't because they weren't making money. Quite the opposite, thanks to the newly introduced features – Story and IGTV – the sums mentioned in the quarterly reports were getting bigger. Their resignation was inspired by something else – the lack of support from Facebook's end.

Zuckerberg's frustration grew in proportion to the growth of Instagram. He didn't want the adopted “child” to outshine and threaten the main product – Facebook. He wanted to keep people using the Facebook app. That's why he removed all links from their main app that contributed to the growth of Instagram.

This, along with other things, made Systrom realize that he wasn't the boss of its own application.

When Systrom returned after extending his parental leave by several months, he organized a meeting with his staff members. The announcement of his resignation, and Krieger's too, was shocking to the people working for the company.

But there was no turning back.

Adam Mosseri, previously working for Facebook was the new head of Instagram.

He was inspired to make the Instagram experience less horrible for the average user and avert the growing trend that fostered anxiety. He wanted to give people back their control. By removing the like count and also by telling users when they'd seen all the new posts in their feed, he wanted to prevent further accusations from parents around the world who blamed the app for making their children feel terrible.

He wanted to use technology for good. And Mosseri believed that using social media is a great amplifier for good deeds. That's why he focused on the following question: “The most important question we face is, are

we good for people?”

*“You should be able to take a chance and build something of value for the world that should be able to grow and be worth a lot, and use that to give back socially. We tried really hard to do that, to be a force for good.” Kevin Systrom*

## **Lesson #7: Create Simple, Habitual Products People Love to Use**

Alongside the story of Instagram narrated by Sarah Frier, the book also covers quite a few tips and tricks that can be useful for business owners and wannabe entrepreneurs.

Here are the main (business) lessons that I’ve distilled from the book:

- **Complex things aren’t better:** Kevin Systrom argued that in order to create something valuable, this doesn’t mean that it should be technically complicated. Focusing on the essentials, and polishing the details are usually enough to build something of quality. His idea of the square photo was based on the assumption that simplicity is better than complexity.
- **YOLO launch:** The acronym YOLO states “you only live once.” The Instagram team was following this mantra when they launched Stories. Instead of first launching it to a tiny percentage of their user base, like most tech companies did, they decided to take the risk and introduce this new feature to everyone. Kevin Systrom was convinced that in order to see if the new feature is worth it, you should give access to everyone to test it. The Story feature was adored by the crowd and eventually crushed their growing competitor Snapchat.
- **Make your offline space Instagramable:** As trivial as it might sound, adding a well-crafted corner in your coffee shop where visitors can snap a photo and share it online is a really good marketing strategy. This applies to everything actually – how you present your drinks, your food, the lighting in the space, how easy it is to share something from your website. The trend of sharing experiences has no sight of slowing down. And even if the phrase “Do it for the ’gram” at some point becomes “Do it for X product”, you should be aware of the emerging markets and make adjustments, so users can contribute to your growth by sharing positive experiences with your brand.
- **Share your vulnerabilities:** People love it if they can appear perfect online but at the same time don’t want others to judge them. Being yourself online is a risky business. After all, if you are yourself, and no one “likes” who you are, how would you feel? Apparently, this is the reason people loved (and still do) the Story feature. This al-

lowed users to share their imperfections because the picture was present for only 24 hours. The conclusion here should be that allowing people to see your vulnerabilities – a.k.a. being transparent – as a business person is not a downside, it's an upside.

- **Focus on network effects:** The real value of social media platforms is the network effect they create. The more people join and participate in the platform, the better it becomes. Even if people are using other services, if most of your friends are on Instagram, you'll feel like you're missing out and likely create an account there. That's how Facebook grew so fast and that's how Instagram followed.
- **Create habitual products:** "Zuckerberg understood that the hardest part of creating a business would be creating a new habit for users." As a business owner, your focus should be to make your product part of the daily routine of people. Once you create this habit in the lives of others, you can later sell them everything. Even if you're not making money out of your invention now, if more people are regularly using it, this means that there is an opportunity for capitalization.
- **Create your values:** To ensure that Instagram was going in the right direction, and to better communicate their goals with their employees and their users, the team sat down to figure out what are their values. Three main values end up as official guiding points when Instagram was run by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger: community first, simplicity matters, inspire creativity. These values were quite different from what other famous similar companies were aiming towards. But they helped them create one of the most-used apps online. According to Chris Cox, head of the news feed, the thing that made them really proud of their product was that they "give people a voice."

*"We're looking to have a level of impact on the world that is unmatched by any other company, and in order to do that we can't sit around and act like we've made it. We need to constantly remind ourselves that we haven't won and that we need to keep making bold moves and keep fighting or we risk peaking and fading away." Mark Zuckerberg*

## **Actionable Notes:**

- **We are eager to express ourselves:** We all want to express ourselves. We want others to accept us for who we are. If you can give this to your users, if you can listen without judging, you can create a strong brand. And not only. This skill – to listen without being judgmental – will help you cope with others. Show them that they can open up in front of you and share their most intimate thoughts and desires. Regardless of whether you're doing business or not, this is a valuable quality that is becoming more important now. In a

world where people can “spy” on you and judge you based on your followers count, 24/7, knowing that there is someone who will accept you for who you are is gold.

- **Consider making more risks:** Emily White, responsible for the internal politics of Instagram, received a call from a recruiter who wanted to convince her to join a new app that was steadily gaining popularity. This app was Snapchat. Puzzled about what to do, she turned out to her husband for advice. He told her, “People who don’t take risks work for people who do.” After the conversation with her husband, she accepted the new job. We all do it. We don’t take risks and that’s why we end up working for people who do. This doesn’t necessarily mean that you should wave your boss goodbye, but it probably means that you should revisit your risk-taking policy.
- **Associate yourself with famous people:** According to Instagram’s secret files, the fastest way to achieve fame online is to somehow associate yourself with famous people. That’s not a new concept, of course. A lot of people build brands, services, or shows by simply talking about celebrities. Even you’re reluctant to associate yourself with gossip-style news, you can still create a strong and meaningful product by sharing key findings from smart people. For example, share your thoughts about books written by other smart folks, share inspiring quotes or interview other people.
- **Focus on making art:** When he was in Florence, way before getting himself involved in making apps, Kevin Systrom registered for a photography class. To prepare, he purchased one of the best available cameras at the time. His teacher was unimpressed. He actually took his ultra-fine lense and gave him a plastic camera that only took square black-and-white photos. The exchange was supplemented with the words, “You have to learn to love imperfection.” His teacher argued that high-quality tools wouldn’t necessarily create better art.
- **Be a force for good:** The online world is a great amplifier. Virtually anything is possible – even if you don’t have programming skills. Everyone with a laptop and internet connection can share his opinion, build a brand and/or sell something. It’s not that important how you do it, it’s what you do. As stated above, the book ends with the following question: “The most important question we face is, are we good for people?” As cheesy as it might sound, adding value and helping others should be a priority regardless of what you do. Especially online. Where you can, thanks to the tools created that connects us, easily reach and influence millions of people.

## Commentary and My Personal Takeaway

No wonder why the book was announced as the best business book of 2020 – the author masterfully tells the story of Instagram while being managed by their founders.

Sarah Frier, a technology reporter for Bloomberg News, after interviewing ex-employees, current employees, and immersing herself in Silicon Valley's files, created a from-start-to-finish book about the story of Instagram as a company. The book focuses mainly on covering the story from the perspective of the two founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. But besides the interesting stuff behind the artsy giant, it also covers a lot of behind-the-scenes related to its competitors – Facebook, Twitter, and even Snapchat.

If you're a tech nerd, or if you're interested in building a strong online brand, or even you're into reading well-crafted stories, I'm sure you'll love this book.

While positioned as a business book, I can't say that it's stressing a lot on the business side of things. It's more about how the founders operated, how they made decisions, and how the app itself influenced – and continues currently – our daily lives.

Key takeaway?

People are in a love-hate relationship with Instagram. On the positive side, we have this: people adore the app because it allows them to create the perfect versions of themselves online thanks to the available customizations. On the negative side, though, we have this: seeing all this perfection makes you feel intimidated about your real self.

## **Notable Quotes:**

*“Social media isn't just a reflection of human nature. It's a force that defines human nature, through incentives baked into the way products are designed.” Sarah Frier*

*“Instagram isn't designed to be a neutral technology, like electricity or computer code. It's an intentionally crafted experience, with an impact on its users that is not inevitable, but is the product of a series of choices by its makers about how to shape behavior.” Sarah Frier*

*“Pretty pictures were just tools on Instagram in the pursuit of being understood and validated by the rest of society, through likes and comments and even money, giving users a small slice of power over their own destiny.” Sarah Frier*

*What to read next:*

- [The Mom Test](#) by Rob Fitzpatrick [Summary]
- [Start with Why](#) by Simon Sinek [Summary]
- [Building A Story Brand](#) by Donald Miller [Summary]

## INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

*Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:*

1. *Are you often judging others? Why?*

2. *Are you taking risks or working for someone who does?*

3. *How can you - or your brand - associate yourself with famous people?*

4. *Are you focusing on buying high-quality tools instead of making art?*

5. *How can you use your skills, your know-how, to make good for the world?*

*Don't forget to save your changes.*