

Q&A

Former Twitter exec looks to change online retail market

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Twitter

By KAYSORIN

Online retail platforms are increasingly looking to specialize in certain areas and offer unique services to consumers in an attempt to differentiate themselves from competitors in a crowded market.

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Twitter's former fashion marketing executive, Francesca Helina, is doing just that with her recently re-launched "socialized" retail Web site, Live The Look, which aims to provide consumers with specific product suggestions tailored to their personal preferences. Ms. Helina was inspired by her work at Twitter, where she was instrumental in launching the sponsored tweet function in 2009, working with the CFDA, Burberry, Marc Jacobs and other luxury brands to target advertisements.

"Live the Look was an idea that had been in my head for a few years as I had worked with a few major ecommerce players," said Francesca Helina, founder of **Live the Look**, New York. "I kept asking myself 'If these guys know so much about their customers, why aren't they helping them piece everything together to create a wardrobe rather than continue to just sell them individual items?"

“And why do I have to keep digging to find my size and styles I like if I have been to this site 10 times?” I knew that was a hard challenge, and I knew that there was a way to do it that would help women, not distract them with sales or subscriptions.”



Francesca Helina

In this Q&A, Ms. Helina discusses her previous work at Twitter, her views on the retail industry and the importance of communication.

Here is the dialogue:

What did your work at Twitter entail?

I was fortunate that I started at a time where I could tackle a lot of different roles over my tenure there. I was doing everything from talking to small business owners about how they use Twitter to global advertisers on their promoted tweet campaigns and everything in between.

I was very passionate about fashion vertical accounts on the Twitter platform as well, so spent some of my time educating, brainstorming with and promoting Twitter to that community.

How did the sponsored tweet change digital marketing?

I think the first version of the product was innovative in that it could be timed to appear immediately adjacent to the ebb and flow of topics discussed on Twitter. So a savvy advertiser could insert themselves into these conversations that were naturally trending on the platform - it was a reactive strategy to advertising that worked well in many cases.

How was the original sponsored tweet first initiated?

It was actually a very grassroots and high touch process. We were careful with our first set of advertisers to ensure quality and creativity behind the campaigns as well as limit distribution until we had a solid process in place.

I don't think there was a “first tweet,” rather we were fortunate that a set of global brands were willing to experiment with us that were the “first advertisers.”

What did you learn while launching the sponsored tweet?

Honestly, I think that was one of the most amazing points thus far in my career. The pace of learning was incredible because we were creating something that had never been done and trying to quickly iterate to make it even more amazing.

I learned to be confident even when you don't have all the answers, talk to anyone even when you don't know if they will agree to what you want and to appreciate a once in a lifetime experience.

What does Live the Look aim to provide consumers?

We want to give women a one-stop shop in just their size (0-24) and style to quickly find items they love from high quality brands.

We aim to help women create looks around key basic items (i.e. jeans, a black blazer, a white t-shirt) by styling every item on the site with the basics they already own and creating full outfits around them as well.

Lastly, we want women of every size to have a positive experience, which is why we are adding fantastic brands like Eloquii and only show you items in your size without having to click to a special section.

Did the work you did for Twitter inspire Live the Look in any way?

Twitter instilled the importance of interaction and community, which we have plans to create this year on Live the Look. It also gave me a sense of how quickly consumers move, which impacts our social strategy and adding new product every day across all sizes and styles.

What do you see as the future of digital marketing?

I see all marketing moving toward mobile/personal devices and toward catching people in the moment as they need things - based on location, surroundings or even who you are with.

What would you recommend to brands looking to succeed on Twitter?

Twitter is such a huge platform now with a lot going on at a fast rate of speed. I would say that three key things are still important:

Be patient - your audience is not going to happen overnight even if you get a big news story. Take the time to connect with people that you want to follow you.

Reach out – don't assume that people will magically find you. Search for topics and accounts that are related to your brand and tweet them!

Be interesting - have a voice and authenticity around your brand – it's not all about messaging and news. Where are you, what are doing? Tweet content that shows the day-to-day activities, not just the shiny polished stuff.

What has been most surprising about launching your own retail Web site?

I've been surprised at how traditional the methodologies of selling still are and how difficult it has been to build a new system. We have had a lot of trial and error in getting so many brands without carrying inventory through a single cart service.

I have also been surprised at how gimmick driven the retail industry is - we are a service trying to provide long term value to our customers by getting better and better with every purchase they make. However, there is always a new "trick" like flash sales, luxury

consignment and now subscription. I wonder if consumers are just looking for the next thing rather than establishing a deeper relationship with a retailer as they mature.

Have you incorporated Twitter into your Live the Look marketing strategy?

Of course! We are on the platform and continually try to engage with our audience as it grows - we are taking our time and have plans for it as a customer service channel, stylist channel and feedback channel in the future.

Final Take

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