

COMMERCE

Holt Renfrew stacks ecommerce on growing store network

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Holt Renfrew Bloor Street flagship

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

Canadian retailer Holt Renfrew is at long last entering the ecommerce space.

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The department store chain will offer editorial content on two online magazines, "Holts Muse" and "Holts Men" to go along with ecommerce in cosmetics, skincare and fragrances on its Web site. The moves will make Holt Renfrew more visible as it continues to expand and fight off rival retailers' entering into the Canadian market such as Saks Fifth Avenue ([see story](#)) and Nordstrom.

"I don't think that it is ever a late move when it comes into getting into the ecommerce space as we live in a time that simply making a boutique available has to involve more than just product offerings," said Kimmie Smith, co-founder/creative director of [Accessory2](#), New York. "There is a culture that needs to be applied, figuring out how to showcase brand heritage while also presenting an extension of that genesis.

"When a decision is made to embrace that channel, there is a need to get it 'right' as there are a number of brands that are within this competitive space," she said. "The reality is that even if it is 'right' for now, it is an ongoing effort to continue to reinvent, so it is more important when entering this space to realize that by doing so, you are invested in making the commitment to utilizing the resources in a consistent effort."

Holt brand new

In April, Holt Renfrew announced that it would unveil ecommerce in the fall. Around the same time, the retailer announced plans to expand its Vancouver flagship by around 40,000-square-feet, part of a \$300 million investment to expand the store network by 40 percent.

The investment also includes other expansions and new openings, including a 2017 opening of a 220,000-square foot "grand vision" in Montreal, all of will help Holt Renfrew compete with Saks and Nordstrom.



Holt Renfrew new ecommerce site

As for the ecommerce site, it will expand beyond an initial offering of 7,000 products beauty products from brands including La Prairie, La Mer, Christian Louboutin Beauty and Tom Ford into other categories.

The retailer has split up its editorial content on its ecommerce site by gender with Holt's Muse servicing women and Holt's Men offering the latest for men.

"The division of designating separate magazines is extremely smart," Ms. Smith said. "When you look at other retailers such as Bergdorf Goodman, which has a physical boutique of just the mens shop across the street from the women's shop as well as having separate social, their magazine choice is consistent with this effort.

"For those that are interested in both, they will take the time to view each one," she said. "Those who are only interested in one form of content will be able to select that which is the most relevant to them."

Holt's Muse includes showcases by Olivia Palermo of the latest in romantic style and articles on social star Caroline Vreeland, yoga and rejuvenation and a brief profile of Bobbi Brown. Men can read about rising figures in the Canadian tech world and gain some photography tips after reading about the wonders of traveling solo.



Holt's Men

The menu of the Web site itself includes options to shop handbags, shoes, menswear and women's wear, but doing so only takes users to labeled images and encouragements to "shop in-store." Clicking on the shop in-store prompt takes the user to another page listing Holt Renfrew stores that carry the product and a notice saying that ecommerce is "coming in 2016," although a more specific launch date is not given.

Holt Renfrew's entrance into the ecommerce world is relatively late, but the design of the Web site is a promising start. Consumer habits have dictated that ecommerce is a necessity for almost every brand, with luxury consumers also using mobile commerce sites more than other consumers.



Holt's Muse

Canada has seen recent spikes in shopping from tourists as a result of exchange rates. Given the relationship of Hong Kong and Greater China with Vancouver that begun around the time of transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China, the city has likely seen an influx of tourists recently. An ecommerce site will allow Holt Renfrew to maintain ties with tourists, among other virtues.

Fashionably late

A recent report showed that many retailers have not fully connected branded content with product pages. A delayed entry into the ecommerce world gives Holt Renfrew a chance to ensure they get everything right.

In a surprising finding, traditional department stores sometimes make more effective investments in online content and ecommerce than pure digital players, according to a new report from L2.

Although ecommerce-only outlets far outpace retail brands with bricks-and-mortar locations in using shoppable content, on the whole they do not consistently use the best practices across all platforms. This means that every brand has an opportunity to emerge as a leader in cultivating brand identity and leveraging online content to generate sales ([see story](#)).

Holt Renfrew is not the only big name taking it slow as it expands its ecommerce presence.

Earlier this week, French atelier Chanel unveiled its first ecommerce Web site for the fashion division in the United States to sell its sunglasses collection.

Instead of a category-wide launch of ecommerce, Chanel has taken a slower path to brand-operated commerce by offering first skincare and beauty products, and now entry-level sunglasses to test the waters. Launched on Nov. 4, Chanel takes a holistic approach by creating an omnichannel ecommerce experience to complement its bricks-and-mortar boutiques to better serve consumers through enrichment and customization ([see story](#)).

As it is with most brands, the biggest challenge and the biggest opportunity are one in the same: editorial side.

"Editorial content requires that there is a balance of information that includes Holt Renfrew as a retailer in terms of their heritage as well as brands that they carry, showcasing personalities and influencers as well as having an enhanced voice that presents something unique that you would not get in any other way," Ms. Smith said.

"The editorial mix is where the challenge is presented when retailers provide content as they have to navigate the nuances between information, advertisement, highlighting themselves as well as their retailers and making a decision on their position when it comes to highlighting brands that are not carried by them," she said.

"It will take time before they find the right balance; however, the effort is worth it as customers and enthusiasts enjoy being able to interact with brands in new ways."

Final Take

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