

MOBILE

Why visual search's next frontier could be chatbots, mobile concierges

April 1, 2016



Mobile visual search is gaining traction with brands

By [Alex Samuely](#)

Subscribe to **Luxury Daily**
Plus: Just released
State of Luxury 2019 **Save \$246 ▶**

With a plethora of big-name retailers already incorporating mobile visual search capabilities into their applications, the technology is likely to evolve in several ways this year, including integrating with messaging chatbots and mobile concierge platforms.

Retailers including JCPenney, Best Buy and Neiman Marcus have implemented mobile visual search into their apps with great success, enabling users to take a picture of a desired product and subsequently search the brand's inventory for the same or similar piece. While many other retailers will leverage this technology within their own digital channels this year, marketers are also likely to find new use cases for mobile visual search, such as placing it within hotel brands' concierge platforms for enhanced guest service.

"Mobile visual search has hit the mainstream, with dozens of retail apps incorporating image recognition," said Ted Mann, president of [Slyce Consumer Apps](#). "What began with bar code and catalog scanning has now become so much versatile, with end users able to snap a photo of virtually anything in the physical world and identify a product (or products) within the photo.

"The technology behind visual neural networks is so advanced and reliable as soon as you snap or hover your smartphone camera over something, you get back structured data about it that you're going to start to see more innovation in what comes next, what comes after that initial snap," he said. "Some apps link to pages where you can buy the product, some direct you to videos or augmented reality experiences.

"In the SnipSnap app, a user can snap a photo of a product and find all the coupons and deals for it. Apps like Polyvore Remix take a photo of a shoe or handbag and help you accessorize and create an outfit. There is a lot of excitement right now around utilizing image recognition within concierge or chatbot experiences, whereby you snap a photo of a product, and then get help in finding that item or buying it. I think you'll start to see more of that both within retailer apps, as well as Facebook Messenger and Kik."

Finding new avenues

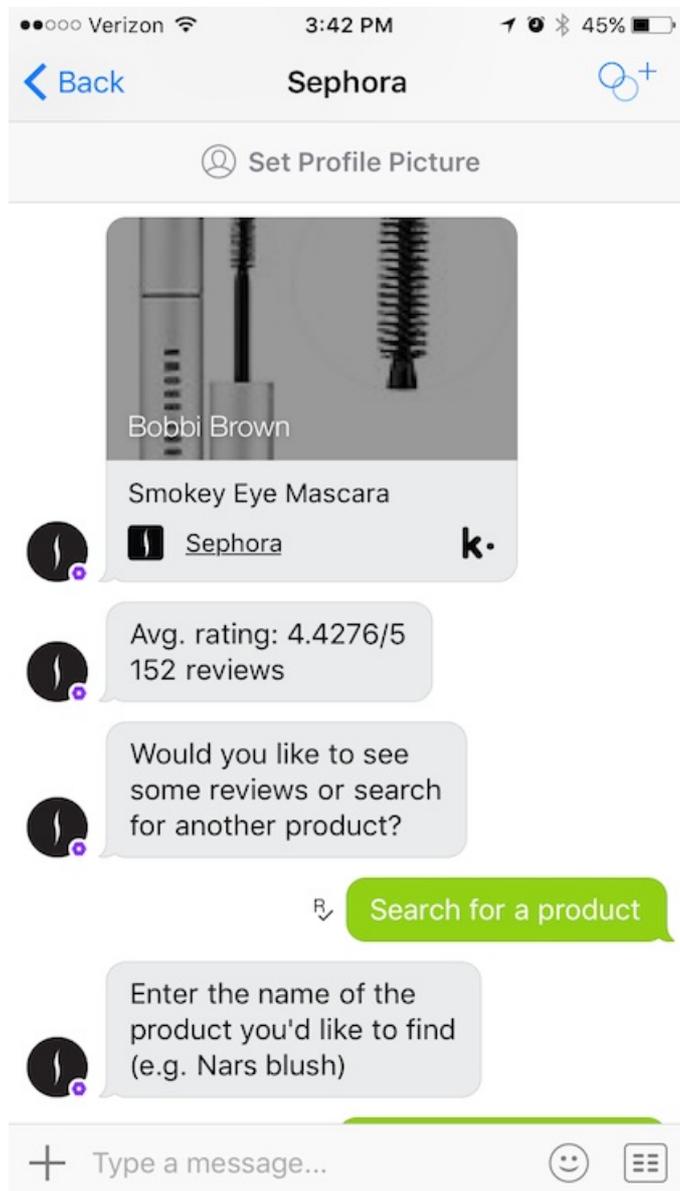
Chatbots and mobile concierges have already cemented their status as major marketing trends this year. They are bound to transform the commerce sector as we know it particular within retail thanks to consumers' eagerness to engage in one-to-one experiences and gain instant feedback from the brands they love.

Incorporating mobile visual search capabilities into these two platforms could be the very push marketers need to heighten in-app engagement and cinch more sales.

Retailers interested in joining forces with a chatbot or virtual assistant could offer shoppers the ability to snap a photo of a desired product, send it to the chatbot and sit back while the AI-enabled helper sorts through the brand's shoppable inventory. The chatbot would then be able to present the possible purchase to consumers and assist them in choosing the right size or style.

Therefore, mobile users would not need to type extensive product descriptions to the virtual assistant, and could simply snap a photo and press the send button.

Several retailers have already begun foraying into messaging platforms in a bid to connect with younger customers.



Sephora is rolling out a presence on the popular Kik app

Sephora's debut on messaging app Kik is a reflection of the push towards conversational commerce through chatbots and how to drive sales with one-to-one experiences on mobile that mimic in-store interactions ([see story](#)).

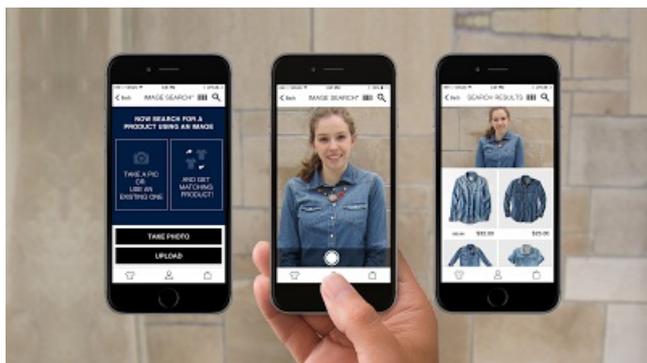
Mobile concierge platforms also provide considerable opportunities for visual search integration. Several hotel marketers have rolled out their own branded concierge in-app services, while others, including Hyatt, have teamed up with Facebook Messenger after realizing its potential as a communication channel for offering customer service and building personal relationships with mobile users ([see story](#)).

If hotel guests require specific items in their rooms, or are on the lookout for activities to do during their vacations, they can snap a photo of their request and instantly submit it to employees on the other end of the chat service.

Consequently, consumers can expect to see major players in the hospitality field experiment with visual search

capabilities as they tweak their concierge platforms.

Meanwhile, other brands are working on perfecting already-existing visual search features within their apps.



Slyce has powered mobile visual search for several brands' apps

"Brands such as Home Depot, Best Buy, JCPenney and Neiman Marcus all employ a camera screen that can scan and identify a virtually any product," Mr. Mann said. "Amazon continues to innovate with its own homegrown visual search.

"One thing we've seen emerge as a best practice is to make sure the call-to-action to scan is super clear to users, and most users have adopted using the camera icon in the search bar, so a user can easily invoke camera screen," he said. "It's also critical to support bar code, QR code, catalog-scanning, and 3D scanning all in one screen. Retailers like Best Buy and JCPenney have done this exceptionally well."

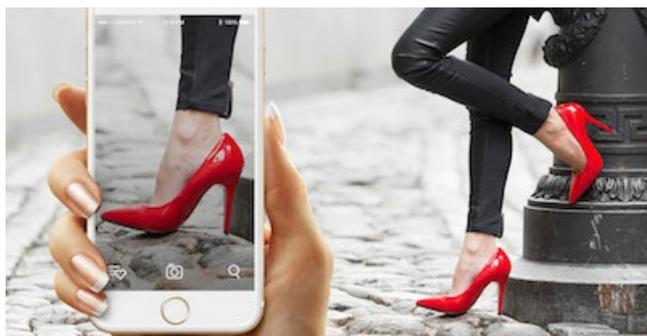
Unbeatable benefits

Retailers are extremely likely to implement mobile visual search options into their apps if they have not yet already.

Some marketers may opt to leverage visual search as purely a commerce function, while others could take advantage of it to enhance customer experiences and prompt dialogue with individual users.

"We expect mobile devices to abandon hierarchical search tree structures and espouse visual search capabilities," said Armin Roeseler, chief information officer of [DirectBuy](#). "Today, consumers are required to continuously refine product searches by function, color, style, etc., which is difficult and time-consuming on a mobile device.

"With mobile visual search, consumers will instead use a photo of a desired couch or ensemble to be provided the exact or similar offering available through a given retailer in an instant."



Scan-to-search tools are still a novelty for many consumers

Brands seeking to incorporate this technology into their current offerings should ensure they do their homework before selecting a third-party partner with which to collaborate.

"Associating your company with strong technology partners is key, as they are beneficial in executing and implementing the corporate vision of how customers interact with the brand," Mr. Roeseler said. "Companies have a specific mission and message in mind.

"By working with innovators in the tech space, companies can ensure the digital landscape aligns with their brand, while also ensuring the user experience is seamless and user-friendly."

Luxury Daily is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your **feedback** is welcome.