

COLUMNS

Why Pinterest is a platform that marketers cannot ignore

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Pinterest has always had huge commercial potential for luxury brands.

For consumers, it is a massive searchable database of inspiration and inspiration curated by humans rather than by bots.

For brands, it is an insight into consumer purchase intentions, indicated either by what consumers pin or what they search for intentions revealed in more detail, and earlier in the purchase cycle, than any other search engine or social network can muster.

Research has revealed the extent of this commercial potential: 72 percent of Pinterest users have bought something that they saw on Pinterest in a real world shop and 64 percent of Pinterest users actually look at items that they have pinned while they are in-store.

Look no further for proof that Pinterest is clearly driving shopping decisions. And these are not inconsequential shopping decisions either.

Pins and

Independent research has shown Pinterest's users are more likely to make big purchases than users of other social platforms.

As consumers are actively curating products and ideas to buy on the platform, it also feels like a natural marketplace for buyers and sellers to meet and exchange information. That is good for luxury brands that want to maintain brand equity and do not want to appear too needy or pushy.

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and SnapChat are places to socialize and share. Advertiser activity feels interruptive and intrusive, so it needs to be carefully managed. Not so with Pinterest.

But there are considerations that have been holding British marketers back.

The very fact that Pinterest is a search tool with social elements rather than a social network means its growth has not been as stellar as its rivals.

The latest published counts suggest the platform has 100 million active users, a figure easily bested by even the

stagnating Twitter.

The Pinterest management team's challenge is different than the other social networks' it has to constantly innovate and prove utility to grow, rather than just push the snowball down the hill and watch it roll.

Pinterest also seems like a very United States-based phenomenon, with limited reach across this side of the pond.

A third of U.S. Internet users have Pinterest accounts, according to the Pew Research Center, but no estimates have been published for its user base beyond its native market.

This impression of U.S.-centricity has been accentuated by its habit of releasing new features only in the U.S., leaving United Kingdom marketers salivating at the possibilities, but unable to sate their appetites for experimentation.

And, finally, to succeed, Pinterest needs to take on another U.S. business that harvests consumers' signals of intent and sells them on to marketers: Google.

Pinterest is well backed and no flyweight, but it still seems to be boxing well above its weight category when taking on the \$75 billion search giant.

But that was last year and Pinterest has been busy addressing these issues.

and needles

Pinterest's establishment of a U.K. office part of an international expansion following the latest round of funding has driven sharp user growth in the U.K. British users grew by 50 percent over the past year alone.

And that growth means that we can now get our hands on some desirable commercial tools that we have previously had to admire from afar.

Promoted Pins arrived in the U.K. in April and more tools that the U.S. brands have been able to exploit are no doubt on the way to these shores soon.

But perhaps most importantly, Pinterest has found some genuine territory on which to take on Google visual search and many of its recent innovations revolve around this theme.

So now users can look for similar objects within pinned images by zooming in on that image and highlighting the interesting part of it.

So, if you like a lamp in a living room picture, you can look specifically for that and similar lamps at different price points.

Or if you like the color of something, or the pattern, you can search for anything you like shoes, clothes, cushions, curtains in that color or pattern.

Even better, Pinterest can even search for matches for something you snap with your phone camera Pinterest's usage is primarily on mobile phones so that visual inspiration can instantaneously be funneled into a purchase journey.

The more consumers use this tool, the more brands will be able to insert themselves into the very earliest stage of research and those in play at the beginning of the purchase journey are much more likely to make their way to the end.

Pinterest is transforming into a powerful visual search engine and it is here that Google is potentially vulnerable.

Vision is the primary sense for all of us, but for the upcoming generations weaned on Instagram and YouTube visuals are even more important. Pinterest is speaking their language.

Add this to its ability to offer inspiration rather than just a specific answer to specific question and you have a highly useful tool for consumers and a highly attractive platform for luxury marketers, where the business is founded on visual inspiration, after all.

Pinterest's founders describe Google as "the ultimate card catalogue" whereas Pinterest "exposes people to possibilities they never would have know existed."

Pinterest recently announced ecommerce tools that will allow users to buy multiple products from different retailers at once by putting them in a shopping cart that is active on any device on which they are signed into their Pinterest profile. Intent can now easily be turned into purchase. Getting excited yet?

THERE IS NO doubt that Pinterest has been a slow burn and has not shown the same unseemly haste that recent social platforms such as SnapChat and Instagram have to make money.

But the evidence is that the fuse is burning faster. We would advise luxury marketers to take a close look now, or else be caught unawares when the explosion comes.

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