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Prioritize ecommerce photography over social media content

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By Gilles Rousseau

Branded content has exploded on social media to a point where it has become a well-established marketing channel that can play well for brand and product awareness.

As a reference, from 2012 to 2015, the number of brands posting new content weekly on Instagram grew from 40 percent to 80 percent, according to a 2015 Instagram Industry Report. The same report shows that the number of top apparel brands posting new content on Instagram more than 50 times per month doubled from 2014 to 2015.

Anti-social
The explosion of branded content on social media is a well-known phenomenon. However, its influence in the context of a purchase-decision driver has been less debated and quantified.

To help brands and retailers assess the influence of social media content and ecommerce product photography, Splashlight and Google conducted a survey asking United States consumers about their online shopping habits. Here are some highlights from the survey:

37.9 percent of U.S. online consumers report that social media content has little influence on their purchase decision and 33.7 percent report that it has no influence at all

47 percent of U.S. online consumers rate high-quality product images as the most influential factor when considering a product purchase from a specific brand

50.5 percent of U.S. online consumers would like to see a minimum of three to five product photos front, back, side and 26.5 percent of consumers would prefer six-plus minimum photos of front, back, side, 360 degree and close-up before they consider making a purchase

The above data points demonstrate that both quality and quantity of ecommerce product photography are the most crucial influencers in driving purchase decision.

On the same page?

The influence of ecommerce photography on online purchase decision can be explained by the following factors.

In the eyes of the consumer, product photography is the most effective way to convey the truth of a product when shopping digitally.

For instance, in the case of apparel, product photography best communicates details, fit, color, wearability and movement.

When viewing visual content during an ecommerce shopping experience, a brand's product page tends to be more user-friendly than a social media platform such as Instagram.

For instance, on a product page, the consumer can easily explore multiple views of a product, zoom-in to view fine details, toggle between color options, and make side-by-side comparisons with other products.

Increasingly, product pages also enable consumers to shop the look and interactively mix-and-match product styling.

While it is possible for a brand to use Instagram's multiple-image feature and zoom-in capabilities to showcase the fine details of a product on the social platform, Instagram is better suited toward organic storytelling rather than transaction.

Bigger picture
The type of social media content that tends to be most engaging for brands and retailers, such as editorial and user-generated content, is successful in building brand awareness. However, this type of content is visually far behind the standard of product photography that is essential to convert a purchase.

Even though we see the emergence of ecommerce capabilities on social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, the user experience is still clunky.

According to L2's Intelligence Report, 64 percent of brands that implemented the social commerce feature have reported zero sales lift.

Finally, the blogger and influencer sphere that dominates the social media landscape has become crowded. Consumers are bombarded by sponsored posts and paid branded content. This creates a transparency and credibility issue for consumers who may be compelled to cut through the noise, and seek brands and retailers' product photography as the ultimate reliable reference for purchasing a product.

Nevertheless, brands and retailers should not give up on social media as a marketing and brand awareness strategy. But its investment should not be at the expense of ecommerce product photography.

Considering the influence of product photography for online conversion, brand and retailers should focus more on scaling and elevating their online product photography that is proven to generate more sales and reduce returns a pain point for retailers, when at least 30 percent of all products ordered online are returned, according to Invesp's 2016 infographic.

More importantly, as brands and retailers are facing a massive wave of commoditization and consolidation dictated by Amazon and fast retail, product photography provides the best ROI to create differentiating, personalized and aspirational content.

I WILL CONCLUDE with an anecdote. During a recent presentation, I showed product photography for a trench coat shot on model. I then asked the audience to guess the brand.

The audience unanimously guessed that it was shot for Burberry. They were amazed to learn that the coat was, in fact, shot for Target's Web site.

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