

RETAIL

## Technology drives photography across ecommerce

June 19, 2018



*Benoit Lagarde is co-founder of Splashlight*

By **Benoit Lagarde**

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A full-production shoot has a lot of moving pieces, with a lot of time that goes into crafting the best possible image. This carefully curated product photography process is difficult to uphold for brands when they are expected to create content at scale.

With today's influence of online and mobile, the imagery used by brands has to be quick, interactive and informative, while also aiming to appeal to the smartphone user.

The retail titan, Amazon, is spoken of quite often in the media, and is posing a threat to many retailers.

In this battle against Amazon, the practices of high-end photography have been injected into ecommerce methodology to increase the quality of the image, without increasing the time and budget to produce.

### Taking stock

The lines between editorial and ecommerce photography have blurred more than ever with this crossover.

Now, brands and retailers are facing challenges in their product photography, while others have found opportunities.

Logistics within ecommerce photography can be a huge pain point if not handled properly.

Retailers are scrambling to design faster to keep up with the shortened demand cycle of the consumer. This then leads to manufacturing product faster than they can shoot and produce the content needed for individual products.

As a result, companies face two logistical hurdles: physical and technological.

Physical logistics are challenging because the location of where many of these shoots take place are not near the distribution centers.

Subsequently, timing issues can occur because stock keeping units (SKUs) need to be shot for multiple purposes in multiple locations for the various mediums on which that imagery will be displayed.

The merchandise needs to find its way throughout all of these locations.

For example, H&M is **struggling with increased competition** from companies such as Zara, Topshop, Uniqlo and Asos whose customers tend to associate with higher-quality clothing and better Web sites.

This feeds into the technological logistics need for a system that all departments can use to communicate and track the merchandise throughout the overall SKU story.

Without this, there is great potential for inefficiency because merchandise can be shipped all around the nation unnecessarily.

Zara, for instance, values its speed and responsiveness to the latest fashion trends. The fast-fashion retailer's competitive advantage is its **supply chain**.

Zara is also unique in the way it uses imagery to help consumers understand what they are buying. This retailer is able to implement a consumer-centric strategy because of the ability to curate visual content that is tailored to consumers, creating the best possible online experience.

#### Making it click

It can be frustrating to online shoppers when he or she clicks on a product thumbnail to take a closer look, only to see a grainy or blurry image appear.

Even if a photo is clear, customers want to see the product from various angles when considering a purchase.

For example, according to a **survey** conducted by us, half (50.5 percent) of online consumers value the quantity of product images available online, as well as the quality of visuals.

Ecommerce has gone through a series of evolutionary changes within the past decade.

For instance, photography's transformation first started with the technology of the camera. The price point went down, quality went up, and the democratization of digital photography occurred because the playing field was now leveled from a cost perspective.

The introduction of the DSLR from Canon with high resolution and high speed also **revolutionized photography**.

As a result, instead of only having one or two photographers who could produce that level of quality because of the cost of the equipment, there are suddenly hundreds of photographers who could afford the same level of equipment, creating a massive boom.

After the DSLR came the introduction of smartphones with high quality cameras. Bloggers and individuals are using their mobile devices as cameras for social media, which continues to have a massive impact on fashion photography.

As a result, photography is being reverse engineered to meet the budgetary needs of retailers.

Our survey found that a large number of respondents value the quality of a brand's product images online over other factors including social media, branding and product description.

#### In focus

The increased consumer demand for premium images and a variety of product shots has put a brighter spotlight on advanced photography solutions.

In ecommerce, one of the biggest reasons that plays into consumer resistance is the inability to properly visualize a product.

The majority of products are marketed to consumers using a single photo, typically featuring a generic background designed for broad appeal.

One retailer that has taken note of the possible consequences of generic, mass appeal is Walmart.

This quarter **Walmart said its online sales grew 33 percent** as the company expands its inventory to include more premium products.

With that, Walmart now focuses on imagery. The retailer noted that its new images were very different to the previous images used and that a key shift was the increased focus on human elements when showcasing products for example, showing real-life products in use and in context.

The majority of brands are always thinking about how to raise the bar and how to define the way that customers

discover, engage and shop online.

The integration of technology in the evolution of photography and its processes now offers retailers more insight into how they can cut costs and production times, while increasing revenue to allow for this shift in versioned content.

IMAGES ARE PROCESSED 60,000 times faster than text. Because of this, there is a push to invest in technologies that improve imagery as it relates to ecommerce.

Retailers need to create multiple sets of images and have versions to reach the various audiences to create a customized, customer-oriented experience.

While retailers still face logistical challenges in ecommerce photography, they should look at the brands excelling in this category and draw inspiration on mastering the fashion photography production flow.

*Benoit Lagarde is cofounder of [Splashlight](#), New York. Reach him at [blagarde@splashlight.com](mailto:blagarde@splashlight.com).*

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