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What retailers must do content-wise to adapt to the rapid shift to mobile

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By [Joaquin Ruiz](#)

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The largest single technology change to take place over the last 20 years is the popularity of mobile devices sweeping every part of the globe.

Mobile technology is still changing quickly, with touch screens popping up everywhere and tablets predicted to outsell PCs this year. And one industry is really feeling it: retail.

Many retailers have seen marketing efforts affected by this rapid shift to mobile.

Specifically, they have seen open and click-through rates decrease over the last three years for two big reasons:

- Emails are not formatted for smartphone screens, yet more than 40 percent of emails are viewed on smaller screens
- Landing pages are not optimized for small screens. People will only pinch and zoom a few times before getting bored. Like 'Texting Thumb,' 'Pinchnzoomitis' is now a recognized condition by the American Medical Association.

While content presentation is critical, it is just the tip of the customer communication funnel. Mobile users want more – more mobile content.

Mobile devices have shifted average daily Internet usage from 6-8 hours a day, mostly driven by work, to 12-16 hours a day, mostly driven by consumer and social activity.

At this point, users expect an awesome presentation experience – simplicity is key: think Cole Haan and Nasty Gal – in addition to:

- Quantity: a steady stream of content to keep a brand top of mind

- Warning: monitor engagement rates (open, click through, time spent, “liking,” tweeting, conversion) carefully

- Quality and relevancy: users do not want to be bombarded. Keep content visually inspiring and extremely relevant to users.

Not surprisingly, retailers’ communication strategies need to reflect this shift in consumer preferences, which are quickly becoming expectations, especially if they want to reach younger, engaged or affluent customers.

Here are a half-dozen ways that retailers can engage with their mobile audience:

- Think beyond the “search-find-buy” mentality

Users motivated primarily by searching are only giving a brand a few minutes of engagement per visit at best.

Retailers should instead look toward driving campaigns that inspire browsing and discovery.

Take Fab.com collections for example, which are inspired by events such as Valentine’s Day but also by interesting and personalized themes.

Timely data, design and socially driven campaigns that feature rich media to weave a message across all device types are what is currently effective.

- Satisfy the consumer's emotional needs

Consumers want to be inspired by beauty, fun and other “intangibles,” rather than just being sold a product.

Brands need to speak to consumers at an emotional level to avoid being thought of as a supplier and not a brand, which will lead to zero loyalty and no commitment.

Consistent, creative marketing and community-created content help to connect brands to consumers.

- Personalize content for your consumers

No one likes being bombarded with email, tweets or notifications of irrelevant material.

Use data collected on loyal customers to your and their advantage: create cohorts and sub-brand communities and use data from social channels.

EBay and Amazon have been experimenting with differing levels of personalization for years, initially starting with product recommendations and slowly moving toward collections and theme recommendations.

Others such as Target and Walmart are getting much better at predictive buying patterns and are able to push suggestions and offers with uncannily good timing.

- Consider not only how content will look on a device but what that device is being used for and if the content is relevant

Browsing experiences work better on a tablet than on a PC.

Searching works best with a keyboard. Geolocation services and showrooming are ideal for smartphones.

When creating communication with consumers, keep the time of day and device customers are likely to be on in mind.

While there is a shift towards mobile devices, we cannot forget that the subtleties of behavior analysis is important. This alone can swing engagement rates wildly for good or for bad.

- Make everything easy to share via social channels, email, you name it

Optimizing all content so that it can be pinned, tweeted, liked and shared is a must because it turns customers into sellers.

Enthusiastic shoppers love having a platform for expressing and influencing others. Reward them with tools to make this easier and organic sales will benefit.

- Establish a content flow that engages users and drives reciprocal behavior

Flow is everything. Too much, too soon is an expensive and losing strategy.

Look beyond just conversion metrics; integrate engagement metrics as well to avoid over optimization for short-term behavior.

Creating a larger funnel and optimizing throughout is a bigger investment but will reap bigger rewards over time.

Consumers are continuously exploring, so give them a reason and desire to do so. Behavior such as purchase, share, browse and rate and review are all very important shopping activities, so do not optimize just one.

Joaquin Ruiz is CEO of [Catalog Spree](#), Los Altos, CA. Reach him at joaquin@catalogspree.com.

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