

COLUMNS

Visual Web is the future of digital

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By **Paul Price**

At first, the Internet was a source of information offering unprecedented accessibility, depth and breadth. Then, it evolved into a source of exchange that we can scarcely imagine living without today.

Now we are on the cusp of the next stage of digital evolution: the visual Web.

This has enormous repercussions for retailers and brands competing in a brave new world. The winners? Those who not only prepare for, but advance, the visual Web. One of the best tools they can deploy is visual merchandising.

Switch hitch

Backed by science, visual merchandising has the potential to directly affect our emotions and decision-making process.

Successful visual merchandising leads to a satisfying conclusion for all: goods in the shopping cart get purchased. But effective merchandising on the visual Web must also play by the new rules of a multi-platform, omnichannel universe.

Omnichannel is no longer just a buzzword it is a fact of life.

A recent study by PwC found that 54 percent of consumers across 25 countries buy products online on a weekly or monthly basis. More than one-third say phones will become their primary purchase tool.

Moreover, according to Google, 42 percent of in-store consumers reach for their phones to conduct research and 98 percent of Americans switch between devices on any given day.

Everyone wants to buy and return products as they wish and get information anywhere they go. Retailers that make this possible make it onto their short list.

But there is a hitch: The consumer already knows how to switch between channels with ease. Most retailers do not.

Retailers have to be prepared to fulfill their end of the bargain, no matter what the channel or stage in the purchase cycle.

When it comes to visual merchandising, this means maintaining a consistent level of quality while fulfilling a range of needs, from awareness to purchase, as well as return or exchange.

And that is because, as Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman explains in the book "Thinking, Fast and Slow," humans use two modes of thinking.

Selfies

The "experiencing self" is a type of automated thinking that relies on intuition, instincts and memories. It is our

happy place to which we default.

The "remembering self" is not as much fun. It is deliberate and requires focus and energy. We go there when we have to, but it is tiring and we shift back to the experiencing self as soon as possible.

The interplay between the two selves has a direct effect on retail sales.

A customer may fall in love with a pair of shoes seen in an ad, but drop his or her quest to own them when faced with disappointing interactions on social media or unappealing product shots on an ecommerce site.

This is reinforced by the fact that consumers abandon their online shopping carts about 70 percent of the time.

Humans are visual beings.

Eighty-three percent of everything we learn comes from what we see.

While this may not be headline-making news to modern marketers, many struggle to adapt this idea to an omnichannel marketing environment.

Instead, they place the burden on their customers, which increases the likelihood that the customer journey will end prematurely with them racing for the nearest exit.

But other retailers are overcoming the challenge with solutions that are consistently satisfying for the experiencing self at each stage of the purchase process.

Take retailers such as Zara or digital native Net-A-Porter. They prove their visual merchandising chops by diligently curating their shopping experiences to tell very specific stories to their well-defined target audiences.

The Limited has made a conscious decision to move away from a static and robotic look and feel to a more effortless and aspirational one.

As the new creative strategy has been rolling out across channels, conversion rates have increased correspondingly.

Visual merchandising gives these retailers a way to communicate with consumers on a level that bypasses the complications of the remembering self to take advantage of the experiencing self.

Prime time

Mr. Kahneman also talks about "priming," which describes the unconscious impact of seemingly unrelated experiences.

Priming has a powerful influence over how we make choices every day.

Whole Foods and Patagonia are two brands that understand this and use priming to their advantage through the stories they tell about the connection between, say, farmers and organic strawberries or outdoor adventures and fleece jackets.

Here are three guiding principles that will benefit any retailer ready to make visual merchandising work for them:

1. Use your heart. Engage your consumers emotionally with storytelling when they are most susceptible to listen as their default experiencing self
2. Be visual. Humans process visual information thousands of times faster than the written word. Keep it consistently engaging and effective by adapting it for every channel your consumers use
3. Start priming. The unique selling proposition (USP) does not hold up against the reality of the human tendency toward irrational decision-making. A different approach is required one that is based on a narrative of interaction between your brand and the consumer in an omnichannel world

WHATEVER YOUR age or life stage, most of us have grown accustomed to a diet of marketing strategies and tactics that have trained us to have the highest of expectations.

Inspired by the millennial generation, we are the most literate consumers in history.

Marketing cycles continue to get shorter as the number of marketing channels expands. It is no longer enough to show and tell. Showing and selling is the key to success on the visual Web.

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