

THE VISUAL ECONOMY

How peoples' visual expectations have transformed commerce and how brands can rise to the occasion



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PART 1:

How Imagery Became Currency



INTRODUCTION

Seeing is believing.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

There are no shortage of expressions that attempt to articulate how we're ruled by what we see. A debate about which of the five senses is most important would be hotly contested, but when it comes to which is most influential, "sight" might have the strongest case. Visual experiences guide our every judgement and decision. More, they lead the way when it comes to our ability to learn and retain information.

Consider:

- 90% of what we process is visual
- We respond 60,000 times faster to imagery than text
- 65% of the world is comprised of visual learners, and it's been proven that using visual aids in classroom environments can improve learning exponentially

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But the impact of visual experience doesn't stop at learning and retention—it also has social implications. We form our “first impression” of people within a mere 50 milliseconds (that's less than a glance for those of you attempting the math). This is a frightening prospect for anyone who's ever wandered around a party of strangers

dogged by the thought that our new haircut was unflattering or that our chosen outfit was inappropriate.

Given the data, it's clear we are innately wired to “think with our eyes.” And brands have long strived to give us plenty to think about.

A SHORT HISTORY OF VISUAL MARKETING

The concept of using visual imagery to convey product features has been around as long as the concept of advertising itself. Traditional product photography started in

the late 1800's when the halftone printing process was invented and print publications could place photographs next to text. But halftone was so cost-prohibitive that hand-drawn illustrations remained the status quo for decades. It wasn't until the 1930s that the photography technology caught up with demand and studio shoots became a practical solution.

It was also around this time that the product marketing discipline gained more prominence, partly because these practitioners helped make the connection

New 1935

EXCLUSIVE • • DISTINCTIVE • • INDIVIDUAL

AUBURN

They look like
\$3000 Cars
but sell for
\$695
and up, at factory

There is immediate joy in glimpsing a design so distinct from that of mass production motor cars; and an elegance that is in keeping with fashion's dictates. There is even more lasting satisfaction in the knowledge that this aristocratic appearance is a fitting "dress" for the intrinsic worth of these 1935 Models—the finest cars Auburn has ever built.

A sound-proofed, all-steel body, welded into a single unit. A frame of deadweight strength. A motor of the famous Lycoming make, flexibly responsive, with a reserve of power far exceeding your everyday driving needs, yet ready when occasion demands. Hydraulic brakes, with uniformly equalized pressure, that bring the car to an instantaneous stop, safely and smoothly. Unequalled roadability, that results from a happy combination of long wheelbase, ride stabilizer, correct balance and low center of gravity.

Even those who have no mechanical inclination, feel that there is something very substantial about the wide doors, the spacious interior, the roomy seats, the quality and luxury of the upholstery, trim, and appointments. Here is every evidence of an enduring investment.

You find crowning justification of your judgment in your relaxed comfort and sense of security as you drive one of these New 1935 Auburn Models. This experience you are cordially invited to enjoy.

The New 1935 Phaeton

AUBURN AUTOMOBILE COMPANY, AUBURN, INDIANA, Division of Ford Corporation

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between the power of visuals and commerce. The Photographers Association of America explained the phenomenon—“people believe what the camera tells them because they know that nothing tells the truth so well.”

For the next several decades photography experienced incremental advances but revolved around film. All that changed with the advent of digital media. With it, a veritable Pandora’s box of image creation popped open.

Digital cameras became available to non-professionals in the 1990’s and by 2004, Kodak stopped producing film cameras. But ultimate quantum leap came with the marriage of the digital camera and the smartphone. Suddenly, everyone was a photographer and the way we thought of imagery—how it’s created and how much is enough—changed.

THE INTERNET UPS THE VISUAL ANTE

If we were natural-born image cravers *before* the arrival of the Internet and the smartphones that keep it at our fingertips, you can understand how they’ve made many of us full-fledged addicts.

Social media, specifically, has fed our need for color and form, training us to assimilate more and more visual information in shorter periods of time. You can easily observe this phenomenon on a typical day. Maybe you’ve sat next to someone on public transportation and casually observed as he scrolled and scrolled and scrolled through his social feed for the entirety of the journey?

93%
of the most
engaging
posts on
Facebook
are images.

Or, maybe you've actually been this person (*hey, this is a judgement-free zone.*) The point is, it's not uncommon for people to binge-peruse images for long—almost unthinkable—stints. And like any other persistent behavior, this one has re-trained our brains to expect more visual stimulation.



The impacts have been both wholly expected (46% of adult internet users post original photos or videos online that they themselves have created) and completely bizarre. For example, there is a growing body of research around “visual hunger”—the notion

that our increasing exposure to “food porn” has impacted our physiological responses to the point that it increases our desire to eat.

But if social influence and the endless quest for more “likes” is the ultimate goal, our proclivity for churning out and posting images is likely to persist. Put simply, images get results.

- 93% of the most engaging posts on Facebook are images
- Good visual content is 40% more likely to get shared on social accounts
- Tweets with images receive 150% more retweets than those without

THE VISUAL ECONOMY FUELS ECOMMERCE

Any trend that profoundly alters culture at large has implications for business. In the visual economy, the notion of “product experience” is largely defined by the quality, volume and interactivity of product images. For consumer goods, visuals are now as much a part of the proposition as the products themselves.

Nowhere has this been more true than for emerging direct-to-consumer brands that have relied almost exclusively on Instagram to build a loyal following. Everlane and Glossier are the gold standard for flexing the power of



aspirational, memorable imagery. Glossier has reported that 70% of their online sales comes via peer referrals, largely due to their ready-to-share images.

But leveraging visual mediums is an obvious play in the fashion and beauty categories. The more convincing examples are of “commodity” brands that have disrupted their industries with fresh, differentiated positions, conveyed through visual platforms.

Harry’s made razors look like chic accessories. Socks aren’t the centerpiece of any outfit, but Bombas made them seem so. And mattresses were sold almost



exclusively out of stale showrooms until Casper's lifestyle visuals made them seem like a new concept altogether.

The phenomenon goes beyond consumer goods. Famously, Air BnB didn't catch fire until the founders decided to invest in sleek, stylized images of their rental properties. Suddenly, the foreign notion of paying to stay in someone else's home became as obvious as paying for a hotel room.

Finally, a visual doesn't have to come from a brand to have power. Consumer-generated images have the capacity to make or break a given business. Back to that tidbit about "visual hunger" –any restaurant owner should be at once thrilled at the prospect of patrons 'gramming their creations and terrified that a poor presentation could result in a bad review gone viral (complete with the pictures to prove it).

Any way you look at it, there's never been a time in history when imagery held this much sway across categories. Immersive, visual experiences are no longer a fringe demand placed on select brands...they are now the expectation for all brands.



PART 2:

Winning in the Visual Economy



SKY-HIGH EXPECTATIONS

In the visual economy, “meeting expectations” sits at the base of the selling hierarchy—the ultimate goal is to get to the top of the pyramid and really “wow” potential buyers. But before brands start that climb, they need to understand what expectations look like and how far they have to go. And while this should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, the general statistics suggest the answer is “pretty far.”

Consumers are willing to cop to the fact that they have higher expectations than ever, but they don’t let brands off the hook—51% say brands fail to meet their expectations.

And proliferation of alternatives, both offline and online, means customer don’t hesitate to look elsewhere to buy. Fifty-seven percent of customers have “stopped buying from a company because a competitor provided a better experience.” Note the wording there. Customers don’t just opt out of a vendor when a particular purchase doesn’t meet their standards—they stop buying from that vendor *altogether*. The stakes? Disappoint them once, lose them forever.

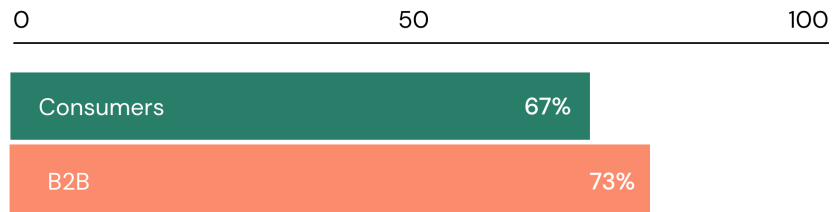
57%

of customers have “stopped buying from a company because a competitor provided a better experience.”

The story is almost identical on the B2B side. 82% of business buyers “want the same experience as when they’re buying for themselves.” A handy way to characterize this is that “shoppers are becoming

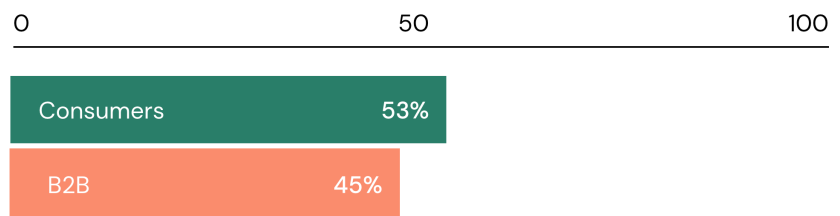
their own salespeople.” They gather information at their own pace, filling in the blanks with preferred channels and sources.

67% of customers who say their standards for good experience are “higher than ever”



In most cases, even B2B buyers making expensive, complicated purchases don’t contact a sales person until they’ve made the decision to purchase.

51% of customers who say most companies “fall short of their expectations for great experiences”



Additionally:

- Users only read 28% of words when visiting a website
- 56% of the test subjects’ first actions upon arriving at a new product page was to begin exploring the product images, *before* reading titles, descriptions, or scrolling down the page to get a more comprehensive overview.

No matter the nature of the purchase, businesses need to provide a better visual experience than ever, and they have work to do to get there.

WHAT “GREAT VISUAL EXPERIENCE” LOOKS LIKE

When it comes to product visuals, the first question people often consider is—“how many is enough?”

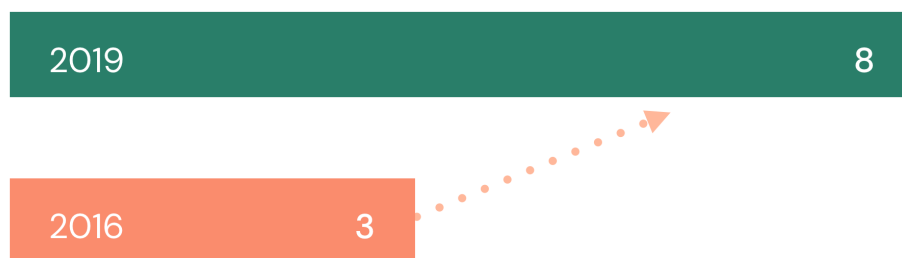
Consider our example from [Part 1](#)—the one of the fellow commuter scrolling endlessly through his social feed. How many Instagram images could he view in a 30-minute sitting? 50? 100? 200 even? It’s reasonable to think in those figures. And what that means for brands’ social media feeds and product pages is that *quantity matters*.

Andrew Lipsman, a principle analyst for eMarketer, [summarized how product images help](#) guard consumers against risk:

“Shoppers once resisted buying products like apparel online because they couldn’t touch, feel and try on the products, and while they are much more receptive to this dynamic, the risk of returns still looms large. Additional product imagery helps shoppers get a better sense of the product and reduce their perceived risk, so they can feel more confident in their purchase.”

Today, [consumers expect upwards of eight product images per page](#). This doesn’t sound too astounding until you consider that back in 2016, they expected only three. At this rate, one can’t help

Average Number of Images US Digital Shoppers expect to See for a Product on an eComm Site



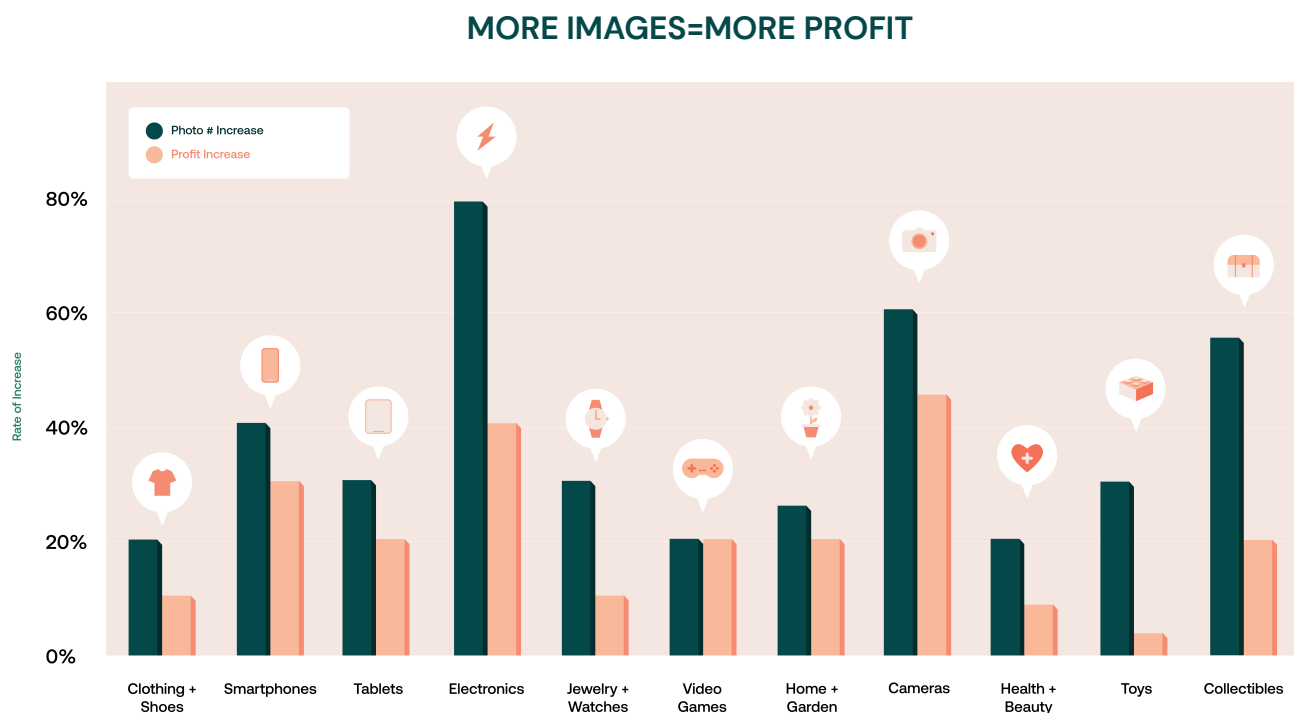
but wonder how many it will be three years from now.

How are brands doing against this benchmark? Okay, quick disclaimer: We did not conduct a comprehensive audit of every product page on the web to determine the “average number of product images per page.” And the truth is, results vary brand to brand, industry to industry.

But one data point intrigued us—Amazon only allows vendors to feature 6 images per product listing.

If the world’s #1 eCommerce destination isn’t routinely meeting visual expectations, it suggests that many retailers are naïve to what customers need to feel confident in their purchase.

It’s also safe to say that these vendors are leaving money on the table. A 2018 eBay study showed a clear correlation between an increase in the number of product images and an increase in profit across categories.



If simply meeting customer expectations doesn't compel brands to change, missed sales certainly should.

But number of images on its own is just a part of the story. It's also how you use each image to present a faithful representation of the product. Variety is essential and it's helpful to think about it by "category" of product shot. Check out our handy chart below for guidance. (And if you want even deeper insight on how to think about product photography, [we wrote an entire eBook](#) on that very topic.)

WHEN IT ALL ADDS UP

Understanding consumer expectations is essential, but when you turn your focus to the cumulative implications, it can be overwhelming.

Consider the hypothetical example of a furniture brand that sells

1,000 products. Let's say that each of those SKU's has customizable features—different fabrics, different finishes, different leg styles and so forth. Now, take into account how customers want to see 8 images of each of those product combinations. It doesn't take a math whiz to run the numbers and foresee logistical complications in attempting to achieve this. In cases like these, most brands just settle for featuring a fraction of their portfolio on their site and in marketing materials.



What those brands may not know is that advances in visual technology can enable 100% product representation. Virtual photography, a method of creating photorealistic images via 3D model, enables unprecedented scale and photo variety. One single digital asset can be rendered in infinite ways and in a fraction of the time of a photo shoot. And the final product is almost indistinguishable from traditional photography. It's even possible to set these photorealistic images in different backgrounds. For a brand with a sizable product portfolio, it could be the only practical route to actually meeting customers' visual expectations.

3D AND AUGMENTED REALITY: THE FUTURE IS NOW

While brick and mortar shopping hasn't gone the way of the dodo, shoppers, particularly younger shoppers, prefer to make purchases online. A 2018 study by Marketing Dive showed that 75% of Gen Z shoppers (those between the ages of 18 and 25) turn to eCommerce to make most purchases. However, the same study provides interesting paradox—of those same Gen Z shoppers, 65% prefer to "touch and feel products before making a purchase."

What to make of this seeming conflict in preferences? That it's likely on those doing the selling to create "near lifelike" eCommerce experiences.

Virtual
photography
can enable
brands to
represent

100%

of their
product
portfolio on
their site.

Online 3D configurators are one way of doing so. They allow buyers to zoom in, spin and add features to products in real-time. As customers demand personalization and indicate that they are willing to pay up to 20% more to get it, putting a 3D configurator on a brand's website seems like an investment worth making. Particularly as some brands have seen a 30% increase in conversion and a 50% reduction in returns by implementing interactive 3D visuals.



Shoppers are also keen to put these 3D products in their own space using augmented reality. 71.5% say that AR is the “future technology they are most eager to use.” The good news is, it's not actually a “future technology” at all. AR is readily available for brands that want to provide best-in-class experiences. In

fact, if you are reading this on an iPhone, you can play around with one of Threekit's AR executions by going to this link—put an espresso machine or a grill in your space right now! (*Again, this will only work on an iPhone.*)

Of course, on top of being just plain fun, augmented reality is the best way of driving buyer confidence, especially if size and space are considerations. 22 percent of returns are due to the product appearance being different than what the website displayed. 3D and AR are virtual fail-safes against this issue.



WINNING IN THE VISUAL ECONOMY

The first step in any major change is acknowledging where you stand today. Many brands simply don't grasp just how influential the visual experience is and that they probably aren't doing it well enough to satisfy the expectations of today's fickle consumer. So, if you're reading this, congratulations...you are a step ahead of that competition!



While doing business in the visual economy has raised customer standards, it also presents unprecedented opportunity for brands, even those in their nascent stages, to compete on the basis of the experience they provide. Almost every brand could benefit by upgrading to virtual photography, interactive 3D or augmented reality capabilities (depending on what makes sense with their products.)

Going to great lengths is worth it only if it makes a material difference in conversion. Research suggests that when it comes to visuals, this is the case. And this investment can start a kind of virtuous cycle—brands can invest in better and better experiences that keep customers coming back again and again.

Imagine the impact if all brands strived for a world where customers have incredible visual product interactions all the time. Those willing to commit to that goal will undoubtedly come out ahead in the visual economy.



Threekit enables brands to create and manage beautiful photorealistic, 3D and augmented reality product visuals at scale. We're uniquely qualified to help guide you through the visual economy.

Schedule some time with one of our product visualization specialists to see how.

Contact

Hilary Murdock

hmurdock@threekit.com

312.983.8800

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