4 Ways to Make Visual Search Work for Your Customers and Your Company

It’s hard to recognize a massive shift in the flow of history when your day-to-day thoughts are dominated by the headaches of freeway traffic.

But here’s something to think about the next time you’re waiting forever to get onto that exit ramp: We’re moving quickly into the world of visual search — I’ll explain in a moment — and entrepreneurs need to position their brands for this new realm of marketing.

Rapid improvements in visual-search technology allow consumers to upload a photo or take a picture of a product, then use that image as the basis for a search. Let’s imagine I love the shoes someone else is wearing at a party. I take a picture, search for the shoes entirely on the basis of the image (no words) and get quick results that include actionable information about the product.

Visual search’s biggest advantage is its independence from textual language. It uses images to transcend the semantic disparity between keywords used by retailers and those used by consumers. Instead of spending hours searching for a “floral dress” or a “flower dress,” a consumer can use an image of a dress she likes and instantly find where to purchase it — or others that are very similar.

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Examples of visual search’s applications are cropping up all over:

- AsiaOne, a news platform operated by Singapore Press Holdings Ltd., provides visual search to help readers find and buy clothes they see on the site.
- London-based fashion retailer ASOS added visual search its site late this summer.
- Traditional retailers such as Target and Neiman Marcus continue to develop initiatives as the power of artificial intelligence leads to strong improvements in the technology.

But for all the brilliant success stories that are starting to take shape around innovative use of visual search, failures are beginning to surface, too. Here are four ways to make sure you end up on the right side of history with this game-changing technology.

1. Wring new avenues from existing content.

Recognize the importance of visual search as a winning strategy to wring new revenues from existing content. For some time now, online publishers have seen their advertising revenues remain flat. Monetizing any current visual content can provide a stream of revenue. And that will become increasingly important as publishers move away from traditional advertising-driven revenue models.

2. Make sure you offer high-quality content.

Your visual content is no different than the rest of your site’s content in one crucial way: It must be high-quality. That should come as no surprise, considering you want to inspire confidence and entice consumers to buy directly on the basis of the images they see. “Publishers that make commerce content work recognize that editorial integrity is key to

driving sales because authenticity matters massively to readers and consumers alike," says Alicia Navarro, CEO of Skimlinks. She should know – her London-based company specializes in monetizing content.

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3. Pay attention to context.

Even while you set high standards for quality, you must pay even more attention to context. Visual search grows stronger when you understand how your audience interacts with your site. Consumers use visual search differently on their mobile devices than they do surfing the web via a desktop or laptop computer. Make sure your visual content is consistently relevant to the target demographic. A quick test: Is this visual content likely to move a user to undertake a visual search?

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4. Differentiate, differentiate, differentiate.

Be fanatical about differentiation and recognize how visual search supports the decision-making process. At this stage in adoption, the tool itself is likely to generate buzz for brands that provide it to customers and deliver on the promise. But buzz alone won't be enough. Even if brands are just edging into the world of visual search, the best among them already are thinking about the next step, and the step after that. With every move forward, the secret will be using visual search in a way that provides solid, useful differentiation.

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The biggest mistake an entrepreneur can make is being unprepared for change. Don’t get caught on the wrong side of history. Carefully consider what consumers will want next and describe their pain points in detail. Then discover how the tools at your disposal – including video search – will solve their problems and improve their lives.

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