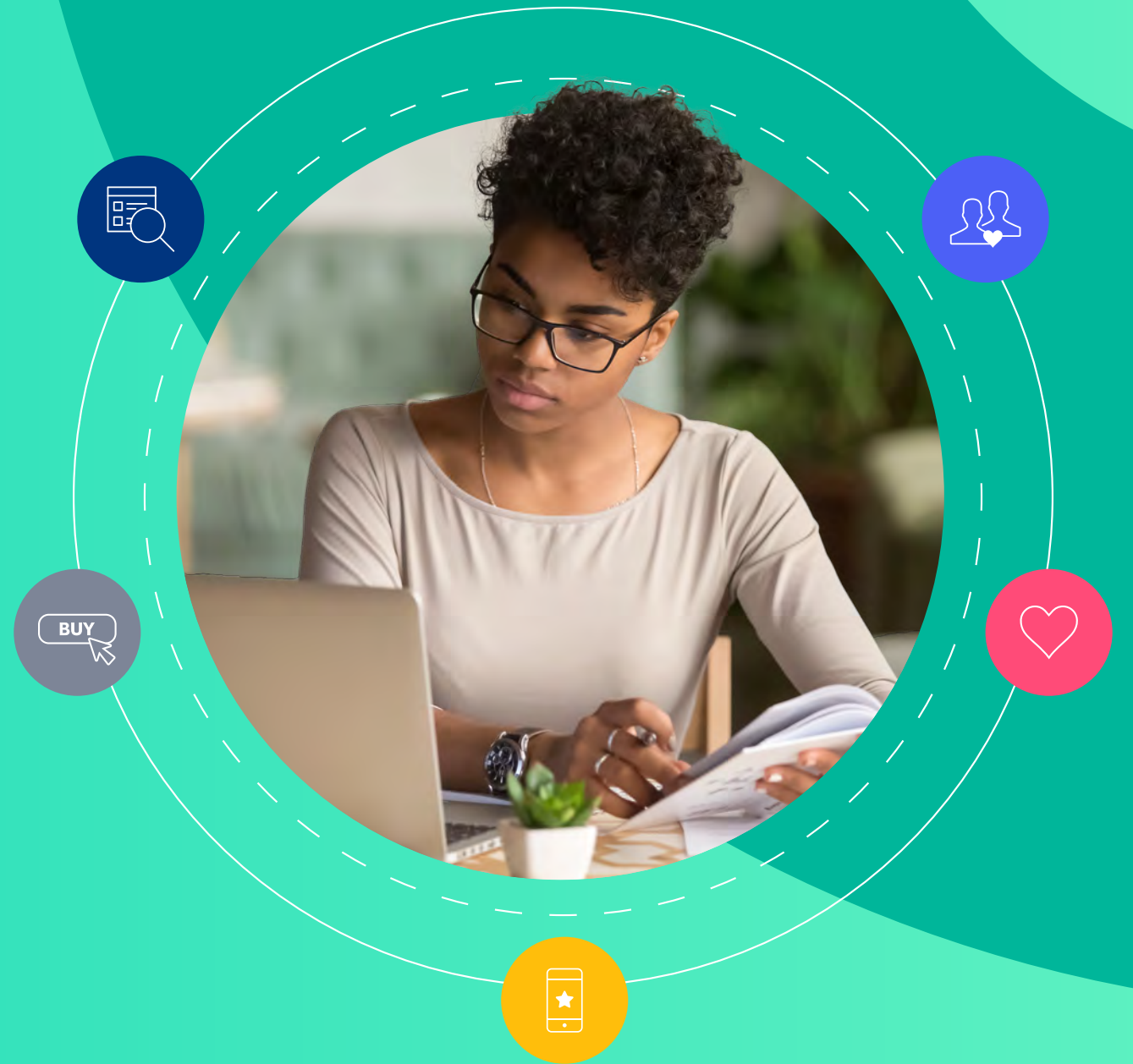


The e-commerce manager's guide to user-generated content



bazaarvoice™

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Introduction

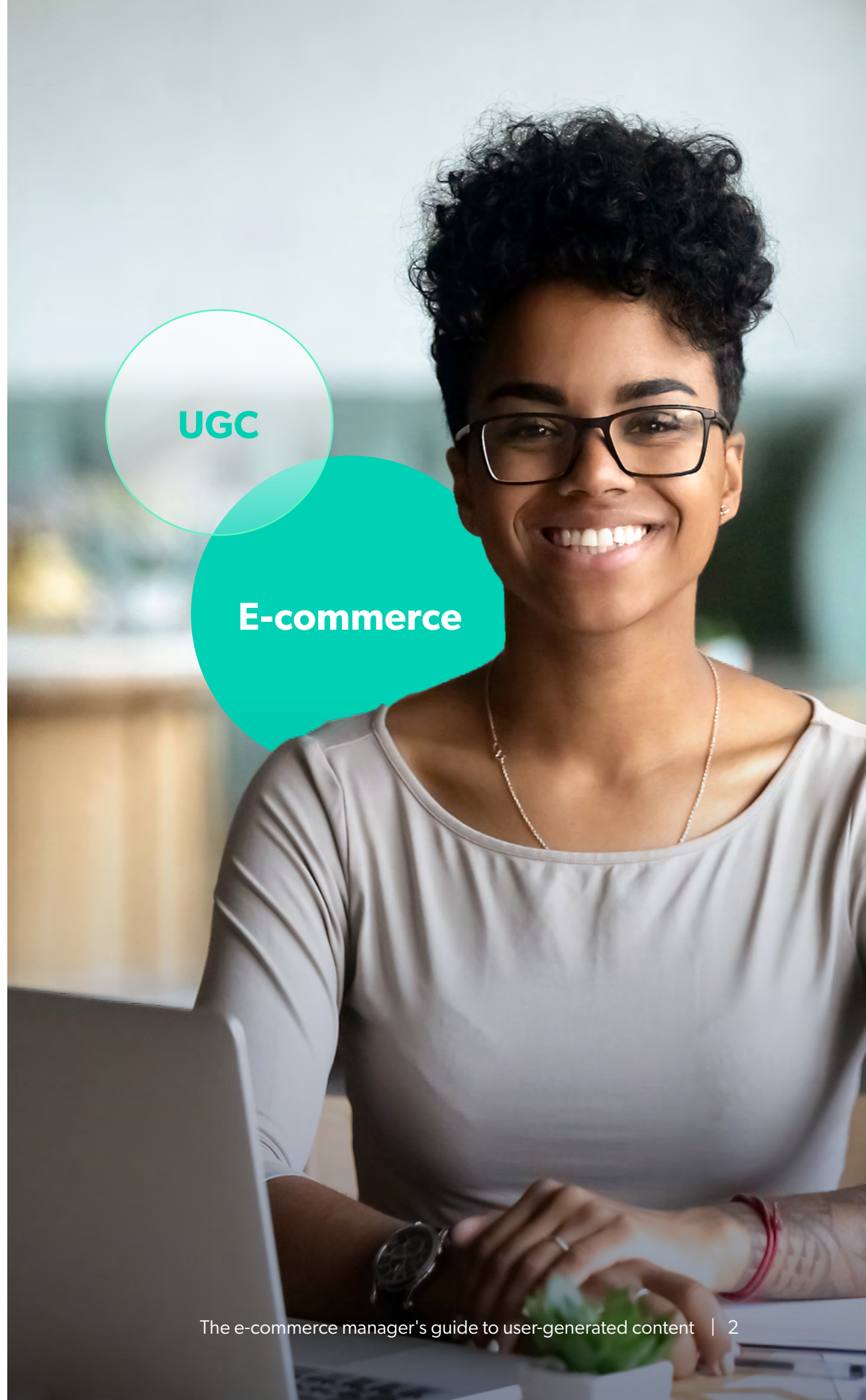
Think for a moment about how door-to-door salespeople make you feel. There's just something suspicious about them, isn't there?

Your knee-jerk reaction when one comes knocking is likely to get rid of them as quickly as possible — especially if the product they're selling isn't something essential (is it ever?). The awkward agony as you're bombarded by an overly-rehearsed sales pitch can be enough to put you off completely. Over-the-top e-commerce brands marketing themselves too enthusiastically is the modern-day equivalent.

Whether your channel of choice is social media ads, emails, or anywhere else, there's a fine line between harmless promotion and pushiness. Excessive advertising feels the same as a persistent salesman that won't take no for an answer. There's a better way to transform hesitation and distrust into excitement and loyalty.

That's exactly the effect that user-generated content (UGC) has on how your brand and products are perceived. UGC is any content related to a brand that is created and voluntarily posted by customers online, and it's invaluable for brands looking to create a more tight-knit experience that wins customers from giants like Amazon. After all, almost all consumers trust word-of-mouth recommendations from peers over any other form of advertising.¹

So rather than always "tooting your own horn" — and risk having your customers roll their eyes — why not let your loyal brand advocates do it for you? This guide will show you, as an e-commerce expert, how to leverage UGC to win over the masses and grow your business to new heights.



The main benefit of UGC is a rite of passage for any e-commerce business

And that's the ability to convert visitors into paying customers. At the end of the day, traffic means nothing if there's no revenue coming with it. Quality UGC — think glowing reviews, breathtaking photos, etc. — has been shown to boost conversion rates by as much as 29% through a variety of metrics:²

90%

Time spent on site increases by 90%³

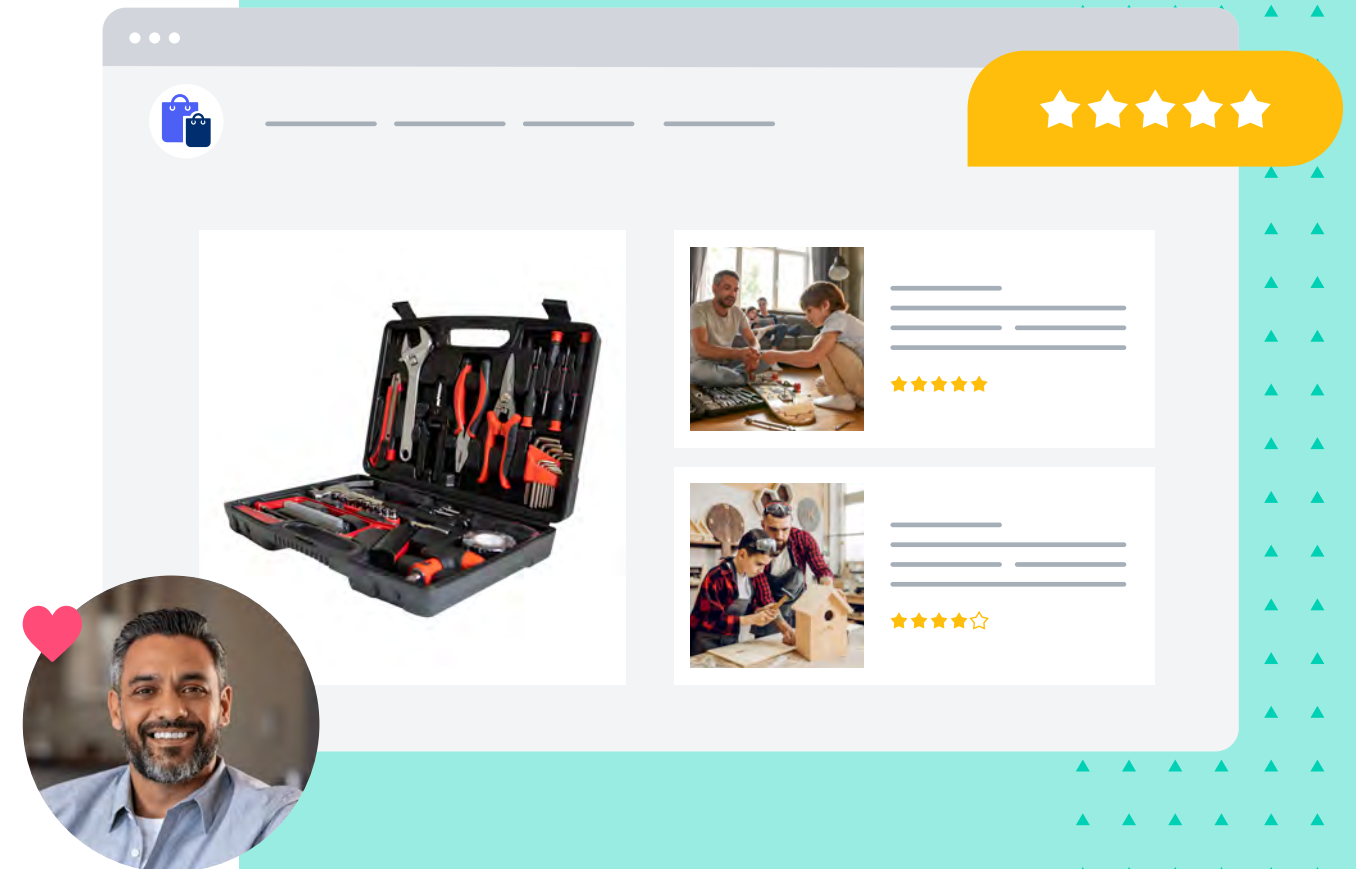
50%

Better engagement when UGC is used in social campaigns³

20%

More repeat visits to your e-commerce site³

These are just a few examples of how UGC can uplift conversion rates. But UGC doesn't just impact performance. It impacts your image, too. It creates a connection and trust within your brand that's only achieved when your business has a reputation for authenticity.





90%
of customers claim authenticity as a top reason in deciding if they'll support a brand⁴



90% of customers claim authenticity as a top reason in deciding if they'll support a brand⁴, and this is especially true with the younger consumer generations⁵ — millennials and Gen Z. For UGC to have the greatest impact on branding and reputation, it needs to be circulated and consumed.

And who are the ones doing so? You guessed it, millennials and Gen Z are most likely to contribute reviews and photos, and 70% or more say knowing how other users feel about a product heavily influences their purchase decisions.⁶ For comparison, about half of baby boomers rely on UGC in the same way.

The final — and perhaps most significant — benefit of UGC is that it won't break your budget. When you have a loyal customer base with the willingness to publicly vouch for your brand, you're in a better position to compete with larger players even when they have greater marketing spend.

Despite the strong case for UGC, as few as 16% of brands are thought to have a specifically formulated strategy surrounding it.⁷ A mixture of professional marketing and UGC is ideal, but to find that balance, you'll first need to know how to utilize the latter to make your e-commerce business stand out from the crowd.⁸ Let's get started!



5 steps to maximizing UGC for e-commerce

STEP 1

Optimize your pages for search

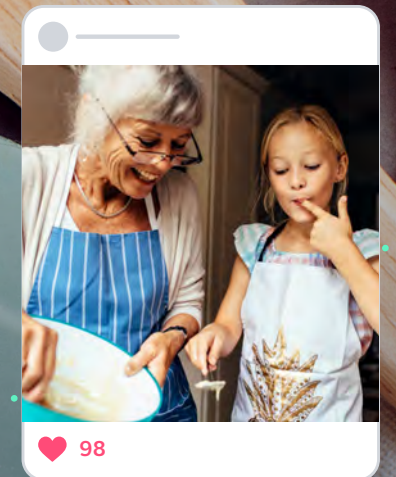
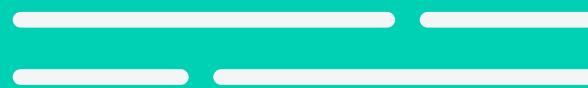
UGC is a goldmine of information that can improve your SEO.⁹ Leveraging UGC to optimize your search ranking is the first step in making your web pages more authoritative and discoverable.

SEO and UGC align in that when done right, they don't cost a dime. Any edge you can take without spending resources you don't have is something worth pursuing.

Product page SEO is especially valuable because it skips over the discovery and exploration of your site and brings the visitor much closer to the bottom of the funnel. Your product detail page (PDP) is where you can really wow those potential customers, so having them land on PDPs organically — without having to navigate through unnecessary pages beforehand — is an advantage.

Product pages with reviews see a stunning 354% increase in conversion.¹⁰ So, adding reviews to said product pages is the icing on the cake and a terrific way to demonstrate the synergy between SEO and UGC and boost performance.

best whisk



Gather keyword-rich reviews

The terms and phrases that customers use in their posts and reviews are what come naturally when thinking of your product, so it makes sense that search terms are similar. Highlighting reviews on all pages organically adds to the volume of those keywords, boosting SEO site-wide. Even reviews off-site, like on Google My Business, will help you rank.¹¹

Although it makes logical sense that your customers' reviews would match search terms, there's no guarantee, especially when you have a huge mix of target keywords. It's also super frowned upon — *cough* probably illegal *cough* — to tell users what to say in reviews.

So your best bet is to gently guide your customers toward creating keyword-rich reviews without outright demanding it. To start, politely ask every satisfied customer to leave a review — simple! Research shows that 72% of customers that are asked to leave a review do just that, so your request won't be ignored.¹²



80% of consumers say online reviews for local businesses are as helpful as product reviews on sites like Amazon.com¹³

The real trick is in how you ask them. Including a short list of questions that are likely to elicit your target keyword(s) in your request will get the best result. Say you sell computers; you could try something like this when asking a customer for a review:

“Hi [Customer Name],

If you have the time, a detailed description of your experience with us is incredibly helpful for others considering our products and services. We’d love it if you could consider these questions when writing a review of our business:

- Which brand of computer did you buy?
- Did you add any accessories to your purchase?
- Which extra services or warranties did you decide to go with?
- Where do you live?
- How did your experience on our site compare to competitors?

We understand this is a big ask, and we also appreciate short reviews if you haven’t got the time!”

In need of expert support?
Acquire, syndicate, manage, and track reviews all with Bazaarvoice’s Ratings and Reviews tools.¹⁴

They may write out various computer brand names, along with accessories and products you sell on your site. They might mention a competitor (it’s common for e-commerce brands to bid on competitors’ names!), as well as location and specific services that might be unique to your brand.

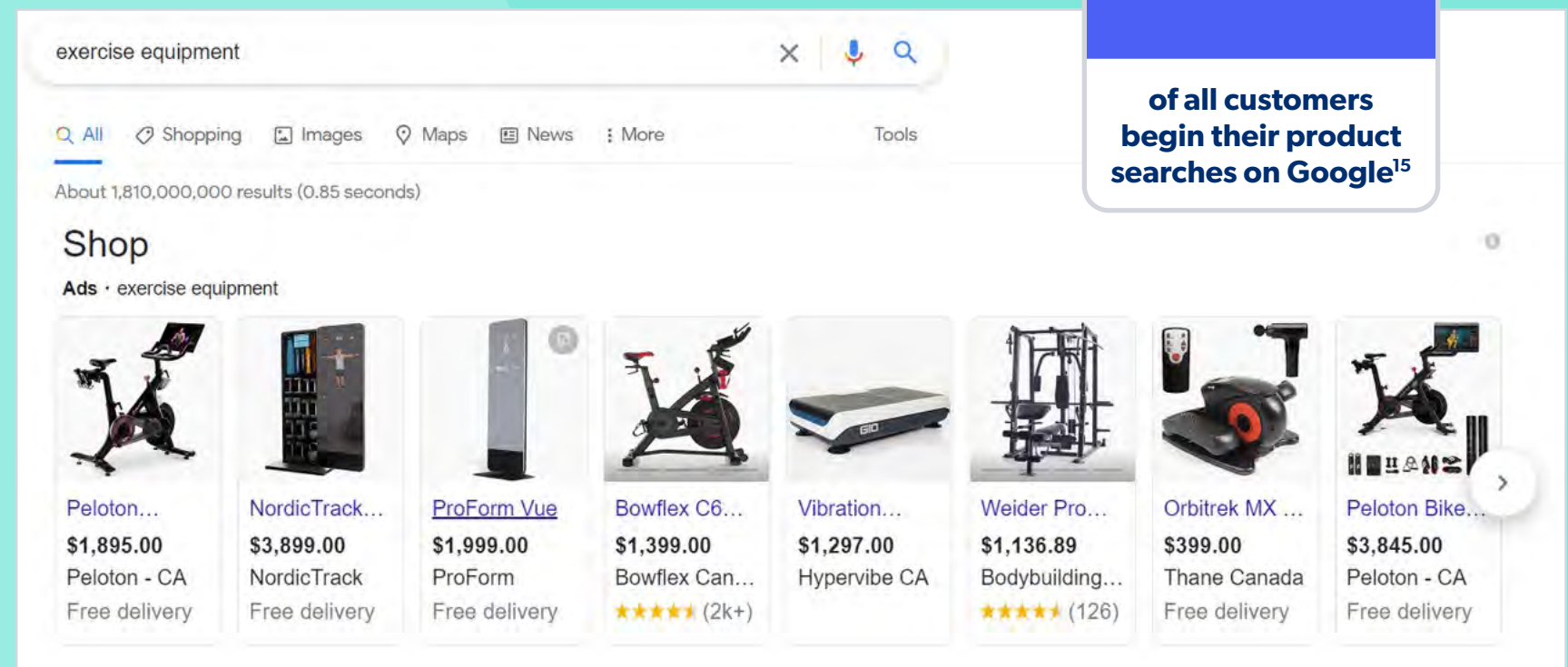
All in all, any review is great for your brand. But knowing how to guide your customers to improve your search standing is even better.

Get featured with Google rich shopping snippets

35% of all customers begin their product searches on Google.¹⁵ Even Amazon, which is essentially built for product searches specifically, only narrowly beats out Google. Having products featured on Google rich shopping snippets — bits of code that organize and display product information on the search engine results page (SERP) — can increase traffic by 20–30%,¹⁶ and organic revenue from that traffic by as much as 677% compared to product links alone.¹⁶

35%

of all customers begin their product searches on Google¹⁵



Google rich shopping snippets display detailed, shoppable information about the search term right from the results page.

How to get your products featured front and center on Google SERPs:



Understand and answer customers' specific questions

This strategy leans on UGC more so than the others. SEO goes beyond search terms and deeper into what's troubling customers. Their troubles inform the questions they ask about products, and having those questions represented through reviews on product pages will contribute to better odds of shopping snippets.



Do everything you can to rank for target keywords

Ahrefs' research shows that 99.58% of products and pages that get featured already rank in the top 10 for specific keywords.¹⁷ Use solid keyword research, prolific use of search terms, latent semantic indexing (LSI), and everything at your disposal to increase your odds of having a product featured on its own rich shopping snippet.



Organize product page information in a way that Google bots can easily comprehend it

This will require more technical skills than the others, but is likely the most significant factor in how easily products get featured. According to Google's developer guidelines,¹⁸ structuring code in a way that makes sense when the page is crawled, validating the page using the Rich Results Tool,¹⁹ and keeping up with Google updates are the best steps to give your products maximum visibility.

Unfortunately, there's no guaranteed way to hold a featured snippet, but doing so circles back to the question of impact vs. budget. Google shopping snippets are free real estate for companies large and small because they're unpaid and rely on the organization of information and SEO instead of money. Do your best to take advantage!

Use fresh written and visual content

Make sure your webpages — PDPs, most importantly — have consistently updated visual and written content that pops. The titles, descriptions, and other written content (yes, UGC included) bolster your SEO, while striking visual content enhances the customer experience and makes products more enticing.

A whopping 87% of customers consider product content, including images and description, as extremely important when they're deciding whether or not to buy.²⁰ So what you'll want to do is invest in high-quality product photography.

There's nothing worse than not having a clear representation of something before you buy it. The risk associated with buying products online has always bogged e-commerce; because customers can't experience the product in person, they have to put a tremendous amount of faith in the brand to deliver what they expect. That's why 75% of online shoppers rely on product images to influence their purchase decisions.²¹

Offer 360-degree views of your products, high definition images, size representations, images of the product in use (lifestyle images), and different sizes and colors to give your customers more confidence in their online purchases. Then, encourage those customers to proudly share images of their products at home for the world to see!



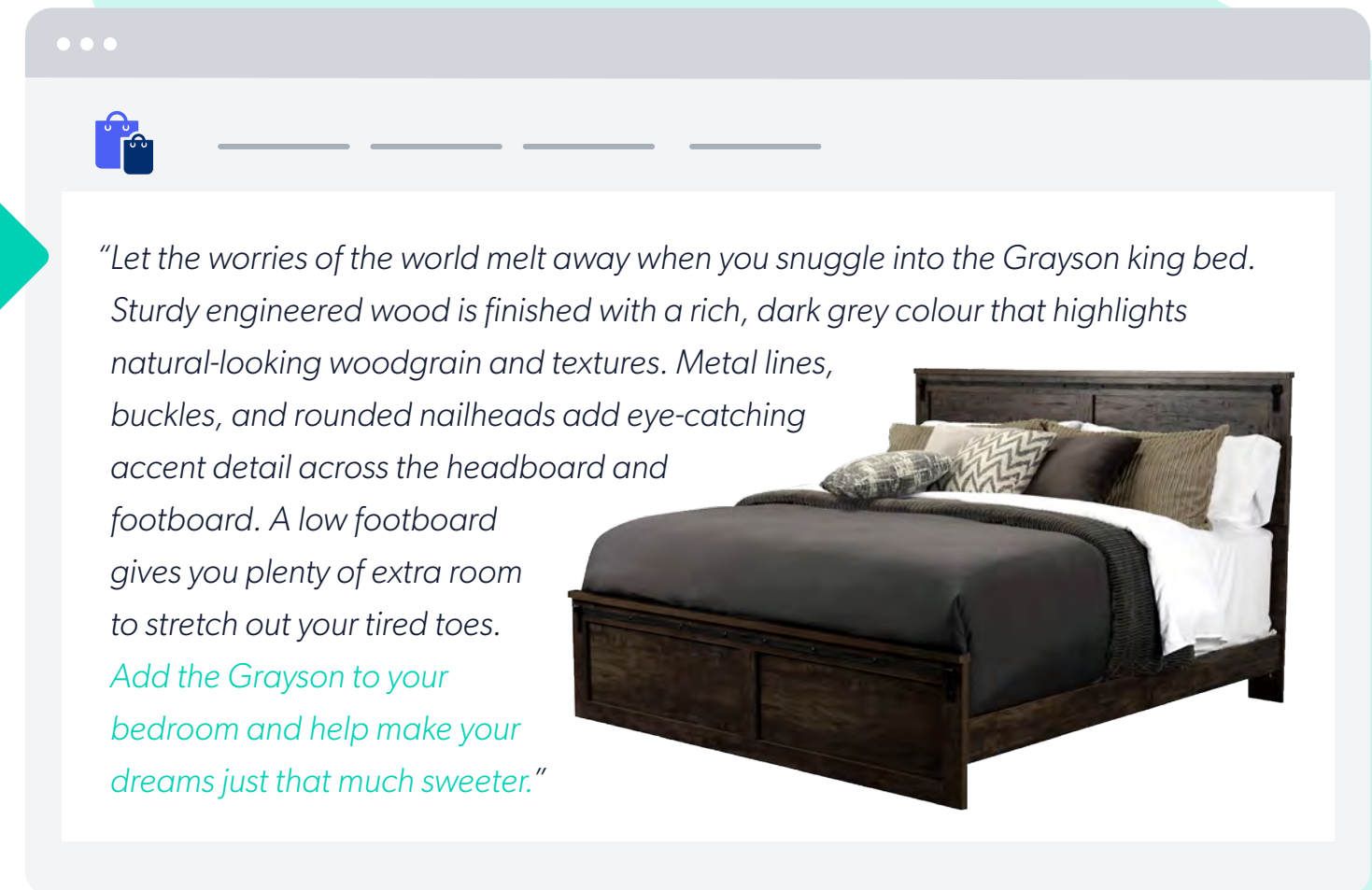
All that matters is what's in front of the camera, not what's behind it.

You'll also want to use top-notch copy in your product description, especially the description. Detailed product descriptions rank in the top three of content most important to customers in leading e-commerce categories, and 50% of returns happen because the product doesn't match its description.²² So, you want those words to excite and inspire your potential customers to use their imaginations. For example:

"Add the Grayson to your bedroom and help make your dreams just that much sweeter."

This description of a bed frame delivers sentence after scintillating sentence of powerful imagery that highlights the true benefit of the product. It makes you want to jump in bed and have the best night's sleep of your life. The lesson here is to be creative and unafraid to get a bit dreamy — literally, in this case — when it comes to your product descriptions. People buy the benefit, not the product.

There's no truer description of a product than in customer testimonials, though. We've talked about building trust and ranking better on search engines, so featuring descriptions from real customers on your product pages is a home run and better than any description you could ever write of your own products. Remember the pushy salesperson analogy at the beginning? Keep it in mind when designing your PDPs.



Build your website's authority beyond SEO

The higher your domain authority, the easier it is for customers to find your e-commerce site through search.²³ Strong SEO goes a long way to improving your site's authority and rank, for sure, but there are a few other things you can do to boost authority as well²⁴:



Optimize your site for mobile users

55% of internet users buy products online using their mobile devices, so making sure your website displays well on those devices is paramount.²⁵ Nothing ruins the experience like when a desktop site loads sloppily on your smartphone. Luckily, Google has a free tool that makes it easy to assess and optimize how mobile-friendly your site is.²⁶



Improve page load speeds

Page load speeds have a huge influence on bounce rates and conversions, but also on your domain authority. A difference of only a few seconds can more than triple the likelihood that a visitor will leave your site.²⁷ When search engines crawl your site, your search ranking will actually be downgraded and appear lower on the list of results if it doesn't perform well. It's Google to the rescue once again; there's a free tool that will gauge your page speed and offer insights into how to improve it.²⁸



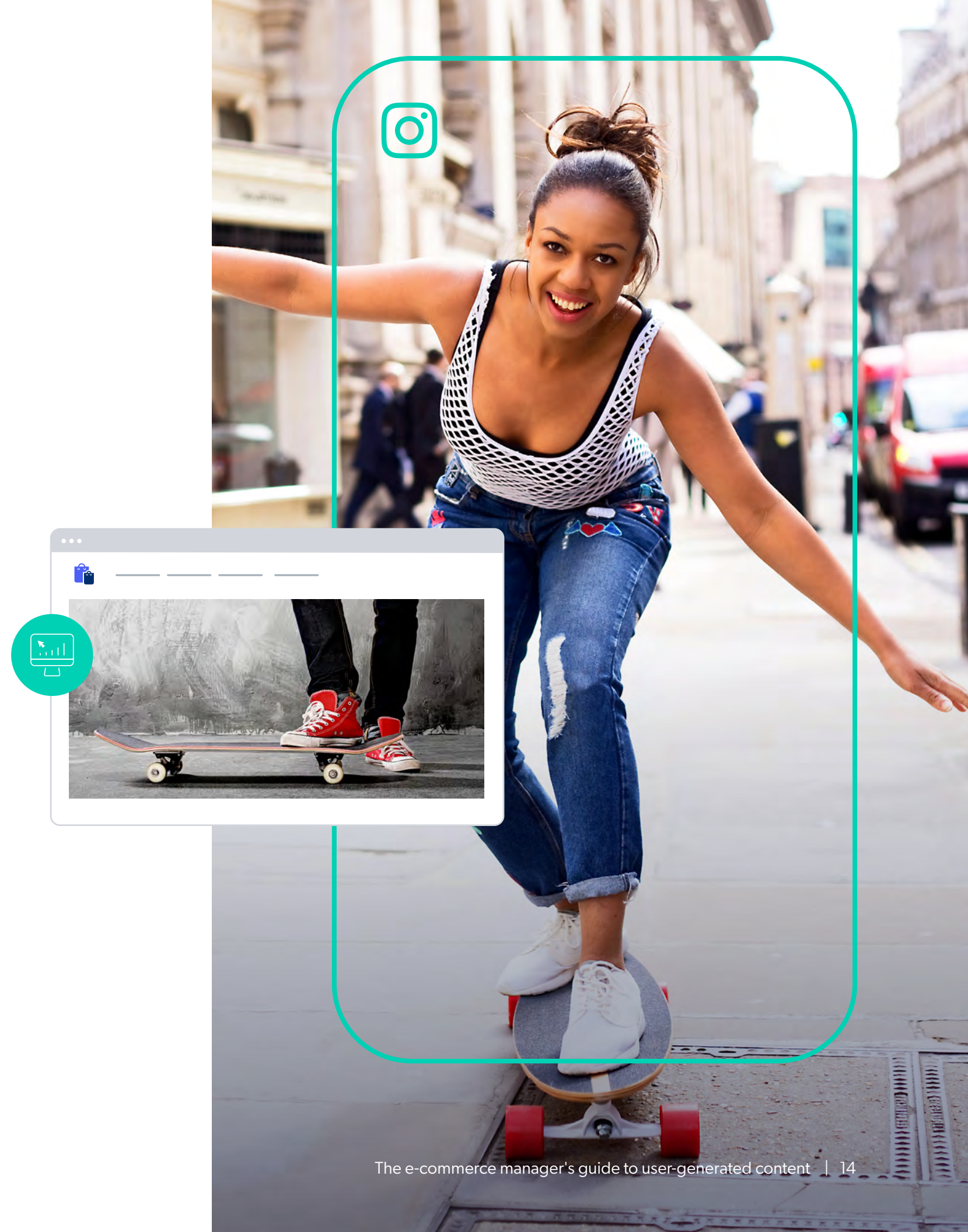
Offer useful content site-wide

This is an open-ended suggestion and really depends on what your targets and visitors consider "useful." A good way to approach it is just to avoid doing the bare minimum. Instead of just putting product info, add reviews and FAQs to your PDPs. Rather than a cookie-cutter homepage, jazz it up with video tutorials or testimonials, promotions, and more. The more useful content, the greater traffic and likelihood of backlinks to your pages, boosting authority over time.

STEP 2

Drive page traffic with UGC

UGC can be used to attract more traffic to your e-commerce site, social media pages, and more — as long as you know how to use it correctly. UGC can grant e-commerce brands an estimated 26% increase in traffic through greater engagement.²⁹



Highlight customers' eye-catching photo and video content

Highlighting the best visual UGC can attract waves of new potential customers to your social media pages and website. Giving credit where it's due is also an exciting way to motivate users to continue sharing content about your brand.

When customers make and share content about a brand on social media, those posts typically see around 28% higher engagement than the company's regular posts.³⁰

Airbnb, for example, regularly uses UGC in its social media activity to maintain enormous engagement and loyalty.³² What the brand does is find breathtaking images and videos from users on vacation and share them with its millions of followers. This inspires those audience members that are long overdue for a vacation, boosting traffic and potentially sales. Added bonus? You just made your customer's week by featuring them.

Extend the impact of UGC from social media by showcasing it on product pages and throughout your website with Bazaarvoice Galleries.³⁷



Airbnb has long mastered using UGC to boost engagement and traffic.³¹



#RedCupArt was a massive UGC hit for Starbucks.³³

Host a contest to get more customers involved

Encouraging user contributions with the possibility of them being featured is an excellent way to get more people involved — and, in turn, increase traffic. These contests can lead to huge increases in traffic to your social pages and website as users clamor to submit their content in hopes of winning.

Starbucks' #RedCupArt³⁴ contest saw customers design their own cup, the winner of the contest being made available as a limited-time holiday cup in North American stores. This UGC contest followed the massive success of the previous #WhiteCupContest in getting customers on board with the brand and its direction.

Feedback was excellent; activity on Twitter and Instagram exploded, and sales saw an increase of almost 12% from the previous holiday season.³⁵

Reuse engaging UGC in your ads

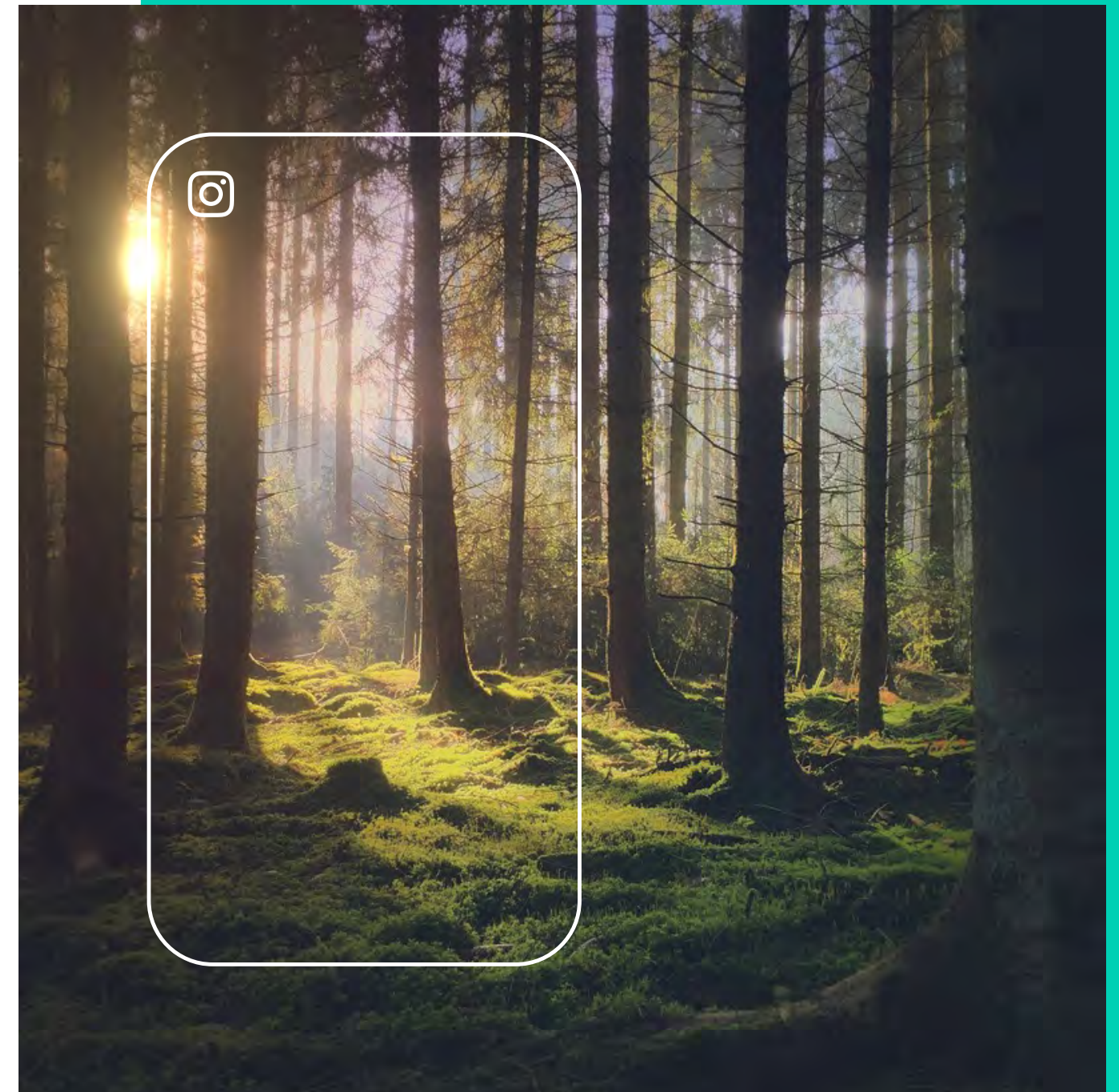
Remember when we mentioned the best bet was to use a mixture of UGC and conventional advertising? Well, this is the holy grail. Once you've highlighted certain content and achieved positive results, take it a step further and use that content in your paid advertising efforts.

Ads that use UGC typically see click-through rates that are four times greater and the cost-per-click cut in half.³⁶ The content you use in your ads doesn't have to be singular, either. If you've got an amazing image and an inspirational review but can't decide which one to feature, why not both? The combination of visual stimulation and the glowing praise from a real customer is utterly influential.

Apple, ever having a knack for marketing campaigns that spark global interest, found UGC to be an integral part of its marketing efforts with its #ShotOniPhone campaign.³⁷ Users were unsatisfied with the performance of the iPhone camera in low light, so Apple encouraged users to share their stunning photographs taken in exactly those dim conditions.

The results checked every box for effective UGC.

#ShotOniPhone increased traffic, boosted engagement (over 16 million hashtag mentions³⁹ to date — no big deal), created a deeper sense of community, and saw higher sales each year after the campaign was first launched in 2015 than any year before.⁴⁰ Mic drop.

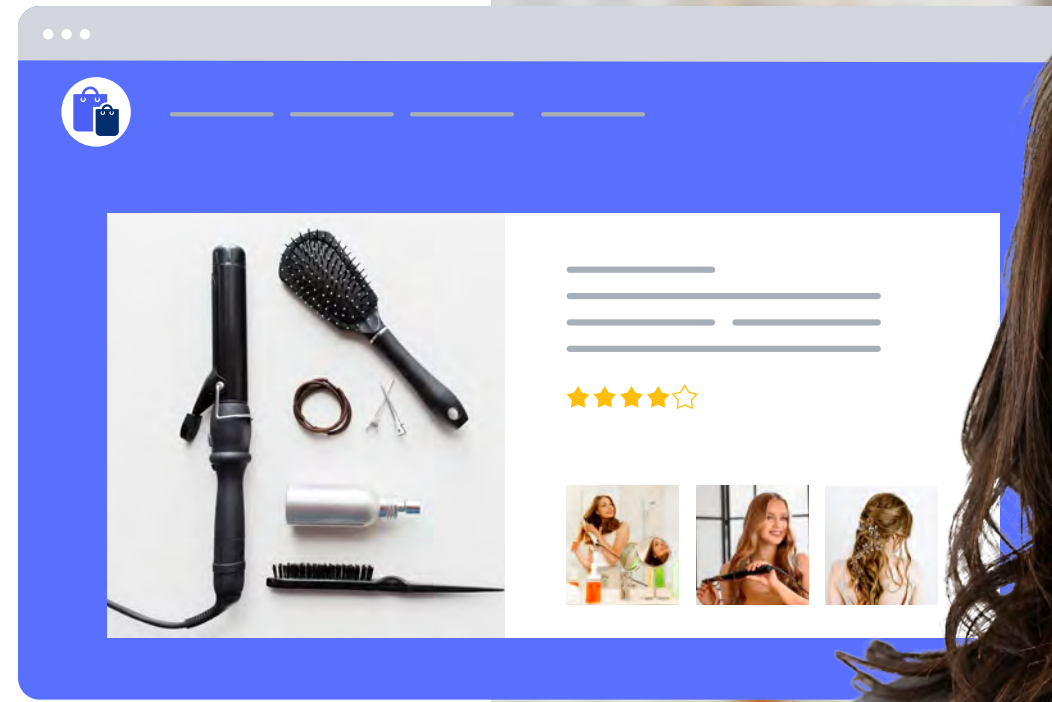


A powerful #ShotOniPhone user contribution.³⁸

STEP 3

Engage customers on your site

Validating your customer's feedback through personal engagement fosters stronger relationships. A 2021 Sprout Social-sponsored report found that 70% of consumers develop a stronger bond with a brand through social media interaction.⁴¹ That bond will lead to greater brand loyalty and eventually, revenue.



Engage customers through visual and social content

Eye-catching imagery is one of the best ways to build ongoing engagement with customers. That engagement leads to interest, then loyalty, advocacy, and all the way to more sales.⁴²

So what's so great about visual content, and why is it one of the best ways to get engagement? A lot of reasons, actually:

85%

Consumers are up to 85% more likely to purchase a product that's accompanied by a video⁴³

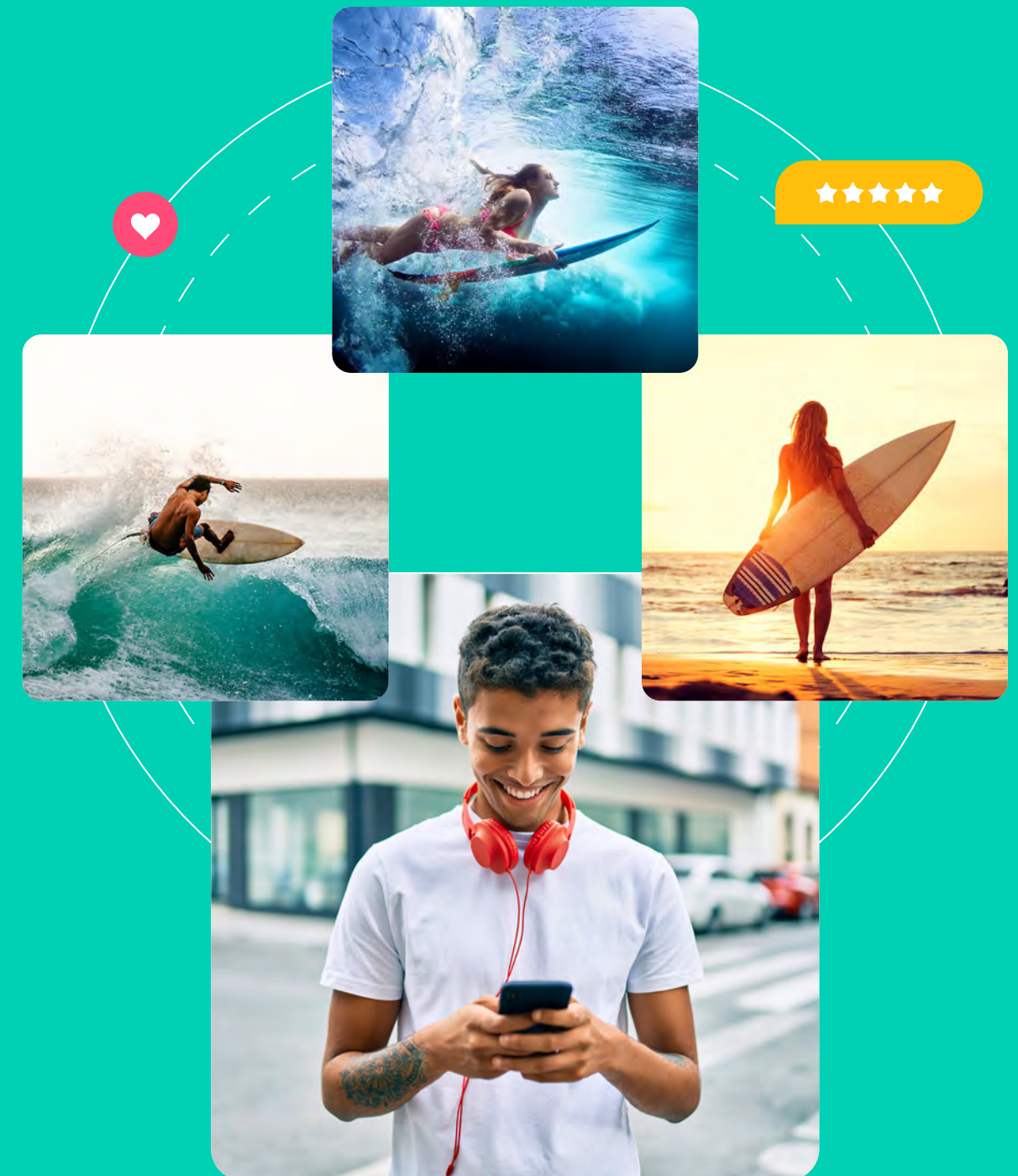
10X

Social posts with videos can boost engagement 10 times; images as much as two times⁴⁴

7X

Brands that generate original visual content have a seven-times-higher conversion rate⁴⁵

Working closely with your social media team is the perfect way to extend the reach of your content, too. Social posts showing off your products in use — in relevant, professional lifestyle photos — will really speak to your audience and compel them to keep coming back.



Show brand participation with Q&A and review responses

96% of consumers read brands' responses to online reviews.⁴⁶ These responses show a human side of your brand and give you the opportunity to express gratitude for positive UGC — and publicly show how professionally you handle negative feedback.

Negative reviews can be disastrous to any e-commerce brand, especially a growing or less-established one. 94% of consumers have been convinced to take their business elsewhere after reading a negative review.⁴⁷ That being said, it's possible to turn that negativity into a bonding experience with your visitors.

The same hesitant consumers that are put off by negative reviews also want to see brands responding to that feedback. 53% of them expect businesses to respond to bad reviews within a week, and just under half of them are actually more likely to revisit a brand that does so.⁴⁷

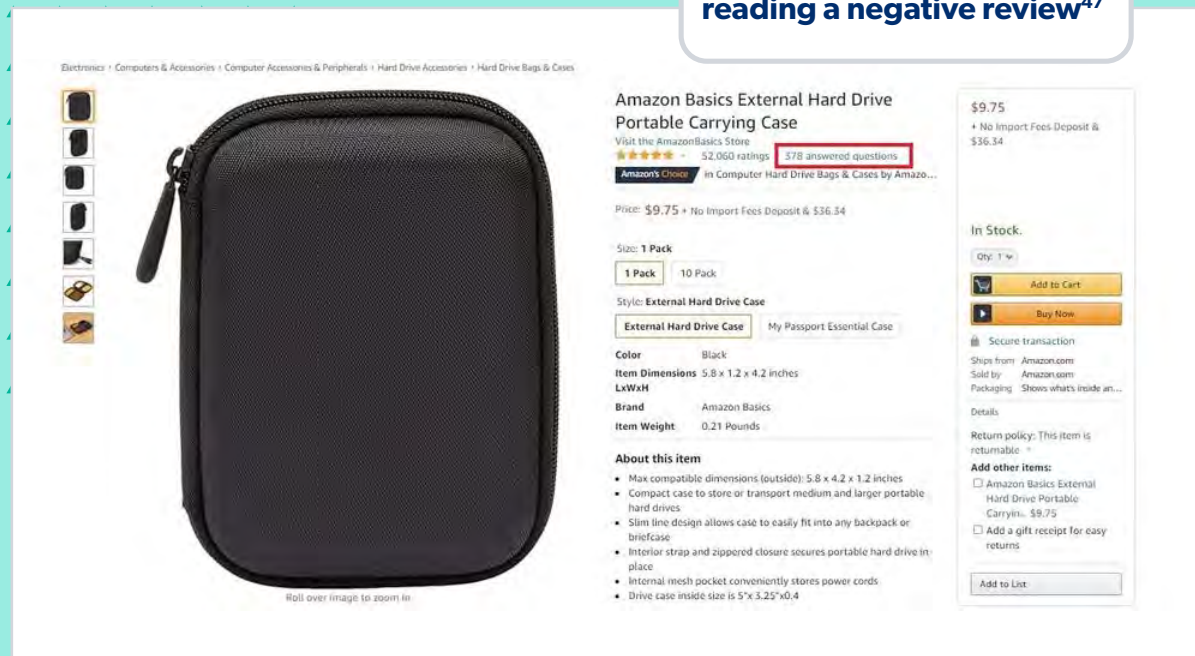
Brand participation becomes a focal point of your UGC strategy. Turning a negative into a positive is a powerful tool for any business, most impressively when it can not only win sales but earn respect and loyalty.

Even if it's not you personally responding, making sure that dialogue features are present throughout your site.

You shouldn't stop at just reviews, either. Ever seen the questions section of an Amazon product page? Customers love having their questions answered by sellers, and good public rapport with those customers is a sales driver, trust marker, and badge of honor in e-commerce.

94%

of consumers have been convinced to take their business elsewhere after reading a negative review⁴⁷



Product Q&A promotes transparency and engagement with customers.

STEP 4

Use UGC to turn visitors into customers

When talking conversion, it's best to let the numbers speak for themselves. The fact is, UGC boosts conversion and reduces costs — something that any e-commerce manager should consider a priority.

Bottom line:
UGC results in a
29% better conversion rate
than websites
without it.⁴⁸

BUY

X

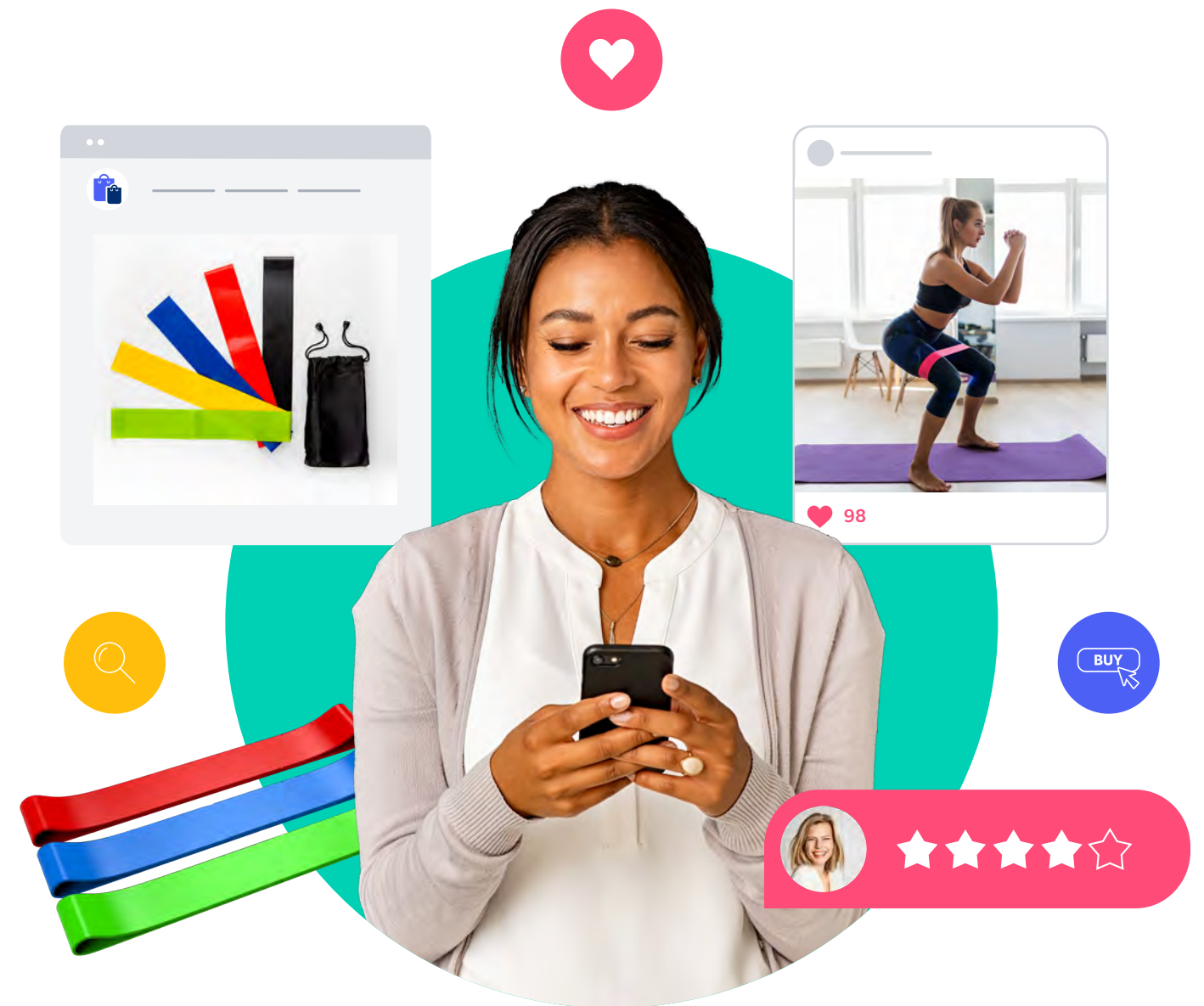
UGC is a driving factor in the decision-making process

Conversion hangs on that tense moment when the customer finally decides to click on the “place order” button. A lot happens before that, though, and having a healthy amount of UGC present throughout the customer journey can sway visitors toward taking action and purchasing.

It really comes down to how often you inject UGC as the customer moves down the funnel. Is it intended to subtly build trust in the background? Or is it front and center, meant to be the decisive factor in compelling someone to buy? Brands that look beyond the product page and get crafty with how UGC is used will see the biggest transformation in how their customers ultimately arrive at a decision to buy.

Try this – instead of: weave glowing reviews into the checkout process to add excitement and void any thoughts of backing out. Or suggest complementary products backed up by positive feedback to have customers add additional items to their carts. Nobody knows your customers better than you; be tactful and strategic and let UGC work its psychological, reassuring magic.

Around 90% of customers across the board say that UGC influences their buying behavior in a positive way.⁴⁹ So it’s not surprising that word-of-mouth marketing (UGC included) is known to generate two times the revenue compared with traditional paid advertising.⁵⁰ Not convinced? UGC can help you improve your site and product, too.



Inform product and site improvement with insights from UGC

The more UGC you have available from your customers, the more valuable data you can glean to inform improvements to your brand and products. The best advice can come from your harshest critics, and in the long run, it will bring out a better brand and experience for all.

Looking at negative reviews is one way to gather feedback, but many reviews can be vague and one-dimensional. Remember when we asked for reviews to elicit keywords? That's another great way to get more in-depth and specific feedback about customers' experience with your site and brand, your products, and most importantly, how things could be improved.

A better product. A better website. A better experience. It all serves to keep those customers coming back, buying, and boasting about your brand. The cycle continues as sales continue to grow.

STEP 5

Keep people coming back to buy directly

UGC is all about boosting website traffic, trust, and engagement with your brand. But the true sign of loyalty is when customers return to buy from you again and again.

Enriching the digital experience and making sure you have what it takes to compete with bigger players is the best way to earn that loyalty.



Replicate the in-store experience online

Creating an outstanding digital experience is one of the best ways to keep customers coming back, especially where getting to shop in person hasn't always been a guarantee.

The in-store experience will always have aspects that can't be perfectly matched online, but as an e-commerce manager, you have some tricks up your sleeve. The biggest is the ability to offer greater personalization to your customers.

When a customer walks into a retail store, the sales associate can't read their mind. Any recommendations will need to be deduced through a conversation with that customer. On the contrary, e-commerce equips you with the data you need to offer personalized product recommendations, flexible discounts, and loyalty rewards that are relevant to each visitor — especially if that individual has visited the site in the past.



Augmented reality allows customers to virtually experience products in real space, online.

In addition to delivering greater personalized experiences for returning customers, try:



Appealing to the senses with trending tech like augmented and virtual reality. These technologies allow products to be virtually overlaid in a real-life space through mobile device cameras, bridging the gap between online and offline retail.



Offering competitive pricing and free shipping so customers don't feel like they're spending more than they would if they picked items up in-store. You can also let customers track their orders in real-time every step of the way to build more confidence.



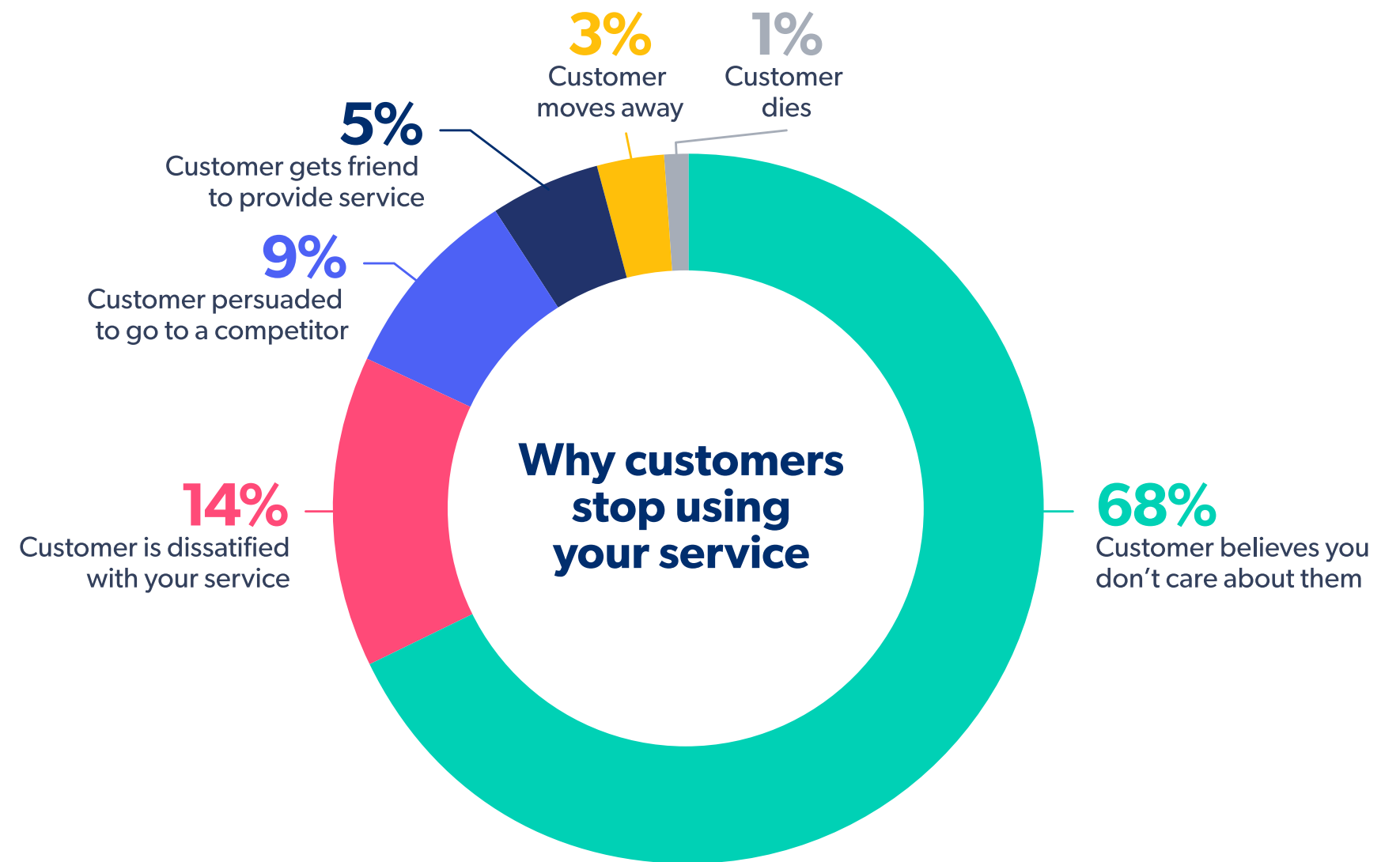
Using space on your site wisely to upsell and draw customers' attention. This mimics the experience of "window shopping," where the customers don't necessarily know exactly what they're looking for but enjoy seeing products on display that appeal to them. Amazon does this masterfully, but you know your customers better, so you can do it better!

Beat the big guys with better customer experiences (and product pages)

Competing with giants like Amazon in terms of scale and capital just isn't something that is possible for most e-commerce brands. But one thing you can almost certainly beat them at is the customer experience — especially on the support and customer service ends.

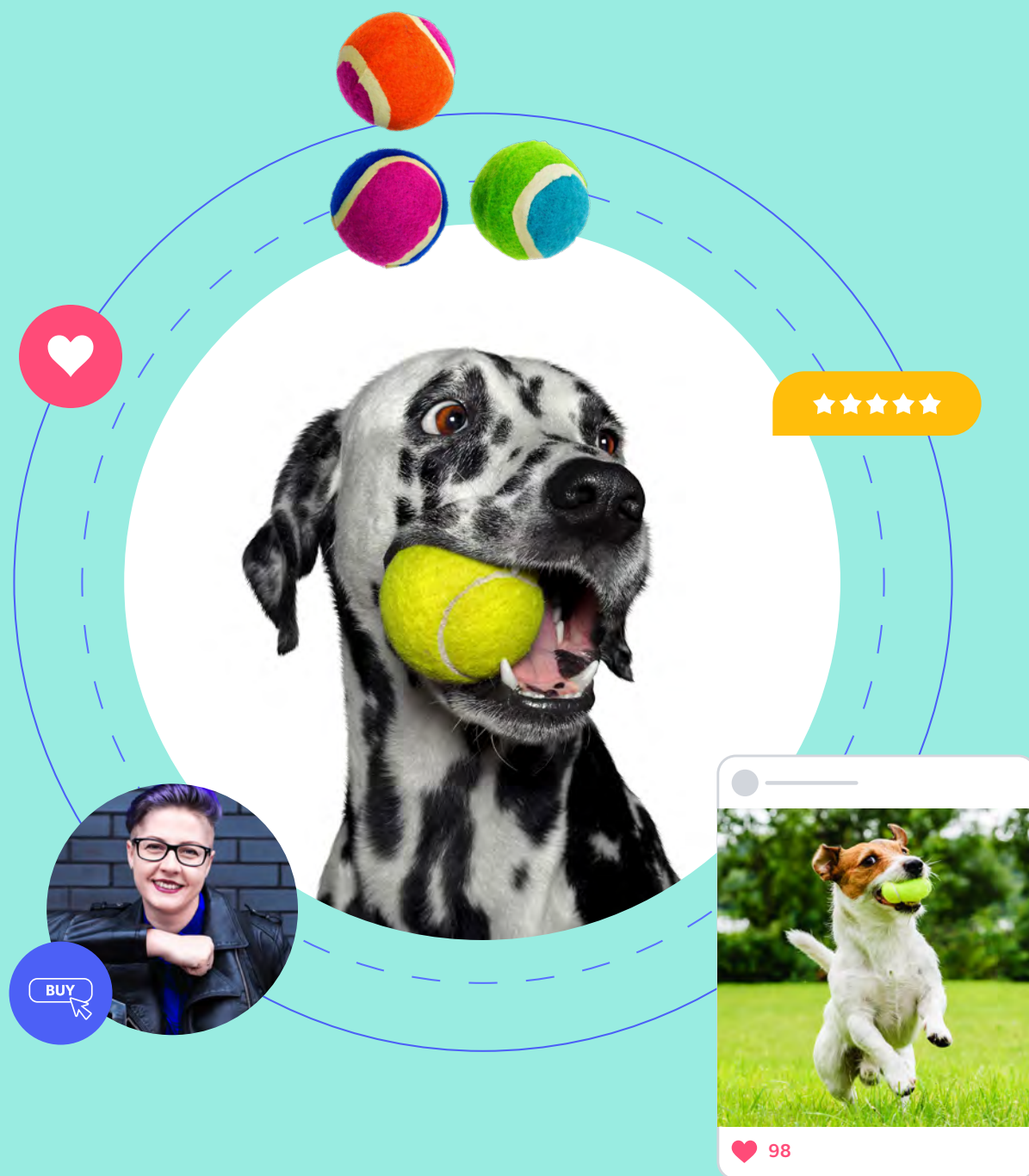
The problem with having millions of customers is that it's impossible to connect with each of them on a more personal level. Amazon has to rely on AI automation to run most of their support activity, which can leave a bitter taste in customers' mouths.

Smaller e-commerce brands have the advantage of building a real tight-knit community without the reputation of being a soulless corporation run by robots. This allows you to craft an experience that's completely unique to your brand, which plays a major role in earning brand loyalty and advocacy.



Source: The Rockefeller Group

The biggest reason customers churn is that they don't feel cared for — something smaller brands can correct.



Showing you care about your customers is the most significant way to keep them around. This is much easier to do at a smaller scale and with a closer community. Customer satisfaction and quality UGC go hand in hand in making you more competitive with the Amazons and Walmarts of the world.

Another, more tangible way to one-up the titans is to strike them right where it hurts: the product page. Amazon (and other e-commerce marketplaces) product pages are absolutely loaded with information designed to get you to buy, buy, and buy more. Sometimes it seems as though they're reading your mind with well-placed product suggestions and flashy promotions.

The thing is, that (de)personalization is completely manufactured by algorithms. You can do better. Use UGC on your PDPs to demonstrate how tight-knit your community is without the need to overload customers with information that hopefully leads to more sales. No clever programming needed, just let UGC show, authentically, that this is a purchase your customer can be confident in.

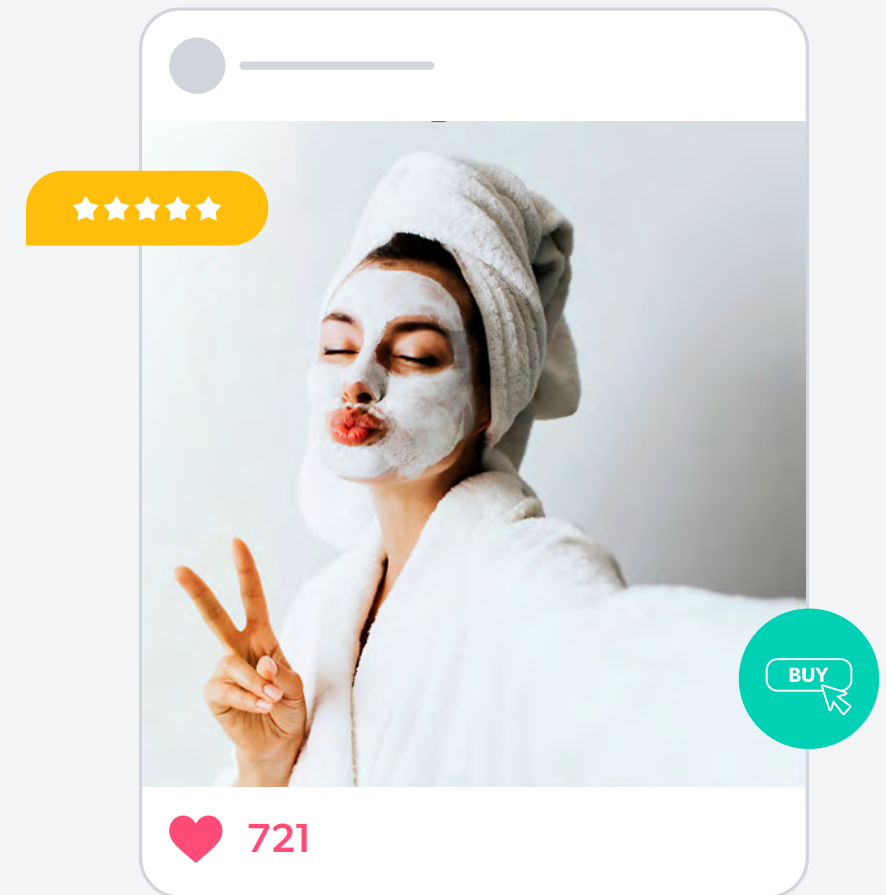
Conclusion

UGC creates a sense of belonging beyond e-commerce

Increased conversions, cost savings, better loyalty, and repeat business — the list goes on. Business drivers aside, the true benefit of UGC lies in the sense of immersion and belonging it creates: that human instinct to be a part of something bigger and better than ourselves.

Brands that recognize and embrace that aspect of humanity will be those that draw the greatest result from UGC. At the end of the day, it's your passion and drive to deliver the best product possible and improve the lives of the maximum number of people that will manifest your success. The customers that sense that will support you until the end.

Keep it honest. Keep it valuable. And keep it real to earn the genuine support of every customer you have. Happy selling — bonne chance!



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