

#Unfiltered: How to empower customers to tell your story with visual commerce

7 best practices for using real pictures from real people to improve the customer experience

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The big idea

With the continued growth of social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, it's getting easier for consumers to share their unfiltered experiences — and for brands and retailers to join the conversation.

Savvy brands and retailers have started taking advantage of this by pulling customer pictures onto their websites and into their social feeds.

As a practice, it's called visual commerce and it enriches the customer experience by giving shoppers an unvarnished, authentic look at what products look like in the real world. For brands and retailers, the promise is strong: Your story, brought to life by your customers unfiltered.

And it works.

In a **2017 survey conducted by Bazaarvoice**¹, 66% of consumers say they're **more likely to buy a product** if they see real pictures from real customers on the product page, while 65% of consumers say they **trust brands more** when they show pictures and videos from real customers.

But whether or not you're engaging with your customers, there's a good chance they're talking about you. Just look at the biggest photo-sharing platform: As of September 2017, Instagram **reported**² it had more than 800 million monthly active users that, all together, post more than 95 million pictures and videos per day.

Those aren't all cat pictures and food shots. **According to Instagram**³, 60% of people say they discover new products on the platform and 75% take action after being inspired by a post. And that's just Instagram — taken together, more than 2.7 billion people use Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter at least once a month.

Based on our research and expertise in kickstarting visual commerce solutions for hundreds of brands, here are seven best practices you'll want to follow to help your customers tell your story, unfiltered.

THE BOTTOM LINE

People are out there showing off your brand. And with the right visual commerce strategy, you can join the conversation.

Pick the right partner

At first glance, visual commerce sounds pretty simple. Just take a quick trip to a social media platform like Facebook or Instagram, search through some hashtags, and port some content over to your website.

Easy enough, right? Not quite.

For one, you've got to figure out the right mix of consumer-generated content (CGC) that complements your brand's story. Then, you've got to make sure the right stuff makes it onto your website (and keep the riff-raff off). On top of all of that, you've got to be strategic about where visual CGC goes and how it fits into the larger shopper journey.

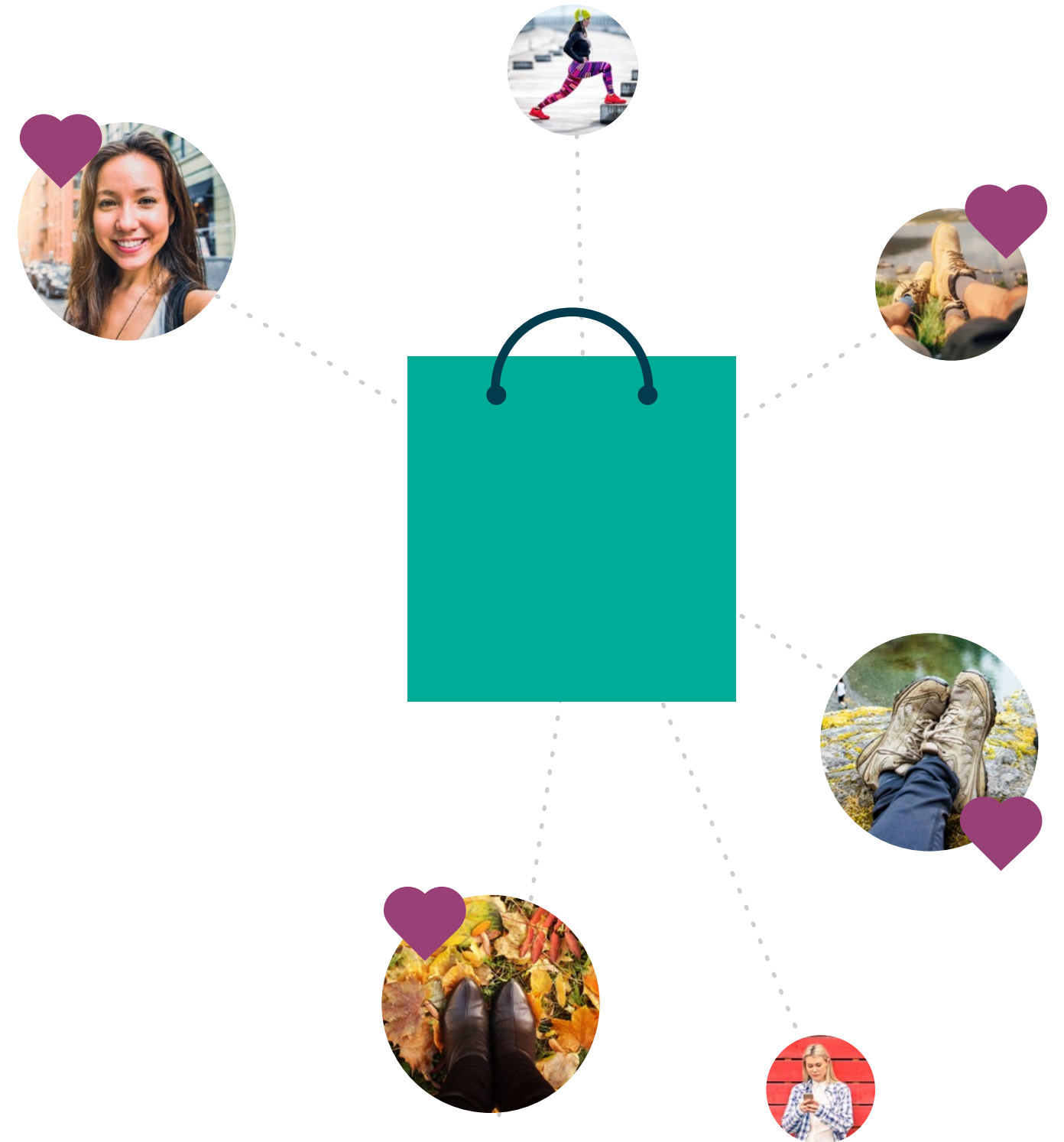
In short, there's a lot that goes into getting visual commerce working for you.

That, in part, explains why more than a few providers have cropped up in the space. And while all of them say they can get you content where you need it, not all providers are created equal.

Some providers have experienced moderation teams to step in when the computers mix things up (trust us, **we know a little bit about moderation**).

Others have dedicated support teams to help you out when something seems a little off. And still, others are great at getting pictures on your site and helping you strategize and refine your content selection.

Then there's the question of whether the provider is making visual CGC shoppable. It's one thing to just show pretty pictures — but you're in a whole new league if you can make it easy for shoppers to figure out what's in the pictures and how to encourage them to put it into their basket.



THE BOTTOM LINE

Be discerning when picking the provider that's right for you.

Key questions to ask before you go to sign the dotted line

What value will this service bring to our business?

What's the process for finding and selecting appropriate visual content to place on our site?

What experience does this provider have with integrating the right visual CGC with our product catalog? Or, more simply: Will the right pictures show up next to the right products?

Will our visual CGC be shoppable?

Is there any process for pairing visual CGC with ratings and reviews? How do you make sure the right pictures show up next to the right reviews?

How will this provider help us strategize on where this content will best serve us in our average shopper's path to purchase?

Does this provider have experience vetting and moderating visual content to make sure they stay on brand with our message?

Does this provider run analysis on what visual content is driving results for us and what's not? How do they define success?

Is there a support team we can talk to 24/7?



Goals are important, so set the right ones

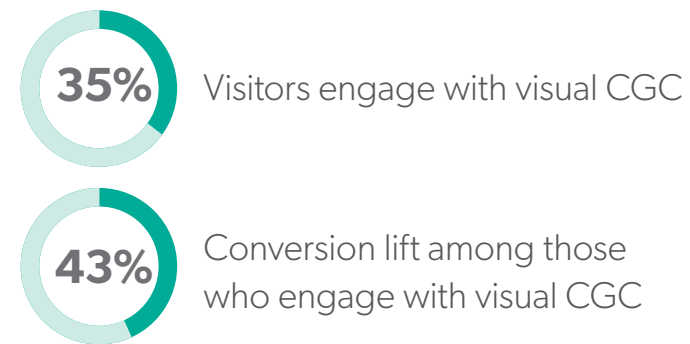
Making a collage of pretty pictures doesn't sound like it requires a whole lot of strategy — but it does.

Visual commerce drives two primary things: **engagement** and **conversion**. Your goals should align to these outcomes as much as possible to make sure you're tracking to the full potential of visual commerce.

A little explanation first

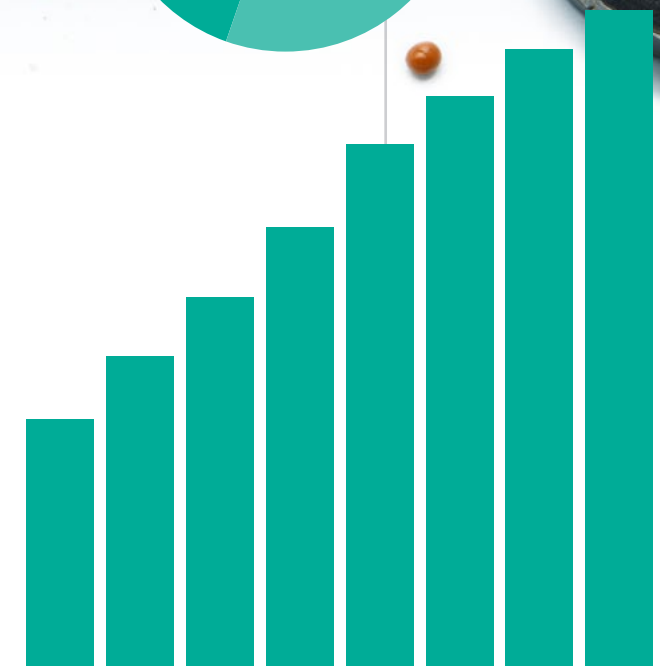
Engagement is any action like a click, a share, a like, that you can quantify and tells you that you're catching people's attention. Any of those actions increase a person's time on your page, which is a good thing.

Two quick facts



LET'S BREAK THIS DOWN

The more you can increase engagement, the more you can lift your conversion rates.



Your goals for engagement should include:

- 1. Content volume:** Get shoppers to post pictures of your products and interact with your brand
- 2. Content interaction:** Once you have content on your website, make sure people are interacting with it.

These two goals go hand in hand

If you have lots of content but no one is interacting with it, you're in a bad position. And if you have no content, then there's nothing for people to interact with.

On the other side, your goals for conversion should include:

- 3. Social channel conversion:** Get shoppers to convert on social channels like Instagram through your visual commerce program — and set goals at the outset with your provider for what to expect.
- 4. On-site conversion:** Make sure your visual CGC on your websites is driving conversion as well, and work with your provider to set initial goals and then measure performance throughout your campaign.

To achieve these conversion goals, you're going to want to display visual CGC in as many places as possible — on your home page, on your category pages, and next to ratings and reviews on your product pages. The more places you're putting this visual content, the more chances you're giving someone to put your product in their basket.

Other goals can include content coverage (making sure you have visuals that span your product catalog and not just a few high-volume items can go a long way), and determining advocate and/or influencer impact (how many people are posting about your brand multiple times, and what impact they're having).

THE BOTTOM LINE

Visual commerce is really good at driving engagement and conversion. Set goals with your provider and program partner that align with these outcomes as much as possible to track your progress.

Figure out what look you're going for

If you're selling monster trucks, you probably don't want Instagram photos of teddy bears on your page. That's either one too many filters — or not enough filters at all.

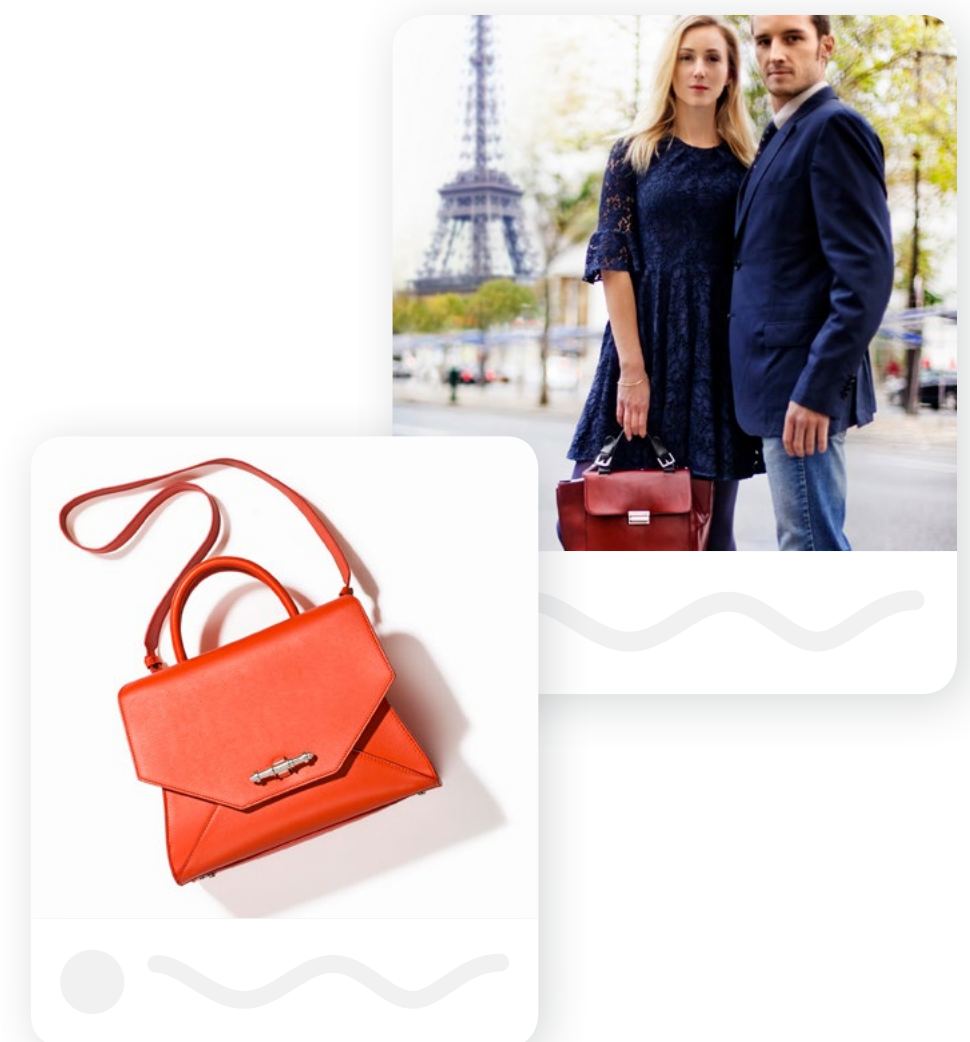
THIS HITS ON A BIGGER POINT

With visual CGC, you want to be strategic about what type of visual social content you put on your site.

At the 30,000-foot view, visual CGC can be classified in two buckets.

- **Lifestyle Content** fosters desire around the look or feeling evoked by a specific image. This kind of visual CGC shows how something fits into and builds upon your lifestyle — and shows where a product could take you (like maybe putting a handbag in the vicinity of the Eiffel Tower to show you the places it could take you).
- **Product Content** makes the thing itself the focus of attention. This type of visual CGC puts your product at the forefront and shows what it is, what it looks like, and what it does. In artistic terms, you might say your product is the compositional center of the picture. And when you make your product the center of attention, you can show off the more technical capabilities (like how many compartments the purse has on the inside).

This isn't an either/or relationship. You should use lifestyle and product-focused content to illustrate the best sides of your brand and products, showing off each in equal parts.



And here's the thing

With visual CGC, you have a new way to combine your own branded content and marketing collateral with real pictures from real people. That puts the choice in your hands about what you want to use and how you want to use it together. You can either bolster your main marketing messages and selling points, or play visual CGC off your messaging to highlight different use cases. An example comes with home appliances: Company X launches a new smoothie machine that can make a breakfast out of anything.

To illustrate it, it releases branded (or filtered) content to show off how different people start their days with smoothies. One person might be an executive, another might be an athlete, and that other guy might be a musician. The Main Marketing Message: If you drink these smoothies, you're ready to take on the world any way you want to.

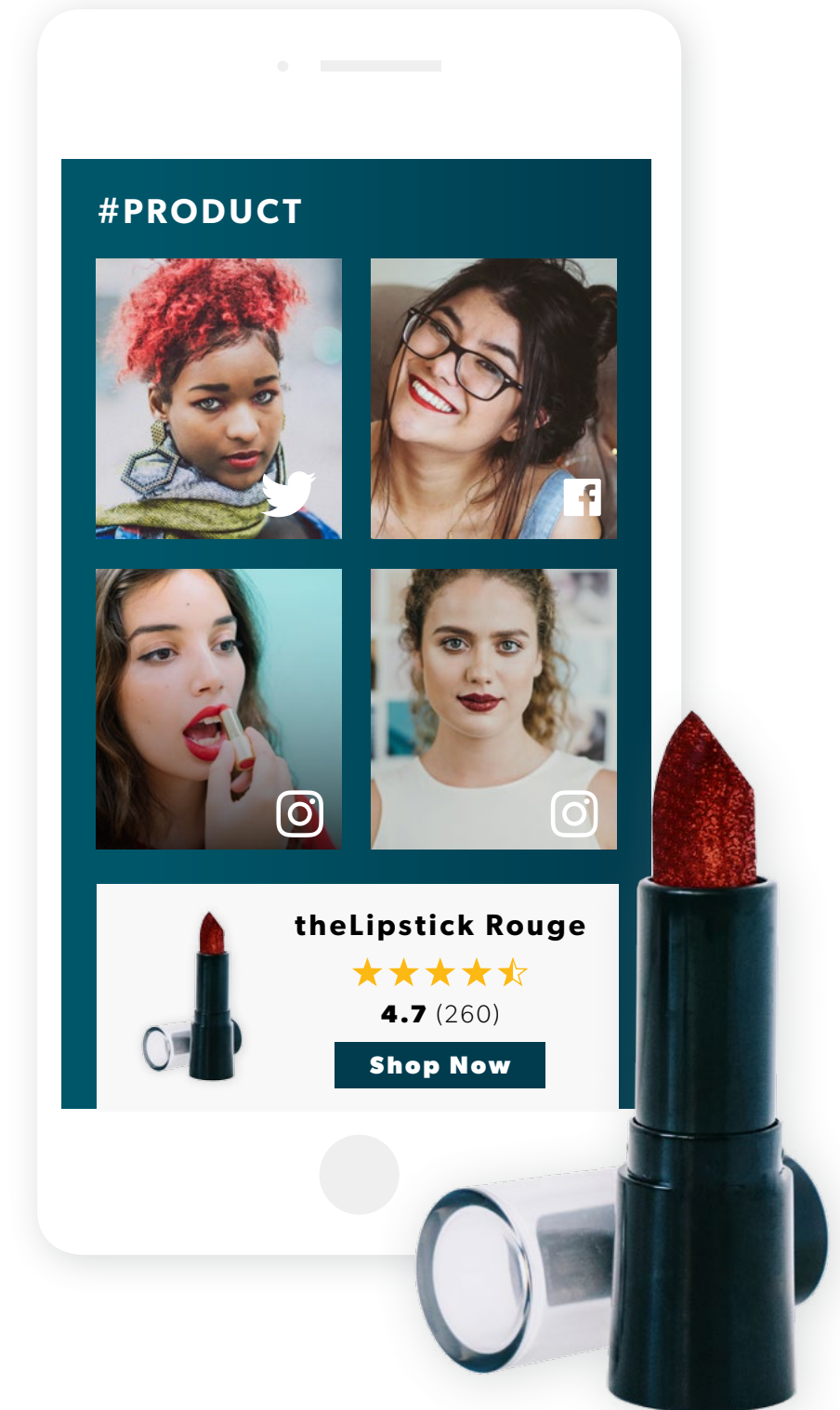
That's super cool and all, but the average Joe might still have some more plebian concerns. Like, "Will this thing fit on my less-than-spacious kitchen counter?" Or maybe, "Can I really make a breakfast out of anything?"

That's where some visual CGC comes into play: By putting real pictures from real customers on the product page, Company X can show potential buyers what these machines look like in the wild.

In our research, 56% of online shoppers say pictures and videos from other shoppers give them the most accurate depiction of what they expect from a brand. What's more, 85% of consumers say they use customer visual content as the tie-breaker when considering multiple brands.

LET'S BREAK THIS DOWN

When you take the filters off, you see what's really there. It's your choice to decide what you want to call attention to.



Start the conversation



LET'S BE HONEST

There are some things we buy that we just have to post about online. Like that awesome new car or that cute new dress, some things just beg us for a picture (and maybe even a #brandname under that pic).

But when it comes to a new pair of socks? Things get a little trickier.

But these things are hurdles, not roadblocks. With visual CGC, you should engage your core audiences and encourage them to post the type of content you're looking for.

This is even more important for retailers. Take, for example, someone who just purchased a new pair of running shoes from their local sporting goods outlet — there's a pretty

solid chance that person's going to #brandname instead of #retailoutlet when they take that glamour shot at the end of their first run.

The best way to get that person to give #you a shoutout instead of offering praise to #notyou? Just ask. You'd be surprised how many people will say yes (for the record, we've found that 61% of people will post a picture if you ask them to¹). Sometimes it helps to offer an incentive or prize, but we'll get to that in a second.

When you're looking for the unfiltered customer experience, here are a couple of questions to ask yourself

- **Channel:** What communication channel should we use to ask for visual CGC? Our site? Our newsletter? Our social channels, perhaps? And what's the reach of these channels? In other words: How much content can we expect from each channel?

- **Hashtag:** What hashtag should we use? Have we used it before? Has another brand used it before? Is it generic or brand-specific? And last but not least: Is it easy to remember?
- **Social Network:** What social channel should we ask people to post on? Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or something else?
- **The Pitch:** What's our pitch to customers to get them to post content for us? Will we include an incentive like a prize or a free product? And, for that matter, what's the foundational narrative behind our campaign? What kind of story are we trying to tell?

When you have answers to all of these questions, you're ready to go. And here's a #protip, just for fun: If you want to really help your customers along, try giving them a few examples of great posts that demonstrate your "ideal" responses. It gives people a place to start and sets a bar for what you want.

Remember the magic word

This is just a good life lesson:

Always ask for permission before you use someone else's stuff. When it comes to visual CGC from social media platforms, permission is key.

Asking before you use a customer's visual content isn't hard, and it'll do you wonders within the legal department.* What's more, we've found that when a company asks consumers if they can use their social content, about 75% say yes.

AND THE NICER YOU ASK, THE MORE LIKELY PEOPLE ARE TO SAY YES. HERE ARE THE FIVE GOLDEN RULES WE'VE SUSSSED OUT FOR GETTING MORE PEOPLE TO SAY YES



Step 1

Start with a compliment (ex. "We LOVE your photo...")



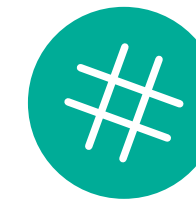
Step 2

Tell them where you are going to use it (ex. "...we would love to feature it on our site and social channels...")



Step 3

Get buy in (ex. "...if you agree, please reply to this message with...")



Step 4

Use a hashtag that is on brand (ex. "#hellya" or "brandnameYES!")



Step 5

Always include a link to your terms and conditions.

But remember, what works on Instagram might not work on Facebook. Or, put another way, it's a good idea to switch up the language you use when you ask for permission — no one wants to sound like a robot.

Even though this is a canned request, it doesn't have to sound like one: If you use the right tool, you'll be able to create a whole series of "personas" that ask permission, so your brand personality can shine and sound human (shameless plug: [Bazaarvoice Curations](#) lets you do this).

THE BOTTOM LINE

Different social media platforms require different messages, so don't be afraid to test a few ones out. And whatever you do, be an authentic person in your messaging — no one wants to sound like a robot.

* Beyond your own legal team's likely concerns, most social media platforms have their own privacy policies.

When it comes to the shopper journey— Put billboards on highways, not backstreets

A RULE OF THUMB

Always put billboards on highways and never, ever stick one on a backstreet (unless it's about to turn into a highway).

It's the same thing with visual CGC — and in this connected age we live in, you've got more highways than backstreets. You want to put visual CGC in all your consumer touch points from brick and mortar to your web properties to your newsletters ... basically anywhere where you know people are going to be.

Need help thinking of where to put visual CGC? Try these places

- On your homepage
- Next to the reviews on product pages
- Email and direct mail marketing
- Digital media
- On product shelves or packaging
- Store windows or mirrors

OH, AND HERE'S THE ICING ON THE CAKE

Visual CGC also lifts in-store purchases. In our research, we've found that 39% of in-store buyers engage with CGC such as consumer pictures and reviews before purchase.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Put visual CGC where you want to influence behavior. If that's acquisition, stick it in an ad; if it's discovery, create a gallery on your homepage; if it's influencing a purchase, include it towards the end of the shopping journey.

And remember, billboards belong on highways, not backstreets.



After Legendary Whitetails put visual CGC on its website, it saw:

- 34% conversion lift
- 77% increase in revenue per visitor
- 32% lift in average order value

[Get the full story](#)

Get the full, unfiltered story

At the end of the day, visual commerce is a way to be a part of the conversation your customers are having with the welcome effect of building up a customer-centric visual experience around your brand.

But that conversation is bigger than social media alone. Shoppers today engage with brands via ratings and reviews and questions and answers — and the research shows that when you combine CGC programs like ratings and reviews and visual commerce, the effect on the shopping experience is exponential.

The research bears this out: 86% of consumers say that seeing **ratings and reviews** coupled with visual CGC inspires confidence. And 44% of consumers say they're more likely to hit the buy button when they saw visual content that included star ratings.¹

It's not hard to see why. Putting visual CGC alongside reviews is testimonial at its most pure: picture proof alongside thought-

out reviews that are uncanned, unfiltered, and straight from other people who have no skin in the game.

And that story is bigger than a review or social media picture because it's greater than the sum of its parts. It's a story you and your customers can tell together, unfiltered.

Here's the takeaway

Your visual commerce program can and should fit into a larger strategy that includes your other CGC and customer outreach programs. Because when your customers are telling your story unfiltered, the more voices the better.

After all, a community isn't made up of a few loud voices — it's made up of a patchwork of like-minded people who share experiences and a guiding light. That's something your visual commerce provider should know plenty about.



The bottom line



Savvy brands and retailers are taking advantage of visual CGC to win more customers with unfiltered, authentic pictures and videos of real people using real products in the real world. Called visual commerce, this practice owes its success entirely to social media networks, which continue to grow and allow people to share their experiences with others.

The promise for brands and retailers is strong: Your story, brought to life by your customers unfiltered. But when it comes to doing visual commerce right, it's crucial to ask the right questions, set the right goals, and be strategic in figuring out how visual CGC can best help you.

In this guide, we've covered all that and more, working to explore some of the research behind why visual commerce works and how it can work better for you. The biggest piece of the puzzle, however, is figuring out how visual CGC fits in with everything else you're doing.

That's where Bazaarvoice comes in. We have experience partnering with brands and retailers to fine tune CGC programs and that experience has born a deep understanding of CGC and how consumers think. Got questions? We got answers — let's talk.

About Bazaarvoice

Bazaarvoice helps brands and retailers find and reach consumers, and win them with the content they trust. Each month in the Bazaarvoice Network, more than one-half billion consumers view and share authentic consumer-generated content (CGC), including ratings and reviews as well as curated visual content across 5,000 brand and retail websites. This visibility into shopper behavior allows Bazaarvoice to capture unique first-party data and insights that fuel our targeted advertising and personalization solutions.

Founded in 2005, Bazaarvoice is headquartered in Austin, Texas with offices across North America and Europe. For more information, visit www.bazaarvoice.com.

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