

Changing trends and challenges of branding through online visual merchandising

Anna Anjana Varghese¹ & Dr. Siby Zacharias.²

¹Master of Business Administration, MPhil in Business Studies.

² Research Supervisor, School of Management and Business Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala.

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ABSTRACT: *Online channels such as websites and social media sites have a huge influence on consumer behaviour in current world. Researches show that currently the consumer buying behaviour is highly influenced by online platforms like social media, online display of the websites, online ads etc. So moving up with the trend and giving special attention on online visual merchandising could bring a lion share of profit to the brand. The aim of this paper is to give a theoretical framework and current online marketing trends on branding through online visual merchandising.*

Key Words: *Online platforms, social media, visual merchandising*

1. Introduction

The trend for visual merchandising is on a rise as there is a huge upward shift in online business in Indian market. The aim of visual merchandising on online platform is presentation of merchandise to attract potential customers and to influence customer's purchase decision process. Visual merchandising processes plays a vital role in the all retailing sector, online merchandising includes demonstrating the look of the product and giving descriptions about the product in such a way as to trigger the feel of the brand and bring in more sales plus increased brand awareness. Online channels such as websites and social media sites have a huge impact on the trends on consumer behaviour. Researches show that currently the consumer buying behaviour is highly influenced by online platforms like social media, online display of the websites, online ads and other e-platforms. So moving up with the trend and giving special attention on online visual merchandising could bring a lion share of profit to the brand.

2. Online visual merchandising

Online visual merchandising is a practice of visual merchandising a product on web sites, social media platforms such as face book, twitter, Instagram etc. Online visual merchandising is expected to do the same goal as visual merchandising in store that is to attract customer's attention, give them awareness and encourage them to purchase goods. Online merchandising is the strategic display and arrangement of products in E- Commerce store, online visual merchandising is the act of using the visual elements to really enhance the overall experience of the viewer. It starts with smart branding and professional product photos, but it expands to more advanced visual marketing concepts like the right placement of customer photos and star ratings to increase trust. According to many researchers visual merchandising has contributed to influence impulse buying. Main components of online visual merchandising include presentation, website environment and aesthetic of presentation. Presentation concerns with product presentation, presentation techniques along with supplementary presentation. In website environment, as an alternative of traditional brick-and-mortar store one should be appealing enough to retain customer's attention on the website. The website environment involves design factors, navigation on the web or online platform used. While considering the aesthetics of presentation the main concern is that customer cannot feel the product physically, so the presentation should be in such a way as to give maximum appealing effect on the viewers. Visual merchandising is a multi-faceted field with a number of techniques working in tandem to elevate the overall online shopping experience. The most vital aspects include:

Product photos: Product photos are your number one sales tool in E-commerce. Photos are the best way to answer customer questions about the details and features of an item. Every product must have excellent professional photos that displayed their products accurately and in full detail. Today, customers lack trust in branded product photos anymore they rather prefer to see customer photos of a product. Displaying customer photos on a product page is a powerful way to improve customer trust (Mandell).

Genuine Customer Experiences: Consumer trust is best earned by showing off the real-life experiences of other satisfied customers. User-generated content (UGC), like customer reviews, photos, and videos, is the

most authentic and aesthetic way to tell customers' stories straight to prospective buyers. Brands are getting more creative in how they integrate their customer review into their merchandising, rather than just displaying customer photos and reviews on product pages, they are also adding them to photo displays in email marketing.

Aesthetic Design: The design of your site is how you catch customer's attention, draw them in, and make them feel comfortable and confident buying from you. This forms major component in influencing consumer behavior and should not be taken lightly. Look and feel of the brand store should be professional, inviting and suitable for your industry and target market.

Enable browsing enhancements and optimize your search feature: Another advantage E-commerce merchandising has over physical stores is the additional sorting power shoppers have on the web. Enabling browsing enhancements such as sorting products by color or specific features allows customers to find products they may not have otherwise seen if they could only sort for a particular item category.

Mobile responsiveness: Since huge numbers of customers shop exclusively on their phones and tablets, the companies E-commerce merchandising must be mobile responsive. All of the products and features should be mirrored on your mobile site, including images, product descriptions, and reviews. To take this a step further, the company also need to create marketing for multiple devices and not just adapt your current marketing and merchandising to mobile, but be strategic in developing a mobile-specific experience.

3. Branding

Branding is anything that helps your target customers instantly recognizes your product. Brand includes things like: Company Name, Logo, Color schemes, Slogans, Fonts, Advertising methods, Message. The more consistent you are with these basic branding components the more likely customers will recognize your brand. Brand is not who you are as a company. It is not who you strive to be. It is how people perceive you as a company now. You can be the most honest, high quality, customer-focused company out there. If people don't see the product that way, company need to work on their brand. Business leaders have long known that branding is the key to success in any industry. The Internet blew branding wide open. It gives one the ability to brand their business in ways that customers not only respond to, but they prefer digital branding. It better aligns with how people make buying decisions in a modern age. Products and services rarely stand alone. If you don't have a brand, they feel nothing. You might entice them with a one-off discount. People may make occasional impulse buys. But they feel no connection that drives them to schedule an appointment. The only reason they would come back is if you gave them another discount. Business cannot grow like that.

A study conducted by Harvard found that for 64% of people, name "shared values" and it is the main reason they follow a brand. They trust that the brand provides them with accurate information and follows through on what they say. 53.9% of people do not trust commercials, infomercials or ads from a brand they don't know. Anyone can run ads all day. But if people don't trust, they will not buy it. Among the surveys, 78% of people say that they trust companies that build their brand on providing relevant, custom content. Branding increases company visibility online by over 400%. That translates to more traffic to your physical store as well as online sales.

When one is building their brand, including the development of their story, personality, core message, and brand promise and so on, they need to be sure to include a strategy for visual components as well. No matter how great your business and messaging are, one cannot deny the fact that visuals are usually the most effective way to capture your audience's attention and build brand recognition, provided you are implementing these visual aspects correctly. By including visuals in your overall marketing strategy, it will help your brand's long-term success. There's no denying that today's marketing world is becoming increasingly dependent on visual appealing, and one must be able to adapt to that strategically.

3.1. How to make your visual brand identity stand out

Be unique – Your product should truly stand apart from the competition. To be truly effective one must have a deep understanding of the competition in the market and how their visual brand identity looks like as well.

Be memorable – Aim to make your visual brand so strong that your audience can glance briefly at the visual elements and know exactly what they are looking at, even without any context. To explain the effect here is an example, the image to the right does not have any copy, but devoted social media users would know instantly that it is the Instagram logo.

Make everything match – Each element of your visual branding should be cohesive and tie together effortlessly.

3.1.2. Things to consider for creating a strong visual brand identity

Get your logo right: You will likely go through many repetitions of this, but it is worth considering. Logo of your brand will be stamped on almost everything that you do so you want to make sure it is compatible. Your personality should shine through the Logo.

Create a consistent color palette: When looking at well-known brands, they all use consistent color palettes. When we think of drink in red people can easily relate to coca cola. Big shot brands are consistent with their colors throughout their texts, images, and designs because it helps make them more recognizable. This ideology is applicable to online colour texturing. Choose just a handful of colors and apply them to everything you do. The colors you choose should reflect the personality of your brand.

Choose a font that matches your brand personality: We have to make sure that along with your color palette, you need to be mindful of the font you use as it can speak volumes about the type of business you are. For a serious business venture, you may want to stay away from Comic Sans, but if your business is lighthearted and fun and that is how you want to be portrayed, then that may be the right font for you. In addition to matching your personality, you must also ensure it matches your audience's perception of you and sits well in their mind.

Choose images that address your audience and reflect your brand: Companies must use images on their website that make a direct connection with their product, rather than confusing the customer.

Layout: Most brands believe that if they have their logo, color, and fonts, then they are good to go, but the reality is they are not quite done with it. It is equally important to make sure how everything goes together. How one presents them as a unified strategy that can truly make or break the brand recognition.

Use the visuals to bring out emotions: The more of an emotional connection one can make with their audience, the more likely they will trust the brand and eventually buy the brand. Questions like what do you want your audience to think and feel when they come across your brand? One should ask these questions, and remember, visuals can more quickly tell customers whether your brand is a good fit for them more than words can (Jantsch).

4. Trends in online visual merchandising

The internet has changed into the greatest influencer of today's customers mind. Over 40% of the world's population has access to Internet. In 1995, it was less than 1%. When one talk about the Internet or digital marketing the talk is incomplete without Google, responsible for 90% of all searches in the world, the statistics show that combining Google Search and Google Image Search there were an estimated 3.5 billion searches per day, meaning there could have very well been more than 1.2 trillion searches in 2018. B2B ecommerce sales are expected to outgrow B2C sales, reaching 6.7 trillion USD by 2020. In 2019, there are an estimated 4,083,105,000 Internet Users in the world. One of the main tools used by companies to bring in more customers is through Search engine optimization.

SEO Statistics 2019: Better content can drive traffic to a blog by up to 2,000%. Google is responsible for 96% of all smartphone search traffic, and 94% of total organic traffic. Enterprises and Mid-sized companies rely more on Technical SEO and content development to increase and maintain search presence. The major share that is 72% of marketers agree that relevancy is the single biggest factor for better SEO. Experts agree that writing for search terms rather than simply incorporating them into the content is pivotal for traffic. Search engines drive 93% of all website traffic. Half of all searches are four words or more. Two seconds is all companies get when it comes to website load time. Anything longer increases bounce rates by 50%. 18% of all local searches lead to a sale within one day. 72% of people who visit a physical location will choose one within 5 miles of their original location.

Having a video thumbnail in the search results doubles your search traffic. 10. 90% of searchers haven't made their mind up about a brand before starting their search. 82% of searchers will use their phone to help them make a decision about an in-store purchase. 84% of people will abandon a purchase if they are dealing with an unsecured website. 50% of people are more likely to click on a particular brand name if that brand name shows up more than once on the search results. Video content is 50 times more likely to drive organic search results than plain text will. Google boasts an average of 63,000 searches every single second of the day.

Media Statistics 2019: The media statistics gives detailed numbers which can help the companies to find the effective medium to pitch their visual merchandising strategies effectively. Close to half the world's population (3.03 billion people) is on some type of social media. 27. 64% of online shoppers say that a video on social media helped them make their decision. Only 43% of online stores see significant traffic from their social media pages. 77% of Twitter users appreciate a brand more when their tweet is responded to. It takes about 10 hours on average for businesses to respond to a tweet, even though customers want a response

within four hours. 31. 59% of adults between 18 and 29 are using Instagram. These data set through an opportunity to the business person to tap into these channels for spreading the awareness and ads to these platforms. The average person spends about 20 minutes on Facebook or one in every six minutes a person will spend online. 1.57 billion YouTube users watch about 5 billion videos on average every single day. The ad leads in YouTube can bring in more customers. 86% of women will look at social media before deciding to make a purchase. While 68% of 16 – 24 year-olds follows a celebrity on social media, 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers say they trust online influencers more than celebrities. 60% of smartphone users between the ages of 13 – 34 are using Snap Chat. 27% of users will skip a video if it plays an ad before the promised content. Apps and websites use Facebook 53.1% of the time for social login opportunities, making it easier for consumers to sign-up for products or services. Two third of companies with hundred plus employees use Twitter as part of their marketing. 86% of people going on Twitter are primarily searching for news. 55% of the 178 million people on Snap Chat follow some type of brand or company.

Mobile Marketing Statistics 2019: Marketers and advertisers are putting 51% of their budget into mobile ads. Digital marketing software is projected to total more than \$32 billion in 2018 with expected revenue at \$65.9 billion for mobile ads alone. People are accessing 69% of their media on their smartphones. 89% of people on smartphones are using apps, while only 11% are using standard websites. Facebook is the most popular app at 19% (measured by time spent). Pinterest is number one for mobile social media, with 64% of referral traffic being driven by smartphones and tablets. 57% of all mobile users will not recommend a business if their mobile website is poorly designed or unresponsive. 40% of all mobile users are searching for a local business or interest. Mobile websites that load in 5 seconds or less will end in a viewing session that's 70% longer than their slower counterparts.

These are few statistics showing that if companies make sure their online visual merchandising is done properly considering the above infographic then they can bring in more customers attention.

5.Challenges in promoting a brand through online visual merchandising

Content Marketing: Content marketing gets three times more leads than paid search advertising. Content creation leads to 434% more indexed pages than websites without updated content. The key is to create as many pathways around the web for customers to find you. Audience relevance is number one when it comes to content effectiveness at 58%, but compelling storytelling takes a strong second place at 57%. 63% of marketers are creating content with buyer persona in mind. 97% of marketers are using prescriptive content, meaning they are laying out a foundation of rules and strategies to follow when it comes to creation. According to surveys on B2B marketers, they are convinced that blogging is their most important type of content (43%) while B2C marketers are convinced visual content is more important (45%). Promotional or paid blogs, reviews on the products, celebrity involvement can bring in more attention to the brand. Building trusted groups online and real time review of the product can bring loyal customers. Visual effect of the content and images in between story telling helps in building emotion in the customer minds.

Video Advertising: On an average people can recall 65 percentage of visual content they see, almost three days later compared to 10 percent of written content. 56% of surveyed online marketers said they used visuals in their content almost 100% of the time. When video and text are both available on the same page, 72% of people will watch the video to learn about a product or service rather than read the text. By 2021, the video advertising will grow to a \$22 billion industry. Digital-marketing statistics says that by 2021, 80% of the world's internet traffic will be based on the video content. Product videos can increase purchases by 144%. Four times more people would rather watch a video review of a product than read about it. 25% of consumers find companies that do not use video less appealing than those that do. According to statistics on online marketing, 45% of marketers use live video during 2019. (Mediavalet.inc).

5.1. Building Your Brand Digitally with Multi-Channel Marketing: Multi-channel marketing is reaching people through various channels online. The same people who are on Instagram are probably on Facebook, and so on. Some people may prefer a certain channel. Some channels are more effective at connecting with people in various stages of the buyer's journey. Different channels better showcase your brand. Being in multiple places increases your touch points. Being in multiple places makes you "feel like a brand", not just a single social media profile. Each channel has a unique way to connect with customers. Channels not only include social media platforms like Facebook. They include email marketing, AdWords, display ads on websites and any other digital channel you choose (STANDBERRY, 2018).

Develop a Customer Reward Plan: Another challenge is to bring in new forms of customer reward concept. Branding your business online is not just about attracting new customers it is about building brand

loyalty. One great way to improve your customer retention is to reward customers for every purchase. One should include

- A personalized thank-you note whenever you ship an online purchase
- send customers a discount code after they buy something or subscribe to your newsletter
- let customers earn store credit every time they make a purchase.

Adopting a reward plan will help you become known as a company that truly cares about its customers. Additionally, if your company offers a type of reward plan that none of your competitors have, you can use it as a unique selling proposition.

6. Conclusion

Branding of a product can bring in more profit to the company. As the trend is moving from physical store to virtual stores it is vital to shift the focus to online visual merchandising of the product. Online visual merchandising needs more technical clarities than traditional merchandising methods. Few factors that have to be taken into consideration is that the products visual perfection, attractiveness, presentation and description. The product must be placed in online market so as it can bring in target audience through search engine optimization tools. Better link between different online channels trending in the market. These few factors of online visual merchandising can fetch a better branding for product.

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