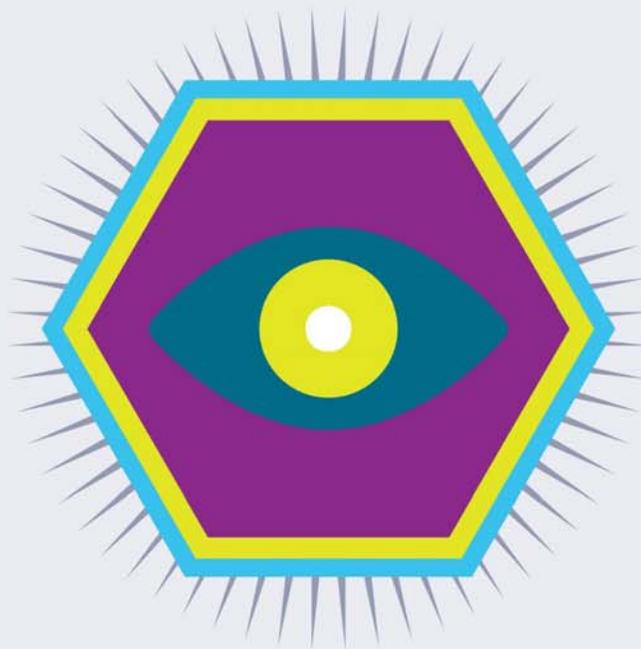


Content: Visual is Vital



By Matt Pigott

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From the moment we open our eyes, there's a battle going on in the brain. Whenever our eyes are open, roughly 70 percent of the brain's activity is dedicated to sight. The neurons dedicated to vision fire off at a staggering two-to-three billion impulses per second, a fact of considerable relevance to content marketers as they enact their very own battles for consumer attention.

PART 1

Every day around two-billion photos are uploaded to visual platforms, including Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat and others; oceans of data from which marketers can—given the right tools—draw meaning from to inform the development of their strategies and campaigns.

So, if visuals are taking over, what exactly does that mean and what distinctions need to be made? How does text, also a visual form, fit into the equation? These are the sorts of questions (and there are many more) that drag art and science into the middle of a Venn diagram where new discoveries, ones that instruct marketing decisions, can be made.

Word vs pictures, or are they one and the same?

One of the main things to consider is that the brain has to work harder to make sense of words. Absorbing images is a largely passive process, whereas reading requires a far higher level of cognitive engagement. This is the reason that, during early development, children take longer learning to read than to recognize shapes. In short, images—substitutes for physical things—have a far greater direct impact on the brain than strings of letters and words that require decoding. But they are still both vitally important spokes in the marketing wheel, and one without the other weakens the art of communication. Relying on promotional posts without complementing text with images is akin to marketing suicide. Research from socialbakers.com found that posts containing images on Facebook accounted for 90% of viewer engagement. Posts without images on the other hand—unless direct and personal—were ignored. The statistical consensus seems to be that, if you can't be bothered to include an image with your post, people won't be bothered to view your post at all. Images attract attention, text engages—in that order. And that's before you even start thinking about video.

Video: King of the web

According to Cisco, by 2017, around 70 percent of online consumer traffic will consist of video. As people have more ready access to video, and therefore consume more of it, marketers are increasingly using it as a hook before leading consumers toward their written subject matter. In a recent interview, Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg said, 'People are gaining the power to share in richer and richer ways. We used to share with text and now we post mainly with photos. In the future, video will be even more important.' Here Zuckerberg peels back the layers of a content hierarchy. But considering these

categories separately could be a red herring for marketers because it's more important to know which of these tools is most useful for the purposes of communication within a given context. An intelligent appraisal of marketing intention is more useful than any knee-jerk reaction to trending opinions that one type of communication is better than another. People don't have much need for Morse code these days, but during the Second World War it came in handy. In short, all forms have their place.

More recently, in the more modern arena of social media, marketers have allowed images to play second fiddle to text simply because text has been searchable and images haven't. But with APIs become more powerful, more intelligent and more discerning, images are becoming searchable too. APIs are getting better at scanning visual content, such as photos, and working out what's in them. Which means for marketers a new and terrifying Pandora's box of delights has just opened. The big question: could these technologies usher in a new era of engagement, or personal invasion?

Photos rich with marketing data

The wealth of visual information in photos is only just being realized. Millions of images uploaded every day are literally brimming with useful information. Advanced algorithms capable of extracting images for analysis, such as logos, gather terabytes of data that can be cross referenced and correlated to build a nuanced picture of consumer behavior and brand sentiment—on a grand scale!

Picture this: a group of backpackers at the summit of a mountain, looking into the camera. As soon as the person who took the shot shares it on Facebook, it's like throwing a tidbit of meat to a pack of information-hungry wolves. Immediately the algorithmic teeth set to work, seeking out logos and other data that will help brands profile customers and refine marketing strategies. Seconds of computation quickly reveal much that would have been ignored or overlooked at a casual human glance: the Berghaus label on a pair of walking boots, the Nike tick on the front of a cap, the can of coke in somebody's hand, the Tag Heuer watch, the Adidas sneakers. This sort of rich data provides a broad-stroke picture of consumption, the layers of which can be peeled back and analyzed in greater detail later.

Couple this with facial recognition software that can ascertain the expressions on people's faces—for example, whether or not they are smiling—and a more effective overview, such as positive or negative, can be tagged on to the logo data providing even richer detail.

While this practice throws up a whole bunch of ethical questions about privacy and data use—another subject entirely—the key point is that such timely and textured information could be the golden ticket for marketers. In the same way that a car needs fuel to run, algorithms need data; social media platforms naturally provide that data-fuel. This new trend of data capture, though still in its infancy, highlights the increasing importance of brand and logo visibility on FMCG products. Knowing that logo recognition APIs are getting faster and smarter should be the 'nudge and wink' that CMOs need to get them jumping on the gravy train. Already, big names such as Coca-Cola are using these mechanisms to fine-tune their reach, communicate more effectively with people who are already engaged, and help find ways to appeal to new customers.

Privacy watchdogs Big Brother Watch suggests that major conglomerates with high numbers of household products swinging from their umbrella spokes are enthusiastically adopting this image-scanning technology to improve their marketing. Furthermore, they point out that APIs are capable of

capturing social settings too—such as whether a photo was taken at a party, at work, on a picnic, at an event—through the analysis of common visual cues.

Image recognition combined with searchable text could be the new marketing weaponry, and there's no reason that, five years from now, the former won't have overtaken the latter in terms of relevance.

It's been emojiional

And then there are emojis. It's thirty degrees outside, so somebody sends a friend or colleague a short text with a picture of a melting ice cream cone. Next to it, a smiley face sporting a pair of sunglasses. What does this mean to marketers? In isolation, very little – but amass, amalgamate and apply a clever algorithm to tons of similar data, and clear patterns are likely to emerge.

Use of emojis to communicate is being seen by many as a new language—cute emblems encapsulating coded messages that carry a deeper psychological meaning. The explosion in emoji use, which had been mostly restricted to Japan, started in the West as the result of Apple's introduction of the emoji keyboard as part of its 2011 iOS updates. Shortly after, a similar keyboard was adopted by Android. In the same way that the practice of texting, and the widespread use of text abbreviations, began trending in the nineties (eventually outstripping calls as the preferred method of cell-to-cell communication) use of emojis is fast becoming a complimentary language from which additional layers of meaning can be teased out.

In a recent study conducted by Instagram there is even room to conclude that use of emoji could be squeezing out text, with fun images already replacing acronyms such as OMG and LOL. In addition to this inverse correlation, the study also found that 40% of texted Instagram comments, today, contain emoji.

PART 2

Picking the right platforms

Another major change is in the area of visual delivery. Global social media platforms – the mechanisms for driving content into the hearts and minds of consumers – are still relatively new, even though the age-old combo of words and pictures isn't. So the main questions are: which platforms are best to deliver specific content on, and how is it possible to achieve maximum visibility to ensure an all-round better ROI?

Rather than thinking deeply about the interplay between content and context, many marketers have reacted to the appearance of new *visual* routes to market by rehashing old content and plastering it over every image-driven social platform at their disposal (predominantly YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook) to extend their reach and exposure.

And it's these platforms in the main that have caused the surge in CMOs demanding more visual content, precipitating a huge rise in the deployment of infographics, high definition images, and video. This, in turn, has led developers – now sitting on sites populated with user content – to think fast about ways to turn their new wealth of data into cash dollars. Therefore, the adage bandied around for a decade or so: *scale now, monetize later* is finally starting to play out in reality.

Pin it to win it

Consider that Pinterest, in the last few months, has turned the world's largest mood board into a giant online supermarket full of shoppable pins while, at precisely the same time, Instagram has started rolling out shoppable ads. The shift from a purely social to a transactional business model has happened far more quickly than it did with Twitter or Facebook. While it might not sit so well with social media purists, it presents marketers with sudden and exciting opportunities. Not only to present their products and services for viewing, but also to sell them directly, click-by-click, to a global audience through a growing array of outlets—places where visual content takes centre stage.

In the coming few weeks some 30 million pins will become 'buyable'. Thousands of products will reach new markets for the first time. This could spawn a shift in consumer behavior while encouraging marketing departments and agencies – especially in the retail sector – to adjust their strategies in light of these new sales opportunities. But this shouldn't be seen as a green light to crudely start trying to press people's emotional 'buying buttons' with snazzy pictures in the hope of seeing the money roll in. Today's savvy consumers are more sophisticated than that; they're also extremely resistant to anything they perceive to be 'loud', aggressive, or manipulative. They, millennials in particular, still want choice and control, even if only at the perceptual level. What the growing pool of younger consumers want are quality products and a seamless, almost transparent, brand experience.

Today, it's the more considered approach that works best for brands, the most successful of which pay real attention to detail – generating content that achieves its goals within the context of specific platforms.

Through Vines and YouTube videos, Snapchat and infographics, combined with searchable text in Tweets and on Facebook—brands are working hard to draw in a new breed of buyers while striving to retain loyal customers.

The challenge is to create the illusion of cohesiveness against an ever-fragmenting marketing backdrop, as well as to stay current – not to regurgitate old material but always generate new ideas and fresh content that can be presented in an understandable, easily digestible, and relevant way.

Ads still matter

HSBC's recent YouTube advertisement shows a man in an elevator. Playing out like an elaborately shot Vine – though over a minute-and-a-half, not six seconds – we see the aspiring businessman at various stages of his life in the lift that each day takes him to and from his office: shots with colleagues, alone and tearful, with his wife, with his children, clean shaven, ageing well and sporting a beard. There's no dialogue, only evocative music; it's the sort of ad/visual content that people are likely to remember because it appeals on an emotional level. The brand the ad represents, and the slogan, *It's never just business*, don't appear until the very end. What's interesting about this approach is that the creative and marketing teams are so confident that viewers will watch the ad all the way through, that they save the brand revelation until the last few seconds. It's bold, and full of its own confidence in the visual story arc playing out. What this and many ads like it reveal is that video in particular is becoming increasingly adept at appealing to more subtle human emotions, not to sell per se, but to generate brand empathy, which engenders loyalty.

Measured in the billions

When considering that a year's worth of YouTube videos are watched on Facebook every day, and that YouTube gets around a billion unique visitors each month, and that a *further* billion mobile views take place each day, it's not hard to understand why 70% of marketers believe that videos will dominate their brand strategies over the next five years. Other statistics further reveal the direction marketing is moving in: According to a Forrester Research, volume content is growing by 200% year-on-year, while 78% of CMOs think custom content is the future of marketing. In addition, 72% of marketers think branded content is more effective than advertising in a magazine.

For marketers wanting to make a sudden impact, words are important but images are vital, and this goes some way to explaining why YouTube is the second largest search engine after Google.

That isn't to suggest that people don't want to *read*, it's just that they're dredging through so much poor quality material most of the time, and trying to dodge aggravating marketing pop-ups while worrying about unhealthy sites unleashing vicious viruses, that filtering information quickly has become an essential skill in the quest to find meaningful material. Scanning and skimming, far from being a frivolous pastime, is now a modern day necessity. Powerful images are therefore the marketer's greatest asset, bait to draw in frustrated consumers then funnel them toward genuinely useful content, and a stimulating brand experience.

Hunting for truffles

So giving the old, cold and stale a slightly different twist, dishing it up, and calling it haute cuisine is a no-no. As new platforms gain traction, it's far better to build a fresh presence with new ingredients and a different twist. This is a gap in the market that new agency, Truffle Pig, has spotted. Formed by a powerful alliance between three major media players – Snapchat, DailyMail, and WPP – its exotic fusion of social media, a newsroom, and global marketing and advertising could set a new industry benchmark.

Founder of WPP, Sir Martin Sorrell said: "In a digital world overflowing with content, consumers crave quality. Truffle Pig combines the best in media, content and user experience to satisfy people's appetite for great storytelling, and inspire brand engagement, loyalty and sales."

Sorrell highlights that marketers need to take a more defined approach, generating campaign specific content for their preferred platforms that enriches the user experience.

Reaching out to Gen Y

One of the main things that brands need to do today is to reach people where they're consuming content, and it may come as little surprise that teens – tomorrow's consumers – and Millennials are turning their backs on what author Stephen King termed 'the glass teat in the corner.' A research report from Miner & Co. Studio, reveals that, for many children, the TV is bowing out to tablets and smart phones. Less than a generation ago, there would have been one or two TV screens in any given household with specific broadcasts being aired at specific times. Intergenerational spats would have been about which programs to watch. Today, most homes have half-a-dozen or more screens of varying shapes and sizes delivering what viewers want, when they want it. Kids retreat to corners armed with said tablets and phones to play games and watch YouTube videos. And parents are more likely to punish their children by restricting their use of those tablets and phones than preventing them from watching TV. It's no longer just about the screen and moving images, it's about being connected, knowing you're connected, and having the ability to interact.

As one of the tweens interviewed succinctly put it: "ipads are cool, TV isn't that good, because you can't control it." From the mouths of babes come great and inexorable truths. What new generations want is swipeable, tappable, pinchable, draggable *control*.

Which means marketers, in addition to the other outreach challenges they already face, are also being nudged toward implementing strategies that veer away from established advertising norms toward interactivity. Today, they must be thinking *cross platform* at all times, both in terms of the devices they target and the context of their online content.

IN CONCLUSION...

The evolution of our modern, digital, interconnected marketplace is driving content to become more visual. There is nothing new in the appeal of images – what makes an attractive print ad in Sears & Roebuck one-hundred years ago follows the same principles as a successful video on Sears’s Facebook page today. Make it beautiful, make it appeal to emotion, make it useful. It’s just the changes in behaviors, technology, and opportunity that have put the emphasis back on how to best communicate with these images. The brands that make doing so a priority will have an unprecedented advantage – those that don’t won’t be seen or heard.

‘Content’ and ‘content marketing’ won’t cut it on their own. It’s not enough to offer our customers something in exchange for their attention, rather than demanding it. Marketing success hinges on understanding change, within our culture and our everyday lives, and following those changes to meet our customers’ needs and desires. The real takeaway from the shift towards visual content isn’t that looking is becoming more important for our audience – it’s that listening to them is.

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How social media is impacting on customer service expectation and delivery.

incite-group.com/events/customerservice

The Incite Summit: East

November 12-13, 2015 The Marriott Brooklyn Bridge

Our flagship event on marketing and customer experience. CMOs and major brands debate the future in NYC

incite-group.com/east

The Incite Content Marketing Summit

November 16-17, 2015 Chicago

Our new conference goes in-depth on how content and pull marketing is changing the role of the marketer

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