Why Next-Gen Digital Commerce Search Requires Elevating Visual Experiences

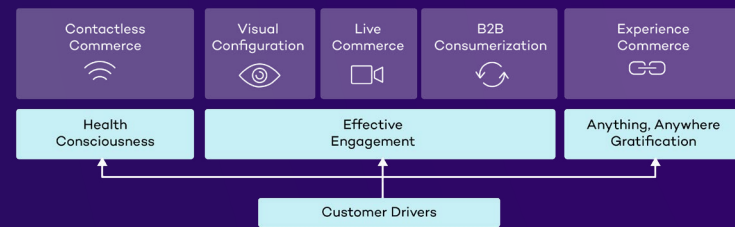## A Primer On Visual Commerce

ZOOVU

Contents

Introduction: The Case for Visual Commerce

There's no way around it: today's digital commerce search standards lack innovative approaches to customer-facing product discovery experiences. According to Gartner, digital commerce is ripe for disruption and innovation in how search can deliver interactive and personalized experiences in the moment.

If you want to **push the limits of the digital customizations** and help your buyers take control of their **search and product discovery experiences, visual commerce is vital.**

59% of consumers think visual information is more important than textual information when making a purchase decision, regardless of category. Early adopters of visual commerce will be rewarded with 30% more revenue from digital commerce than those who stick to traditional, static experiences. By educating buyers and helping them visualize exactly what they're buying before they place their order, **visual commerce elevates the digital search experience by helping buyers take control.**

A Hybrid Future in Digital Commerce post 2020

Contactless Commerce	Visual Configuration	Live Commerce	B2B Consumerization	Experience Commerce
Health Consciousness	Effective Engagement			Anything, Anywhere Gratification

Customer Drivers

Source: Gartner

In this primer, we provide an exhaustive overview of visual commerce: by the end, you will be able to develop a strategy to incorporate this next-generation search capability to support and deliver for buyers regardless of industry or selling model.
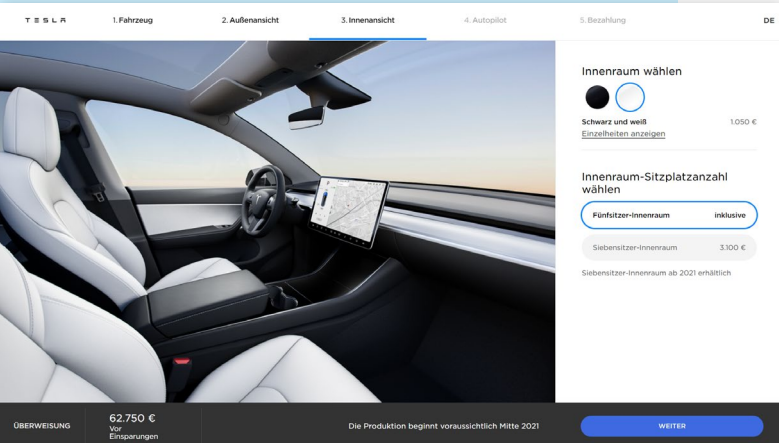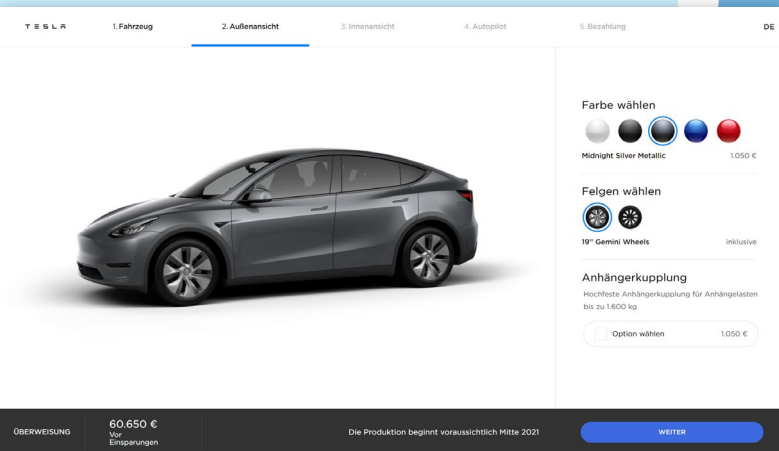
What is Visual Commerce?

With a historic number of customers shopping online and relying on digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic, the e-commerce stakes have shot up for brands that once thrived on in-store sales. Today, visual commerce is a make-it-or-break-it necessity as brands scramble to recreate the brick-and-mortar shopping experience online in a post-COVID world.

This approach involves using **visual content** at the forefront of a brand's marketing and e-commerce strategy—such as high-resolution photos, videos, and augmented reality—**to help consumers learn about its products and connect with the brand.**

The internet is a quintessentially visual place, and photo-sharing social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest have made it even more so. A prime example of the movement favoring visual content is in the evolution of web design, from early websites in the 1990s being heavily text-based with few images and no layout to speak of, to the responsive, clean web pages we see today, where crisp images are the centerpiece.

Evolving technologies including faster networks and more processing power on devices has made visual commerce applications widely available and **more vital than ever to implement, disseminate across channels, and optimize.**

Source: Tesla

TRY IT OUT

The key to an effective visual commerce strategy is **to guide customers through an interactive and customized purchase experience that allows them to personalize the end product**.

Shopping online can be daunting, particularly for expensive, high-stakes purchases like furniture or an automobile. **The goal of visual commerce is to dispel a customer's qualms** and provide them with the ability to visualize what they're buying to **help them make an educated decision, overcome barriers to purchase and reduce the likelihood of a return.**

Without having access to samples or being able to view the product in a showroom, consumers are often doubtful about buying certain items online, or they take longer to make a decision, which lengthens the sales cycle.

If a customer visits your ecommerce site and encounters a shopping experience that is lacking in information and understanding barriers to purchase, they will buy from a competitor who doesn't leave them to infer everything about a purchase.

When it comes to ecommerce, the strength of your brand no longer lies in your products but in the online search experience you provide.

According to a study by Salesforce, 76% of customers say that shopping on the internet has made it easier for them to switch from one brand to another.

# The 3 Distinct Purposes Visual Commerce Delivers

1. Engage

Compelling visual content attracts customers and encourages them to engage with your brand. For example, social media posts with images command 650% more engagement on social media than text-only posts. Visual commerce enables customers to "try on" a product (eg: using augmented reality), test it out, or even just view it from different angles.

2. Educate

Brands have an opportunity to **contextualize the product for the customer** with visuals that show them how to use it (eg: video tutorials), how it fits into their lifestyle, and ways they can customize the product.

3. Empower

Engage
DRIVE CONNECTION

Connect the right content to the right people at the right moment

Inform conversations and grow data library

Educate
DRIVE MEANING

Apply semantic understanding of language, context and data

Conversations

Semantics

Contextual Search

Learn new language characteristics and conversational trends

Form correlations and meanings

Empower
DRIVE UNDERSTANDING

Make confident and informed decisions

Strong product visuals help customers make confident and informed purchase decisions. Data shows Americans experience second thoughts about buying items online just 22 seconds after purchase. Customers who are sure of what they're buying won't feel buyer's remorse and are far less likely to return items.
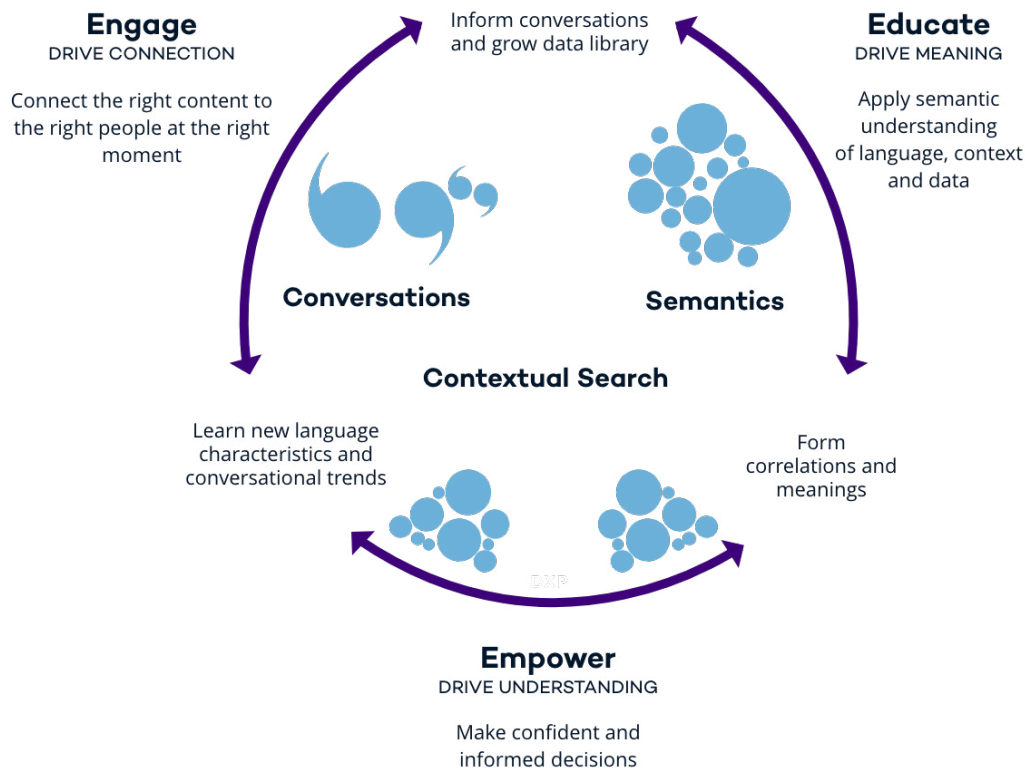
Understanding the Effectiveness of Visual Commerce

Visual commerce appeals to the fundamentals of consumer psychology, hence its universal appeal.

Humans are visual creatures—there's a reason why ideograms like the 'no smoking' or 'restroom' symbol transcend language differences and are used worldwide. Here are some stats that show why visual content makes for a winning ecommerce strategy.

58% the percentage of items bought that Americans added to their online shopping carts each year
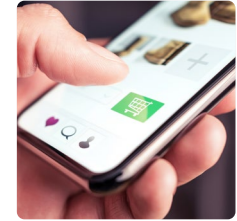
Consumers are willing to pay 20-30% more for customized products when presented with visual configuration experiences

54% of US shoppers and 55% of their UK counterparts have delayed or decided against a purchase due to unhelpful product photos

90% of information transmitted to the human brain is visual

Solving Critical Business Problems with Visual Commerce

Unlike some commerce strategies (like social shopping), visual commerce is agnostic in its ability to solve critical business problems.

For B2C brands and retailers, visual commerce helps

Shorten the sales cycle

Customers may dally on a purchase if they feel they don't have enough information to shop confidently. In 2020, the worldwide cart abandonment rate was a staggering 88.05%, according to Statista. Visuals, reviews and customer-generated content create trust in a brand and empower the customer to hit the 'Order' button.

Reduce product returns

Items are returned for several reasons: the product didn't meet the customer's expectations, the product does not match the photo or description, or the customer no longer needs the product. When customers are better educated on how to use a product and can view true-to-life images and reviews from other customers, they are far less likely to buy an item by mistake or feel hoodwinked by a product that doesn't meet their expectations.
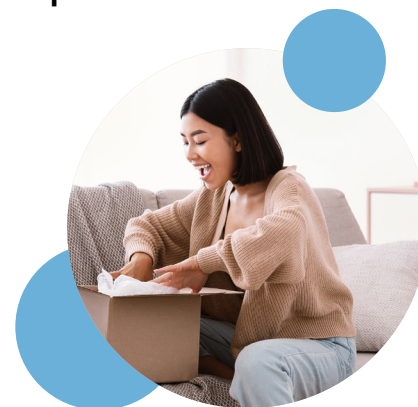
Build trust in your brand and attract new customers

Visuals take the guesswork out of online purchases, thereby making your brand appear trustworthy. While visual content is generally engaging, it also provides marketers with fodder they can use for social media, banner ads and email campaigns to attract new customers.

For B2B Manufacturers and sales teams

Improve margins and shorten sales cycle

B2B buyers expect their purchase process to be more aligned with their consumer lives. When provided with more visuals, buyers confidence is increased and they are more likely to purchase more and quicker.

Streamline sales processes and reduce errors with CPQ

With less back and forth between departments to determine costs associated with custom requirements, the most common delays in closing deals for complex products are minimized. Perfect order performance is easier to attain.

Equip direct sales teams and channel partners

Remote digital selling tools, like visual configurators, ensure sales teams and channel partners are always fully trained and comfortable with products they're selling ensuring an increase in product uptake.

The Building Blocks of a Visual Commerce Strategy

Creating a Foundation of Digital Interaction

As a content strategy, visual commerce involves using visuals for storytelling throughout your sales and marketing collateral such as your website, social media, blog posts, email campaigns, advertising and so on.

But visual content isn't limited to marketing purposes; it also helps improve product discoverability and customizability, which boosts sales.

Visual commerce experiences vary from industry-standards on the importance of high quality lifestyle imagery on product pages to next-generation AI image recognition technology that is on the verge of setting new standards for digital commerce.

The Fundamentals

Visually compelling product pages

Detailed product information is essential to driving online sales. If customers read a product description and still have questions, they are far more likely to abandon their purchase. Go beyond boring product shots with a text description and **offer a variety of visual content, such as high-resolution photos, demo videos, and 3D product visualizations** (more on that later).

Photos must be taken from various angles and include a zoom feature that lets the customer hover their mouse to see different sections of the item in more detail, such as examining the different facets of a gemstone or the texture of leather goods.

Aside from product photos, include lifestyle shots that show the product in its suggested context to inspire the viewer and help them understand how it's used and how it looks in its intended setting. Even better, include staged lifestyle shots that show how to pair the product with **complementary items as a cross-selling opportunity** while also making the individual item look more appealing.

For example, if you're selling a sofa, you can stage it together with matching throw pillows, a coffee table and area rug. Make sure each item bears a shoppable tag that enables the customer to see pricing and product details when hovering their mouse over the item. Include a URL to the corresponding product page for every tag so customers can easily add additional items to their cart.
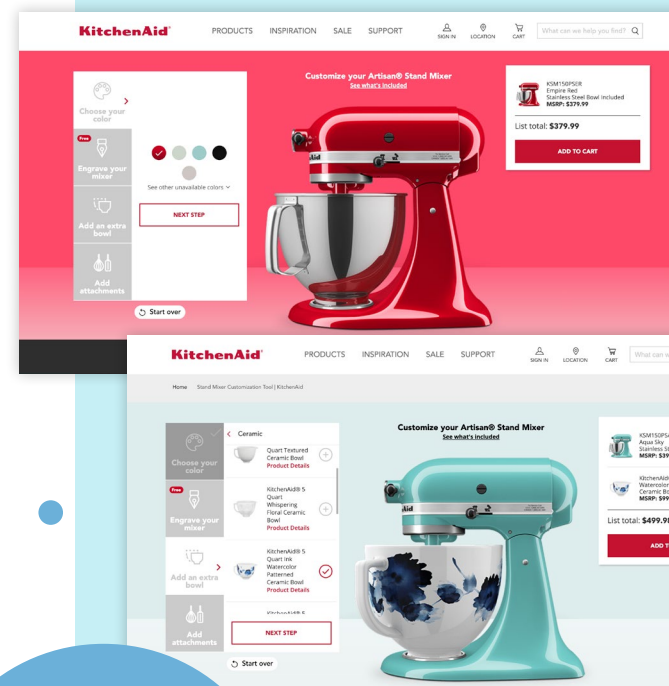
Source: KitchenAid

93%
of consumers consider visual content to be the key deciding factor in a purchasing decision

Source: Juntso

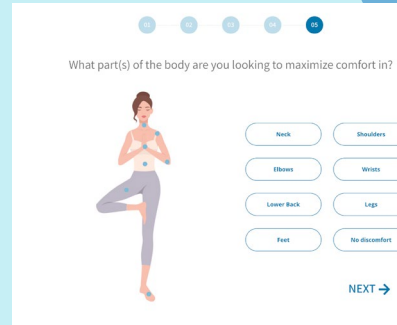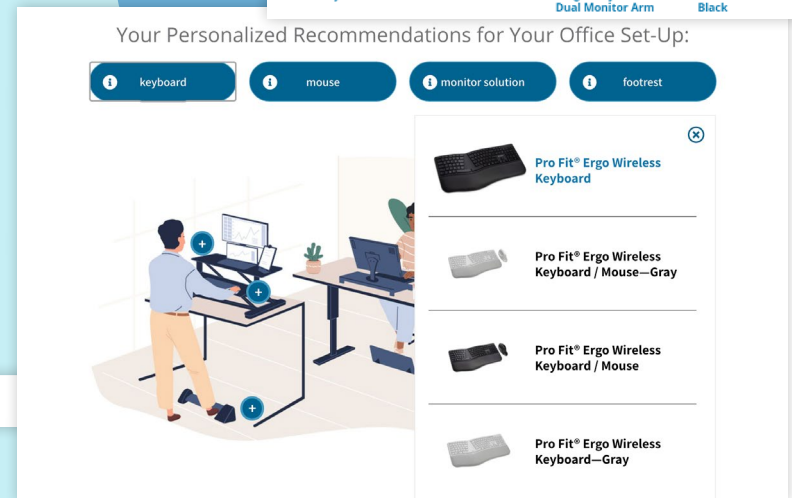**TRY IT OUT**

Kensington, a desktop and mobile accessories brand, provides a great example of how to combine a digital assistant with a product configurator. The brand's Wellness Configurator starts with an intake questionnaire that allows site visitors to self identify their needs and receive product recommendations accordingly. Digital assistants are a great way to **gather insightful data about your consumers and boost product discoverability.**

"Configurators made sense for us so we can show more of a product portfolio, they help us take the complexity out of purchasing electronic accessories."

Rafi Khusro, Global Product Marketing Manager at Kensington

Source: Kensington

TRY IT OUT

Put user-generated content front and center

In addition to generating quality images in-house, you can also include user-generated content (UGC) throughout your website and marketing collateral. UGC refers to any content created by your customers. This includes social media posts, YouTube videos, reviews and ratings. In fact, having easy access to user-generated content has become an expectation: research by PowerReviews found that 88% of consumers "specifically look for visuals submitted by other consumers prior to making a purchase."

Customer-created content builds trust.
Product photos are often artificially enhanced to show the item in an ideal light; often, when customers receive the product, they find that the colors don't match or the shine was exaggerated. When customers post photos or videos of themselves using the product, they have no motive to misrepresent it. A simple side-by-side comparison of stock product photos with user-generated social media posts easily shows that UGC is typically **more visually compelling than product photos**, which are meant to be functional.

Research shows that **65% of shoppers are more likely to trust products that have user-submitted photos or videos in their reviews**. Social media posts also exhibit a subliminal social proof aspect — when people see others wearing a particular clothing item or driving a certain car, they are motivated to acquire that item for themselves because it appears desirable.

In addition to featuring UGC on your product pages and throughout your website, don't be afraid to use it in your advertising. Nike's online banner ads saw a 300% higher click-through rate when they showed real customers wearing or using the product compared with the ads that featured a model.

88%

customers "specifically look for visuals submitted by other consumers prior to making a purchase."

Source: Asos
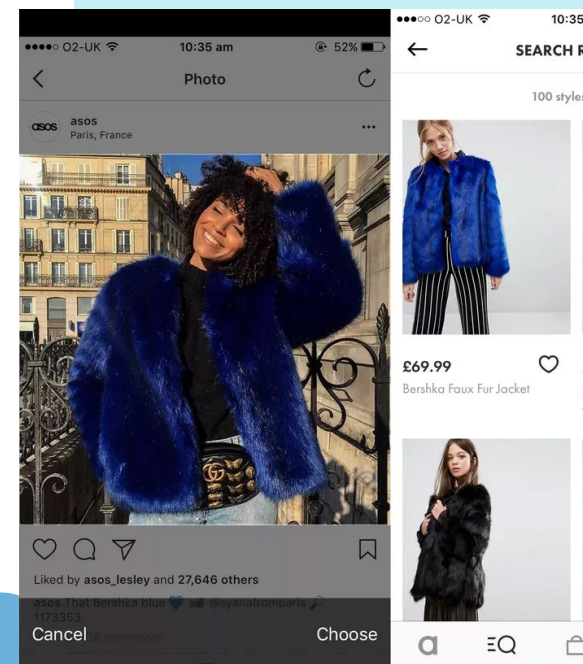
Prescription eyewear brand Warby Parker features plenty of user-submitted photos on its Instagram page, many of which are heartwarming and amusing. The company also posts a selection of its favorite UGC to Instagram Stories once a week.

Meanwhile, American based category retailer DSW has a widget on its product pages that displays photos posted by customers wearing the product so shoppers can compare the product photos to the real thing.
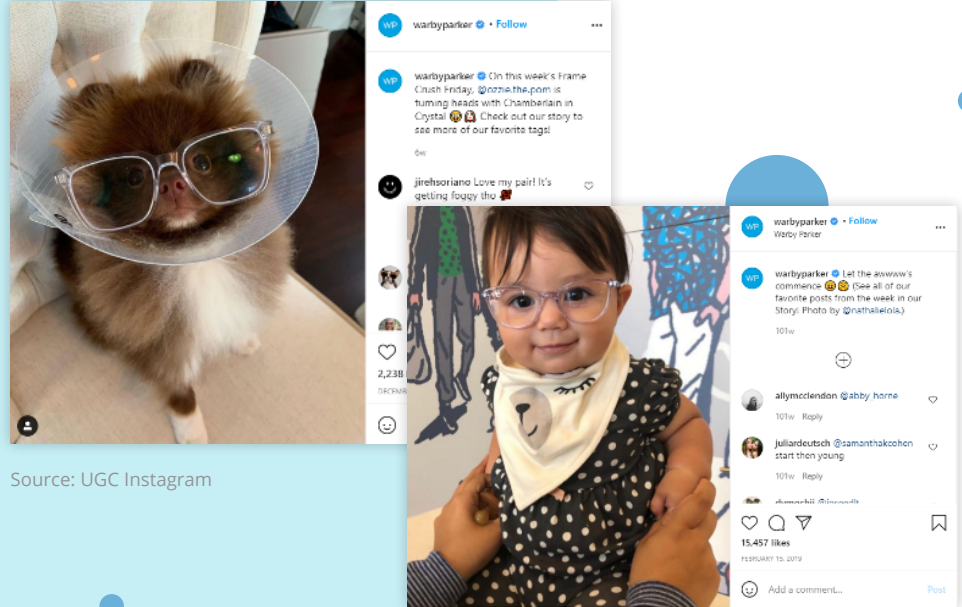
Source: UGC Instagram
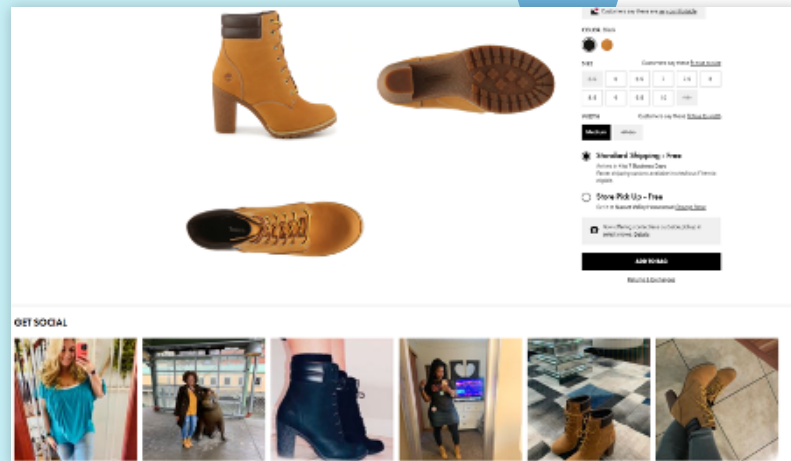
Source: DSW

The Next Generation

Virtual product configurators

If you offer customizable products, including a virtual product configurator on your product pages is absolutely essential. **A product configurator is an application that allows customers to customize and visualize products to their own specifications**. For example, automakers like BMW that sell cars online offer configurators that enable buyers to customize the interior and exterior of the car by swapping out colors and various components and add-ons.

In fact, even if the sale is ultimately completed at a retail store, **product configurators serve as a key consideration for a customer who is in the research phase of a high-investment purchase**. Since 2018, multiple surveys found that 80-90% of consumers research a new or used vehicle online long before contacting a dealership, even if just 25% expressed interest in a fully online purchase.

Product visualization and the ability to customize an item helps customers feel confident in ordering online while also **providing them with a sense of ownership that makes them far less likely to return the item**.

Product configurators serve as a key consideration for a customer who is in the research phase of a high-investment purchase.
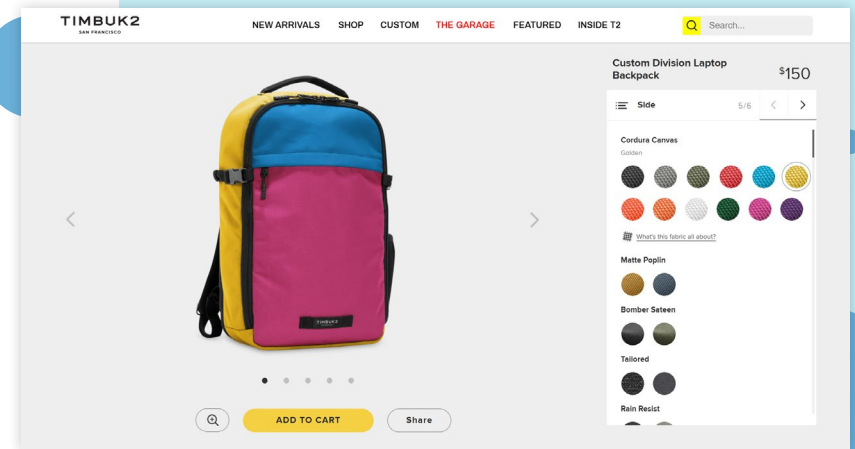

TRY IT OUT
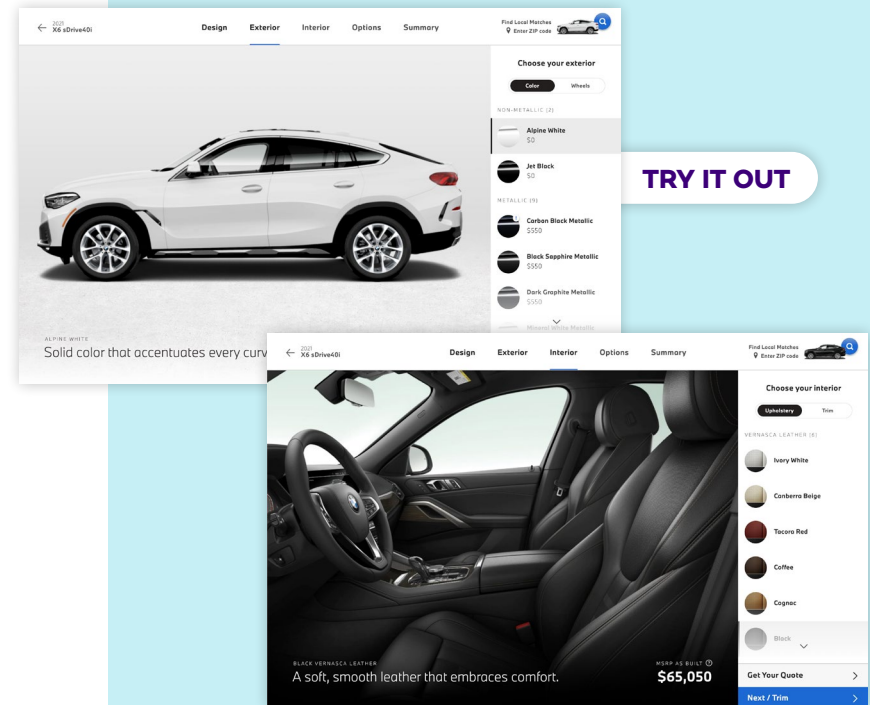
Source: BMW

Web/mobile product configurators

Browser-based configurators embedded within a website typically use 2D images for simple product customizations, allowing users to change the design, style and characteristics of a product. A mobile configurator is intended for larger, more complex items with many customization features, such as a shed, mobile home or room design.

These types of configurators usually feature 3D product visualizations that allow users to rotate the product, click on various aspects and swap out customizable elements, such as light fixtures or roofing options.

Source: Timbuk2

TRY IT OUT
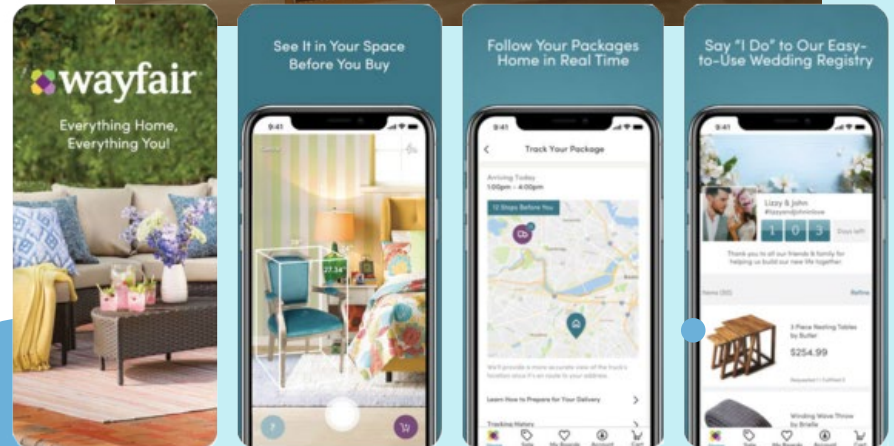
VR product configurators

Accessible only via a VR headset, these types of configurators immerse the user in a fully computerized virtual environment. The most common use case is for interior designing planning of hotels or offices. Customers can configure several items simultaneously and decide how to position them in relation to one another, adjust the dimensions of the space or even select different backgrounds or themes. The VR Hotel app is an example of an interactive VR application where users can design hotel rooms virtually before making any decisions in real life.

Source: VR Hotel
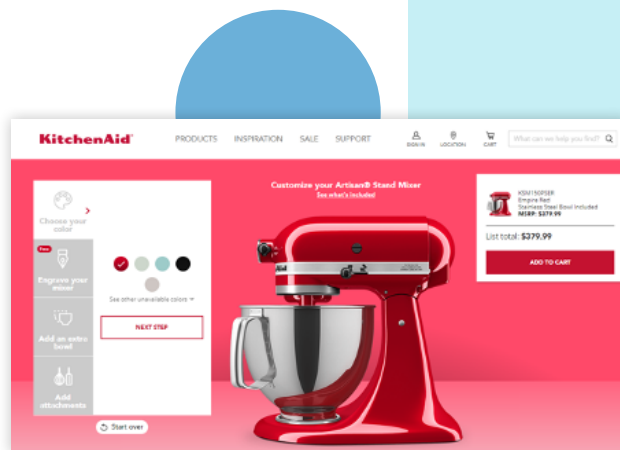
AR product configurators

Using a smartphone or tablet equipped with a camera, users can overlay 3D or 2D images of products onto a photo or video of their surroundings. Furniture buyers can envision how a new sofa would look in their living room with a true-to-scale 3D model, or try out virtual paint swatches on their walls to find the right shade. Meanwhile, most eyewear brands now provide AR photo filters that allow customers to snap a self portrait and "try on" various eyeglasses.

Source: Wayfair

Visual configurators can help retailers slash the costs of maintaining showrooms and holding excess inventory since they reduce the need for customers to see and sample products in person. Automaker Tesla was one of the first car manufacturers to lean heavily on online sales, after announcing in 2019 that it was shuttering most of its showrooms.

An online configurator can display more product variations than a showroom can stock cost-effectively, without the need to mark down outdated sample stock when a new product design launches. Another way to minimize showroom and inventory costs is to install product configurators in stores where customers can view product variations on a kiosk or tablet swallowing retailer to offer the same shopping experience with a smaller store footprint.

Source: KitchenAid

Source: Studio Shed

KitchenAid's product configurator features 2D product photos with the option to customize color, add engravings, and additional attachments. Configurators present a prime opportunity for upselling add-ons and cross-selling complementary items.

TRY IT OUT

Studio Shed, which manufactures outdoor sheds, is a great example of a 3D product configurator for a highly customizable, complex item. The 3D product visualization enables users to rotate the product and select customization options for different elements, such as the doors, siding and eaves.

TRY IT OUT

3D product visualizations

While configurators are great for customizing items, they're better intended for customers who are ready to purchase. For buyers in the consideration phase, 3D product visualizations are a useful tool to encourage them to talk to a sales rep, schedule a tour or simply keep your brand top of mind until they're ready to buy—especially when it comes to a big-ticket purchase like a home.
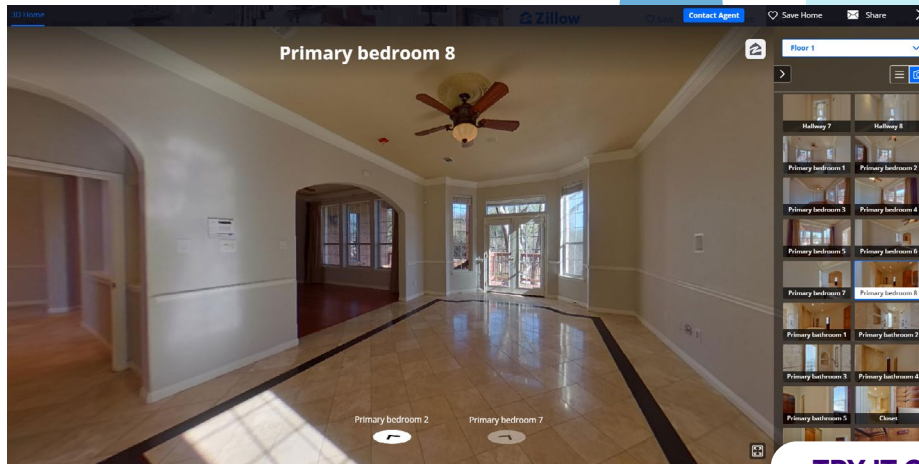
Source: Zillow

Real estate websites like Zillow enable realtors to post 3D virtual tours of a home—complete with a dedicated mobile app that provides step-by-step guidance on how to create and post one. These are typically shot on a 360-degree camera—although some iPhone models can capture panoramic videos—and enable the viewer to navigate a 3D rendering of a home by clicking on various hotspots to move around. While a 3D tour is no substitute for viewing a home in person, it's a handy sales tool to encourage customers to take the next step.

Mobile home manufacturers like Palm Harbor also offer 3D walkthroughs for every model. Consequently, by the time a customer visits a sales office, they already know which models they want to tour, and having done some preliminary research are likely more receptive to hearing suggestions about customization and upselling.

Visual search

Visual search involves using images rather than text as the input for a search engine. AI-powered image recognition **technology interprets the content of the image and returns related search results**. This enables customers to discover similar items from different brands and find products unique to their specifications, which can be difficult to define using keywords. Instead, customers can use screenshots and internet images as a starting point to find similar content, or they can point their smartphone camera at a specific object. This type of **intuitive search solves two specific pain points** for customers:

- **"I don't know what I want, but I'll know it when I see it";**

- **"I know what I want, but I don't know what it's called."**

Visual search is powered by computer vision (specifically, image recognition technology) and is trained using machine learning. Properly labeling images for searchability is the key to making visual search work, and is also good for optimizing image SEO (optimizing image alt tags, title, file name and so on).

Given its inherently intuitive nature, there is a **large appetite for visual search among consumers, with 55% saying image searches are instrumental in helping them develop their style and taste**, according to Pinterest.

In 2017, eBay debuted two visual search features for its mobile app called 'Find it on eBay' and 'Image Search.' The former allows customers to upload images taken from the internet and receive product listings for items similar to the ones pictured, while the latter lets users take pictures or use existing ones on their smartphone to find similar listings on eBay.
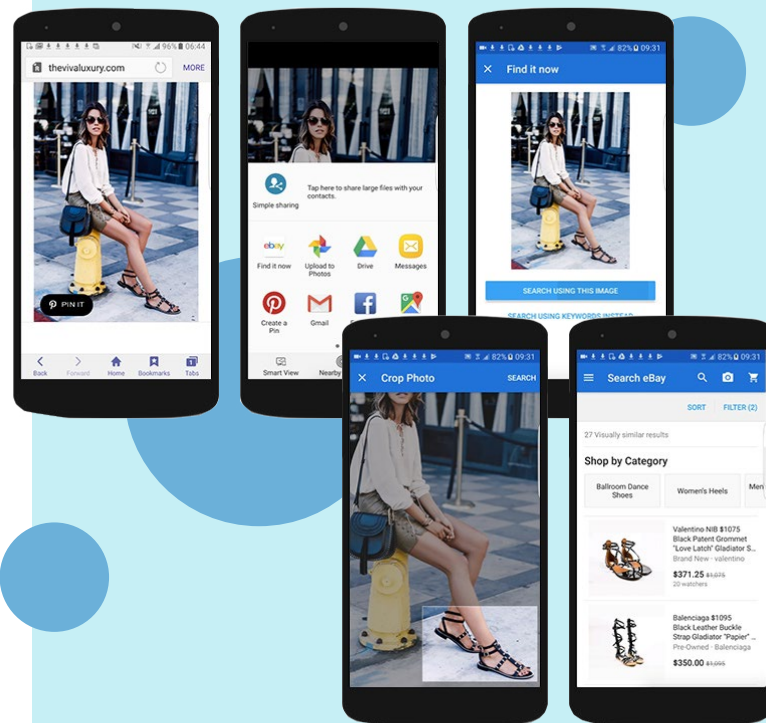

Source: Ebay

Lookbooks and digital catalogs

When it comes to "lifestyle" items like clothing, jewelry and makeup or furniture and home décor, posting inspirational, how-to content is essential to nurturing a long-term relationship with customers.

This can be anything from fashion lookbooks that show customers how to style a clothing item for a workday versus a night out to recipes accompanied by beautiful food photography that subtly encourages the use of a certain air fryer or food processor you're selling. **The key is not to show products but end results, like that sumptuous potato gratin or cozy sunroom.** For example, Amazon Prime advertises its two-hour grocery delivery by showing scenes of a seemingly pristine dinner party, despite being organized at the last minute.

This type of **imagery inspires consumers** to want to achieve these results for themselves using the products you've positioned as essential to that endeavor. While these lookbooks and lifestyle shots should live on your website, they provide ample content for social media posts, ad campaigns and email blasts as well.

Thoughtful **content curation is a major value-add when it comes to shopping online**, because retail stores have space limitations. Think of it as the online version of the visual merchandising that makes stores like Adidas, IKEA and Whole Foods so attractive. Examples of curation include listicles that group items according to style or theme, such as Etsy's pandemic-inspired 'Ideas for Staying In' list or Amazon's '8 Essentials for the Bedroom' landing page, which features subcategories for bedding, mattresses, dressers and so on that make it easy to find related products. Staged photos combine various items together and enable customers to shop the entire look, thereby encouraging a larger purchase.
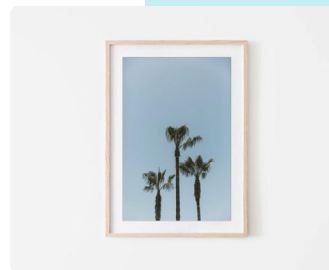
Source: Etsy

IKEA's famous annual catalog, which discontinued print in 2020 after 70 years, was a hotly anticipated item that provided endless inspiration to homemakers, especially those looking to get more mileage from a small space. Best of all, the catalog featured hypothetical families with relatable characteristics— such as the nature-loving couple who just bought their first starter home (pictured below)— another great example of personality-based content curation. By 2017, the IKEA catalog was as widely distributed as the Bible and the Quran.

78%

of online shoppers want photographs to bring products to life - they want to see the product as if it's part of their own daily lives.

Source: BigCommerce

Source: IKEA

Video tutorials

Tutorials aren't just for B2B SaaS products — although those are indispensable. In fact, tutorials can be created for two distinct purposes: **to educate (ideal for B2B) or to inspire (B2C)**. Ideally, each tutorial should accomplish a bit of both. Educational tutorials instruct users on how to accomplish specific functional tasks, such as assembling a piece of furniture or using a feature in a software application. Providing a knowledge base flush with informative how-to articles, screenshots and video tutorials is a key part of the user experience for B2B SaaS products, and reduces the dependence on technical support.

Inspirational tutorials are designed to show customers various things they can accomplish using your product, even if they haven't bought it yet. For example, Home Depot's 'DIY and Project Ideas' section features guides on everything from home decor to storm preparedness.

While these tutorials are inherently useful, they also help customers become aware of needs or hobbies they didn't know they had, and make purchases they wouldn't have otherwise considered.

73%

of shoppers are more likely to buy a product or service if they've watched a video explaining it
Source: Animoto

Source: Home Depot

Shoppable social media posts

Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok and Pinterest offer a shoppable posts feature where brands can tag items in a photo or video with a shopping bag icon. Upon tapping the tag, customers will see product name, details and price. Some merchants can process payment directly through social media (bonus points for contextual commerce!) while others redirect the user to their website to complete payment.

87%

said they took some kind of action after seeing product details on Instagram.

Source: Facebook
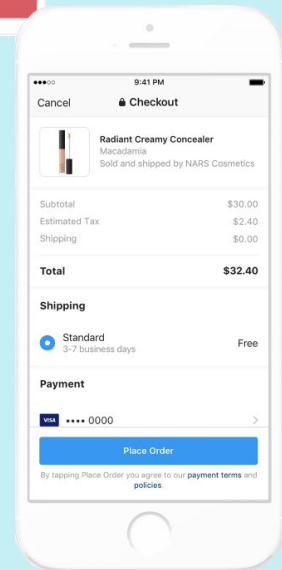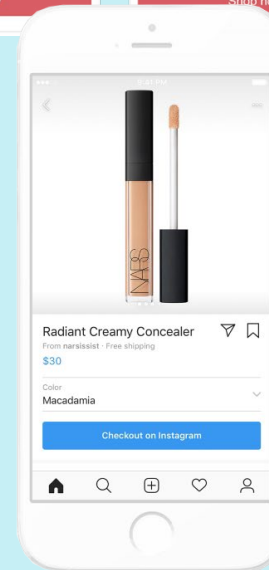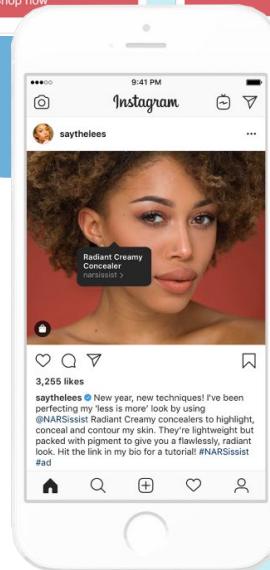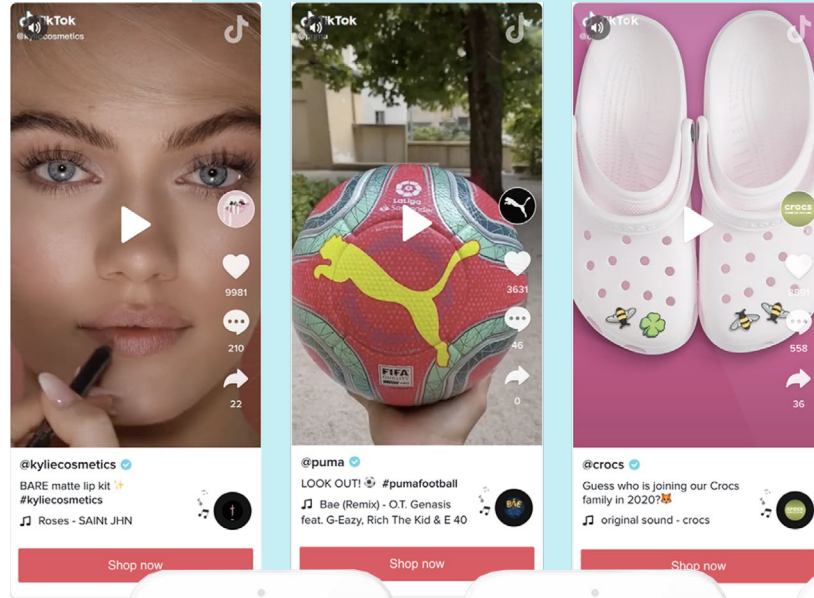
Delivering a Winning Visual Commerce Strategy

How to get it right

With so many possible approaches to visual commerce, marketers often struggle to decide what type of visual media to use and how to present it. **The best strategy focuses on connecting dots on how visual commerce makes the overall shopping experience better** (e.g. enhance the product finder experience with a configurator).

When it's time to develop an effective visual commerce strategy, there are 5 crucial steps to take:

- Focus on educating and inspiring the customer

- Make all your visual content shoppable to reduce friction

- Improve product discoverability through visual search, image SEO and curation

- Use cross-selling and upselling tactfully

- Think of visual commerce as a strategy for building a relationship

Focus on educating and inspiring the customer

Provide value-added content aimed at **contextualizing the product** by showing how to use it, tangible end results customers can achieve with your product and some non sales-focused content that's simply aimed at **engaging or educating**. For example, Better Homes & Gardens recently posted an Instagram Live video on how to arrange a bouquet for Valentine's Day. No specific products were tagged or mentioned in the video. When it comes to posting content intended purely for engagement, avoid being sales-y and focus purely on sharing expertise and best practices.

Make all your visual content shoppable to reduce friction

Glossy photos that aren't clickable (or searchable) serve no purpose. Make sure all product photos and videos on your website and social media posts bear shoppable tags that allow the customer to see pricing and product information upon hover, and feature URLS that lead to the corresponding product pages.

Finally, **perform an audit of your product pages.** What information is missing? How can you use visual content to help customers make decisions more confidently?

If your product is complex and/or customizable, a configurator is a must. If texture, color and aesthetics are important considerations in the purchase decision, include a video that highlights the product from different angles, photos that can be zoomed in and out, and user-generated content that shows the product in use.

Improve product discoverability through visual search, image SEO and curation

Visual search provides an alternate method for users to find product listings on your site using images while also improving your site's SEO. While your internal visual search engine is powered by a machine learning algorithm using image labels that don't affect SEO directly, comprehensive visual search also means improving your image SEO rankings on Google and other search engines so that your products will appear in visual searches performed outside of your website. This means you must **pay attention to image discoverability within your site as well as general SEO searchability**.

Finally, don't forget about curation. If you're a general purpose retailer with goods spanning numerous product categories, or you offer specialty or niche products such as an ergonomic gaming chair or sleep tracking device, **consider offering curation pages that group items by theme or creating a digital assistant** for your homepage to help users find the right items. Beyond improving product discoverability, curation also serves as inspirational content when it comes to lifestyle items such as home goods or apparel.
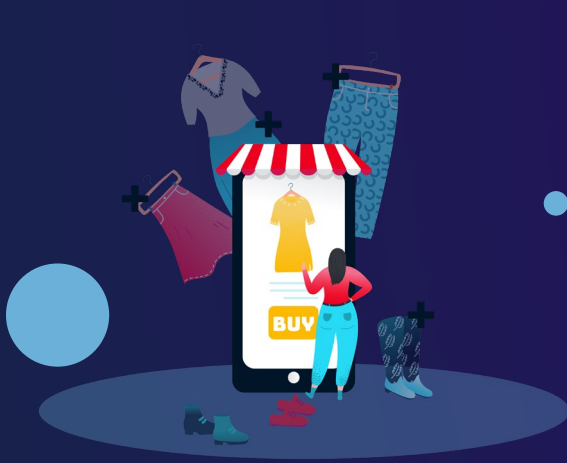
Use cross-selling and upselling tactfully

Visual commerce allows brands to **seamlessly upsell and cross-sell**. For example, product configurators can feature add-ons or premium features that would otherwise be hard to sell using only text or photos. **When a customer can assemble a product virtually and personalize it, they assume a sense of ownership before they've even purchased it, and are more likely to be receptive to upgrading.** Also, staging related items together in inspirational photos and videos helps with cross-selling, provided they are properly tagged and linked to product pages.

Think of visual commerce as a strategy for building a relationship

While the ultimate goal of visual commerce is to increase sales and reduce returns, your content strategy should focus on attracting new customers and engaging with existing ones. Even if you're trying to solve a specific business problem using visual commerce, such as 'Reduce cart abandonment by 50%,' remember that **content strategy is about the long haul, not generating an immediate sale**.

Case in point: User-generated content isn't always shoppable, as customers don't necessarily tag items the way a retailer would, and so doesn't necessarily result in an immediate sale, but it's so important to nurturing organic leads. **Focus on offering genuine advice and value-added content**, but in a way that plays up your brand and furthers your marketing objectives. How-to content that turns out to be sales-y will only fuel negative sentiment towards your brand.

Remember that visual commerce is not just about inbound marketing, like nurturing leads and driving up engagement metrics on social media; you can also use it to s**olve specific business problems** such as high bounce rate, cart abandonment or excessive returns. These metrics indicate that **something is missing from your ecommerce experience—often, it's a lack of information or poor product searchability.**

Above all else, visual commerce elevates the digital commerce by bringing products to life. As commerce technology evolves, the power to deliver interactive and immersive experiences to customers will always put you ahead of the competition.

ZOOVU

Gets it.

Zoovu is the next generation digital commerce search platform that merges context and meaning across channels to help brands and retailers have rich, personalized conversations with their customers.

Zoovu's proprietary AI naturally understands and speaks the customer's language by turning technical specs into an easy-to-understand conversation. Ultimately adapting to the customer's conversation style to help better engage, educate and empower them in making purchase decisions in the moments that matter. With Zoovu's world-class semantic library you can easily interpret the context and intent behind your customers' every search.

More than 3,500 brands and retailers use Zoovu to engage, educate and empower shoppers to find and buy the right product, including Amazon, P&G, Whirlpool and Microsoft. Zoovu operates worldwide in 500+ product categories, across all languages.

www.zoovu.com