COVID-19 is driving visual commerce experiences

by Thomas R. Cutler

Visual commerce leader Chris Beaudin of ATLATL Software tells the US manufacturing journalist, Thomas R. Cutler how COVID-19 is now affecting our buying processes.

TRC: Before COVID-19, how were visual experiences inspiring interest, driving demand, and creating a path to purchase in today’s digital economies?

CB: “Visual Experiences” tie together the waking moments of our lives. We ingest visual information at an incredible rate and brands that capitalise on this will see greater success. Look at the rise of social platforms like Instagram, or how others that preceded it like Facebook have all evolved towards visuals as the core component of communication. Imagery really does speak so much louder than words. And thus, companies who’ve embraced this have seen much broader interest, much stronger demand, and a much smoother path to purchase than their competitors who haven’t.

TRC: And since COVID-19 how have evolving enterprises modified their Visual Commerce customer outreach?

CB: The number of companies reliant on online customer interact (B2C, B2B, D2C) is only growing during COVID-19. The explosion of media and brand content has a direct connection to the smartphones in our pockets. Access at all times has democratised information and exposed us to a competitive world of available options. Within today’s digital age, there are new demands on sellers. Instead of physical experiences, consumers prefer virtual ones. We consume through a screen, thus as sellers, we must think differently about how we present our products.

TRC: How does the “Visual Buying Experience” work in practical terms?

CB: A customer intending to purchase a vehicle, for example, will perform 80% or more of their decision-making via research online. From viewing existing inventory at each location and getting information on available models, pre-COVID-19 buyers still had to go to the dealer to get a feel for the car. But that was then.
Now the Visual Commerce buying experience can be so much better. From the comfort of my couch to touch-free dealer to door delivery of new car, the buying experience is accelerated and transformed. Buyers are immersed in a visually rich, inspirational experience that had me envisioning a family ski trip, weekends on the beach, and long drives through the country.

I could picture the easiest grocery pickup ever, complete with an organiser keeping all our produce safe and stowed away. I was buying the visual experience these automakers were offering. Every step of Visual Commerce creates a well-crafted buyer journey presenting more engaging content and ways to experience the product. I was able to do digitally what I used to do physically.

**TRC: What impact is COVID-19 having in accelerating the visual journey?**

CB: Brands are recognising the urgent need to offer the digital version of what we used to do in the brick & mortar locations during COVID-19. Days are focused on creating impactful visual experiences because the convenience of online shopping will almost always win with the house-bound consumer.

That said, the experiences digital offers have to meet the high expectations of these consumers. Automakers were early to recognise this as they sell a high dollar product where the purchase decision relies on emotion as much as it does rationale.

**TRC: How has ATLATL Software developed its position in Visual Commerce?**

CB: We think about the customer experience and welcome potential customers by focusing on leveraging product visualisation across the visual landscape to ensure we communicate effectively and meet the high expectations of prospects. ATLATL Software has taken a role as we evolved web-first shoppers, to the strong demand for visual experiences. A photograph would have sufficed in the past, but the consumer base is now more sophisticated with higher expectations.

**TRC: How has the visual experience migrated to a more sophisticated consumer?**

CB: There’s been an evolution from static photography to video to now interactive visualisation to best represent products. To understand this evolution we have to look at each type of visual experience.

Static visual experiences included any 2D still images either captured in traditional photography or through CGI (Computer Generated Imagery). Traditional photography is great when you are on location, when you want people in the scene, or you are capturing an event.

CGI is better for instances when you have digital models of a product and would like to benefit from the ability to easily update and edit the image over time. These products can be siloed to focus just on the product or placed into a scene. When executed well, CGI can be incredibly difficult to distinguish from the real thing.

“Motion” based imagery shows a captured sequence of a product in action, usually through videos or product GIFs. Presenting products in motion could be as simple as a brief demo reel,
but also include more elaborate productions with full studio quality. Motion is great for
creating inspiration as well as answering more of the buyer’s expectations than merely showing
a static picture of it.

Interactive product experiences include the best of both. With 3D interactive product
presentation, the buyer is now in the driver seat. Empowered to control their own process, the
buyer can navigate a journey that feels personal to them.

No longer constrained by how static images and video control their viewing, the buyer has the
ability to view and configure a product to best meet their expectations. This becomes possible
through platforms like ATLATL Visual, which leverages a company’s product models to create
buyer-centric interfaces for greater commerce experiences.

**TRC:** Since we are all data-driven, what has led to the rapid adoption of Visual Commerce?

**CB:** Visual is the most powerful of the senses with 60,000X faster processing of information
through sight. Ninety percent of the information we capture is through what we see and 65%
learn most effectively through visual cues. There is a 43% increase in conversion through visual
cues and 323% better performance when people can follow visual cues.

**TRC:** How does all the Visual Commerce convert to sales?

**CB:** Eighty-six percent of consumers will pay more for a brand offering a better experience and
80% of consumers will pay more for personalised experience. It all forms a winning sales
combination with a 40% increase in conversion rate with visual experiences, as well as a 24%
increase in sales efficiency accompanied by a 30% reduction in sales costs.

**TRC:** What is the Visual Commerce adoption prognosis with so many unknown variables in
the evolving enterprise?

**CB:** Since no one knows the duration of long-term social distancing, it is clear that the growth of
Visual Commerce will increase exponentially faster than initial forecast in 2020. Since a visual
experience is much faster than the thousand words it may take to describe products buyers are
able to see exactly what they are buying with heightened accuracy and confidence.

**TRC:** Are there any other obvious benefits to Visual Commerce?

**CB:** Yes, product returns are significantly reduced because the visual buying experience has
already enabled customers to address questions. Reducing returns must be calculated into the
ROI value proposition. Furthermore, they get visual confirmation of the options and
customisations they make rather than having to assume they chose correctly.

**TRC:** Does COVID-19 spell the end of retail?

**CB:** Before COVID-19 studies reported that with each 1% increase in online penetration, 8,000-
8,500 stores will need to close. And there are no signs that online shopping will slow. In fact,
the average household spent $5,200 online last year, which is up 50% from just five years
earlier. During COVID-19 that will double again since no one knows when (or if) some retailers will simply close their doors forever.

Before COVID-19, in the US 9,200 stores closed last year, and experts predicted upwards of 75,000 more stores will close by 2026. That number will also double.

This mass exodus away from retail is a transformational shift in our economy that will have to be addressed by companies of all categories. The question that remains is who will be amongst the group that embraces change and begins to offer new, digitally based, visual product experiences, and survives this shift.

But the truth is, many will not survive. As evidenced by the continued increase in store closings, what started with eCommerce will continue. But there is a new hope for those still seeking a way to thrive in this new digital world.

**3 STEP BUYERS JOURNEY**

1 | SEARCH & SELECT
2 | MAKE IT THEIR OWN
3 | BUY & RECEIVE

**TRC: What are the biggest mistakes for companies entering Visual Commerce?**

CB: Enterprise teams are making the leap and investing in a great new way to sell products. Frequently sales and marketing staff work with an outside agency to design a beautiful interface and construct some sort of backend. They complete the project and companies are stuck with something that cannot be scaled.

It is critical to investigate platforms that specialise in offering visual solutions to meet evolving business needs. A platform provider will continue to work beyond the launch of a static launch, adding new product lines, editing current offering, and streamlining integrations. All of this can occur while continually working to improve the platform with new features that make the offering even better.
TRC: Are there any final Visual Commerce thoughts?

CB: Before and certainly during COVID-19 we know that a 3-dimensional, interactive, visual product presentation is simply the best way to sell products in the digital age.