Why Visual AI is the NEXT FRONTIER of E-commerce
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Introduction

The continued rise of e-commerce has been turbo-charged by the effects of the pandemic. With so many stores closed, and with consumers wary of being in crowded places, previously reluctant online shoppers have been forced to take the plunge into online shopping. At the same time, people who were already fans of e-commerce have been buying online more often, and from more categories, than ever before.

The surge in online sales has been the savior of many retailers and brands, many of whom would otherwise have been forced out of business in the past year.

In many markets and categories, a decade of digital development has been compressed into a single year. But effects of the pandemic on e-commerce go way beyond scale and pace. They have created a ‘new normal’ for online shopping.

The crisis has challenged and changed notions of loyalty. Unable to shop in the way they wanted and for the items they preferred, consumers have been driven to try new things and new approaches. And, as the dust eventually begins to settle, many of these new habits and preferences will stick.

Brands that won first-time customers during the pandemic are now working hard to hang on to them. And those brands that, before the virus struck, thought they’d already won customers for the long haul, but saw them move away when times were tough, are now having to work just as hard to win them back.

Even as “normal” shopping resumes – and eMarketer predicts that e-commerce growth in the US, for instance, will slow to 8% as stores reopen in 2021, down from 2020’s 18% – this will be anything but business as usual.
Tipping point

E-commerce has reached a critical moment, but not in terms of user numbers or even vendor participation. This is a tipping point that’s all about the user experience.

As consumers regain the option of shopping at physical stores or from any number of online brands and retailers, every online vendor faces an opportunity – and one they have little choice but to pursue.

They need to become more memorable, more intuitive, offer a near-frictionless experience, and they need to be more adept at getting the right products in front of the right people, fast.

Just as brick-and-mortar stores are searching for ways to revitalize the physical shopping experience, online stores should be creating unparalleled digital customer experiences.

They must play to the strengths of a digital platform, providing personalization, efficiency, and inspiration in ways that will simultaneously delight shoppers, drive sales, and foster long-term loyalty.

This focus on the customer experience is no longer optional. In the “new normal”, consumers will shop almost anywhere – once. But the brands they’ll return to again and again will be the ones that emerge as winners.

The days of great customer experiences being a differentiator are numbered. They’re now table stakes. In an omni-channel and omni-choice world, great is no longer good enough.

Exceptional experiences must be the goal, and that’s what we’re here to talk about in this report.

Because not only is this a world of near-infinite consumer choice, it’s a world of infinite inspiration.

Newsfeeds, discovery pages, ads, and other streams of curated, personalized content are never more than a click away. The average American, for instance, spends over two hours a day on social media; In China, it’s about the same.

In this context, brands and retailers are looking for ways that technology can help them create the kind of experiences that build sales and loyalty, and the good news is: there’s help at hand.

This report, created by WPP and visual AI specialists Syte, introduces the way that one layer of technology in particular – visual artificial intelligence, or visual AI – can help e-commerce brands and retailers thrive despite all the challenges they face.

Visual AI can help them not only survive, but also generate some amazing results.

We’ll explain what visual AI is and show some of the exciting ways it’s being used to create memorable, friction-free customer experiences that spark engagement and lead to higher conversion rates, bigger baskets, and stronger loyalty.

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Visual AI is a field of computer science that trains machines to make sense of images in much the same way as people do.

With the help of computer vision and image-recognition technology, machines don’t just “see”; they are actually able to assign meaning to images and the objects within them.

Visual AI can “spot” an item within an image and categorize it as a dress, a ring, or a lamp by comparing each item to images it has previously seen, just as a person would. Not only that, visual AI can identify colors, shapes, styles and incredible levels of detail, like the cut of a neckline or even the level of distressing on a pair of jeans.

It works because AI engines are trained by “looking at” hundreds of thousands of categorized and labeled images. The visual AI engine then processes and learns from every pixel, so it can refine and expand its understanding of different objects.

This matters because it enables retailers to enrich their product data with additional details that can be used to improve anything from site search to personalization.

As a result, it also helps consumers and retailers move away from the somewhat clunky experience that text-only search involves, based on terms like “formal black skirt”.

Visual AI enables shoppers to find products that look like items that have caught their eye online or in the real world, without them having to find the right words to describe them.

In fact, when a visual AI search engine sees the kind of things a shopper clicks on in a session, and the items they avoid, it can see details and identify preferences at a level of detail that shoppers themselves wouldn’t think to type in a search bar.

For the shopper, it’s quick and intuitive, and it provides them with a new way to discover and buy that provides not just a pain-free experience but an outstanding one – one they want to come back for. And that’s great news for retailers and brands.

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**This is big business.**

The value of the AI image recognition market in 2020 was $1.7 billion, and it is expected to reach $5.2 billion by 2026.
Of all the applications for visual AI in e-commerce, perhaps the most critical is its ability to transform the product discovery experience. After all, if people don’t quickly find what they want on a website, they move on, regardless of whatever else a brand might have to offer.

Product discovery includes searching for a particular item, as well as casually browsing until inspiration (or a well-trained visual AI engine) strikes. In both cases, the goal for the online retailer is to present the most relevant products for each customer at just the right moment.

As a result, they expect all content – e-commerce sites included – to be as curated, individualized, and inspirational as their social feeds are. Not only that, but they also anticipate a smooth transition from eyeing a top they want to buy on Instagram, to finding it on their favorite retailer’s website.

Across all age groups, 61% of shoppers say search and navigation is the single most important part of the e-commerce experience, ahead of fast shipping, flexible returns or even exceptional products.

Visual AI is therefore a game-changer for brands seeking to improve their product discovery experience.
Three ways visual AI aids serendipity

No two shoppers are alike, and each time a shopper visits a website, they bring with them a new context. A mother may set out to find a suit for her son one day and a couch for her living room the next. She may have a specific style in mind or need some inspiration.

Visual AI powers a variety of personalized discovery pathways that lead customers to the ideal products for them – taking into account their unique context at that moment.

It serves as the backbone for effective and intuitive product discovery, setting the tone for a stellar customer experience that drives purchases and repeat business. Here’s how.

Visual Discovery Journeys

Shopping often goes hand-in-hand with inspiration. A shopper might see a necklace on a friend or in an ad, for instance, and they set out to find something similar.

What they’re looking for might be tough to put into words, but visual AI allows shoppers to upload an image – one they’ve found online or a picture they’ve snapped themselves – and begin their search without needing to describe what they like.

An online retailer can offer visual-AI-powered image search, then present search results from their inventory that look as close as possible to the shopper’s uploaded image. Alternatively, similar items can be displayed in personalized product recommendation carousels so shoppers can see at a glance what’s available.

Once a shopper starts clicking on items, the search engine learns their visual preferences – without them needing to type “I don’t like visible zips” or “I like tops to be off-the-shoulder” – and refines the range it presents.
A term coined to link "search" with "merchandising," searchandising is part of the essential infrastructure of an e-commerce site, and is intrinsic to delivering an amazing shopping experience. It begins with detailed and consistent product tags – or metadata – and this is where visual AI shines.

Visual AI technology can scan images of every item in a store’s inventory and automatically assign detailed product tags, cataloging the style, material, embellishments, color, and more. With this advanced method of product tagging, consistency is ensured, and all product attribute synonyms are accounted for, creating a uniquely rich database for search as well as inventory analysis.

If a shopper searches for "navy blue work pants," for example, visual-AI-enhanced search will return results for products that are relevant – regardless of how they are named in the catalogue. The shopper will see both "midnight blue trousers" and "dark blue slacks", rather than receiving a "no results" page and leaving the site in frustration.

This allows brands to enjoy the full potential of search-generated revenue. Shoppers who search on an e-commerce site are typically two to three times more likely than other browsers to convert to a sale. Solutions that rely exclusively on text-based tagging risk driving these goal-oriented shoppers away.

Traditional e-commerce personalization relies on behavioral and demographic data, placing shoppers into broad segments based on what they are most likely to want to purchase. While this can produce helpful product suggestions, it’s a far cry from true, one-to-one personalization.

Visual AI unlocks an entirely new data set that can be used to make more relevant product recommendations for each shopper: the visual details of the items they view.

Traditional personalization will understand that a shopper clicked on a brown couch, and will recommend items that other people who clicked on that couch went on to buy. But personalization powered by visual AI will understand that the brown couch was also a two-seater, high-backed, tufted, leather, and had brass studs. Based on these details, it can ascertain a shopper’s aesthetic taste, in real time, and recommend items with similar characteristics.

The result is not just a vastly improved customer experience – and McKinsey research in 2020 found that 80% of shoppers want retailers to personalize their retail experiences – but also a much greater likelihood they will buy.
Now, it’s essential, and not just because it generates sales in the short term. What matters even more than making a sale today is the effect of a shopping experience on long-term brand loyalty.

A key element of customer experience (or CX) is discovery. Or, to put it another way, a delightful discovery experience can be the driver of loyalty.

**The loyalty shock**

With so many options to choose from, particularly post-pandemic, consumers just won’t tolerate poor product discovery experiences. They expect that brands will understand their unique tastes and immediate needs in order to offer products that perfectly fit the bill.

Brands that don’t hyper-personalize their product discovery experiences to align with their customers’ preferences in the moment will fall behind in 2021.

With the pandemic throwing normal shopping routines up in the air for most people, habits of a lifetime have been broken. When the dust settles, they may reform, they may not.

This break in transmission has enabled some brands to pick up new users, and success will be the result of retaining those newly acquired customers.

McKinsey research shows there’s a strong intention among many consumers to continue with new online shopping activity that began during the pandemic.

“In many major European markets, over half of all people say they adopted new digital shopping habits and 65% or more (up to 88% in some markets) plan to keep these habits up. It’s a similar story in the US, Brazil and the largest Asian markets.”
The value of devotion

Every customer is to be treasured, of course, but it’s the most loyal customers who are like gold dust to brands and retailers.

That’s because it’s the small proportion of loyal, repeat customers who bring in the most sales. In fact, the loyal minority is so devoted that 39.4% of loyal customers will spend more on a product even if there are cheaper alternatives available. And 60% will recommend the brands they’re loyal to, to family members and friends.

Bain & Company has found that loyal customers’ willingness actually grows over time; apparel shoppers spend 67% more per order after shopping with a brand for 2.5 years, compared to their average cart size in the first six months.

And consider this: on average, a shopper’s fifth purchase was 40% larger than the first, and the 10th purchase was nearly 80% larger than the first.

Delivering delight

Earning loyalty is usually a long-term operation involving membership programs, targeted sales and discounts, retargeting campaigns, and more. But none of that will lead to loyalty if the customer experience is a flop.

A consumer shift towards focusing on the value of experiences over products was under way before the world was thrown into COVID chaos; that’s been accelerated as people re-evaluate what really matters to them. Life’s too short to waste it on frustrating or joyless experiences.

The link between shopping, delightful discovery and loyalty is simple: when shoppers can easily find items that suit their tastes, it’s logical that they’ll enjoy the experience, are likely to spend more, and will come back again.
There’s strong evidence showing that on-site technology that makes the browsing and shopping process a pleasure has clear links to sales and loyalty.

Shoppers who engaged with on-site tech, including image search and recommendation engines, to assist in product discovery have a 12% higher retention rate as compared to other high-intent shoppers.

Even within the first 30 days after their purchase, they spend 19% more with the site than the average shopper.

That’s because product discovery technology helps smooth the journey from product search to purchase, or casual browsing to buying. Shoppers walk (or click) away with a satisfying purchase – and the feeling that the brand “gets” them and their needs.

It feels as personalized and effortless as using social media because the experience is tailored to their preferences with minimal effort from the shopper. They discover and buy products in the same way they live their lives: instantly, intuitively, and visually.

Technology really shines when it feels less like technology and more like humanity. When it “understands” and responds appropriately.

Visual AI amplifies a brand’s ability to personalize experiences and recommendations in the way that a close friend or smart sales associate might do at a store. By going beyond statistics and segmentation, and acting a lot like a human eye, it understands the nearly imperceptible details that draw a shopper to a particular item or style.

It then merges that information with current shopper intent, context, and user behavior to recommend the right products at the right time, exactly like a seasoned and perceptive personal shopper. Human, minus the risk of human error.

This happy experience prompts shoppers to return for their next purchase, and the one after.
This is just the beginning of what might be described as a “hyper-personalized” customer experience, one that tailors every aspect of a shopper’s journey to their preferences.

In addition to personalizing the navigation and discovery experience on screen with visual AI, it should soon be possible to have websites adjust their color scheme and layout to align with a user’s mood. Calm blues when you’re having a stressful day, perhaps.

A lifelike avatar version of each shopper could model selected items to show exactly what they’ll look like on that person, and when the package arrives, it could be wrapped in recycled packaging with a drop of lavender to recreate the calming mood of the shopping moment.

Imagine this: you’re out walking and approach a bus stop fitted with an interactive smart mirror. It analyzes what you’re wearing and recommends products and accessories that match your styling.

If the mirror is linked with a brand whose app you use, you might get a push notification with a ready-made wishlist.

“True personalization is multisensory, omnichannel, and intuitive. That’s where visual AI shines, and it’s what keeps consumers coming back.”
The Business Impact: A Boon for Forward-Thinking Brands

Here are four key ways that visual AI can boost a retail brand, both in the short and long term:

**Engagement**

When shoppers can find products that suit their exact tastes and preferences with speed and ease, it follows that they’ll engage and spend more. What’s more, brands that go the extra mile to offer innovative technology that improves their customer experience earn a reputation as market leaders in a hyper-competitive industry.

Data from visual AI specialist Syte shows that among serious shoppers who are viewing between three and 10 pages per session, those using visual-AI-powered product discovery tools spend 61% more time on site than non-users.

**Data from**

*Visual AI specialist Syte shows that among serious shoppers who are viewing between three and 10 pages per session, those using visual-AI-powered product discovery tools spend 61% more time on site than non-users.*
Conversion rates

Syte data shows that online retailers using visual-AI-powered product discovery technology see a five-fold uplift in conversion rates because shoppers are quickly presented with the specific items they want to buy.

This applies to e-commerce sites using tools such as visual search, AI-enhanced searchandising software, and visual AI personalization solutions.

For brands with unique inventory challenges, such as second-hand retailers that have only one of each item in stock, the impact can be even greater.

In these cases, shoppers are likely to struggle with searching through thousands of products and even when they find it, might not find it in their size.

Visual-AI-powered product discovery tools prevent these shoppers from dropping off the site before finding what they want.

In fact, recycled fashion retailer White Rose found that shoppers using visual-AI-enhanced site search tools converted at almost seven times the rate of the average shopper.

Basket sizes

Not only are shoppers using visual AI tools more likely to buy something, they’re more likely to spend more.

Average order value rises by 16% for shoppers using visual AI technology, essentially because shoppers quickly find more of the things they like.

Average revenue per user also rises, by as much as 480%, according to Syte.

Repeat visits

As shoppers learn that they can easily find what they’re looking for on a particular site, whether via visual search or AI-driven product recommendations, they’re more likely to return and spend more with a brand over time.

Syte’s data analysis from July-December 2020 found that compared to other high-intent shoppers, those who engaged with on-site product discovery tools were 12% more likely to return and shop again in just the first 30 days.

They also spent more when they came back; those shoppers who used visual discovery technologies spent 19% more money with the site in the 30 days following their initial experience.
Fast Facts

ON THE IMPACT OF VISUAL AI

5X
UPLIFT IN CONVERSION RATES WHEN USING VISUAL-AI-POWERED PRODUCT DISCOVERY SOLUTIONS

16%
RISE IN AVERAGE ORDER VALUE

480%
BOOST TO AVERAGE REVENUE PER USER

12%
HIGHER RATES OF RETURNING TO SHOP IN FIRST 30 DAYS AFTER USING VISUAL AI TOOLS

19%
MORE MONEY SPENT WITH A BRAND/RETAILER IN FIRST 30 DAYS AFTER USING VISUAL DISCOVERY TECHNOLOGY

Source: Syte data, 2020

Why Visual AI is the Next Frontier for E-commerce
Seeing is believing – the impact of visual AI in the real world

The effect that visual AI can have on e-commerce sites’ conversion rates, basket sizes and retention rates is best illustrated with real world examples.

The following three retailers are in very different sectors of the retail industry, but all have seen the value of visual AI in improving their customers’ experience – and their own bottom line.

**Signet Jewellers UK** is the business behind two well-known UK high street jewelry retailers, H. Samuel and Ernest Jones. When the pandemic forced its 450 stores to close, Signet focused on improving its e-commerce experience for shoppers.

With thousands of products to choose from and limited screen space in which to display them, the retailer set out to make more of its jewelry easily discoverable online, simplifying and streamlining the shopper experience. And, as 70% of Signet UK’s mobile traffic lands on product detail and listing pages directly, they were determined to increase engagement and reduce bounce rates from these pages.

Signet partnered with Syte to add a range of visual AI-powered tools to its sites, including Camera Search and a Discovery Button, which enables shoppers to click on any item pictured on-site and be directed to all similar-looking products in stock.

It also added a “Shop Similar” recommendation carousel, simplifying product discovery for goal-oriented shoppers and browsers alike. When mobile shoppers landed on a product listing or detail page, they could use the Discovery Button to find similar items, refine their search and arrive at the perfect piece.

Since deploying visual AI tools, Signet has reduced its bounce rates and significantly improved conversion rates and e-commerce revenue.

“We were determined to not only ensure shoppers find what they’re looking for on our websites, but to make that process feel premium and friction-free. After implementing Syte’s solutions, our shoppers were able to quickly and easily find the pieces they wanted, improving CX and increasing revenue.”

Matthew Gratze, Director of Digital, Signet Jewellers UK

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**Image:**

6.8X

**HIGHER CVR**

17.7%

**UPLIFT IN AOV**

584.5%

**INCREASE IN ARPU**
Online retailer PrettyLittleThing (PLT) is a global fashion destination primarily targeting young women, best known for its collaborations with online influencers.

The brand had more than 12.4 million followers on Instagram and 2 million likes on its Facebook page. Its challenge was to leverage that social media reach to improve product discoverability, increase conversion and boost loyalty.

A visual AI Camera Search funnel featuring social media images to inspire shoppers was added, a move that led to a 43% click-through-rate on search results.

Educational posts on social media about the availability of Camera Search—using social media pictures or shoppers’ own photos—were used to increase use of visual search.

The result was a much better customer experience and massive revenue growth.

Coleman Furniture is a pioneer of online home decor and wanted to make its online-only customer experience as immersive and engaging as in-store shopping. It wanted the experience to be compelling, individualized, and to give shoppers the confidence to buy furniture online.

With an inventory of 100,000+ items, Coleman faced the additional challenge of connecting shoppers of all age groups, and with varying tastes, to the pieces that best matched their style.

The task was to simplify the shopping journey by providing on-point recommendations for shoppers who had something fairly specific in mind. Coleman also wanted to introduce shoppers to inspiring products, even if they didn’t know what they wanted.

Working with Syte, Coleman added Camera Search, so browsers could quickly look up items they have seen but don’t know how to describe. There was also a Discovery Button, and the ability to “Shop Similar” items and “Shop the Look”, enabling them to find complementary items and decorate entire rooms from a single image.

This not only made it quicker and easier for shoppers to find items that matched their preferences, but also encouraged them to buy more than just the item they had in mind. The results?

“...make it as simple as possible for customers to shop and find both products they are looking for and the products they want but didn’t know existed. As soon as we partnered with Syte, customers could easily find products they love, and conversion and AOV increased significantly.”

Michael Stein, Head of e-commerce at Coleman Furniture

Online retailer PrettyLittleThing (PLT) is a global fashion destination primarily targeting young women, best known for its collaborations with online influencers.

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The result was a much better customer experience and massive revenue growth.
The onward march of technology tends to throw up what has become a familiar tension for brands and consumers – between delivering a personalized experience and protecting personal privacy.

Naturally, this also applies to experiences powered by visual AI. One of the most pressing questions retailers have is whether visual AI solutions collect personal shopper data. The answer to this is that trusted visual AI vendors should not collect or store any personal data from shoppers -- this includes images uploaded to image search tools.

Instead, they use anonymized data already collected by the retailer in order to enable real-time optimization of the customer experience. One of the great advantages of visual AI solutions is that they can rely on a wealth of product data, like cut, color, etc., rather than personal data, to provide better experiences.

Since brands and retailers today are also making ongoing efforts to ensure GDPR and CCPA compliance, it’s important to note that visual AI vendors that operate in the manner described above are compliant with both GDPR and California privacy law regulations.
Where do you start?

Headache-free tech deployment

For retailers, deploying visual AI technology should be quick and easy.

A vast e-commerce site with a catalogue of hundreds of thousands of items can be given a visual AI upgrade in a matter of weeks, with the right vendors.

This would include indexing its entire product feed and adding visual discovery, searchandising, and hyper-personalization tools.

Tagging a site’s entire inventory using visual AI – to identify the colors, styles and materials used – is all automated. There is no human/manual tagging involved, which makes it fast and pain-free.

Deploying visual AI technology does not involve a complete overhaul of a retailer’s existing site, nor does it require any site down time.

Solutions can usually be integrated via API, JavaScript, and e-commerce platform plug-ins.

What to look for

The potential rewards of deploying visual AI are big – both in terms of winning immediate sales as well as building customer loyalty.

Given that success in this field is all about improving the shopper experience – and going beyond simply “good enough” – it’s essential that retailers consider carefully the credentials of visual AI technology vendors when deciding who to partner with.

Beating rather than meeting retailer and shopper expectations should be the goal.

Speed of service and cost are obviously key considerations, but the accuracy of a technology supplier’s image recognition and matching capabilities must be paramount.

After all, a visual search solution that returns irrelevant results, or product recommendations that miss the mark, can do more harm than good.

Beyond that, retailers should consider a tech supplier who can provide all the AI-enabled product discovery capabilities available, from visual and text search to product recommendations and smart merchandising.
About Syte

Syte, WPP’s partner in producing this report, is a visual-AI-powered Product Discovery Platform serving retail clients all over the world.

Syte’s visual AI algorithms were developed by the CERN physicist who led the AI efforts instrumental in the discovery of the Higgs boson particle.

The company’s co-founder and chief technology officer, Dr. Helge Voss, now applies his expertise in neural networks and machine learning to enable Syte to develop and refine its highly accurate visual AI technology. Syte’s tools use visual AI to create intuitive search and discovery experiences for all types of shoppers.

Product offering

Syte’s solutions include visual and text search, automated product tagging, personalized recommendation carousels, and more. Each solution uses unique data generated by visual AI to help shoppers find the most relevant products.

Syte’s solutions are split into three “suites” that work together:
The Visual Discovery Suite helps shoppers find items they love via Camera Search as well as “Shop Similar” and “Shop the Look” product recommendation carousels, which use visual AI to suggest similar and complementary items. There’s also the Discovery Button, which makes every product image shoppable by letting shoppers click through to find similar items to anything pictured in a given photo.

The Searchandising Suite includes Deep Tagging, which automates product tagging and adds many new, detailed attributes to each item using visual AI to create a richer database for search and analysis; Automated Product Descriptions that leverage the AI-generated tags; and Augmented Site Search, which uses the AI-enriched product tags combined with natural language processing and smart merchandising rules to provide the most accurate and high-converting search results for shoppers.

The Hyper-Personalization Suite includes Personalized Product Recommendations and a flexible API. This can be used by retailers to create personalized emails and even personalized collections of products to send to customers, perhaps as part of a subscription model. By linking real-time behavioral data and visual AI, retailers can predict the products most likely to delight each shopper in real time.

The solutions in each of Syte’s suites are managed and customized through a central Discovery Console, which provides full data visibility, deep analytics, A/B testing tools, as well as smart merchandising rules and ranking strategies.

What’s Next?

To discuss how visual AI might work for your business or your clients, contact:

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Why Visual AI is the Next Frontier for E-commerce