

# Visual Experiences That Connect

A look at the power of UGC and the tech needed to support it

As a rule, brands seek to understand their target audience, demographics and all, before creating content or launching a campaign. With intensifying competition for consumer time and attention, the stakes for communicating relevancy to your intended audience have never been higher. To wield a positive influence and succeed in business, you must know who you're speaking to and reach them with content that resonates.

As a start, figure out the lifestyles of those people by answering these questions:

What are their hobbies and preferences?

What opportunities excite them?

Who do they trust?

What challenges do they routinely face?

How do they spend their time and money?

The better you get to know your target buyers' personas, the more effective your marketing efforts will be because you'll strike the right tone, deliver clear messages, and present captivating visuals. Simultaneously, you should lean on that same group of people to fuel the content pipeline for marketing efforts.

This white paper discusses the rising importance of user-generated content (UGC) and the methods for leveraging it to promote your brand in a highly visual, digital landscape.

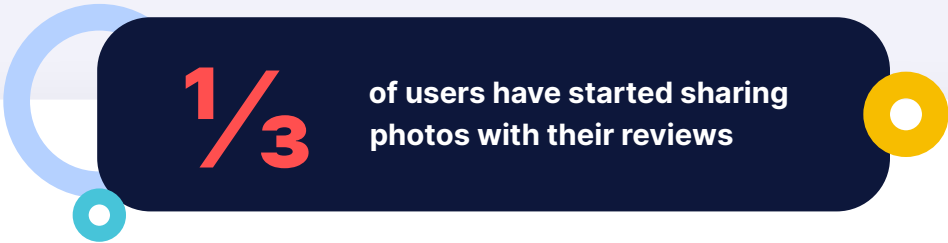
## Definition of User-Generated Content (UGC)

As its name implies, UGC is content not created by your brand or company, but by the users of your product or service: shoppers, customers, viewers, visitors, members, or clients. They have the power to become your most fervent advocates, marketers, and salespeople. For this reason, users that voluntarily create—and share—visual content on your behalf is an invaluable resource.

## UGC's Tremendous Influence

Because humans are social creatures who seek social connections, we instinctively want to share our experiences and seek affirmation as we make our way through day-to-day decisions. Word of mouth is arguably one of the most effective and natural marketing vehicles. Its power is like catching lightning in a bottle; thus, those who rave about your brand are shouldering part of the heavy lifting of marketing for you.

Data consistently shows that today's consumers trust peer content more than brand-created content. A July 2020 study from Visual Objects found that "when asked to compare screenshots of a brand's UGC versus branded content, survey respondents chose the UGC option on Instagram for both Starbucks and clothing brand Aerie." Sixty percent of those surveyed preferred Aerie's UGC image to its branded post. Only 39 percent of the respondents said Starbucks' branded content was more influential than its UGC.

**1/3**

of users have started sharing  
photos with their reviews

Which, if any, of the following  
types of content have you  
personally created and posted  
about your experiences with  
products and services?

**45%**

RATINGS

**45%**

REVIEWS

**32%**

PHOTOS

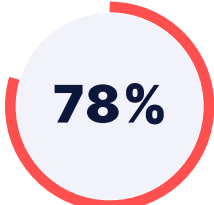
## Gen X, Gen Z and Millennials

are most likely to create content about their  
experiences with products and services.

**78%** of respondents from Germany  
or the U.K. reported creating some  
kind of content compared to **73%**  
of respondents from the U.S.

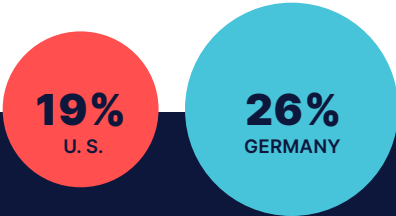
**73%**

U. S.

**78%**

U. K. / GERMANY

While what was being created was generally similar across all three  
countries surveyed, status updates on social media was the option  
that differed the most between Germany (**19%**) and the U.S. (**26%**)

**19%**  
U. S.**26%**  
GERMANY

In summary, UGC matters a great deal because:

**It impresses viewers with a level of the brand's authenticity that cannot be attained through brand-originated content.** IAB

reports that "86 percent of consumers say that authenticity is important when deciding what brands they like and support."

**It more accurately represents your product or service in real life.** A recent ResearchScape

survey found that 67 percent of people globally turn to fellow buyers' reviews that have images and videos when selecting a product.

**It spells consumer relatability, which is convincing.** If you

realize that you share common ground with someone or see yourself reflected in the visuals a brand displays, that resonates.

## Challenges Faced When Managing UGC

The three main challenges in managing UGC include initial creation, the ongoing moderation, and eventual delivery to the final consumer touchpoint. Let's explore each briefly.

### UGC Creation

This step in the process is where customers or users initially generate and upload their content into whatever interface is usable for the brand. Brands should provide an intuitive and smooth way in which to contribute.

If asking consumers to share content via an online portal or user review form, you can include some parameters or guidelines about the content you'd like to receive. But in order to make the creation process frictionless, you don't want to provide too many stipulations, or you'll risk users opting not to create anything at all.

In sourcing UGC from social channels, be mindful of if and how you can pull content from users' personal feeds. If a brand is tagged or mentioned, or, especially, if a campaign's hashtag is in the caption, that's usually permission enough to leverage and promote the UGC.

### UGC Moderation

Before any UGC goes live, you must moderate the content, whether manually or through an automated means. Weeding out inappropriate, offensive, or harmful content is a top priority. Additionally, as gatekeeper for the digital communities associated with your brand, you must verify that all UGC meets the brand standards.

Companies should establish internal access privileges for UGC usage. Here there are two key questions to answer:



**What content is free to be used or is otherwise committed to another marketing effort and shouldn't be duplicated?**

**Are there trademarks or copyrights to be aware of?**

## UGC Delivery

Moderation then leads to the formatting and optimization of UGC so that it can be delivered in a timely and high-quality manner. Because visuals are effective only if the viewing experience is ideal, you must deliver UGC across devices and browsers at the highest quality with the shortest load time by applying transformations like aspect ratios, cropping, resizing, color correction, and overlays. Consider all the work your creative teams put into branded content and imagine that multiplied out across all the UGC assets you want to employ.

## UGC Use Cases

Let's take a look at three use cases.

### UGC USE CASE #1

#### E-commerce Product Pages

In marketing e-commerce products, the most important "moment" to plan for is that point of decision, when a consumer makes a move to commit that product to their cart, or bounce off the page in search of something else. The goal, then, in building e-commerce product pages is to provide compelling information and content that increases the likelihood that the shopper will convert.

Lulu's Fan Photos are a great example of UGC to increase conversion. On each of its **product pages**, women's apparel retailer Lulu's sources imagery from its fans, featuring the pictures prominently as Fan Photos. This UGC goes beyond the usual written reviews and simple images of items being worn in real life. Additional context is available for prospective buyers to consider: the height, weight, and measurements of the people in the images, the sizes they ordered, and information on whether the items were true to size and whether they ran small or large.

### UGC USE CASE #2

#### Professional Marketplaces

In professional marketplaces, such as Airbnb, eBay, Etsy, HomeAdvisor, Just Eat, and Zoopla, content is generated by partners: people like homeowners, shopkeepers and service providers create content on their offerings. Website visitors can then browse vacation-rental or apartment listings, shop for products, evaluate vendors, or peruse recommendations for dining, entertainment, and travel.

Three unique content-management challenges accompany this use case, in addition to those already discussed:

**Quality.** Uploaded images and videos often lack web readiness. The probable causes are an insufficient investment of time, attention or resources (such as camera equipment) on the part of the content creators. Other times, the creators fail to generate or save files in the highest resolution.

**Context.** To convince users to take action, content must quickly communicate context. If you're selling a car or a piece of furniture in a marketplace, take pains to, for example, eliminate extraneous or confusing details in the related photo. If you're promoting a product or service for a homeowner, a wide shot of a kitchen or living room doesn't convey what the service provider does. Presenting the right balance of detail and clarity is key.

**Control.** Because professional marketplaces give users tools for managing their pages and profiles, a control mechanism must be in place to limit the number of uploaded images or videos.

Both UGC contributors and those at the company level moderating the marketplaces must perform the requisite hands-on management tasks before publishing the content.

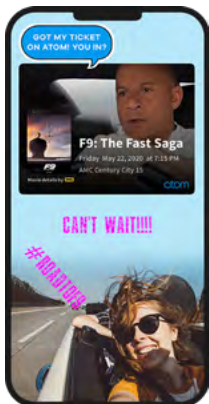
### UGC USE CASE #3

## Social Media

From the core channels like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to others like TikTok, YouTube, and the many dating apps, we all have a general sense of the types of content created by social-media users.

Speaking to the prevalence and power of UGC video content specifically, Mary Meeker's **Internet Trends Report** found 20x growth in Snapchat Lens viewership and 100 percent growth in Instagram and **Facebook Stories**, between **2017** and **2019**. Hugh Fletcher of Wunderman Thompson Commerce also states that “video is the content of preference” for young people and that social media is hugely influential for their purchasing decisions. As a proof point of video's power to persuade, consider **Unbox Therapy**, a product “unboxing” social media influencer. This Canadian YouTube channel has close to 17 million subscribers and has generated more than 3.5 billion views.

In addition to customer reviews, influencer campaigns, and at-home “try-on” sessions, consider a couple examples of the UGC possibilities in social media:



### Movie tickets by Atom:

In August 2020, with theaters reopening after pandemic shutdowns, Atom Tickets **launched a ticket-buying experience** on Snapchat. In addition to purchasing movie tickets, Snapchat users can share their movie-going plans by posting stories, initiating or participating in group chats, or sending direct messages, sometimes inviting friends to snag a ticket in a nearby seat.

### Pringles #TasteTracks:

In this 2017 campaign, Pringles brought to life a Mr. P chatbot on Facebook Messenger, enabling fans of the stackable chips to **create and share custom music videos** in the app. As part of the contest, a trip to the Ibiza Rocks festival was up for grabs.



Running an engaging social-media site often requires a significant level of content management—a daunting task for organizations that lack resources or expertise. Just like professional marketplaces, managing UGC on social media takes meticulous preplanning and vigilant efforts for implementation and maintenance.

## A Crucial Leverage of UGC's Paramount Role

Unquestionably, UGC plays a critical role in influencing buying decisions. Research has repeatedly shown that shoppers are instinctively drawn to their fellow consumers' take on a product or brand. As much as star ratings and written reviews carry heavy weight, companies must find more compelling ways to capture shoppers' interest.

An increasingly popular way is to show products in action in real life by adding images and videos to written reviews, which, in some cases, are what shoppers look at only before making purchase decisions. Correspondingly, how reviewers share images and videos is important. Ensure that all the related visual media are of high quality and set your site's social perimeters to enable easy sharing across channels like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Those important steps, which are a breeze to carry out with the latest technology, promise to yield fuller shopping carts in the long run.



To learn more about UGC and more, read **Cloudinary's Guide to Building the Ultimate E-commerce Website.**

## About Cloudinary

Cloudinary's mission is to empower companies to deliver visual experiences that inspire and connect by unleashing the full potential of their media. With more than 40 billion assets under management and 6,500 customers worldwide, Cloudinary is the industry standard for developers, creators and marketers looking to upload, store, transform, manage, and deliver images and videos online. As a result, leading brands like Atlassian, Bleacher Report, Grubhub, Hinge, Lyft, NBC, Mediavine, Peloton, Petco and Under Armour are seeing significant business value in using Cloudinary, including faster time to market, higher user satisfaction and increased engagement and conversions.

For more information, visit [www.cloudinary.com](https://www.cloudinary.com)