

# VISUAL SEARCH

TAKE YOUR BUSINESS TO THE NEXT LEVEL BY ADDING VISUAL SEARCH TO YOUR MARKETING STRATEGY!



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## Introduction

In 2019, market research studies revealed that visual search is a rising trend that's going to drastically change the way consumers shop online. So, let's start with the big question: *what is visual search?*

Well, have you used Pinterest in the past five or so years? If not, what about Google Lens?

*That, folks, is a visual search.*

It's a search engine that uses images to run a search query instead of text. Using artificial intelligence, visual search uses deep neural networks to identify what's in the user's image- and then deliver results with similar images (i.e. content, products, etc.).

So, the key difference between an image search and a visual search is; in an image search users type a text query and are served with images, in a visual search users input an image query and are served with images.

The reality of visual search is that it has been a part of our digital ecosystem for years, with notable movements as far back as 2017.

Despite this, many marketers have yet to realize how valuable investing in it is.

Furthermore, given that most big technology companies (Google, Pinterest, Snapchat, Amazon, Microsoft, etc.) are ramping up the functionality and prevalence of their visual search- now is the perfect time to set yourself up for success!

In this report, we'll cover how visual search works, the practical benefits of visual search, which platforms are developing visual search functionalities worth using, and how to optimize your material for visual search.

*Let's jump right in!*

## How Visual Search Works

Before we dive into exactly how to set yourself up for success using visual search, you should understand the user behavior behind it, and ultimately why companies have decided to pursue this powerful technology.

This will allow you to understand all the possible uses so you can cater your optimization activities toward your customers' needs.

As we mentioned earlier, visual search is an artificial intelligence technology that helps people search using images instead of text-based queries.

The search engine takes the image, analyzes what's inside the photo, identifies the defining characteristics, and serves results of similar images.

It's uncannily accurate. If you've never used it before, hop onto the Pinterest app, open any pin, and tap the button on the bottom right corner of the pin. It's a search icon with a box around it.

Pressing that button takes you to a screen called visual search, where Pinterest shows you other pins with similar (but usually the same) products.

As you can imagine, visual search works incredibly well for inherently visual marketing material.

So, complicated topics, and generally any kind of information that's best shown in a detailed article or tutorial, for example, likely won't perform well on visual search.

On the other hand, infographics, photographs, and illustrations will likely perform well on visual search.

You may be asking: *why bother with visual search when you can just have prospects enter a text-based search query?*

The answer is that the starting points of a regular search and a visual search are very different.

For example, users who are conducting search queries with visual search usually have an idea about *what* they want to buy and are now looking for *where* they can buy it from.

People might not know the keywords or terms they need to enter to find the product they're looking for. After all, 90% of the information our brains receive is visual!

Images, on the other hand, are much better than keywords at describing what you're looking for.

In turn, this means that search engines can deliver extremely accurate results.

In practice, this means that if users have a picture of your products but don't know it's from your business, they can make a visual search and find your business.

Alternatively, customers might be searching for a competitor's products but stumble into yours instead.

The technology is still developing and there isn't a single dominant design on the market.

But understanding the intersection between *why* companies are developing visual search and *how your customers are using it* will help you define your strategy.

## Benefits of Visual Search

### Search Engine Optimization:

Visual search is important because digital marketers have to keep up with the direction that platforms are moving towards.

Simply put, as platforms evolve their search engine functionalities, digital marketers may need to pivot and re-strategize in order to maintain their search engine ranking (and hence, their visibility).

Visual search simplifies things and helps businesses maintain their position and exposure.

### Increased Engagement:

Besides keeping up with changes to customer-based platforms, visual search is also a great opportunity to connect with your customers in new and exciting ways!

Research shows that early adopters of visual search are seeing some great benefits in their KPIs, and ultimately their bottom line.

For example:

- Forever21 increased their **average order value by 20%** when they used visual search.

- Users that tried out Boohoo's Camera Search **converted 85% more** than those who did not use the Camera Search function.
- Consumers that used Tommy Hilfiger's image recognition app **spent more than double the average amount of time** using the app, in comparison to their regular ecommerce site!

### **Forecasted for Widespread Adoption:**

Furthermore, visual search isn't just some time-limited trend, geared towards a younger audience.

One study showed that while 18-34-year-olds are 30% more likely to use visual search than any other cohort, 52% of *all* adults surveyed had an interest in visual search.

In fact, 50% of those surveyed aged 35-54, and 41% of those above 55 expressed interest in learning and adopting visual search.

This goes to say that with visual search, you'll still have a wide reach across your target market- even if it's a fairly new technology.

### **Streamlined Customer Experiences:**

Visual search is also a great asset for ecommerce businesses that rely heavily on the visual appeal of their products (i.e. fashion, home goods, interior design).



This is because users can go straight from an ad (on Pinterest, for example) to the seller's online store in a matter of seconds.

It's a smooth and convenient customer experience, which reduces many common friction points that may have prevented people from purchasing in the past.

### **Increase ROI of Influencer Campaigns:**

A large percentage of businesses use social media influencers to help promote their brand, and you can use visual search to maximize results.

For example, Retail Dive found that 84% of active wear brands and 83% of beauty brands use influencers as part of their marketing campaign.

Influencer marketing is heavily rooted in visual media formats like photos and videos, so it pairs excellently with visual search.

You could have your influencer promote one specific product, but have the rest of the content available through the use of visual search.

This way, instead of only having one visible product, you create an ecosystem of available products that are directly linked to your store.

This could lead to a significant increase in the average order value of a collaboration with an influencer.

## **Increase the ROI of Content Marketing Activities:**

Speaking of shoppable content, visual search is also a good opportunity to improve other areas of your marketing campaign, especially content marketing.

Many new and established companies are spending time and money on their content marketing, but are unable to accurately measure ROI, given the nature of the customer journey.

This is in stark contrast to marketing using visual search, where you can track all sorts of metrics with far more clarity.

In fact, visual search is positioned to make content marketing not only easier to track, but the data is easier to understand.

Visual search means that you can promote your products in a more natural way that also helps customers understand the value your business can bring to their lives.

## **Platforms with Visual Search Functionalities**

In 2017, Google launched *Google Lens*. Since then the functionalities and usability have improved by leaps and bounds, making Google Lens a particularly powerful tool for both users and marketers.

### **Google**

<https://lens.google>

Using the phone camera, images can be scanned in real-time, or users can use images from Google.

Once the query is made, the internet crawling is done by an artificial intelligence-powered neural network that identifies what's in the user's query.

The standout feature is the ability to bridge digital and physical experiences using Google Lens. Nevertheless, there's still a variety of things that can be done with Google Lens and a phone camera.

*For example, users can:*

- Take a picture of a piece of clothing, furniture, or home decor, and find similar products online.
- Hold their phone camera up to text in any foreign language and translate in context, in real-time.
- Scan equations or questions and find quick answers, explainers, videos, and tutorials.
- Identify almost any plant or animal!

## **Pinterest**

<https://www.pinterest.com>

Like Google, Pinterest also launched its visual search functionalities in 2017.

Unlike Google, however, visual search on Pinterest is slightly different.

When users find a pin with items they're interested in, they can use visual search to find similar products, and then go straight from Pinterest to the retailer's website.

Pinterest has also launched *Lens*, which works the similarly to Google Lens, but uses Pins as search results instead of websites.

Although Pinterest doesn't get the same hype as other platforms like Instagram and YouTube, it's a great asset if you know how to use it.

This is because 48% of Pinterest users are actively searching for products, making around 600 million visual searches every month!

## **Amazon**

<https://www.amazon.com/adlp/arview>

While Amazon has the same visual search functionalities as Google and Pinterest, they've differentiated by including *augmented reality* features.

Augmented reality lets users view an item, like a piece of furniture, for example, in their home.

If you're already selling on Amazon, the *View in Your Room* feature is a great way to help customers in the decision phase of the marketing funnel.

And further down the line, you're likely to find the feature on other similar platforms. Provided Amazon continues as they are with this feature, augmented reality could be the future of ecommerce and online shopping.

## **Snapchat**

<https://www.snapchat.com/en-GB>

Working in cooperation with Amazon, Snapchat expanded the scope of Scan into visual search.

Previously, Snapchat was well known for its partnership with companies like Shazam, which let users use Snapchat to identify music playing in the audio channel of Snapchat's live camera.

Now with Amazon, users can tap and hold on items in the live camera. If the product is available on Amazon, a pop-up with the product's name, brand, price, and rating shows up along with a link to purchase it on Amazon.

Snapchat, which is primarily a messaging platform, has always been a bit tricky for businesses to navigate and make use of.

However, with this new feature, Snapchat is much more shoppable, and hence much more useful for businesses.

Besides this collaboration with Amazon, Snapchat is leading the foray into augmented reality.

Snapchat has been clear about how they expect augmented reality to become the go-to medium for the internet in the next five to ten years.

## How to Optimize for Visual Search

It's quite easy to optimize your touchpoints for visual search, especially if you're already familiar with search engine optimization!

Below we'll cover optimizing for visual search on your website, social media, and how to use print media in conjunction with visual search.

### **Website Search Engine Optimization:**

We're going to cover more specific pointers in-depth, but if you're new to search engine optimization and need some help, this resource from Moz is a great place to start:

<https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo>

One important thing to note is that optimizing for visual search shouldn't override other best practices. And this will probably hold true unless visual search takes precedence over regular searches.

But above all else, don't forget that search engine optimization should be done for the sake of making your touchpoints easier for *humans* to find, navigate, and interact with. You're writing for humans, not search engines!

*Here are some tips to help you optimize your website and social media for visual search:*

### **Optimize Image Titles:**

Search engines use the file name of the images you upload to determine what it's about.

Although search engines can use artificial intelligence and neural networks to analyze your images pixel by pixel, they also use other less resource-intensive methods to understand what the image is about.

So, before uploading images (or any kind of document really), make sure you rename the file to something more descriptive.

For example, you should change an image name from *IMG\_01.jpg* to *[brandname]\_[productname]\_[descriptiveattribute].jpg*.

### **Use the <alt> Tags:**

In addition to the file name, search engines also use something called the <alt> tag to understand what exactly is inside an image. It stands for “alternative text”, and is read out loud by screen readers.

A properly filled out <alt> tag makes your website accessible to people who are visually impaired and search engines’ crawlers that determine your website’s ranking.

### **Use the Image Description or Caption Fields:**

In case you’re using a content management system like WordPress, HubSpot, or even Medium, uploading an image will automatically pull up a small description field.

Make sure to fill this out so that the search engine has more information to work with! It doesn’t have to be as visually descriptive as the <alt> tag, but make sure to include some information about what the image is about.

### **Optimize Size, Format, and File Size:**

Check that the images you have on your website are optimized for viewing on the internet.

You’ll want to aim for a compromise between image quality and file size so that you can keep the load time of your website short but still maintain a good user experience.



If you have the time and resources, you should also work on optimizing your website for mobile. This is worth pursuing because in 2022 alone, over 59% of *global* web traffic was through a mobile device.

### **Include an Image Sitemap:**

Sitemaps help search engines understand the structure and information architecture of a website.

If you find that your images still aren't getting indexed properly, you can add a sitemap of the images on your website so that search engines can see how your images relate to the rest of your content.

### **Structured Data:**

Structured data refers to the standardized vocabulary (HTML) that webmasters use to provide information about the website. These additional tags make it easier for search engines to understand exactly what your website is about.

Let's take this line of code as an example: `<h1>avatar</h1>`.

This line of HTML tells the browser to display a header that says "avatar". The rest of your website might make it clear to *you* that you're talking about the 2009 film instead of a video game avatar.

Nevertheless, this would be unclear to a search engine that can only see the `<h1>` tag.

Thus, you could ensure that you're showing up for the right "avatar" keyword by including structured data on your website, especially for images and products.

### **Social Media Marketing:**

Another great thing about visual search is that search engines index images from your social media too, thereby increasing the reach of your social media strategy.

With just a few small changes here and there, you can drastically increase the chances of ranking on visual search queries.

### **Shoppable Content:**

If you're using a platform that has shoppable content functions, take advantage of them!

For example, Pinterest and Instagram let you tag items in posts and link those products directly to your website.

And on Instagram, you can sell directly through your account, so that users don't even have to leave Instagram to make a purchase.

*There are two key benefits to this.*

First, making your content shoppable shortens the marketing funnel since customers don't have to move between platforms and touchpoints.

As such, fewer obstacles and pain points are preventing them from making a purchase.

And as we said before, making your content shoppable provides more information for search engines to work with.

This helps you rank higher on search engine queries for keywords that are relevant to you and your business.

### **Influencer Marketing:**

Visual search is changing the landscape of influencer marketing.

Trend forecasting shows that the role of the "influencer" is shifting into that of a "curator" (i.e. someone who "curates" an aspirational lifestyle and creates content about it).

With this in mind, you can imagine how the role of the influencer is not just about selling products they like, but about selling an ecosystem of products that have helped them "achieve" their lifestyle.

Visual search helps you tap into this "ecosystem of products" by making *entire pieces of content shoppable*. You can do this directly by tagging the products on social media.

## **Enhance Print Media:**

Once you've got your website and social media set up for visual search, you might want to explore other ways you can use the same functionalities for other purposes.

For example, Google Lens is an exciting way to connect your online and offline materials to provide a richer experience for your customers.

Some businesses with physical material like menus, catalogs, and signs are using Google Lens to let customers scan the material and access further information like reviews, coupons, and product information.

Even if you're mainly online, you can apply this concept to a pop-up store or a physical ad to make the most of your investment.

Others are even offering exclusive unlisted content that's only accessible by scanning print media.

This means that the link users are directed to can't be indexed by search engines, and is only accessible if you scan the image.

Creating this kind of exclusivity is a great way to increase engagement with the customers who are the most important to your business, or even generate interest and hype for your brand.

## Final Words

Implementing visual search into your marketing strategy early on could be the key to maximizing awareness and establishing authority for your brand.

But, if you're short on time and can only do two things on this report, *we suggest you:*

### **Optimize Images on your Website:**

This is the bread and butter of visual search! Make sure that you rename your image files to something more descriptive, or choose a filename that provides context about what the image is about.

Secondly, make sure you fill out the <alt> tag with a *visual* description of what's in the image so that people using screen readers can also know what's in the picture.

Search engines also use the <alt> tag to index images, so you'll be rewarded twofold for making your website accessible.

Lastly, make sure you include a description or caption for each image on your website.

Some content management systems will automatically bring up this field whenever you upload an image.

Your captions don't *have* to be visually descriptive like <alt> tags, but you should include information like what's being depicted in the image, image credits, when it was taken, etc.

Overall, don't forget that search engines reward you when you write for *humans*, not search engines. Blackhat techniques like keyword stuffing will do more harm than good in the long run!

### **Take Advantage of Shoppable Social Media Features:**

Most features on social media can be indexed by search engines, so they're a great way to hit two birds with one stone: ranking on social media algorithms and ranking on search engine results pages.

*Besides the basics like:*

- Using the caption for relevant and targeted copywriting.
- Tagging people, influencers, partners, and even customers in posts.
- Using the location pin when relevant.
- Using a consistent and cohesive hashtag strategy.
- Using the first comment or pinned comment feature to engage with your audience.
- Following a consistent strategy.
- Optimizing your campaigns using performance data.

*You should also make sure that you:*

- Fill out the <alt> tag for people who are using screen readers (most social media platforms include a text field for this before posting).
- Tag products in posts and link directly to that product (whether in your own posts or a collaboration with an influencer).
- Always include some way to access your online store in each piece of content.

To your success

## Resources

Here are links to a few resources that I believe will help you:

### **Visual Search Guide:**

>>

<https://www.semrush.com/blog/visual-search-guide-benefits-optimization/>

### **7 Tips for Optimizing Images for Visual Search:**

>> <https://www.webfx.com/seo/learn/visual-search/>

### **Visual Search 101:**

>>

<https://www.contentninja.in/dojo/digital-marketing/visual-search-marketers-guide-google-lens-seo/>

### **Ecommerce Marketer's Guide to Visual Search:**

>>

<https://vwo.com/blog/an-ecommerce-marketers-guide-to-visual-search/>