4 Paid Social Trends to Watch in 2017

Social ad spend is expected to reach $36 billion worldwide next year—a 20% increase from 2016.

That's not because marketers just magically grew bigger budgets overnight (though that's on their lists of New Year's resolutions). No, marketers are increasing social ad spend because they have to if they want their messages to be seen and heard.

Think about it. Over two billion people worldwide use social media. In the battle for attention, brands compete against each other, but also against users' friends and family, celebrities, and major news stories.

That's why paid social ads have moved from being an optional part of your social strategy to being a crucial one. Thankfully, there are plenty of tools to help marketers launch creative, customized, and even automated ads that reach the right people at the right time.

These features are launching and evolving at a rapid pace, and it can be tough to keep up. To help you stay on top your paid social strategy, we're unpacking four major trends to watch in 2017.

FOUR MAJOR TRENDS TO WATCH IN 2017

1. "Buy" Buttons

2. Messaging Apps

3. Livestreaming

4. Dynamic Product Ads

1. Driving the Sale With "Buy" Buttons

People used to simply plan their purchases on social media. Now, they can actually make those purchases right on their go-to social platforms. Here's how.
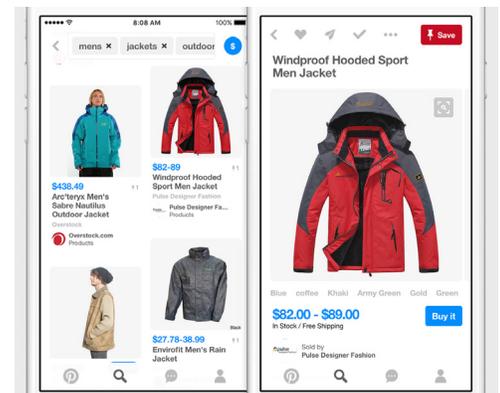
PINTEREST

A whopping 93% of Pinners use the network to research their buys. It makes sense, then, that Pinterest pioneered social shopping with Buyable Pins. These are regular Pins with a price tag and a blue "Buy It" button on them. All users have to do is click the button, and they can place their orders without ever leaving the Pinterest site or app.

While brands like Macy's, Nordstrom, and Kate Spade were some of the first to try out this feature, Buyable Pins are now used widely across the platform.

Buyable Pins

Users can even search for Buyable Pins by price and add items to their shopping bag for later. After visiting a certain brand's Pinterest board, they can also choose "Shop Pins" to see all of the Buyable Pins from that specific company.

FACEBOOK

Facebook first started testing its "buy" buttons in 2014. While those never fully rolled out, the social network does provide other ways for users to shop on its platform. For instance, brands can add a "Shop Now" call-to-action button to their ads. These buttons take users to the brand's website without leaving the app.

Facebook is also letting brands add shop sections to their Pages, where they can showcase products and set up mini e-commerce stores.

TWITTER

Similar to Pinterest, Twitter provides an option to place "Buy" buttons on your ads. These were first tested with brands like Burberry and Home Depot. After clicking on the button, all users have to do is enter their shipping and payment information, and confirm their order.

While these "Buy" buttons hold a great deal of potential, they're not yet driving huge sales for brands. It will take time to work out the kinks, and for users and marketers to get accustomed to them. Still, considering millions of people use social media to research their purchases, there should be options to buy in-app and on-site. Expect these features to continue rolling out and evolving after the new year.

2. Automating Service With Messaging Apps

Emarketer predicts that, by 2018, over two billion people will use messaging apps. In fact, the Facebook Messenger app already has 900 million users alone. These apps provide a way for people to quickly communicate with friends and family without having to deal with SMS text, phone calls, or emails. And brands are getting in on the action.

Popular messaging apps such as Snapchat (now Snap Inc.), WeChat, and Line offer an array of ad options for brands. For example, Line has fun, sponsored stickers, and WeChat has sponsored Moments, which feature photos, videos, and links. Meanwhile, over on Snapchat, brands can buy Snap Ads, Sponsored Geofilters, and Sponsored Lenses, like this one from Taco Bell.

As we noted earlier this year, we're gearing up for a messaging app revolution. But it's not just being driven by social ads. It's also being driven by chatbots, which are automating e-commerce and customer service on mobile.
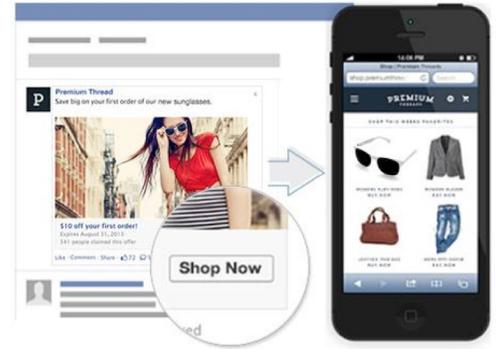
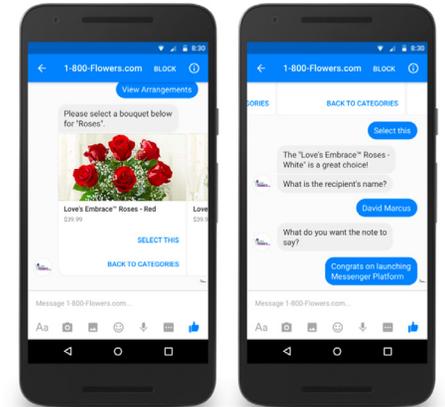Facebook's "Shop Now" call-to-action on ads

Twitter's "Buy now" button on ads

Snapchat lenses for Taco Bell

Take Facebook Messenger, which has already teamed up with brands like Uber, 1-800-FLOWERS, and Spring to complete purchases directly within the app. Users simply have to start a chat with these brands, choose their order, and finish the buying process. No need to open another app, make a phone call, or wait for a different website to load.

Many of these chatbots are less than a year old. Time will tell if customers are comfortable talking to automated systems, and if brands can get their chat scripts right. Regardless, they prove an important point: Companies are looking for ways to make the customer experience more efficient, and anyone that can do that will have a leg up in an ever-crowded social space.

Facebook's "Shop Now" call-to-action on ads

3. Engaging in Real-Time with Livestreaming

It seems like video marketing has been on every "trends to watch" list for the past five years. While it will continue to dominate the social space—especially as Facebook's algorithm favors native video—we're seeing video take a new turn this year with the proliferation of livestreaming.

In terms of organic options, brands have been using Twitter's Periscope and Facebook Live to reach audiences in real-time. For instance, TOMS uses Facebook Live to broadcast mini fashion shows. And who could forget that time BuzzFeed made a watermelon explode after 45 suspenseful minutes?

Paid options are still nascent for livestreaming, however. Twitter only just started sponsoring Periscope streams, first teaming up with retired tennis pro Andy Roddick, who hosted content for the U.S. Open Tournament. This makes sense for Twitter, because now people can watch live content and live-tweet that content in the same place.

Over on Facebook, brands can't sponsor or boost Facebook videos while they're live, but that may change going forward. Meanwhile, the social network is starting to test commercial breaks during live videos, making these broadcasts feel even more like live television.

As marketing guru Guy Kawasaki predicts for 2017: "Live video, live video, and live video."

Buzzfeed uses Facebook Live to make a watermelon explode

4. Getting Personalized with Dynamic Product Ads

It's one thing to share your products with new people; it's another to share your products with people who have already expressed interest in your brand. That's what retargeted ads—or, as Facebook calls them, dynamic product ads—facilitate.

By launching dynamic product ads, marketers can reach Facebook users who have previously visited their brand's website or mobile app; they can also give customers a second look at products they've already viewed. Aside from their targeting capabilities, dynamic ads are unique because they showcase an entire category of products. Meaning, even if someone viewed a laptop on your website, they might see an ad featuring laptops, headphones, and printers. This allows brands to upsell or cross-sell. It also lets them personalize messages and save time from having to create a slew of individually targeted ads.

Despite being only a year old, dynamic product ads already account for 21% of all social spending, according to Kenshoo. Evidently, they're not going away anytime soon, and customers are responding to these personalized messages.

Outside of Facebook, Twitter offers retargeting tools to help customers complete the buyer journey with their ads. Snapchat also recently launched new targeting features, including Snap Audience Match. This allows brands to target people who are already on an email list or similar database, opening up opportunities for retargeting.

Marketers can reach Facebook users with dynamic product ads

Your Game Plan For A New Year

If 2017 is anything like 2016, there's a lot in store for the ever-changing social space. As social spend increases and competition heats up, marketers can't afford to just launch paid ads and see what works; they'll have to launch them with the right strategies and tools in place.

Many platforms are making this easier for brands, with helpful features such as "buy" buttons, in-app chats, and livestreaming capabilities. And with the new year just ahead, it's up to marketers to stay on top of the latest trends, using them to engage customers in creative and innovative ways.

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