

THE PUBLISHER'S GUIDE TO **ECOMMERCE**

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Introduction

Although advertising and subscriptions¹ remain at the heart of the revenue strategies of many publishers, there's an increasing recognition of the need for diversification². As a result, an importance is being placed on growing alternative income streams³. For some players, eCommerce could be a key part of these emerging revenue strategies.

eCommerce grew by 15% in the United States last year, representing a \$517.36 billion market,⁴ and with global web sales in 2018 nearing \$3 trillion,⁵ up 18% year-on-year, this is clearly too big a space for publishers to ignore.

For many publishers eCommerce is increasingly about more than just affiliate links, branded content and online shops.

Although these activities still have their place, we are increasingly seeing a number of media outlets - across a wide variety of verticals and areas of content focus - exploring some of the wider opportunities that eCommerce potentially affords.

In some cases, this means innovating and moving into spaces, such as brand licensing,⁶ which many publishers have previously been uncomfortable with. It also means going beyond just the sale of physical products online, in order to explore a range of commercial transactions that are facilitated through the internet, including both the transaction of goods and services.⁷

A number of these ideas are explored in-depth in this new report, which features lessons from publishers and content creators around the world. From this, we have identified 10 key strategic lessons for publishers large and small alike.

We hope you find this deep dive into the emerging world of eCommerce as rich, and fascinating, as we do.

Keep an eye on What's New In Publishing in the coming weeks for more case studies related to some of the key players - and strategies - featured in this report.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This includes roles in all media sectors (commercial, public, government, regulatory, academic, and nonprofit/civil society) and all platforms (print, digital, TV and radio).

Damian continues to be an active journalist, writing monthly columns for ZDNet (CBS Interactive) and *What's New in Publishing*, and frequently appears in other publications such as journalism.co.uk and IJNET.

He writes about digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution of journalism. Damian is the author of *50 Ways to Make Media Pay*, a special insight report sponsored by Sovrn and published by *What's New In Publishing* in March 2019. The report is available in both English and Spanish.



Picture via Marko Knab

ABOUT US

Founded in 2008, *What's New In Publishing* provides a single destination for independent publishing businesses looking for news, advice and education across a wide range of publishing subjects.

We cover developments in digital publishing, magazines, and newspapers, focusing on the issues and technological advances confronting the industry at a time of profound disruption, offering practical and useful advice from "What's New?" to "What Next?".

With many thousands of publishers worldwide subscribing to our weekly e-newsletter and many more visiting the site regularly, *WNIP* is one of the world's longest running and leading B2B websites covering the publishing industry.

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New horizons. New opportunities. New revenue streams.

Publishers can't rely on display advertising alone. As the digital publishing landscape continues to change, monetization strategies are changing as well. One of the most promising is the ever-expanding realm of eCommerce, which ranges from first-party storefronts to third-party branded goods to native commerce integrations. They're all powerful tools in the right hands.

This report offers a deep dive into how high-performing publishers harness eCommerce. From BuzzFeed to Marie Claire, Active Interest Media to Dennis Publishing (and more), it highlights how publishers around the world are turning eCommerce into a compelling revenue source. Indeed, for some publishers, eCommerce channels are now their best-performing and fastest-growing.

While we're pleased to support this resource, it'll be up to individual publishers to leverage that potential—and to decide on the mix of strategies that's most suitable for their individual needs.

Yours,

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Power to the Publisher

Earn more from every link.

Turn clicks into cash with intelligent link monetization. Automatically monetize existing product links, create new links, and earn commissions from **70,000+ affiliate merchants.**

- 100% free to use
- Earn from every click or sale
- Access CPC deals with top advertisers

- Share links anywhere: web, email, even social
- Collect valuable user data
- View strategic performance metrics

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Lesson #1

Publishers are betting on eCommerce's potential (but it's not there yet)

The percentage of revenue most content creators derive from eCommerce, remains small. NBC's TODAY Show generated \$60 million in eCommerce revenue last year, which sounds impressive until you compare this with the \$509 million in advertising revenue that the show reportedly brought in during 2016.⁸

Similarly, *The New York Times*, which generated \$709 million in total digital revenue last year, found that most of this came from subscriptions and advertising. "Other digital revenues," a category which consists "primarily of affiliate referral revenue," contributed just \$49.4 million.⁹

Nonetheless, these organisations, and others, are betting that this will change; and they're investing in eCommerce accordingly.

In this chapter, we look at the rise of online stores, how publishers are working with third parties to enable eCommerce, and some of the brands who have invested in eCommerce early on in the hope of it becoming a sustainable revenue stream.

In a previous report, *50 Ways To Make Media Pay*, we highlighted examples of eCommerce activity ranging from selling archival prints and publications, through to the development of online stores and the travel programme run by the progressive American magazine, *The Nation*.¹⁰

However, as we shall see, those examples were just the tip of the eCommerce iceberg.

In brief: The Denver Post and Seattle Times

Selling products related to a publishers archive has been a time honored staple for many print publications.

Outlets like *The Denver Post*, through an online store,¹¹ which sells Colorado photos taken by its photojournalists, and *The Seattle Times* - which sells¹² wall art, keepsake pages (reprints for their archive), photos and prints as well as coffee table books - are making a more concerted effort in this space.

In doing this, publishers will often work with third parties for the fulfillment, creation and distribution of products, reducing some of their risks in the process.

As they stand, these moves are unlikely to bring in large amounts of revenue. Nonetheless, they are a relatively low risk way for publishers to harness the power of their archive, and dip their toe in the eCommerce waters.

In brief: The rise of online stores

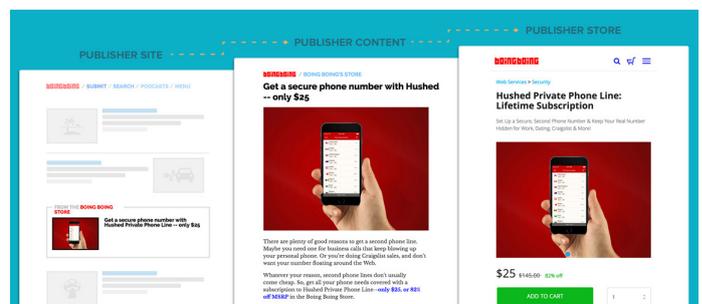
Alongside dabbling with efforts to creatively unlock some of the financial potential of their archive, an increasing number of publishers are also embracing the opportunities afforded by online stories.

StackCommerce, one solutions provider in this space, has highlighted the benefit of their partnerships with publishers such as *Boing Boing*, *The Awesomer*, *Slashdot* and *Digg*.¹³

After integrating an affiliate partnership in 2015, 20% of *Boing Boing*'s revenues now come through native commerce,¹⁴ while *Digg* generates \$100k in annual incremental revenue through a white-labelled shop (store.digg.com) and a shopping specific newsletter.¹⁵



Homepage of the Denver Post's Online Store.
Via Denver Post Store



Example of native commerce at Boing Boing.
Via StackCommerce

Meanwhile in Ohio, the *Richland Source*, a for-profit online news site, has taken this to a whole new level, through 'Made in the 419,' a portal¹⁶ selling clothes, books and music designed and made in the 419 area code.

Launched in December 2014,¹⁷ the site notes that it “is proud to say that our photographers, graphic artists, screen printers, embroiderers and artisans are from Mansfield, Plymouth, Shelby, and all over the region.”

“And if we can't get it here,” they add, “we buy from companies like American Apparel that manufacture their goods here in the USA.”¹⁸

Jay Allred, publisher of *Richland Source*, has nonetheless downplayed its financial impact, noting that despite the move catching the eye of media commentators, it's not necessarily a direct money-maker, although there may be knock-on impacts which are hard to measure, such as increased brand recognition and profile, which may help other revenue streams.

“Made in the 419 gets more interest than any other thing we do,” he told *Nieman Lab* in 2015, “even though I'll tell you it generates the least amount of revenue; we're basically break-even on it.”¹⁹

In brief: Hearst and Dennis Publishing's eCommerce efforts

Dennis Publishing, through its buyacar.com website, is selling between 250 and 300 cars a month. Its titles *Auto Express* and *Carbuyer* help drive 15% of activity on Buyacar and the company hopes to make £100 million [\$138 million] in revenue from sales in 2019.²⁰

Their recent acquisition of *Car Throttle*, a market leading automotive social media brand, is part of their wider strategy “to build an end-to-end automotive business in the UK.”²¹

U.S.-based publisher Hearst, has developed four commerce products in the past year. This includes a *Runner's World Store*, a cookbook developed by *Delish* - their digital-native food site - and *Women's Health*, as well as online workout classes, costing \$15 per month, or \$100 a year. The classes feature a mixture of new and repurposed content.²²

BuzzFeed's pivot to product development

BuzzFeed is another example of a media company actively pursuing multiple revenue streams, including eCommerce. In 2018, they made \$100 million from income sources that didn't exist two years ago.²³ The company's commerce division, which is supporting this diversification, generated \$50 million in sales in 2018.²⁴

Alongside high profile successes - such as best-selling cookbooks,²⁵ as well as partnerships with major American retail giants Walmart²⁶ and Macy's²⁷ - BuzzFeed is also helping to design products for other companies. It's an approach that some UK publishers - like Hearst UK, Jungle Creations and Highsnobiety - are also pursuing.²⁸

In BuzzFeed's case, these products do not necessarily have their name on it,²⁹ although some, such as a combined lip gloss holder and fidget spinner, do.³⁰

More conventionally, BuzzFeed's eCommerce efforts have also introduced a new "Shopping Showcase," a form of shoppable ads, designed "to connect our strong advertising business and fast-growing affiliate business."³¹

Clearly labelled as an advertisement, Product Manager, Swara Kantaria explained the potential behind the move, saying:

"The shopping ads are awesome because they are a new native ad format that not only grows our biz but also serves our users' needs. When readers are on shopping posts, they are in the mindset to shop and find products they love and want to buy.

"With the new shopping ad product, brands can put their products in front of potential buyers who are ready to shop and therefore, will more likely buy the product."³²

Google report that 50% of online shoppers say images of a product inspired them to buy it.³³

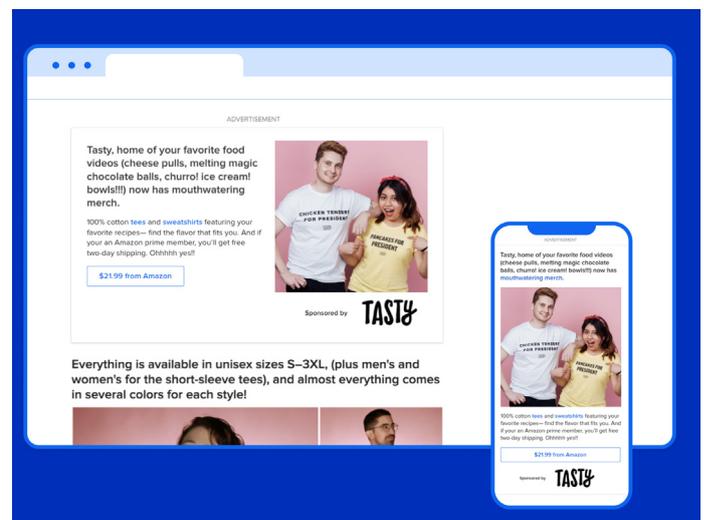
The emergence of shoppable ads - a format which allows brands to personalise the products an audience sees, and make it available for purchase at the tap of a finger³⁴ - is rapidly becoming more commonplace.

Their presence across Google Image search,³⁵ social networks³⁶ and elsewhere on the web, are all helping to make eCommerce more viable and appealing.



The GlamSpin, which offered three flavours of lip gloss: Peach Whirl, Grape Twist and Strawberry Cyclone.

Via Bustle



BuzzFeed's shopping showcase ad product.

Via Medium



Lesson #2

Many of the foundations for growth are starting to emerge

Shifts in advertising and consumer behaviours, a “new respect for affiliate models,”³⁷ coupled with advances in the eCommerce capabilities of platforms and social networks,³⁸ are all helping to lay the groundwork for the next stage in eCommerce’s evolution.

According to Group M (part of WPP), eCommerce related ad spend is growing faster than digital advertising, a trend which “holds implications for both marketers and media owners.”³⁹

In the U.S., much of this activity is taking place on Amazon, which is now the third largest digital advertising platform (by \$).⁴⁰

This chapter explores the role of social networks in the rise of eCommerce, and why mobile continues to grow in importance. For some publishers such as *PinkNews*, there is huge growth potential at the intersection of mobile and social media, with platforms like Snapchat enabling selling direct to readers.

The role of social networks

Most conversations about publishers and eCommerce, tend to examine the use of social networks like Facebook and Pinterest as channels for the promotion of commercial products and services.⁴¹

This interest in social commerce is not surprising, given the amount of time we spend on social media: 1/7th of our waking lives.⁴² Moreover, according to data from *GlobalWebIndex*, “nearly 3 in 10 cite researching/finding products online as a main reason for using social media.”⁴³

Despite this, adoption of social commerce has arguably been slower to take off than many industry watchers had predicted.⁴⁴

“The holy grail of “social commerce,” [is] an area that has eluded social platforms like Facebook for years and killed many other startups tackling the category along the way,” *VentureBeat* noted in 2016.

“F-commerce, so to speak, failed because people weren’t ready to shop on Facebook,” they wrote. “Retailers have found integration with social platforms to be frustrating as well.”⁴⁵

Three years on, however, things are beginning to change, and “the line between social media and eCommerce is increasingly becoming blurred.”⁴⁶

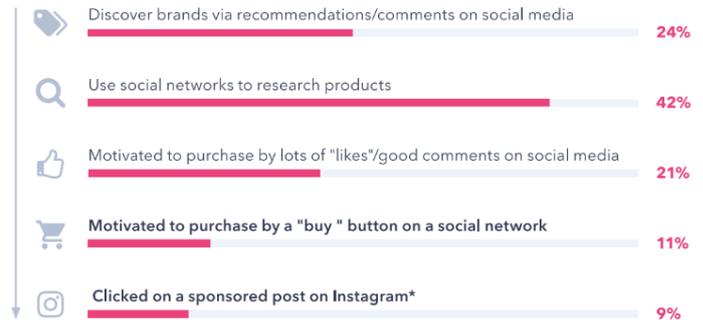
The growing importance of mobile

Improvements in the user experience (often driven by platforms, but not exclusively so),⁴⁷ changing consumer habits⁴⁸ and an increasing willingness by content creators to operate in this space, all mean that social commerce is slowly becoming more widespread.

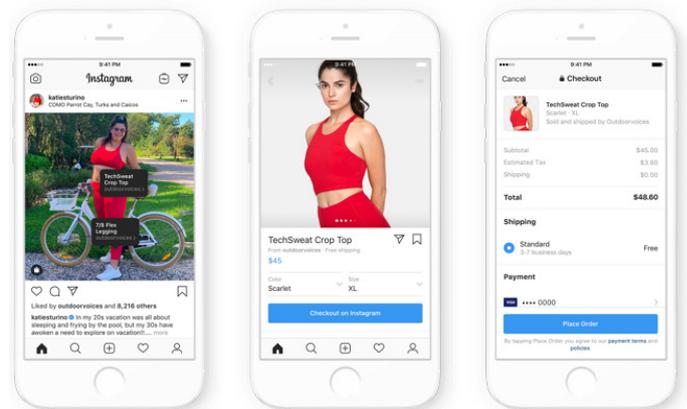
GlobalWebIndex, in a recent report, highlighted a key trend shaping this development; the move to mobile shopping. “The mobile phone is now the device of choice for all stages of the purchase journey – from researching, to buying through to reviewing,” they said.⁴⁹

As a result, mobile eCommerce is projected to be a \$3.5 trillion industry by 2021.⁵⁰

Social media’s impact across the purchase journey



GlobalWebIndex Q3 2018 Base: 113,932 Internet Users aged 16–64.



Example of an Influencer’s Shoppable Post on Instagram.
Via *The Atlantic*

Mobile e-commerce is up and poised for further growth

Estimated mobile e-commerce sales worldwide



Mobile eCommerce, 2016–2021.

Via FIPP

“The mall of the future is not a sprawling metropolis of stores, punctuated by the occasional soft pretzel stand and megaplex movie theater, but a platform on your phone.” Arielle Pardes, predicted in *WIRED* earlier this year.⁵¹

PinkNews’ Snapchat experience

For publishers, the example of *PinkNews*, a UK-based LGBTQ+ news site, demonstrates some of the eCommerce potential to be found at the intersection of mobile and social media.⁵² This summer the publisher started selling products directly to their Snapchat users.

According to *The Drum*, *Pink News*’ “founder predicts first-party sales in shoppable ads will soon become its biggest revenue source.”⁵³

“There is something thrilling about a user who visited *PinkNews* on Snapchat to learn the latest about James Charles, deciding to swipe up and buy a pair of \$40 sunglasses from us on the spur of the moment,” their CEO Benjamin Cohen wrote.⁵⁴

Meanwhile the experiences of publishers such as Marie Claire UK, POPSUGAR, BuzzFeed, Dennis and South African-based Associated Media Publishing (which are explored in more detail in this report), offer further clues and ideas for publishers interested in cracking the eCommerce nut.



Examples of *PinkNews*’ products on Snapchat.
Via Medium



Lesson #3

Brand extensions are the logical place to start

In developing eCommerce strategies, it makes strategic sense for publishers to identify propositions which build on their existing relationship with audiences.

Arguably, the best eCommerce products are logical brand extensions, and there are a growing number of examples of publishers choosing to generate revenue in this way.

In this chapter, we present some publishers extending their brands in smart ways through eCommerce. From BuzzFeed's *Tasty* cookbooks and kitchenware, to *Culture Trip's* own travel agency, there is plenty of inspiration to be found in ideas which are firmly anchored in the parent brand.

Tasty (BuzzFeed) and Family Handyman (Trusted Media)

Tasty, BuzzFeed’s food brand, is a good example, having successfully broadened its reach beyond their core site and social media channels.

“Look at all the ways that business [Tasty] is generating revenue,” BuzzFeed’s CEO Jonah Peretti wrote earlier this year.⁵⁵ This includes cookbooks and kitchenware, as well as a recent partnership with McCormick Spices, to create five different Tasty Seasoning Blends.⁵⁶

“BuzzFeed receives a licensing fee for each spice blend sold, and commands its normal rate for media [e.g. sponsored posts, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, newsletters or gift guides promoting the products]. The dual revenue streams align with BuzzFeed’s plan to complement its advertising business,” *AdExchanger* observes.⁵⁷



Examples of Tasty's reach and impact. Via BuzzFeed

Trusted Media, the publisher of *Reader's Digest* and 11 other brands, is another company looking to invest more in direct-to-consumer offerings and eCommerce.⁵⁸

Family Handyman, its publication for DIY homeowners, launched in 1951.⁵⁹ In recent years, it's expanded to include a membership programme (*Family Handyman Insider*) as well as DIY University, which builds on the magazine's core content to offer paid courses on how to perform home repairs.



Dennis Publishing

Similarly, Dennis Publishing’s foray into car sales built on the fact that substantial audiences already came to their properties when looking to buy a car.

“We’ve got about five or six brands in automotive that cover the entire lifestyle of ownership,” Nick Flood, Managing Director, Digital, told INMA Media Subscriptions Week 2.0 earlier this year.

“But for years, what people have been doing is coming to our website, deciding which car to buy, and then going off to a dealer, going off to a manufacturer direct, going off to a supermarket or physically visiting somewhere. We were just missing out on all these sales, coming through us every single month, which kind of wasn’t good enough.”⁶⁰



Presentation by Nick Flood, Deputy MD, Digital, Dennis Publishing. Digiday Publishing Summit Europe, 2018. Via Slideshare

LESSON #3

To remedy this, Dennis acquired BuyaCar.co.uk in 2014, growing its turnover from £400k to £62m in 2018.⁶¹ The website enables users to buy a quality new or used car online, apply for finance and have the car delivered to their home.

Across the UK, 21% of all UK online motoring spend is spent with Dennis; and the company projected to make 40% of its 2018 revenue from eCommerce.



Promotional picture for buyacar.co.uk.
Via Dennis

Better Homes & Gardens (Pacific Magazines)

On the other side of the world, *Better Homes & Gardens*, is Australia's most-read magazine. Described by its owners, Pacific Magazines, as “the country’s original and most successful multi-platform brand,” it reaches 6.9 million users each month across their various platforms.⁶²

Alongside the print publication, which launched in 1978, BHG also has a TV show, an active digital presence, and a dedicated eCommerce vertical, bhgshop.com.au.

In 2018, the company re-engineered their digital assets (including their online shop), so that they were more closely aligned with the magazine and TV show, whilst also decluttering and speeding up their sites.⁶³

This integrated approach enables audiences to interact with BHG content across a variety of different platforms, and features eCommerce as a logical extension of content audiences are already consuming.



BHG's media channels.
Via Better Homes and Gardens Media Kit, 2019

Culture Trip

Meanwhile, *Culture Trip*, “a start-up inspiring millions of people to explore the world’s culture and creativity,” has recently moved beyond content and related affiliate links (e.g. '7 Places To Stay in New York With Mesmerizing Rooftop Views') with the launch of their own online travel agency.⁶⁴

The move was made possible, in part, by \$80 million of Series B funding which the company secured in 2018.⁶⁵

Designed “to connect its rapidly growing millennial audience with places to stay and things to do around the world,”⁶⁶ the site will continue to work with affiliates and partners like hotels.com, Expedia, Airbnb, and Hostelworld, the website *Travolution* reported, at the same time as ramping up their booking capabilities.⁶⁷

LESSON #3

As Dmitry Shishkin, Chief Content Officer at Culture Trip, told the *Global Editors Network*, the move “will allow us to offer our users who came to us for our content a chance to complete their travel planning with us, via a wishlist functionality content that helps people to orient themselves and plan their itinerary.”

Highlighting other revenue streams, like branded content, Shishkin argued that “content is the anchor for all of these.”

“The business we are building is a travel one and media one,” he said, “so we [are] earning money from both sectors.”⁶⁸



Dmitry Shishkin • 1st
Chief Content Officer at Culture Trip
8h • Edited

A massive milestone in **Culture Trip** history as we launch our own Online Travel Agency, offering our users a complete, full-funnel experience - from inspirational, orientational, planning editorial content to a live booking engine. It's a major step forward in our strategy. Huge congratulations to the travel business team led by **Andy Washington**. More details <https://lnkd.in/e-zSXRn> [#travel](#) [#disruption](#) [#startupgrowth](#)



**culture
trip**

Culture Trip launches OTA platform

travolution.com

46

5 Comments

Announcement of Culture Trip's Online Travel Agency.

Via LinkedIn



Lesson #4

Embracing eCommerce requires an internal - and external - culture shift

As increasing numbers of media companies begin to explore eCommerce, so there's a recognition that this may impact both business culture and practice.

Publishers need to be cognisant of this, as eCommerce has the potential to change dynamics within the newsroom, as well as with audiences.

This chapter sets out three publishers who have undertaken this challenge. *The New York Times* is looking at how it can enable a closer integration between its eCommerce efforts and its core news output. Associated Media Publishing in South Africa has already started work on upskilling editors and getting both the employees and the audiences on board. And New York Media has expanded its eCommerce offering with a dedicated website designed to help their readers "shop the internet."

There's no right way to do this, but to realise eCommerce's potential, there needs to be behavioural shifts both internally and externally.

The New York Times Company

The New York Times, which purchased the reviews website *Wirecutter* in 2016 for “slightly more than \$30 million,”⁶⁹ has described the acquisition as part of a tonal shift, “rethinking *The Times’s* role as a guide,” given that “readers are hungry for advice from *The Times*.”⁷⁰

Alongside being part of wider efforts to broaden The New York Times Company’s revenue base,⁷¹ CEO Mark Thompson admits that they’re also exploring the potential for a closer integration between sites and products, like *Wirecutter*, and the NYT’s “core” news output.⁷²

Unlocking this potential will require a different mindset for both *Times* employees and their audience, as both parties will need to behave differently if this strategy is to be successful.

Associated Media Publishing

As Julia Raphaely, CEO of Associated Media Publishing in South Africa has stressed, just putting eCommerce opportunities “out there” is not enough. Raphaely argued that in order to drive adoption of new digital behaviours, like eCommerce, publishers must show audiences how these approaches can benefit them.⁷³

“You’ve got to be focused on the end-point which is getting people to see your brand as relevant,” she said, speaking at the Digital Innovators’ Summit earlier this year.

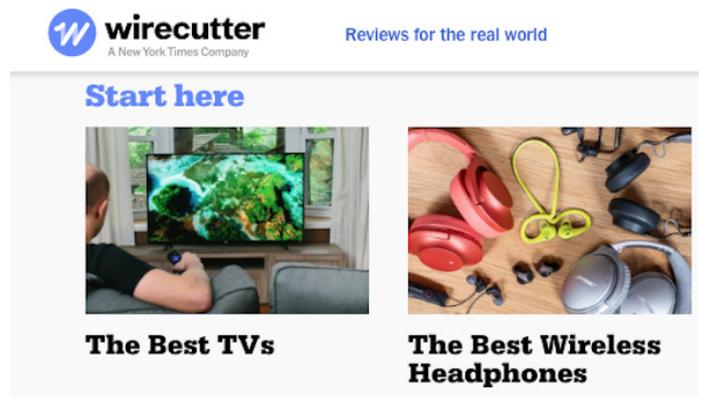
In doing this, publishers must also bring their advertisers, staff and audiences, with them.

Discussing their October 2018 QR code campaign, Raphaely told the Media Voices podcast:

“We started placing QR codes around the magazine but in a very integrated way, because you don’t want to suddenly become a catalogue.

“We also had to upskill our editors who were curating the product because you can’t just plunk any product in your inverted commerce shop window.”⁷⁴

To be successful, staff, audiences and advertisers all need to buy into this vision.



Wirecutter's electronics recommendations homepage.
Via WWD



Examples of AMP covers with QR codes.
Via Associated Media Publishing

Ultimately, “we see this as a natural progression,” Raphaely has said. “We are closing the gap between content and commerce across all our channels, leveraging AMP’s editorial influence, brand authority and audience insight to serve our content consumers better.”⁷⁵

The Strategist (New York Media)

Other publishers have taken a different approach, stressing continuity rather than evolution.

The Strategist, from New York Media, is a website designed to help people “shop the internet” and “surface the most useful expert recommendations for things to buy across the vast eCommerce landscape.”

Discussing the development, David Haskell, New York Media’s Editor for Business and Strategy, noted that this type of content could be found right back to the first edition of *New York Magazine* in 1968.⁷⁶ *The Strategist* launched as a standalone site in late 2016.⁷⁷

Nonetheless, there’s a substantial shift - for publisher and existing readers alike - in migrating from being a section in a biweekly publication, to a standalone website “publishing three to four times daily.”

What each of these examples demonstrate is the need for culture change and behavioural shifts among both internal and external audiences, if eCommerce’s potential is to be realised by publishers.



AMP's "Read to Shop" campaign.
Via IAB South Africa



Lesson #5

To drive eCommerce, publishers will need people with different skill sets

In engaging with eCommerce, content creators will inevitably find some bumps along the road.

Part of this stems from the need to do things differently. That's never easy. But at the same time, that doesn't mean that the potential for eCommerce should be overlooked.

To succeed, many publishers will need to do more than simply adopt a different mindset. They will also need people with different skills and experience.

This chapter explores the value of outside skills, why the focus of publishers has evolved, and how they can take action on these developments.

A consumer and product focus

“In the past, as a magazine publisher, we used to think of readers, readers, readers – and obviously everyone does read, whether you’re on a digital or print platform – but, at the end of the day, you’re not talking to readers, you’re talking to consumers,” suggests Julia Raphaely, CEO of Associated Media Publishing in South Africa.⁷⁸

This type of language may make some people feel uncomfortable.

As a feature in *Folio* on affiliate marketing – just one facet of eCommerce – recently observed:

“Talk of optimizing conversions against content are still fighting words for many editors and will always raise questions about the integrity of content decisions.”⁷⁹

Yet, consumer behaviours – as well as advertising models – are changing, driven by new platforms and fresh ways of getting information.

Simon Owens, a tech and media journalist living in Washington, DC, highlights just one way in which these developments are manifesting themselves:

“...As more and more consumers eschew brick and mortar retail stores in favor of online platforms like Amazon, they’re increasingly turning to online review sites to suss out which products are worth buying.

“*The Wirecutter* has ostensibly replaced the Best Buy store clerk who could walk you through the features of each television or laptop on sale.”⁸⁰

To remain relevant, publishers need to respond to these developments. The rise of review sites – from the likes of Tronc,⁸¹ New York Magazine, BuzzFeed, the New York Times Company (through their ownership of *Wirecutter*) and others – is just one way that increasing numbers of publishers have responded to these shifts with new sites, sections and approaches.⁸²

The value of outside skills and experience

It’s notable that, when looking at the case studies in the report, eCommerce leaders seldom come out of the newsroom.

Emily Ferguson, Head of Fashion Affiliate at *Marie Claire* and *Marie Claire Edit*, had previously been an analyst for Barclays Wealth Management, an entrepreneur who founded her own online affiliate marketing fashion website, and worked at *the Telegraph* as an eCommerce Business Development Manager.

BuzzFeed's CMO, Ben Kaufman previously ran his own start-up, and is leaving the company at the end of the year to concentrate on his latest venture, Camp, "a retailer built to engage and inspire young families through immersive and ever-changing thematic experiences."⁸³

Meanwhile, Jennifer Birkhofer, Director of eCommerce, NBC News Digital and the TODAY Show, came to the TV giant after being responsible "for bringing in alternate sources of revenue and traffic for the NYMag.com sites," such as The Cut and Vulture.

As well as managing eCommerce and affiliate partnerships, she helped launch *the Strategist*, New York Media's "first vertical funded primarily through affiliate revenue rather than advertising revenue."⁸⁴

For most publishers, ensuring that your eCommerce efforts are led by people who are entrepreneurially-minded appears to be key.

The Strategist

Shopping the Internet Smartly | Every product is independently selected by (obsessive) editors. Things you buy through our links may earn us a commission.

Sales
Beauty
Home
Kitchen + Dining
Fashion

Travel
Tech + Electronics
Fitness
Kids + Babies
Gift Guides

Find Anything

Best Buy

DEAL OF THE DAY
These Madewell Ankle Boots Are on Super Sale at Nordstrom Right Now

THE STRATEGIST
What Comedian Jacqueline Novak Can't Live Without

NOT A PROFESSIONAL... JUST "CRAZY".
My Favorite Products for a Glam Night Out

THIS THINGS INCREDIBLE
I Quit the Dry Cleaner (and My Monthly \$150 Bill) With This Shirt Press

Strategist 100
Dupes Week
Status Stuff
Mattresses

Rio Viera-Newton
NOT A PROFESSIONAL... JUST CRAZY.
The Products That I Never, Ever Take Out of My Purse

The Strategist.
Via Facebook



Lesson #6

Consider your Minimal Viable Product (MVP) and be prepared to pivot

“Success is not linear it’s a journey and learning process,” says Emily Ferguson, reflecting on a key takeaway from a talk by one of her heroes, Natalie Massenet, Founder of *Net-A-Porter* and former Chairman of the British Fashion Council.⁸⁵

For publishers, that not only means being willing to do things differently, but also knowing when to walk away; and indeed when to hedge your bets.

It may not be a surprise that BuzzFeed's 'hot glue gun for cheese' was shelved, but the publisher has since gone on to become a leader in developing products for its verticals, showing it has learned from its earlier propositions.

Here we look at some case studies of eCommerce plays that didn't work out in the long term, or where publishers have pivoted towards a more sustainable model.

Marie Claire UK

Marie Claire UK launched their online fashion aggregator platform *Marie Claire Edit* in November 2018. With the tagline ‘Shop the brands you love. Fashion Editor approved’, *Marie Claire Edit* offered point of purchase, approval badges from Marie Claire editors, and the ability to shop from designer and high street brands like Selfridges, ASOS, Topshop and NET-A-PORTER.⁸⁶

A key goal at launch was to demonstrate proof of concept. One potential reason for this, as *Retail Dive* contended, was a potential “muddying the waters between a magazine’s editorial mission and its revenue interests.”

“Even now, it may test the limits of how much content consumers will patiently read when they are on a mission to shop,” they added. “Although, separating Marie Claire Edit from the core magazine site may mitigate concerns about sales links overloading editorial content or too much content getting in the way of sales efforts.”⁸⁷

Less than a year later, in August 2019, an enhanced version of the site was released, featuring new navigation and shoppable editorial content which is updated daily. The initial “proof of concept” site had delivered an average 6% conversion rate, and average basket size of £397 pounds (\$478).⁸⁸

“We launched the site last year with only a few core elements to prove concept, and fundamentally understand our users,” said Emily Ferguson, Head of Fashion Affiliates. “Since then, the team has spent months testing how the site interacts with Google and what elements of the platform should be developed to further enhance its potential.”⁸⁹

BuzzFeed’s eCommerce past

Other publishers have also demonstrated flexibility, a willingness to learn, and the ability to listen to their audience, when it comes to developing their eCommerce propositions.

Interestingly, as well as expanding their *Tasty* portfolio, BuzzFeed has also abandoned many of its earlier (more quirky and less scalable) efforts, despite these moves garnering considerable media attention.

Currently mothballed products include the Fuck Shit Shop; “BuzzFeed’s new spot for the sweariest shit you didn’t know you needed,”⁹⁰ and the Fondoodler, a “hot glue gun” – “but for cheese.”



Marie Claire Edit at launch. Via Netimperative

FUCK SHIT SHOP

Yeah, that's right, we finally fucking closed. Go find something else to waste your money on.

Enter your email

f SHARE t TWEET

The Fuck Shit Shop website (October 2019)

POPSUGAR Must Have

The San Francisco-based publisher POPSUGAR has modified POPSUGAR Must Have, a subscription box which features fashion, beauty, home products, at a cost of \$75 (or \$270 for the year). Prior to this, customers could purchase a monthly box for \$39.95, as well as one-off “Limited Edition” boxes distributed across the year.⁹¹

Announcing the move, Lisa Sugar, Founder & President, POPSUGAR said that the decision was “as a result of customer feedback”⁹² a rationale reinforced in their online FAQ:

“...We've received feedback from customers that, while they love their surprise box every month, they can sometimes get overwhelmed by the sheer number of products.... So we listened! Moving ahead, we will slow the pace of delivery and will pack each box with more high-end luxurious treasures.”⁹³

More than half (54%) of online shoppers in the United States say they use a subscription service, according to a recent survey conducted by Clutch, a ratings and reviews platform.⁹⁴

That said, although popular with millennials, “the longevity of the model's success remains to be seen,” *Retail Dive* notes,⁹⁵ citing a 2018 McKinsey study⁹⁶ which found that 40% of those subscribing to subscription boxes ultimately cancel their services.⁹⁷

To avoid this fate befalling them, publishers like POPSUGAR will need to continue to listen to their audience, and potentially tweak their products, if these propositions are to remain viable in the long-term.

F+W Media's eCommerce failings

In contrast to these efforts, the failure of F+W Media, the former publisher of *Writer's Digest*, *Antique Trader*, *Gun Digest*, *Popular Woodworking* and other magazines, offers a cautionary eCommerce tale from which other publishers should learn.

The company went bankrupt at the start of 2019, citing a poorly-executed eCommerce strategy as a key cause.

F+W's management had previously moved into eCommerce, believing it to be “a natural extension of its existing business lines.”

Initially, all seemed well. Folio reported in 2011 that the company would soon be opening its twenty-fifth eCommerce store and



Example of a Must Have box.
Via POPSUGAR

that eCommerce revenues were up more than 50%, as a result of processing between 12,000 to 15,000 transactions from online shoppers every month.⁹⁸

“In 2014, former CEO David Nussbaum doubled down on the space,” *Adweek* recounts, “announcing a new name - F+W, a Content + eCommerce Company - and announcing that F+W was “strategically moving away from our traditional roots in the media business” to focus on “its fastest-growing businesses, digital and ecommerce.” This was, it turned out, not to be a good bet.⁹⁹

“There’s nothing like bankruptcy for exposing the flaws in a strategy that once looked credible,” notes Colin Morrison, a former journalist and CEO of media and entertainment companies such as EMAP, Australian Consolidated Press, Axel Springer, Future, Reed Elsevier, and Hearst.¹⁰⁰ “It is now clear that F+W under-estimated the cost and complexity of its eCommerce,” he adds.¹⁰¹

Although their eCommerce activity was generating a healthy profit margin and revenues of \$60 million in 2014,¹⁰² within five years it was identified as a primary cause of F+W’s demise. F+W lost 36% of its subscribers during 2015-18, while advertising revenue fell by 30%. Previously profitable eCommerce was, by the end of the decade, running at a loss.

“The company’s decision to focus on eCommerce and de-emphasize print and digital publishing accelerated the decline of the company’s publishing business,” CEO Greg Osberg wrote in documents submitted to a Delaware bankruptcy court, “and the resources spent on technology hurt the company’s viability because the technology was flawed and customers often had issues with the websites.”¹⁰³

“As the company began online sales of art, craft and writing supplies, it invested heavily in merchandise, the warehousing to store it, and the tech to manage the whole process,” Colin Morrison relates.

“F+W never had the expertise or technology to match its ambitions to become a full-service online retailer and this, ultimately, wrecked its relationships with pre-existing print customers.”

This experience highlights that even in cases where eCommerce is a good strategic fit for publishers, it’s not a panacea and that on-going success is not guaranteed. Overexpansion, poor execution, and an inability to change track, can ultimately derail eCommerce efforts.



“F+W, A Content + eCommerce Company.”
Via Facebook (posted December 2014)

However, being able to spot these warning signs at an earlier point can potentially enable publishers to have a second bite at the cherry. Condé Nast, for example, sought to parlay eCommerce into a revamped *Style.com* in 2016,¹⁰⁴ before pulling the plug less than a year later.¹⁰⁵

“It marks the end of a very short chapter for Condé Nast,” *Drapers* the 130 year-old Fashion Business publication wrote, “in which the publisher of *Vogue*, *GQ* and *Vanity Fair* sought to diversify its revenue sources in the face of declining print advertising spend.”

“*Style.com*, originally the home of all Condé Nast’s catwalk coverage, relaunched as an ecommerce site in September 2016 after a year of delays, but it failed to make an impression on consumers.”¹⁰⁶

In 2019, the company plunged back into the eCommerce with the launch of *VogueWorld*, “a distinct digital sub-brand combining the title’s celebrity and street style content with eCommerce.” Harnessing affiliate links and relations with retailers, *Glossy* notes that “while Condé Nast would not break out projections for *VogueWorld*, specifically, it said company-wide, it expects to grow eCommerce revenue by 300 percent in 2019.”¹⁰⁷



Lesson #7

Data, not content, is King

“Publishers need to have the first party insights to create commerce environments that are contextually relevant to their users as well as their brand partners,” argues Chris Vollmer, now the Managing Director at MediaLink and previously a partner at PwC’s strategy consulting firm Strategy&.

“That means understanding the preferences, interests and behaviors of their user communities more deeply and more analytically than they have before.”¹⁰⁸

In the eCommerce space, a number of companies are adopting this approach, harnessing data to support their own properties, partnerships and spin-off businesses.

This chapter explores the publishers who are using data to enhance and inform their eCommerce offerings, from being able to spot trends sooner, to developing data products.

POPSUGAR Insights

POPSUGAR’s assets don’t just include their core website, but also POPSUGAR Insights, a “female focused research platform highlighting relevant & actionable original insights about women's digital media behaviors.”¹⁰⁹

Part of their full-service creative agency, The Bakery, the research platform is focused exclusively on women and designed to help marketers learn more about female audiences.

POPSUGAR’s understanding of their millennial-led audience is at the heart of their partnership with Kohls, an American department store chain. Through this, Kohl’s carries an apparel line informed by POPSUGAR’s user data.

“POPSUGAR will bring key predictive insights to tell us exactly what this customer wants through the content they are searching, browsing and engaging with across channels,” said Michael Gilbert, Kohl’s Executive VP of Product Development.¹¹⁰

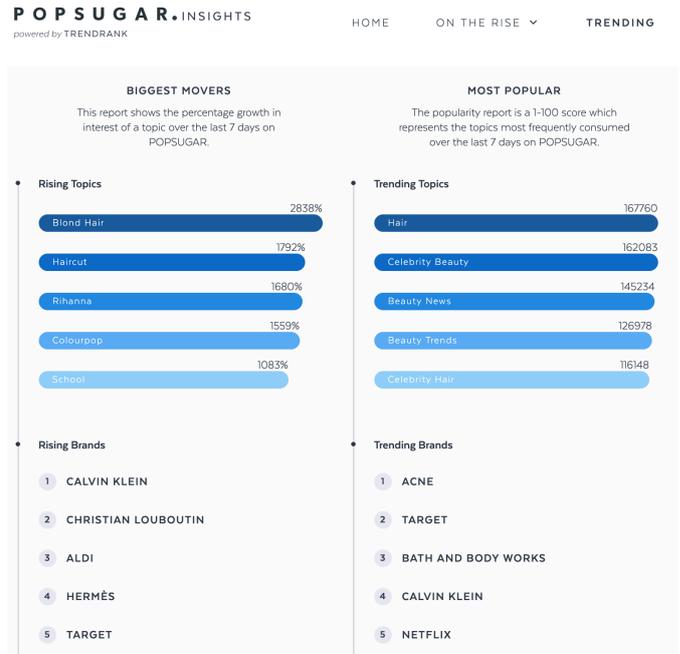
According to Greg Revelle, Chief Marketing Officer at Kohl's, using POPSUGAR’s data means that together “they’re able to spot trends more accurately and sooner.”¹¹¹

Alongside this, POPSUGAR also uses data to reinforce development on their own site. The value of shoppable content on their website - introduced through a “Shop the Article” feature,¹¹² which allows readers to toggle between an article and third-party links to the items featured in it - is backed up by their own research.

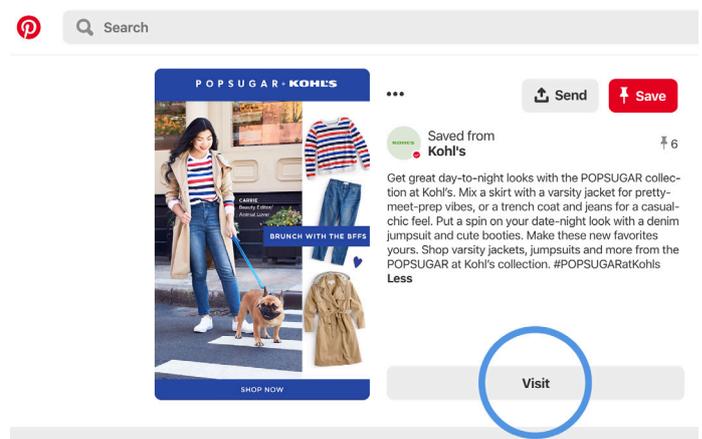
“We learned that 67% of millennial women wish that they could take advantage of the benefits of shoppable content and instantly purchase the products they see in digital content,” they note.¹¹³

According to *Marketing Dive*, this new approach had an immediate impact after its release in Spring 2017.

“After a first week of testing the new format drove 87% more clicks to retailers websites than other commerce-focused articles, and right now the PopSugar Shop articles make up around 5% of the publisher’s daily content. Along with the new articles, 20,000 archived commerce posts were converted to the new format.”¹¹⁴



Trending and rising brands and topics on POPSUGAR. Via POPSUGAR Insights, October 2019



Promotional materials for POPSUGAR + Kohls. Via Pinterest

Future Publishing

The U.K.-based Future Publishing is a company which strongly emphasises its eCommerce credentials.

As their website notes, in the past 12 months they have generated £130 million (\$164.6 million) in revenue for their partners and sold 2 million products through their websites.¹¹⁵

Future Publishing has a global eCommerce team of 20, covering a wide range of roles including developers and UX experts, and the company also has both an Editor In Chief of eCommerce, and a board member who is solely responsible for eCommerce.

Describing themselves in their media pack as “A Global Leading eCommerce Content Publisher”¹¹⁶ the company recognises that visitors who come to their sites “to read a product review, buying guide or deals post,” are usually doing so with a purchase in mind.

As a result, it’s made sense for them to build on this with a storefront offering opportunities for audiences to purchase technology products, gaming hardware or the software, that they have been reading about.

What arguably makes Future Publishing different is that this content is supported by data, specifically, price comparison data delivered by their proprietary eCommerce engine; Hawk.

The system compares prices across 250m+ products on a daily basis, and drives 5,000 transactions a day,¹¹⁷ including geo-territorial solutions.

Amazon and Walmart’s content play

In a development for publishers to note, companies like Amazon and Walmart are increasingly moving into the content business, blurring the line between traditional retailer and content provider.

Amazon, for example, doesn’t just offer original and acquired content through Amazon Prime, it also operates Amazon Live, a QVC-like channel on its website.

Walmart, which owns the on-demand video service Vudu, is commissioning a dozen shows in 2019, designed to allow viewers to purchase items seen in the shows.¹¹⁸

580k Facebook Fans	N/A Facebook Fans	179k Facebook Fans	3.85m Facebook Fans	1.36m Facebook Fans
200k Twitter Followers	11.4k Twitter Followers	84.1k Twitter Followers	1.98m Twitter Followers	1.03k Twitter Followers
128k Newsletter Subscribers	12k Newsletter Subscribers	63k Newsletter Subscribers	23.8k Newsletter Subscribers	27.7k Newsletter Subscribers

Examples of Future Publishing’s titles.
Via Future Publishing Media Pack

The iPhone 11 - the successor to the iPhone XR - has gone from secondary handset to firmly taking the limelight. Offering most of the top-end camera technology of the powerful iPhone 11 Pro, it packs good spec and manages to do so for a lower cost than many would expect - this is the one to go for if you want a good value new iPhone.

+ FOR

- Improved camera
- New range of colors
- Good battery life remains

- AGAINST

- Design is almost identical to XR
- No headphone dongle in the box
- Camera bump a little sharp

Price comparison: Find the best deal for your next phone

Plans Recommended

See all prices (116 found) [FILTER](#)

Apple iPhone 11 (Instalments)

	Data 2GB	Upfront \$30	Monthly \$69.17 /mth	VISIT WEBSITE at Sprint
	Data 5GB	Upfront \$30	Monthly \$84.16 /mth	VISIT WEBSITE at Verizon Wireless
	Data Unlimited	Upfront \$30	Monthly \$79.17 /mth	VISIT WEBSITE at Sprint

SHOW MORE DEALS

POWERED BY **techradar**

IN ASSOCIATION WITH **whistleOut**

TechRadar review of the iPhone 11, and price comparisons for the phone for U.S. consumers.

Via Techradar

Both companies enjoy existing relationships with consumers, relationships which in turn yield huge amounts of data about shopping habits and preferences. Being able to parlay this into a content offering - and vice versa - could potentially be a potent mix.

As a result, given the increasingly close ties - seen at both Amazon and Walmart - between these two parts of their businesses, any publisher interested in eCommerce needs to be monitoring the implications of these developments.



Lesson #8

Partnerships are essential

Few publishers possess the end-to-end skills and tools to deliver their eCommerce ambitions single handedly.

As a result, many media organisations are partnering with a wide range of players - from commerce platforms like Shopify¹¹⁹ and StackCommerce,¹²⁰ through to retailers and social networks - in the delivery of their eCommerce activities.

For publishers to execute a successful eCommerce strategy, these types of partnerships are often fundamental. But timing can also be essential, with partnerships around key days in the shopping calendar also proving particularly profitable.

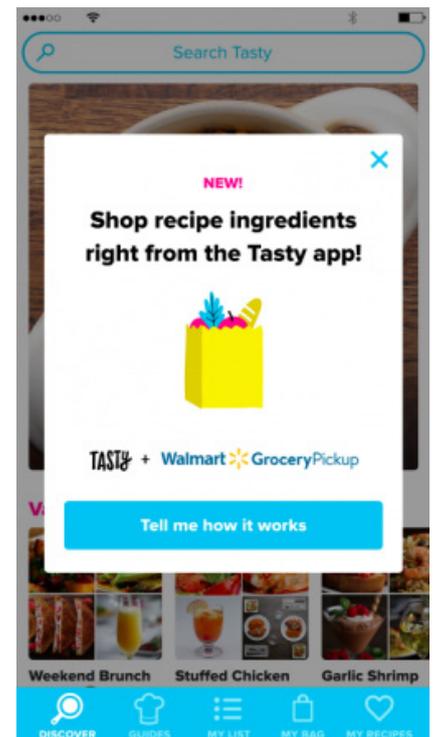
Here, we look at a range of different partnerships, with publishers choosing to team up with supermarkets, platforms, department stores and tech companies.

Partnerships can take many forms; often starting small and growing.

Marie Claire UK partnered with the online British supermarket Ocado, to launch an online premium beauty store, Fabled by Marie Claire in 2016. The site, which also has a physical store on Tottenham Court Road in London, was sold to the fashion retailer Next in June 2019, building off an eight-month collaboration between Next and Fabled by Marie Claire, which included Next selling over 100 beauty brands including Clinique, Benefit, Smashbox, Burberry and Gucci, through Fabled.¹²¹

The U.S. based site POPSUGAR, partnered with department store chain Kohls, on a New York pop-up store in both 2017¹²² and 2018,¹²³ before launching the POPSUGAR at Kohl's¹²⁴ clothing range. Aimed at millennials, the collection is available at over 500 Kohl's stores and Kohls.com. A further partnership, Beauty by POPSUGAR, means that alongside being able to purchase products online, they can also be bought at a number of ULTA Beauty stores across the United States.

BuzzFeed's partnership with Walmart continues to expand, going beyond simply selling Tasty branded cookware, to also feature "shoppable recipes," whereby audiences can add ingredients featured in a Tasty video to their online Walmart grocery cart. "This is different from advertising," says Nilla Ali, VP of Strategic Partnerships at BuzzFeed. "It is very much down-funnel and integrated with content."¹²⁵



The Tasty app and the Walmart Shopping Cart.

Tie-in's with the shopping calendar

Sometimes partnerships will be more prosaic, building on other events in the retail calendar. Future Media, which owns titles such as *TechRadar*, *T3* and *PC Gamer*, has seen considerable engagement with sales on Amazon during Amazon Prime Day. In July 2019, they revealed:

"Over the 48-hour period we saw more than 4m global visitors on our websites; increased traffic to our retail partners by 186% and saw an estimated 100K transactions worth over £5m/\$6.2m."¹²⁶

Similarly, in America, NBC's morning programme, *The TODAY Show*, generated more than \$12 million in sales during the week after Thanksgiving,¹²⁷ against \$60 million in eCommerce revenue for the whole year.¹²⁸

The show sold over 2 million products during the holiday season,¹²⁹ demonstrating the importance of tapping into established shopping behaviours, such as "Black Friday," the day after Thanksgiving. "Steals & Deals," a long-running



Jill Martin's Steals & Deals!
Via Nathan Congleton/NBC

segment hosted by Jill Martin, is the major driver of this activity for the NBC show.

Other publishers, like BuzzFeed, have seen similar results. Clickthrough rates on BuzzFeed's affiliate links were seven-times higher than usual on Amazon Prime Day.¹³⁰

Partnerships with platforms

Magazines have built their businesses and brands forever via partnerships," says Andrew Clurman, President and Chief Operating Officer, Active Interest Media, "sometimes they work out well for both partners ... sometimes they don't."¹³¹

The same can be said of relationships with platforms and social networks. Although these partnerships can, at times, be fraught, most publishers will conclude that the size and reach of these networks makes working with them inevitable. Put another way, "can't live with them, can't live without them."

Amazon, for example, drives 650 million visitors to the site every month through partnerships with publishers,¹³² and Recode reports that the company "is in talks with big American publishers, including the *New York Times* and BuzzFeed about deals that would reward them for expanding their international presence, specifically in consumer-oriented shopping sites."¹³³

Publishers have experimented with new formats such as Facebook Live through paid partnerships with platforms,¹³⁴ but typically haven't worked with Amazon in this way.

"Amazon already pays internet publishers that refer shoppers to the company via "affiliate links" embedded on their site, but it thinks that business could grow significantly if US publishers had more readers outside of America.

"Right now, publishers are paid when a shopper clicks on a link on their site, heads to Amazon, and eventually buys something. But sources say Amazon has been proposing various deals that would give publishers money up front in order to expand their international sites or open up new markets."¹³⁵

Of note here is the two-way relationship between the retail giant and publishers, with both parties seeing the other as a potential gateway to growth and new revenues.

These principles are also applicable to the relationships that publishers have with social networks, especially as eCommerce activity on these platforms, becomes easier.

Visual social networks - like Snapchat, Pinterest and Instagram - more obviously lend themselves to this type of activity. In 2018, Snap began testing a commerce function with some of its Snapchat Discover publisher channels,¹³⁶ while POPSUGAR has

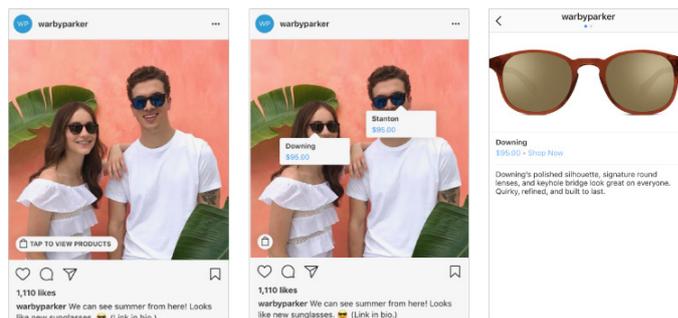
turned Sparkle - a fast-loading web page format designed to facilitate eCommerce transactions - into a product that brands and retailers can use.¹³⁷

Alongside developing their own relationships with social networks, publishers will also need to keep an eye on partnerships being developed with retailers, not least because many of those arrangements will be replicable for content creators, and mimic the type of experience some publishers are already seeking to offer.

Endicia, an online shipping blog, has highlighted the example of one retailer, which arguably falls into this category:

“Warby Parker is among U.S.-based retailers sharing posts on Instagram featuring an icon encouraging users to “Tap to view products.”

“When tapped, a tags appear on various products featured in the post (up to five products per post). A user selecting one of those tags is then provided a detailed view of the selected product and a link to buy.”¹³⁸



Warby Parker on Instagram.
Via Endicia

A mutually beneficial arrangement

“The trick to embedding new ways of doing business into legacy media companies is finding partners and clients who want to collaborate, and then monetising that in a way that allows you to remain authentic as a brand,” advises Julia Raphaely, MD of Associated Media Publishing in South Africa.¹³⁹

In doing this, it’s important to recognise that it’s not just publishers who are looking to diversify their income streams and find new revenue models.

Advertisers and retailers are also recognising the need to do things differently. As an article in Folio recently observed:

“Amazon and emerging direct-to-consumer challenger brands pressured many retailers to look past search and display and find new ways to get into the real consumer path to purchase, which often begins with publisher content.”¹⁴⁰

For publishers there are a wide variety of factors to consider when embarking on partnerships in this space. This includes the fit with your existing brand, the potential impact and influence on editorial, as well as the underpinning technology, supply chains, third party fulfilment and potential opportunities for mergers, acquisitions and investment.

LESSON #8

Heart Media, a publisher of luxury lifestyle magazines in Singapore and South East Asia, is an example of one company which invests in eCommerce, but purposefully seeks to avoid doing it directly.

As Oliver Burlot, Heart's CEO, explains:

“We stay focused on print and digital media and events, but we don't build eCommerce platforms as it is a totally different job.

“We invest in eCommerce to understand how it works, but not to operate it.”¹⁴¹



Heart Media titles.

Via Heart Media's Facebook page



Lesson #9

The future will be more immersive, invasive and frictionless

As eCommerce develops, the emphasis for retailers, publishers and other interested parties (such as social networks) is on creating as seamless an experience as possible.

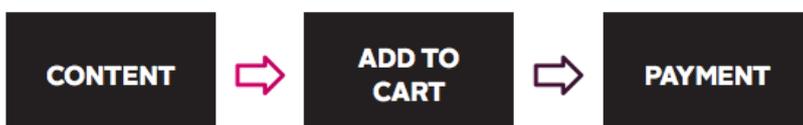
A frictionless experience, where you can shop in-app and onsite (or at the very least reduce the number of steps involved), as simply as possible, is seen as key to success.¹⁴²



Shoppable technology can **shorten** the conversion process to something like this:



Or in some cases, even this:



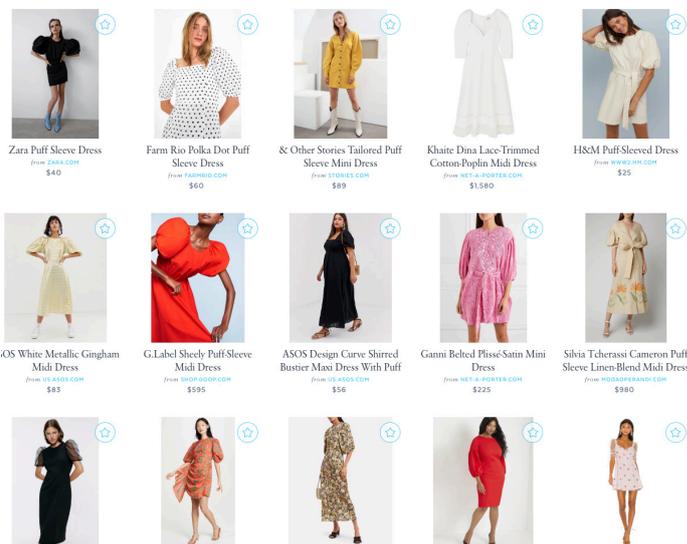
The evolution of shoppable content.
Via Styla and Digital Doughnut



The principle of convenience can be seen in the way that a number of publishers are developing their websites, and transitions between editorial and eCommerce material.

POPSUGAR, for example, allows you to “shop the story,” as you seamlessly toggle between an article and the products featured with in it. Readers can then click on an item in order to be taken directly to the relevant page on a retailer's website.

This type of user experience will become more commonplace in the near future, as shoppable content (as described below by Raymon Ray, founder of *Smart Hustle Magazine*,) becomes increasingly ingrained in our online experience.



“Shop the Story” function from an article on the “Romantic Puff-Sleeve Dress Trend.”
Via POPSUGAR

“Imagine you published an article about the benefits of wearing the right shoe size when working out. Within the article, you linked to five different workout sneakers sold on your site.

“Rather than readers having to click through each link and abandon the article that contains the helpful information, shoppable content technology instead enables you to consolidate all the shoppable “content” (basically, a list of the products mentioned) into one area or widget so that readers can easily peruse and add them to their shopping cart whenever they want.”¹⁴³

The evolution of social commerce

Social networks are also innovating with similar UX principles in mind,¹⁴⁴ although *GlobalWebIndex* note that currently, on social networks, this potential remains unfulfilled.

“Our data shows that the purchase journey on social media have yet to be closed. It seems that social channels are the perfect space for consumer brand discovery and product research, but are yet to fulfill their potential when it comes to completing the purchase.”

They highlight lessons from the APAC region, as key to understanding how other markets need to adapt to find the eCommerce “Holy Grail.”

“APAC’s lead in social commerce is a product of how consumer behaviors formed when the internet gained mass adoption in the region: it came later and rolled out more quickly, yielding a more integrated, mobile-first online space.”

LESSON #9



“At the core of this is convenience,” they observe. “It’s no coincidence that some of the top mobile payment services in these three APAC markets are owned by the major social media platforms in those countries.”¹⁴⁵

Given this and the growing role of mobile in searching for products, publishers will need to continue to think mobile first,¹⁴⁶ and they’ll also want to keep an eye on the evolution of Apple Pay and Facebook’s own cryptocurrency too.¹⁴⁷

Social Mobile Payment Services

% of Social Shoppers who have used the following services to pay for an item on their phone



Question: Which of the following services have you used to pay for an item / service using your phone?
Source: GlobalWebIndex Q3 2018 Base: 7,776 (China), 369 (South Korea), 1,504 (Taiwan & Thailand) Social Shoppers aged 16-64

Social Mobile Payment usage in select SE Asia markets.
Via GlobalWebIndex

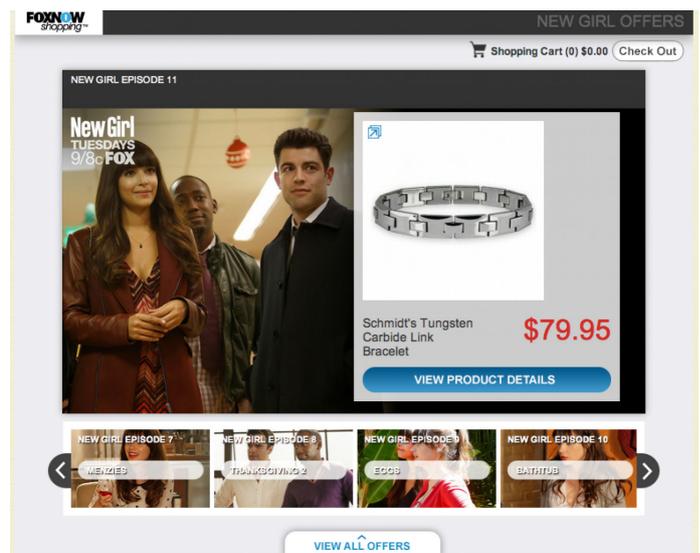
NBCUniversal and eCommerce on TV

eCommerce activity, however, won’t just take place on social networks and publishers websites. Publishers need to note that alongside these online efforts, new formats for eCommerce are also emerging, as eCommerce opportunities become increasingly prevalent in our daily lives.

Broadcasters, like the American TV giant, NBCUniversal are exploring ways to create new types of eCommerce and shopping experiences, again with a focus on improving the speed and ease of purchase.

In early 2019, the media conglomerate announced plans to feature QR codes within ads and shows, thereby creating a new - more streamlined - route to potential consumers. The broadcaster will collect a fee for producing these shoppable ads, as well as a percentage of sales derived from these QR code scans.¹⁴⁸

This builds on examples of earlier efforts by TV companies to encourage consumers to buy products they’ve seen featured in the shows that they love,¹⁴⁹ (a model Walmart is also exploring in 2019),¹⁵⁰ although NBC’s efforts are also moving into the traditional ad-break, as well as their core programming.



New Girl fans using the Fox Now iPad app in 2013 could buy items seen in the show.

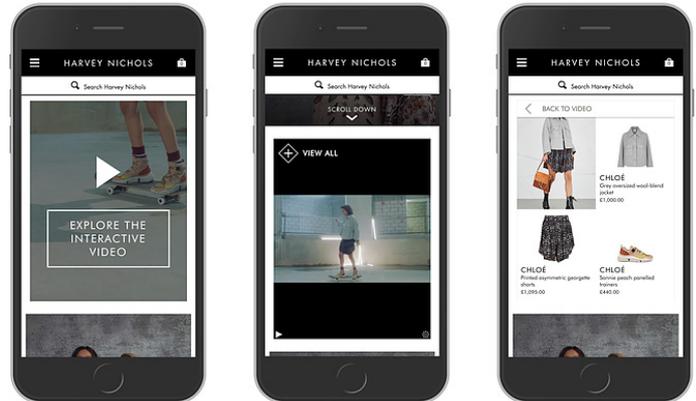
Via JWTIntelligence



The rationale behind this new TV advertising format, *Business Insider* says, is “to offset disappointing ratings and entice advertisers, NBCU is looking to ShoppableTV to boost the value proposition of its ads.” It’s also part of a conscious effort to reduce ad load at a time when many consumers are paying for ad-free services like Netflix or Amazon Prime.¹⁵¹

An early test of this technology, during a broadcast of the TODAY show, resulted in around 50,000 scans in five minutes, *The Drum* reports.¹⁵² ShoppableTV is expected to be integrated into their major media channels such as NBC, NBC Sports, Telemundo, Bravo, E!, CNBC Prime, and USA Network in the near future.

“Globally, people are inspired by the products in the content that they watch, but currently, there is no easy way to direct that person to purchase,” explains Rosa Pereiro a Senior Client Solutions Director, based in Singapore, for the online video company, Brightcove.



Example of a shoppable video from luxury fashion retailer, Harvey Nichols.
Via Smartzer

“If online TV platforms and advertisers could shorten that search-and-buy cycle, and make the experience seamless and convenient, we are betting that many consumers would be open to shoppable video as part of their viewer experience.”¹⁵³

“Brands have long been subtle when it comes to product placement in programming, but this does not provide any meaningful data beyond brand impression data.

“With shoppable video, content owners can track click-to-view, click-to-buy, and click-to-share interactions—and ultimately, get a clearer view of conversion data,” she adds, noting that “shoppable video opens up a completely new revenue stream potential.”

Among publishers, one step in this direction can be seen through BuzzFeed’s partnership with Walmart. Viewers of Tasty videos (via the dedicated Tasty app) can now add the ingredients in the video to a Walmart online grocery cart, with the option of picking up the contents in store, or having them delivered.

“Finding that perfect recipe, creating a grocery list and finally getting to the store can keep any chef out of the kitchen,” said Janey Whiteside, Chief Customer Officer, Walmart, in a statement announcing the development.



Explaining Tasty’s shoppable recipes.
Via BuzzFeed



“We’re excited to create a fun solution that feeds customers appetites to put time back in their busy schedules all while saving money with Walmart’s everyday low prices.”¹⁵⁴

Interactive video

In addition to this new potential tier of eCommerce, analysts and start-ups are also exploring a number of other ways in which more immersive and interactive media could shape our consumption habits; developments which could have implications for eCommerce.

The New York based start-up, Cinematique, captured the attention of the tech press, after creating a template for “touchable video.”

“When you’re watching a Cinematique-powered video, you can tap or click on different items to save them and learn more later, and in some cases buy the featured product,” *TechCrunch* explained.

Although the company has now closed,¹⁵⁵ others may seek to emulate the type of customer experience the company pioneered.¹⁵⁶

The role of voice

A further technology which may make eCommerce in-roads is voice. Smart speakers (like Amazon Echo and Google Home) have enjoyed rapid adoption in a number of markets around the world.

By the end of 2019, it’s anticipated that 200 million units will have shipped globally, growing to over 500 million in 2023. Canalys, a research and analysis company, predict that ownership of these devices will overtake tablets by 2021.¹⁵⁷

This growth and market size will, inevitably, unlock a range of innovations.¹⁵⁸ Voice is already shaping search and SEO,¹⁵⁹ and voice commerce - although nascent right now - may, in time, become a shopping format that consumers become comfortable with.¹⁶⁰

Image recognition

Finally, publishers also need to keep a watchful eye on image recognition, “computer technologies that can recognise certain people, animals, objects or other targeted subjects through the use of algorithms and machine learning concepts.”¹⁶¹

This emerging technology can enable brands to track the presence of their logo and products across the web (for example, in pictures users upload to social networks),¹⁶² and in turn use



it to more effectively target the digital ads that they serve consumers.¹⁶³

Retailers such as Asos,¹⁶³ as well as platforms like Amazon and eBay,¹⁶⁵ Pinterest and Google already offer visual search. As WIRED noted in 2018:

“Pinterest Lens camera search allows users to search by taking a photo of an object offline and receive results for online recommendations. An apple will return results for related recipes for dishes, such as pie or cider. A photo of a pair of running shoes will result in related shoes, and even athletic clothing to style with it, available for purchase.”¹⁶⁶

The potential impact for eCommerce of this technology could be game changing.



Benedict Evans ✓
@benedictevans

I suspect machine learning will be the biggest change to ecommerce since it began - image recognition in particular. What happens when you can wave a phone at something and say 'I like this'?

10:36 AM · May 19, 2018 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

*Tweet from Benedict Evans, Andreessen Horowitz ('a16z').
Via Twitter*



Lesson #10

Trust and transparency matter more than ever

The scope and range of possibilities for eCommerce will grow rapidly in the next decade, driven by a range of technological developments, as well as a desire by publishers, retailers and advertisers alike to effectively harness eCommerce's burgeoning potential.

Given this, it is important for publishers to determine their role in this rapidly evolving space.

In an era of content proliferation, a publishers reputation - and the ability to act as a trusted guide in a crowded, cluttered and often confusing world - can be part of a publishers secret sauce.

This principle doesn't just apply to traditional verticals.¹⁶⁷ It should also be applicable to the wider online experience, including eCommerce, and a digital environment where content and eCommerce increasingly intersect.

This final chapter looks at how publishers are building and maintaining trust whilst navigating eCommerce, and why transparency and consistency are so valuable.

Helping consumers navigate the online world

“You go to the front page of Amazon, you try to buy a gift for someone. You have literally every option under the sun,” says Ben Gafni, VP Business Development at StackCommerce.

“So the best publishers aren’t just presenting people with a list of deals and discounts, they’re using the power of their voice to talk about things that people might not have heard about.”¹⁶⁸

Organisations such as Dennis Publishing and New York Media, are just two players who talk about this in terms of “service journalism.” Discussing the launch of *the Strategist* in November 2016, David Haskell, New York Media’s editor for business and strategy, used similar language, writing:

“Our *Strategist* editors are first in their class at helping readers navigate life... In its digital form, the *Strategist* will apply its service journalism to online shopping – which has fast become where most of us buy most of our stuff – with extremely useful shopping advice.”¹⁶⁹

It’s an approach that Marie Claire UK’s Managing Director Justine Southall also endorses, although she has also acknowledged some of the wider benefits - to brands and retailers - of their shopping platform *Marie Claire Edit*.

Developed by *Marie Claire*’s Head of Fashion Affiliates Emily Ferguson and the wider editorial team, Southall, who is leaving the in late October 2019,¹⁷⁰ has described benefits deriving from the platform for all stakeholders:

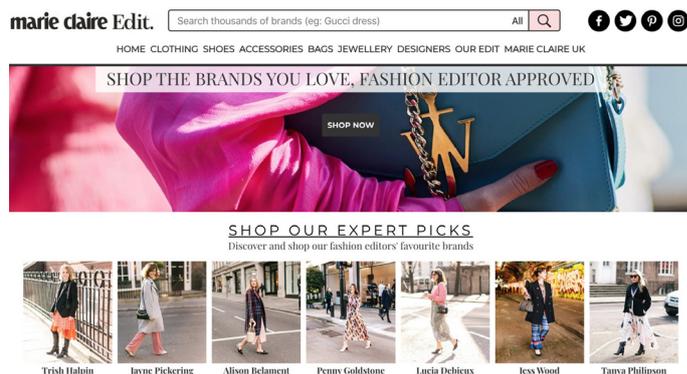
“The job we do as magazines is to inspire, curate, edit, recommend and help our readers and customers make choices. *Marie Claire* has tried to anticipate the way that women want to engage with us and to shop, and with *Fabled* by *Marie Claire* and now with the launch of *Marie Claire Edit*, we have taken that into new territory.

“Now the power and influence of *Marie Claire*’s trusted fashion editors extends even further to offer brands and retailers a new way to engage with consumers through quality native content.”¹⁷¹

Building and maintaining trust

eCommerce activity risks blurring some of the traditional church and state lines that many publishers currently have set in place. As a result, these manoeuvres need to be carefully navigated.

Raju Narisetti, a professor of professional practice at *Columbia Journalism School* and the former CEO of *Gizmodo Media Group*,



Marie Claire Edit emphasising the role of the Fashion Editors.
Via *Fashion Network*

argues that “Putting in ‘buy’ buttons just because you have a big audience is a failed idea.”

“But,” he says, “if you think about it as commerce becoming a byproduct of your reader trust – and trust being the main product – then I think you have the ability to succeed.”¹⁷²

Editors and publishers work hard to develop trust among their core audience. However, as they expand further into the realms of eCommerce there’s a risk that this may be eroded.

In reviewing numerous websites for this report, there was little consistency in terms of how publishers were signposting and labeling eCommerce related content. It was often unclear if clicking on links to recommended products might result in payment to a publisher.

That said, in some cases, this would be clearly signposted in one area of a site, but not in another. It was confusing to say the least.

Moreover, few sites also explained – or had clear links to – their editorial policy, and how this influenced the products they wrote about, or the external links that they provided.

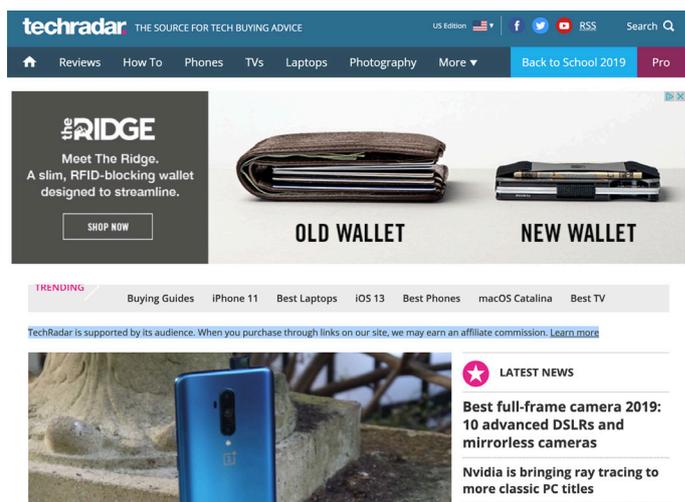
With levels of trust in the media and journalism, around the world, near record lows,¹⁷³ publishers need to ensure that they offer a consistent user experience across their sites. Furthermore, there may be merit in the industry as a whole thinking about the use of common labels and terms, to ensure a consistency of experience and transparency for their audiences.

In a world of shoppable ads, branded content, native advertising, affiliate links and marketing, as well as the rapid rise of recommendation focused journalism and websites,¹⁷⁴ helping audiences to differentiate between these different types of content is essential.

Publishers and journalists may be able to differentiate between these activities, but we should not assume the same level of media literacy among audiences.

One key reason for this, as the *New York Times* has effectively noted, is that the lines between many of these content areas are effectively becoming murkier.

“Magazines have long blurred the line between commerce and editorial content, tacitly supporting advertisers in their fashion shoots. Recently, some have begun venturing into eCommerce with various products in their pages (sometimes even taking a cut of each transaction).



Example of labeling on the techRadar website.
Via TechRadar, October 2019. Highlighting by the author for illustrative purposes.

“Stylists and photographers who produce editorial shoots are often the same ones behind ad campaigns.”¹⁷⁵

This can enable brands to benefit from a consistent look and feel, but for audiences it risks muddying the waters between editorial, eCommerce and advertising.

Moreover, as the *Times* notes, “synergy like this, where the dots are connected out in the open, is rare.”¹⁷⁶

The value of transparency and consistency

Trust is hard to gain, but easy to squander. Given this, it’s imperative that publishers are transparent about their editorial processes and the financial implications of consumer behaviour.

“We don’t accept unsolicited product,” Ganda Suthivarakom, Special Projects Editor at *Wirecutter*, told *Vox*, while Acting Editor-in-Chief for the site. “We have the same DNA as the *Times*, and we know that reader trust is the most important asset we have. We can never squander that, because without it, we don’t have a business.”¹⁷⁷

Jessica Spira, the site’s director of revenue, and now VP Partner Growth and Management at Ziff Davis, previously outlined how *Wirecutter* might publish product recommendations irrespective of the financial dynamic.

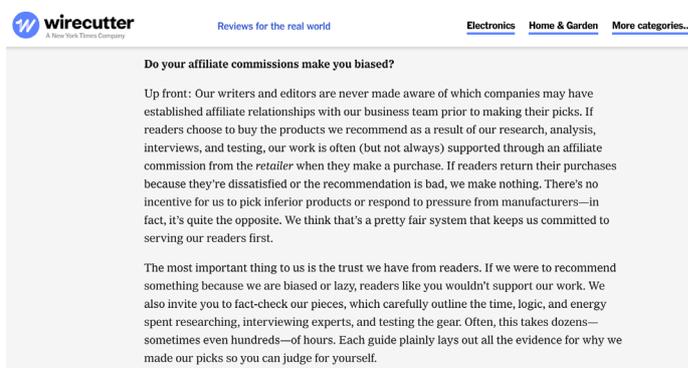
“In some cases, we don’t have a relationship with anyone or otherwise they are products that just don’t have affiliate programs,” she said. “It’s really about the reader first, and if our editorial team has decided this guide is a reader service and needs to be published, it gets published.”¹⁷⁸

Spira also explained how *Wirecutter* was careful to only link out to vendors with deliver excellent customer service.

“We’re going to list the retailers that we believe in in terms of whether they have good return policies. They’re reputable. Their customer service is good. Their return policies are good.

“We have confidence that the experience our reader will have at a merchant is a good one. If we don’t feel that way we won’t include that merchant. A merchant could say, ‘Oh, I’m going to pay you an enormous rate,’ and if it’s not a merchant that our business team feels is reputable, we will not surface them.”¹⁷⁹

The implication here is that a poor experience will reflect badly on *Wirecutter*, even if the entire transactional relationship is handled through a third party. Understanding and accounting for



Wirecutter’s “About Us” page explaining Affiliate Commissions. Via Wirecutter

this is an important consideration for publishers venturing into eCommerce.

Similarly, Skimlinks, a commerce content monetization platform, whose clients include major retailers as well as “over half of the top 100 US & UK publishers by revenue including Conde Nast, Hearst, BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, Trinity Mirror, MailOnline, and more,”¹⁸⁰ have shared some of the lessons from Dennis Publishing’s eCommerce work; another client of theirs.¹⁸¹

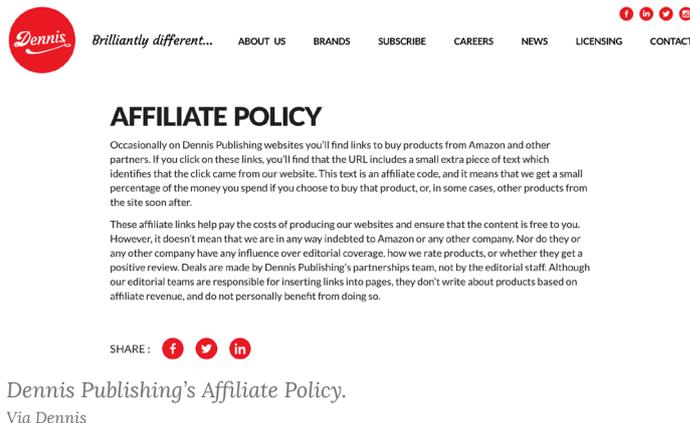
Aside from highlighting the affiliate policy on sites such as www.expertreviews.co.uk and alphr.com, (policies which are in a similar vein to *Wirecutter’s*) they also note that “Dennis has coordinated content monetisation efforts centrally.”

This type of central organisation “ensures [that] best practices on creating and promoting commerce-related content are communicated consistently to the editorial team,” they write.

It also meant that “across the portfolio of brands, teams are supplied with content strategy around eCommerce results so they understand how best to use this data to inspire content creation.”

Ensuring a consistency of approach - behind the scenes, onsite and in terms of eCommerce fulfilment - are all important eCommerce considerations for publishers.

Inconsistency in any of these areas risks consumer blowback, adverse feedback that few publishers can afford at a time when their eCommerce efforts are often so nascent.





Conclusion

“Content, community, and commerce when combined effectively have fuelled financial wins for many businesses, but not a lot of them have been newspaper and magazine publishers,”¹⁸² notes Nikolay Malyarov, the CEO, International & Chief Content Officer at PressReader.

Malyarov, in an opinion piece published by FIPP, argues that publishers are stuck in a rut, obsessing over the future of advertising and subscriptions. “Income diversification is fundamental to survival,” he says, “even if the long-term potential of some ideas are, as yet, unproven.”

For many organisations, eCommerce arguably falls into that category.

A 2018 survey from *Digiday* found that “for most publishers these revenue streams [eCommerce] are nascent and supplemental income rather than core components of their revenues. Less than 10% of publishers in the *Digiday* survey said eCommerce was responsible for more than 25% of their revenues.”¹⁸³

Nonetheless, as this report has shown, there are lots of ideas out there, and examples of publishers who are successfully embracing eCommerce to varying degrees.

There is no single model for publishers to pursue; and eCommerce is a label which covers a multitude of revenue opportunities; ranging from affiliate relationships through to developing (and selling) your own products, as well as leveraging consumer insights for financial gain.

Levels of risk, and return, vary. As a result, each publisher needs to determine their own eCommerce path; routes which are likely to be as unique as their individual publications.

What is clear, however, is that publishers strategies cannot be rooted in the past.

“For advertisers, journalism was an expensive but necessary middle man,” the *New Statesman*’s Jasper Jackson recounts, “but the internet cut him out.”

CONCLUSION



“Women’s magazines, like men’s magazines, are particularly vulnerable to this logic because of a basic rule of media on the internet;” Jackson argues, “you win by being very big, or very specific.”¹⁸⁴

It’s against this backdrop – one not exclusive to women’s and men’s magazines – that all publishers and content creators must adapt and evolve to new consumer, audience and advertising realities. Within this, the rise of eCommerce is simply too big to ignore.

Moreover, as eCommerce continues to become more pervasive, and purposeful social media behaviours – such as using social networks to research and find products to buy – further nudge eCommerce forward,¹⁸⁵ platforms, retailers, publishers and content creators alike, must all strive to innovate in their efforts to grab a slice of the eCommerce pie.

This is a field which has momentum; and as a result, we can confidently expect more publishers to get involved in eCommerce over the coming months and years.

For most players it will never be a panacea for historic business models, but eCommerce looks to become an increasingly essential component of a growing number of publisher's revenue streams.

Subsequently, this is a trend no publisher – large or small – can afford to overlook.

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