

Elevating the Everyday Brand Ambassador

Considerations for UGC Management



Flip through any yearbook, and you'll find a list of "superlative" recognitions. You remember the adjectives: the ones voted on by your peers at the end of a school year. Once tabulated, the silly tradition honors the class clown, the best dressed, or someone most likely to [fill in the blank].

Before social media and online sharing, the ability to provide feedback into what would otherwise be a predetermined yearbook was for many young people the first experience of user-generated content (UGC). Regardless of whatever pride or notoriety those titles brought to the recipient, high schoolers are just ordinary people. And that's exactly what the Interactive Advertising Bureau calls the creators of UGC.

“Ordinary people’ have become avid and voluntary content creators, notably on their mobile devices. Publishers, marketers, and agencies are increasingly taking notice and capitalizing on this trend in new and exciting ways.

- IAB

In the same way that high-school superlatives elevate an “ordinary” student, when brands infuse UGC into their digital marketing strategies, they’re elevating the everyday consumers who are a part of their community.

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UGC really took off with the advent of the Internet. Before having access to digital channels of our own, we were entertained, informed, and persuaded through traditional media and advertising. [As TINT explains](#), “Fictional stories became oversaturated and unrealistic—consumers didn’t need to see actors faking an experience with a product; they wanted to see real customers talking about their experience with it.” And thus began the shift to “nonfiction” advertising.

In 2003 came MySpace and the first public-facing opportunity to claim and curate your own corner of the World Wide Web. You could connect with and rank friends, customize your profile’s theme or color scheme, and make known your music preferences. Facebook followed a year later, and then by the start of the next decade, Pinterest and Instagram entered the conversation.

When given the platforms on which to create and share our own content, we owned it. In 2020, approximately [3.6 billion](#) people worldwide were on social-media networks. Today, more than [995 photos](#) are uploaded to Instagram **every second**. It’s no wonder that brands have realized what a gold mine social channels are, and are looking to bring that connectivity into their own digital landscapes.



UGC is moving to the head of the class as a powerful branding tool, which we explored in a [recent consumer survey](#).

Most Likely to Succeed

— Some industries are a natural fit for UGC. When asked which industries they value seeing peer-created content for, consumers voted restaurants (33%), retail (32%), and healthcare providers (17%) as their top three.

Most Influential

— UGC resonates across generations, but the age group that can be most influenced by UGC is overwhelmingly Millennials, with 78% of them saying that UGC is especially helpful in making purchasing decisions

Most Helpful

— Forty-seven percent of Millennials and 52% of Gen Z say that they find video reviews more helpful than images. Keep this in mind when sourcing your UGC for an even bigger influence on conversions.

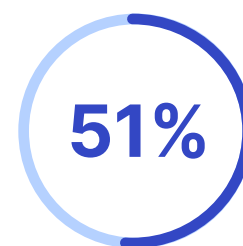
The Power of UGC: Putting the Customer Front and Center

Benefits of using UGC in branding efforts abound, the primary one being its pervasiveness.

Tania Nemaric, vice president of brand marketing for 1-800-Flowers.com, asserted, "People trust people. Stories that are generated by customers can change how a brand is perceived.

When you see someone who looks like you, it becomes relatable." A bevy of recent surveys on the subject back up that observation.

- Approximately **52% of web users** say that they post on social media at least once a month about the products they've purchased.
- **Eighty-three percent** of Instagram users discover new products and services on that platform.
- Ads featuring UGC garner **73% more** positive comments on social networks than from traditional ads.
- Nearly two-thirds (**61%**) of consumers agree that UGC encourages them to engage with brands.
- **Seventy-nine percent** of web users say that UGC highly influences their purchasing decisions.
- UGC delivers a **4.5% higher conversion rate** than branded content.



Beyond its persuasive power, UGC is also easier on marketing resources than creation of original content. A **recent study** from TINT found that 51% of marketing professionals had budgets cut in 2020, making the strategic shift to UGC as a way to build authenticity but also to save money.

Is the content brand safe and supportive of your brand’s mission?

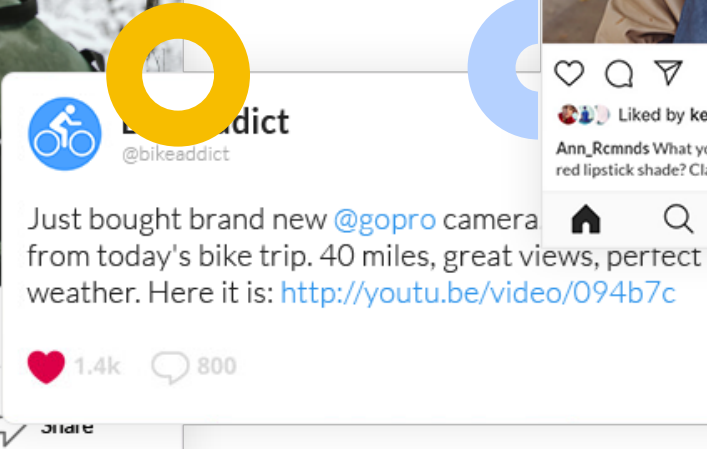
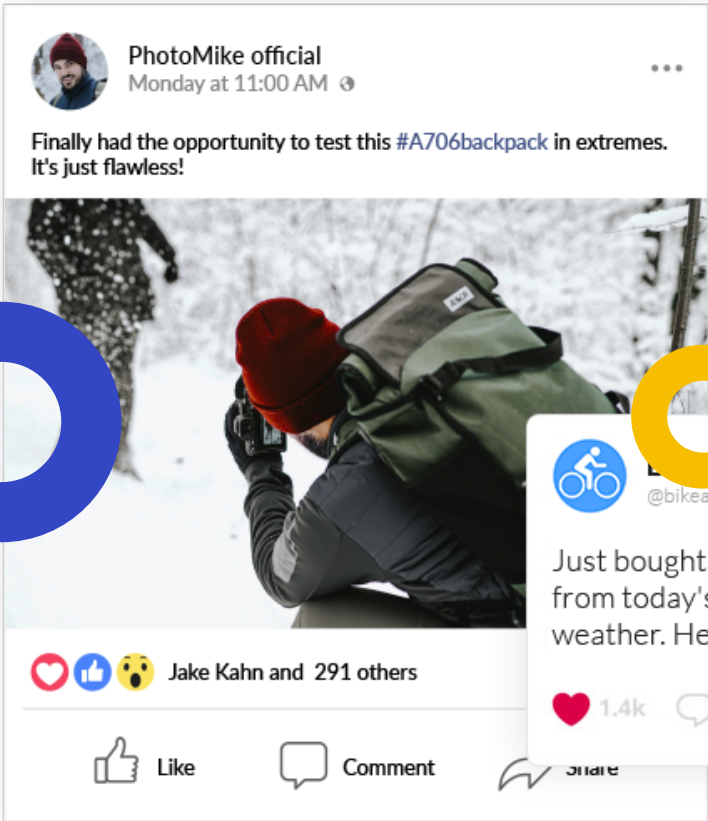
Do you have safeguards in place for usage permissions and influencer disclosures?

Implementation Considerations

With **90%** of the people on Instagram following a business, embracing UGC is a no-brainer. Leveraging UGC for website visuals, social-media ads, or other marketing efforts is an exciting opportunity for developing successful strategies, but one that requires a great deal of planning. If UGC breeds authenticity and relatability—and it does!— then it’s important to preserve that quality by being deliberate and thorough in harnessing its power.

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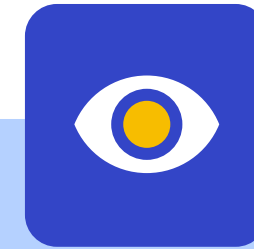


Is the content brand safe and supportive of your brand’s mission?

To post user-generated images and videos on its digital channels, you must ensure that nothing harmful to the brand sneaks its way into an owned channel. And not just malicious or inappropriate content, but competition’s content, too.

Gartner suggests that by 2024, “content moderation services for [UGC] will be surveyed as a top CEO priority by 30% of large organizations.” Also, “brand advertisers must neutralize polarizing content and, at the very least, show a balance between views. Eventually, industry standards for content moderation will emerge, but in the meantime, CIOs must invest in content moderation services, enforcement, and reporting.”

To ensure that UGC checks all the boxes for your brand’s story, be specific with your content needs so that users give you the right context, focus on certain product features, or play up a fun theme for a particular campaign. For example, in quest of images of its prized plants in new homes, online plant retailer **Bloomscape** asks customers to post photos with the hashtag #newplantfriend after unboxing the potted plants they purchased, smoothly creating a timeline of images from which Bloomscape can source UGC.



1-800-Flowers.com’s vice president of brand marketing says the company’s site receives more than 5,000 pieces of UGC every month, including written reviews and imagery. It’s just not possible for one person or team to sift through that goldmine to pick out the best bits and discard the undesirable ones. Therefore, **1-800-Flowers** combines a careful human eye with the best in AI technology to quickly assess asset potential.

Do you have safeguards in place for usage permissions and influencer disclosures?

As you work to ascertain that your UGC supports your brand’s identity, you must also protect the customers in your community and avoid excitedly snapping up content without permission to do so. If you’re sourcing content from an unsuspecting web user, you’d be starting off on the wrong UGC foot and damaging relationships.

In addition, be at the top of your compliance game with influencer-involved campaigns. True UGC by raving fans is different from the content promoted through campaigns with social media influencers. The latter involves a commercial motive, that is, there “exists a connection between the endorser and the seller of the advertised product that might materially affect the weight or credibility of the endorsement.” The lines can start to blur if you’re not careful—after all, the content itself would look similar since it’s created by a social-media user and not by you, the brand.



The FTC requires any “material connection” between official endorsements and paid product placements to be **clearly obvious**. Most often those connections are communicated through prominent hashtags like

#ad **#sponsored** **#partner**

in addition to any other copy that conveys the relationship. As you leverage influencers, be forthcoming with those relationships through which you’re paying to have content created for you.



influencers



Why is UGC important for e-commerce?

Why should you spotlight UGC on your e-commerce site?

Which social-specific UGC trends should you act on?

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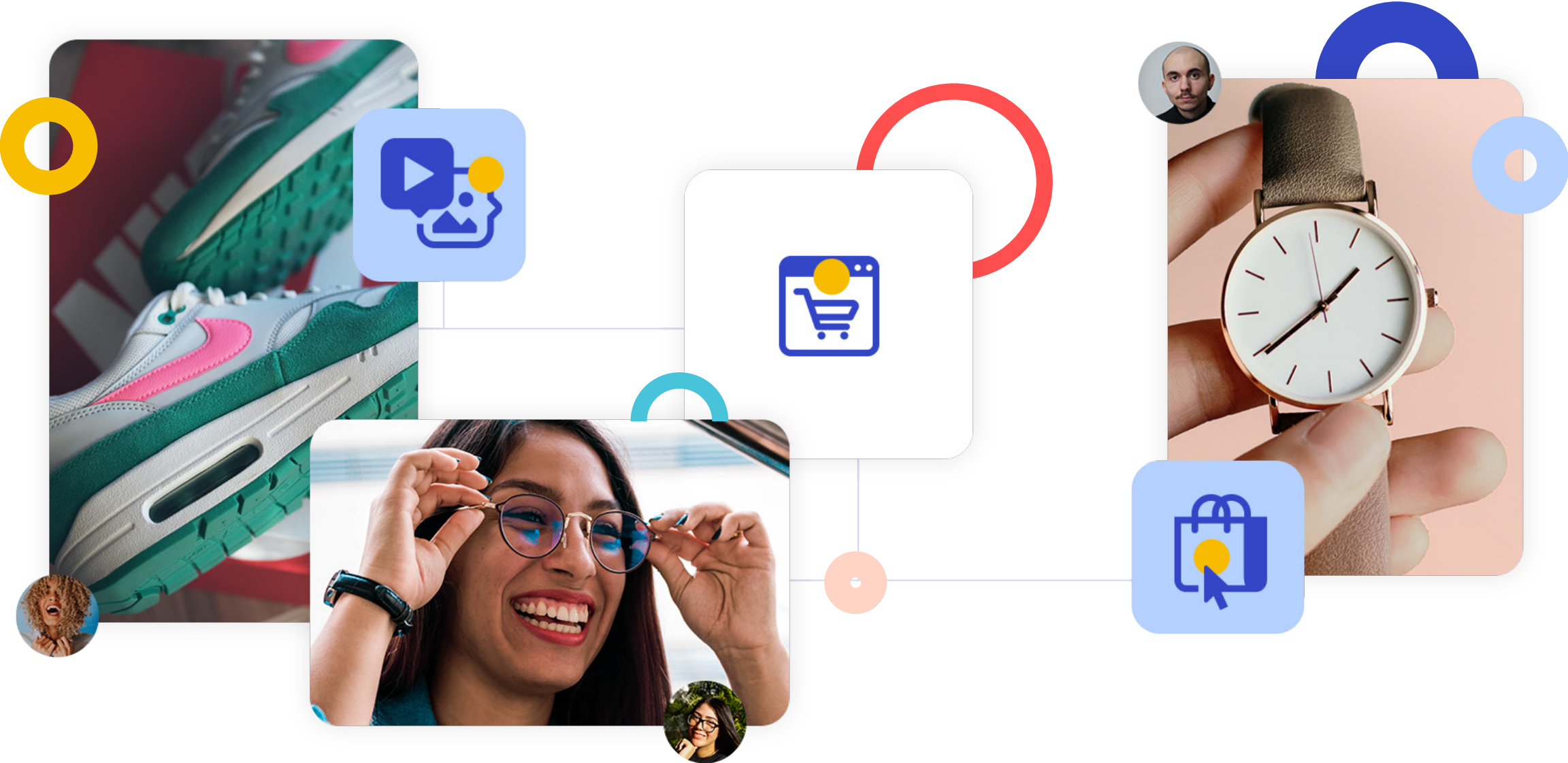
About Cloudinary

Application of UGC to Your Digital Strategies

Before applying UGC to your game plan, answer the two questions below.

Why is UGC important for e-commerce?

Why should you spotlight UGC on your e-commerce site?



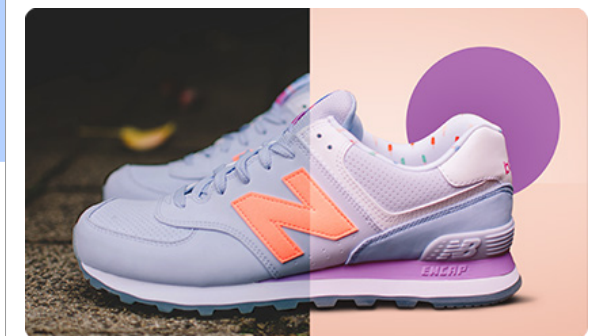
Why is UGC important for e-commerce?

Shopping is naturally a social experience. You might start a conversation with a stranger in the aisle, bump into someone you know browsing the same products, or make a date of it with a friend or loved one. All those happenings accord you other people's feedback that might influence your purchase decisions. Even the person manning the fitting room can offer affirmation of an apparel selection or a critical eye to steer you in a different direction.

Alternatively, when consumers shop online—as almost everyone did during the 2020 pandemic—they do so without the assistance of a store associate, independent of fellow shoppers who might volunteer feedback. That explains why UGC is valuable to e-commerce. People crave the authenticity of inputs that are not paid advertisements or staged photoshoots. Product pages on e-commerce sites are an excellent example of where UGC can really shine.

Recall the take above from Tania Nemaric of 1-800-Flowers. Her remarks during a 2020 webinar speak to why UGC is a powerful tool for e-commerce brands.

Not surprisingly, therefore, studies have shown that we trust peer reviews, referrals, and recommendations much more than advertisements. One survey found that **77%** of shoppers prefer products photos taken by customers over those by professional photographers.



Use UGC to help people validate their purchase decision. If you show them a product being used by real people, the path to conversion is much stronger. We've been testing this across our site, looking to see exactly where in the purchase funnel people are more likely to need that reinforcement. We've seen stronger response and conversion rates in channels where we've been able to integrate customer content

– Tania Nemaric of 1-800-Flowers

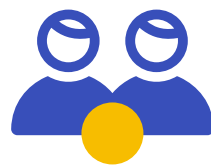
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What makes UGC succeed as a complementary marketing initiative? Here are some of the ways in which to leverage that content and make it work for you.



Make UGC shoppable.

Lulus Fan Photos are a great example of how UGC boosts conversion. On each of its product pages, women's apparel retailer Lulus sources imagery from its fans, featuring their pictures prominently as Fan Photos. This kind of UGC imagery goes beyond the usual written reviews: it enables shoppers to envision how individual clothing items would look on them from seeing everyday people wearing and showing them off in real life.



Offer content-creation tools.

In a 2017 campaign, Pringles brought to life on Facebook Messenger a Mr. P chatbot, with which fans of the stackable chips could **create and share music videos** in the app. As a reward of the contest, a trip to the Ibiza Rocks festival was up for grabs. With UGC, Pringles isn't just sharing photos of people savoring its product with a music-video campaign. It's also attracting customers to its website and equipping them with tools to create interactive content—works of art that connect consumers to the brand.

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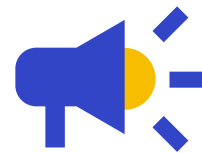
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Think beyond social media.

Brands can encourage their audience to cite a content hashtag that underscores the company's products and then spotlight the UGC in retargeting ads. According to Bazaarvoice, those ads generate a 35% higher clickthrough rate and a 60% lower cost per click than ads that don't feature UGC.

Do not adopt UGC in digital campaigns alone. You could also repurpose it in ads, inserts, and campaigns, e.g., in the form of cards enclosed in order boxes or direct-mail pieces similar to those from Wayfair and Target.

The list goes on: **consider capitalizing on UGC in fostering a community, shedding light to a cause, or creating a unified brand look.** Remember, by elevating UGC as an integral part of your marketing efforts, you offer potential buyers an authentic look at what your customers think of your merchandise, inspiring trust and interest, instead of merely your brand's perspective as promotional ads.

Which social-specific UGC trends should you act on?



TikTok

Research suggests that TikTok users around the world spend an average of **44 minutes a day** on the video-sharing app, opening it **eight or more times** during a 24-hour period. All that time translates to engagement rates far higher than some of the older social-media networks. Compared to the 5% average engagement rates on both Facebook and Instagram, TikTok content boasts an average engagement rate of **29%**.

When viewing content on TikTok, users can easily spot the more authentic content created by peers versus those from brands. According to a **survey** conducted by Realeyes with their video-performance analysis metrics, UGC TikTok videos scored 8% higher than brands' TikTok videos.

Consequently, a smart first step for UGC creation on TikTok is through TikTok challenges, which ask users to submit their original videos based on a theme with very simple parameters. An early (and viral) example was the Guess-sponsored **#InMyDenim** challenge, which has attracted more than 50 million views on the platform. The requirements of the challenge were straightforward: "Show us how you style your denim" and overlay Bebe Rexha's song I'm a Mess to finish it off.

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SnapChat

Ninety percent of 13- to 24-year-olds are on [Snapchat](#); for users up to age 34, the percentage is still large: 75%. Altogether, Gen Z and Millennials represent tremendous purchasing power for e-commerce brands. In fact, in the last month, Snapchatters are 63% more likely than non-Snapchatters to have purchased a product on mobile.

Within the Snapchat app there are two trends of note:

- **The return of the quick response (QR) code** — QR codes have grown in popularity, particularly in 2020 with contactless options on menus or for mobile payment. Snapchat's unique Snapcode, which acts the same as a QR code, is another way to generate excitement for a brand's campaign, event, or product. The codes are recognizable and the call to action is clear: scan and see! Snap's marketing lead says, "You don't have to download a special app to use them, and Snapchatters know that they're getting trusted content through a platform they already know and love."
- **Adoption of augmented reality (AR)** — AR gives consumers another way to interact with their favorite brands on mobile. Through a Snapcode, Ralph Lauren offered shoppers virtual try-ons as an alternative to in-store fittings. That fun, whimsical content was then shared, further amplifying brand awareness. Snap's global director of creative strategy says that AR usage eliminates "fishing" for engagement: "When you're using AR on our platform, you won't need to 'challenge' people to collaborate or share your content. People will share it because you've given them an experience they want to share."

Video Dominance on Social Platforms

In 2019, Americans spent an average of **42 minutes a day** viewing digital video on smartphones but only 23 minutes on desktop computers. Video consumption is on the rise, and leveraging video across a brand's digital channels is becoming perhaps the most valuable medium for communicating with consumers. What's more, it's a huge convenience and a load of gratification for consumers to be able to create their own video content, share it on social channels and even hand it over to brands to be repurposed.

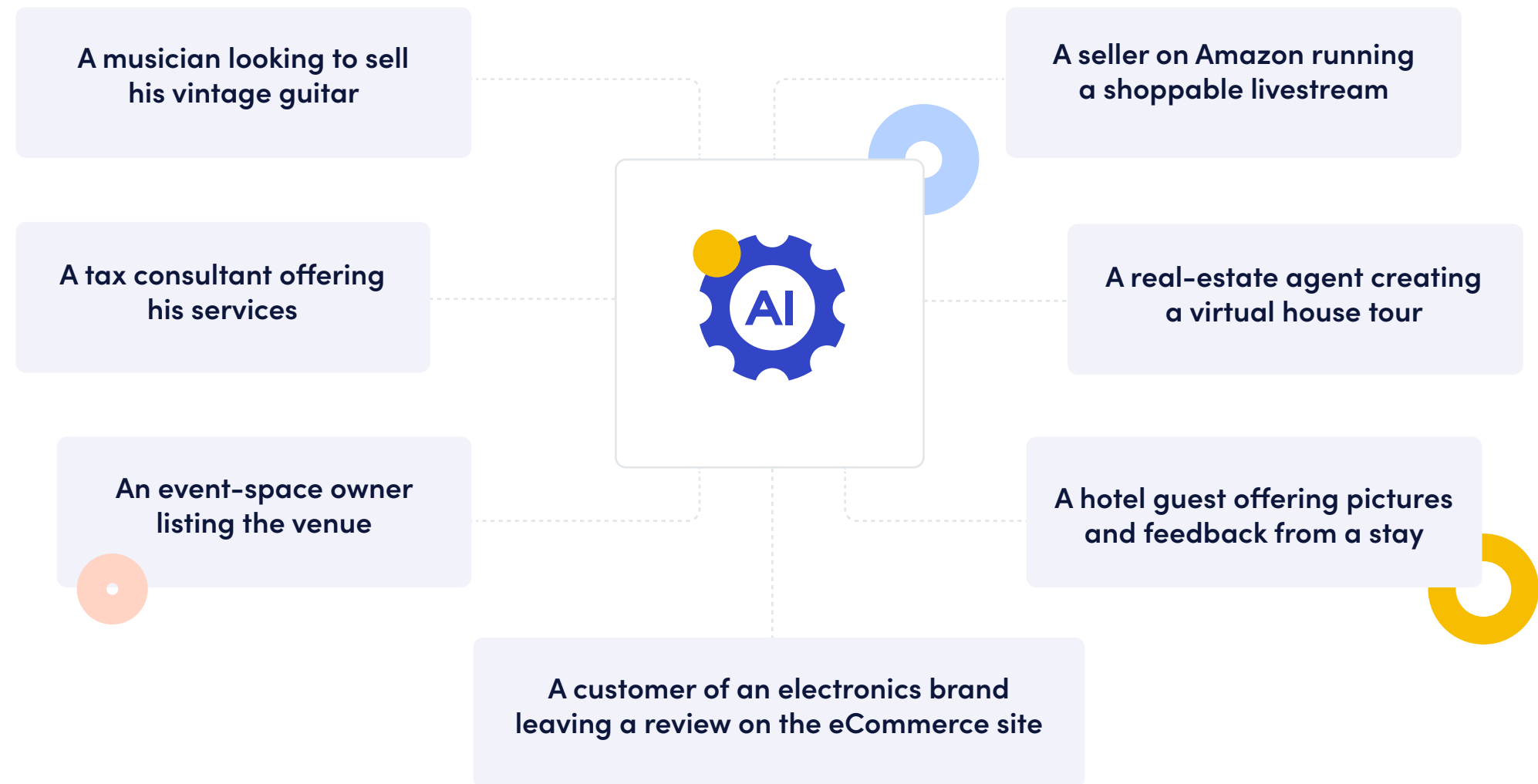
Where social networks are investing testifies to video's popularity:

- Because video "has become a significant part of how Redditors create and connect," at the end of 2020, online discussion board Reddit **acquired Dubsmash**. By adding Dubsmash's video-creation tools to the platform's native video offering, Reddit's creators will be able to "express themselves in original and authentic ways that are endemic to [the Reddit] communities."
- Also toward the end of 2020, Snap rolled out **Spotlight**, a tool for featuring popular UGC videos (think TikTok style) on the Snapchat platform. Snap even incentivized participation—to the tune of \$1 million a day—paid out to creators of the top-performing posts. That perk certainly sweetened the deal for consumers already hungry for video creation and consumption. Snap CEO Evan Spiegel says that the company is seeing an average of 175,000 videos posted **per day** to Spotlight, and that Spotlight has been gaining more than **100 million** active users monthly since it launched in December 2020.
- Econsultancy's excellent coverage on social-media marketing explores video usage trends and ad spend. In a section titled "Video Goes From Strength to Strength" in a 2020 **article**, Econsultancy observes that video usage and engagement, UGC, social commerce and social video are all trending dramatically upwards. What is going down as these rise in popularity? The growth of general ad spend, as well as influencer marketing.

The Future of UGC: AI-Generated Content

By definition, UGC requires the participation of individuals who are not associated with the brand or business. Artificial intelligence (AI) plays an exciting role in the future of UGC, too.

To best understand how AI can generate or streamline content, let's look at a few tangible examples of content creators. These are the prospects or "users" of a "publisher" or marketplace in which UGC will exist:



Content creators can leverage AI to create the best content before submission. In particular, those creators care a lot about the presentation of content that pertains to their livelihood. AI helps tell unique stories more quickly and in a captivating way, with a more streamlined upload process by, for example, doing the following:

- Automatically tweak videos for best results, focusing on certain objects or deleting irrelevant segments, plus adding transcriptions and subtitles for international audiences;
- Enforce moderation and brand safety early in the process, notifying the creator of potential moderation issues **before** submission;
- Identify products shown or services discussed during a shoppable livestream, adding in related details such as prices, availability, direct links, and product descriptions.

The publishers—the online space in which the UGC will live—must ensure brand safety, alignment with creative guidelines, and allocation of appropriate time and resources for content approval. Besides identifying content-moderation issues, AI can also suggest automated edits or fixes, even inputting them without human approval. With AI, publishers don't have to watch video UGC to find out if a user is giving a review of, say, a dress or jacket. AI can identify in-video products and streamline categorization of the content so that publishers can easily pull up relevant footage as required down the road.

Venture capital firm [Andreessen Horowitz](#) calls AI a content “cocreator,” adding that AI tools have “the potential to democratize content creation and empower human creators to focus on higher-level design and storytelling.” Think of AI as the heavy lifter of coding, transformations, drawing and animation.



Both the quantity and quality of UGC will improve as these tools are adopted. And over time, as AI models improve, the quality of emergent, AI-created content may one day even surpass the caliber of human-created content, predicts Jonathan Lai.

Ways in Which Cloudinary Makes UGC Work for You



Upload Transformations Moderate Delivery Shoppable

Upload

Customers, fans, brand ambassadors—whatever you wish to think of them as—it’s with those individuals that the UGC process really begins. In fact, it’s happening whether you take advantage of their content or not. Naturally, they talk to friends and family about products or services they use, taking pictures of items and sharing feedback in text messages or on social media.

Leveraging UGC starts with your ability to harness the content that users create, giving them the ideal online form, platform, or portal to pass on their observations and media to you for publication and promotion. To ensure that users know exactly how to upload their content in a way that accelerates the time to value for your organization, provide clear upload guidelines but steer away from excessive format or size stipulations that would inhibit participation.

Here are a few considerations and best practices for uploading UGC.

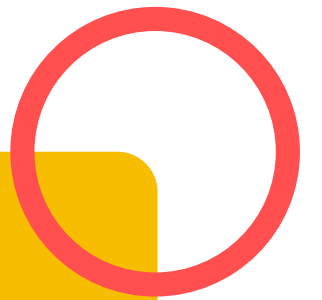
- **Curation** — When sourcing UGC from social media, ensure that you have the permission to do so. If an associated brand's hashtag is in the post, or if someone mentions or tags your brand specifically and intentionally, that is generally enough permission for the content to be handed over to the brand for promotional use.
- **Bandwidth** — Given the confines of your workflow, restrict image uploads to a maximum file size.
- **Storage** — Collect all UGC images and videos in a folder for review and approval before taking any of them live. Think of how you'll want to search this library, too. Product descriptions, SKU numbers, campaign names, event types—there's an effective way to navigate the UGC madness; you just need to have a good organizational plan in place.



How does Cloudinary simplify UGC upload?

To mitigate bandwidth concerns, Cloudinary's built-in downsizing capabilities ensures that images do not exceed the file-size limit during upload. That way, not only are you relieved of the resizing burden, but also the UGC does not complicate your creative process or slow down page loads.

In addition, Cloudinary's AI automates search and storage. Auto-tagging and machine learning make the content organization process a dream. Teams are freed up from having to separately and manually tag each and every piece of content—Cloudinary's technology does it for them.



Transformations and Moderation

More than likely, your brand's UGC needs transformations before it's ready for primetime on your site or for marketing campaigns. The brand you've built is extremely valuable, and protecting its consistency and reputation is a high priority when you invite users to be a part of your brand story.

Consider these aspects of UGC transformation and ways for managing them:

- **Derivatives** — Extend the life of each user-generated piece of content by creating variations of the original that you might use in other channels or down the road. Exporting in a different file format, cropping, flipping the orientation, adjusting aspect ratios—you'll need a team of designers to perform those tasks manually, or find technology that expedites that process.
- **Calibration** — Even with high-quality cameras on mobile devices, users might have adjusted the brightness or exposure in a way that doesn't quite fit your vibe. Consider rendering UGC through filters or color adjusters that better match your site's look and feel so that everything looks cohesive.
- **Context** — Similarly, users might not compose a shot the way a professional photographer would. So, pay attention to what needs to be cropped, blurred, or otherwise removed from the frame. With video, in which your product is the main focus, be sure to meaningfully transform those assets and trim the files to retain just the most pertinent portion. And any audio you keep should complement, not distract, the content. A sound alternative is to incorporate music to eliminate ambient noise or replace the original audio altogether..
- **Security** — Security encompasses both brand security—that is, verifying that inappropriate content hasn't accidentally slipped through the cracks—and technical security, which necessitates examining the content for malware, leaked private information, and abuse.

Never post UGC as is; take precautions to ensure presentability and safety in all regards.



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Upload

► [Transformations and Moderation](#)

Delivery

Technology for Good: How PetRescue’s UGC Management Saves Animals’ Lives

About Cloudinary

How does Cloudinary simplify UGC transformations and moderation?

UGC often isn’t ready to post as is. With Cloudinary, you can fine-tune saturation, brightness, and contrast with a one-time setup of calibration parameters. The result might be, for example, an image shot on an iPhone that matches the light and airy feel of your product pages. You can also easily add photo overlays or captions to embellish a campaign or to credit to creators with their social-media usernames.

Cloudinary also supports crucial management tasks like transcriptions and creation of thumbnails. Through automation, Cloudinary ensures that user-uploaded assets are secure and malware free, blurring irrelevant image background or text as you desire.



Transformations and Moderation

Delivering high-quality content across desktop and mobile devices is critical. We know that content is engaging and that better engagement leads to better business outcomes. Hence, the UGC you incorporate into your branding efforts is only as meaningful as the speed and quality of its delivery.



You must satisfactorily answer these two questions when transforming media assets— the final, perhaps the most important, aspect of incorporating UGC:

- Is the image or video in the best display format for the user's browser?
- What is the best high-resolution setting for displaying the UGC on both desktop and mobile?

How does Cloudinary simplify UGC delivery?

Automation is a smart choice for efficiently delivering high-quality content across devices or browsers via multiple CDNs. Cloudinary's [automatic-cropping](#) feature spotlights the most relevant part of the media on all devices and browsers. Additionally, special algorithms optimize and reduce file size without visual degradation.



Technology for Good: How PetRescue's UGC Management Saves Animals' Lives

Quick facts:

- PetRescue's site hosts more than 25 million UGC images.
- Users creating pet profiles can upload as many as 30 images for one animal.
- Mobile is an increasingly popular way for adoptive families to interact with PetRescue, requiring image optimization for fast page loads.
- With Cloudinary, PetRescue can apply changes uniformly across its entire UGC image library with just one click, and users can crop and resize photos at will.

Australia's most popular animal-adoption site, PetRescue, has a vision of a future in which every pet is safe, respected, and loved. To turn that aspiration into reality, the website connects emotionally with its audience through imagery, boasting over 800,000 listings of cats, dogs, guinea pigs, horses, rabbits, and so forth, with an aggregate of over 25 million UGC images, which PetRescue must support with storage and management techniques.

PetRescue found that the process of uploading images—up to 30 per pet profile—was difficult for end-users, who could not crop or resize those pictures at all. Never mind the back-end tasks, from server to AWS S3, through queuing and transformation and back again, which translated to long delays.

With Cloudinary, PetRescue has migrated its entire image database to that platform and optimized the files through automation for mobile. PetRescue staff are no longer tasked with burdensome administrative work, and instead can focus on the core mission of preventing pets from being prematurely and needlessly euthanized.

Scrolling through the photos of dogs on the PetRescue site, you'll see captions, such as "Looking for love," "Oh so sweet," and "Loyal and fun." Dozens of puppy-dog eyes stare longingly through the screen, beckoning potential adopters to click through. More photos—and even a video or two—are in each pup's profile, building a storyline for what life could be like by welcoming a pet into its "forever" home.

[Read more about PetRescue's case study](#)

About Cloudinary

Cloudinary's mission is to make it easier for companies to unleash the full potential of their media to deliver engaging visual experiences that inspire and connect. With more than 50 billion assets in its management and 7,500 customers worldwide, Cloudinary is the industry standard for developers, creators, and marketers looking to upload, store, transform, manage, and deliver images and videos online. As a result, leading brands like Atlassian, Bleacher Report, Grubhub, Hinge, NBC, Mediavine, Peloton, Petco, and Under Armour are seeing significant business value in using Cloudinary, including faster time to market, higher user satisfaction, and increased engagement and conversions.

For more information, visit www.cloudinary.com.