

# 06

## Designing for Hedonic Shopping Motives: Pinterest as a Model for E-commerce Evolution

Shelby Muter

---

# Designing for Hedonic Shopping Motives: Pinterest as a Model for E-commerce Evolution

Shelby Muter

---

Even though the ways in which people research, shop, and purchase items have evolved, the reasons people shop have essentially stayed the same. It is widely accepted that consumers are primarily motivated by either utilitarian or hedonic goals. Utilitarian consumers are concerned with purchasing products in an efficient and timely manner; whereas hedonic consumers are focused on the potential entertainment and enjoyment that arises from the shopping experience.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing these differences in shopping motives is especially important because of the changes in the retail environment. In 2012, U.S. retail e-commerce sales amounted to 225.5 billion U.S. dollars and are projected to grow to 434.2 billion U.S. dollars in 2017.<sup>2</sup> With a significant increase in projected online sales, it is essential for retailers to research, evaluate, differentiate, and adapt current e-commerce design practices to capture the various needs of an expanding market.

A key component of current e-commerce design is the photography used to sell products and services. Viewing the product you would like to purchase, whether it be in-person, in a catalog or on a screen, is important to any shopping experience, but is crucial for online shoppers. For e-commerce consumers, high-quality photos are expected on retail sites, because it is the main way companies present their products and services. A National Retail Federation report shows, 67% of online customers say the quality of a product image is very important when selecting and purchasing the object, even more than the item's description (54%) and its ratings and reviews (53%). With consumers placing considerable value on product photography, it is vital for retailers to evolve current e-commerce design methods.<sup>3</sup>

Despite prior research showing that the two primary motives for retail shopping—utilitarian and hedonic—also apply to the online shopping experience, e-commerce design has predominantly focused on fulfilling utilitarian goals.<sup>4</sup> Designers have created simple interfaces, quick navigational tools, and easily accessible merchandise to meet these practical, task-orientated needs.<sup>5</sup> As a result, it seems as if a standard design has been created within the industry, which treats the online presence of a company as a virtual warehouse of products. Typical e-commerce designs do not take into consideration hedonic shopping motives.

---

### Treatment of Product Images in the E-commerce System

E-commerce design can be described and classified in many ways but the two most dominant and overarching characteristics of the current design practice are exemplified in the treatment and arrangement of product images. A quick browse through current online retail sites yields many of the same design elements and structures. Companies often choose to copy successful sites or construct a design mirroring their offline store, instead of creating virtual spaces that enhance the online shopper's experience.<sup>6</sup> The most popular example of

this phenomenon has been in the replication of the e-commerce giant, Amazon. Professional and amateur designers have continuously replicated elements of the Amazon.com design purely because of the site's status as the world's largest retailer.<sup>7</sup> The research company, Nielsen Norman Group, warns that Amazon "is simply so different from other e-commerce sites that what's good for Amazon is not good for normal sites."<sup>8</sup> The blind adoption of the Amazon-like style has resulted in well-indexed products which are extremely utilitarian but lack any sort of hedonic appeal.

Product images make up the majority of e-commerce sites and highlight a single item at multiple angles, typically on a white background. The item is usually centered within the frame of the image and includes minimal or no shadow, as if the product was floating in space. This eliminates any distractions that could result from lighting or cropping and places complete focus on the item. White backgrounds are universally used to create consistency amongst varied products and to isolate the subject. A standard e-commerce product image, intentionally static and objective in its presentation, shall be defined henceforth as a utilitarian image.

---

**"Typical e-commerce designs do not take into consideration hedonic shopping motives."**

---

Depending on the retailer, the variety and amount of images used to show an item will vary. Some companies will only supply shoppers with a single image, while others present multiple shots of the same product. If additional shots are included, they tend to follow a standard set of angles, depending on the category of product. For instance, product images for apparel will include a model facing forwards, sideways and backwards to show the piece of clothing from different points of view. Additionally, a flat shot of the item, close-up of



Figure 1. Various e-commerce image samples. Courtesy of Nordstrom.com

the fabric or detail shot is sometimes included (Fig. 1). In comparison, general merchandise, such as towels or plates, tend to have less supplementary shots or are only shown in a single image.

The bulk of product images are traditionally placed on category pages, in a grid based structure and are used to document the inventory, thus allowing customers to quickly research various items. These pages normally have between

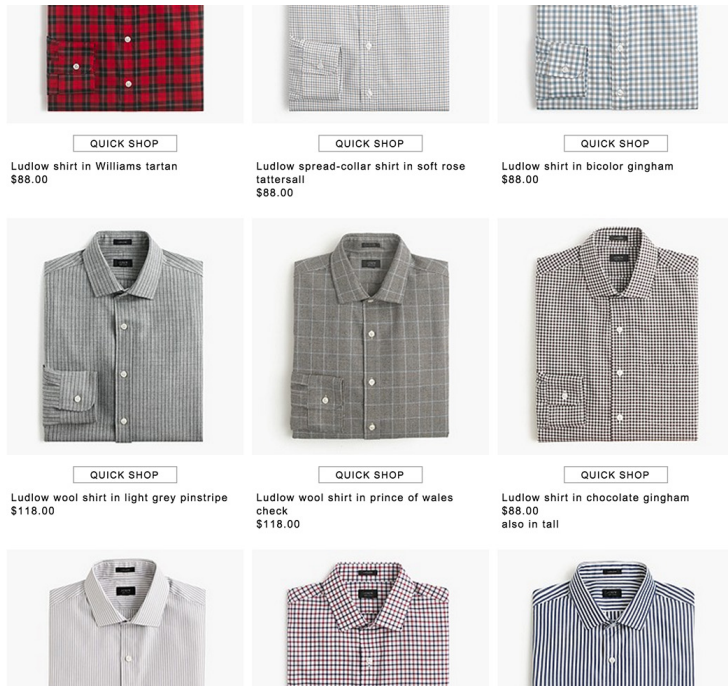


Figure 2. E-commerce grid structure. Courtesy of Jcrew.com

three to four columns of products and extend down the length of the webpage or until the available products end. The organization of products into a three to four column structure (Fig. 2) is utilized by almost every e-commerce site, no matter what the retailer sells.

Product images are also found on individual item pages, which is where the additional images, if available, can be viewed. Individual product pages also follow a universal design in which the main image is located in the upper left corner and thumbnails are provided underneath to show any additional photos. Text descriptions are located to the right, along with sizing, color, quantity, and an “add to bag” or “add to cart” button. Customer reviews, which sometimes include user-generated photography, are found below the product images and description.

The standardized treatment and placement of e-commerce images has produced sites that have been purposefully stripped of any overbearing design or styling for the sake of ultimate usability and functionality. Researchers have cited that “organizing product information around aesthetically pleasing consumption settings or complementary product combinations, tends to lack clear organization structure which consumers need to achieve goal-oriented tasks efficiently.”<sup>9</sup> This strategy assumes that consumers are only interested in shopping because they are focused on a goal, or in other words, only motivated from a utilitarian perspective.

---

### The Catalog Image: Visceral Imagery, Spontaneous Discovery and Narrative Pacing

Retailers have historically used multiple and varied infrastructures and artifacts to sell products to consumers. Catalogs in particular were an integral part of the retail experience. Unlike many contemporary retail strategies, catalogs

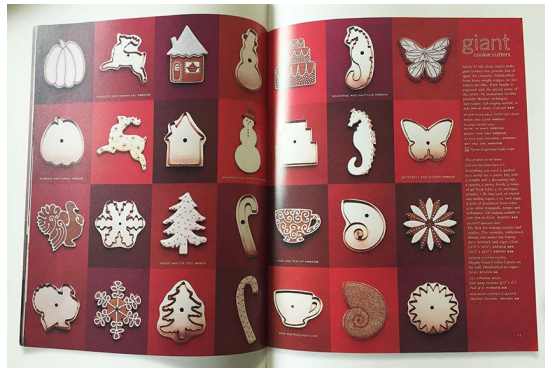
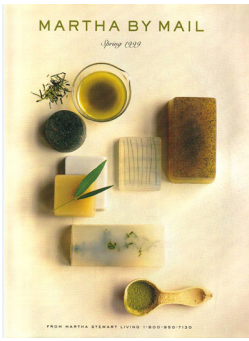


Figure 3. Montgomery Ward catalog spread. From: Dianna Edwards and Robert Valentine. *Catalog Design: The Art of Creating Desire*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport, 2001, 11.

allowed for visceral imagery, narrative pacing and serendipitous discovery. There have been countless catalogs, published by varied retailers over the years but all have been primarily focused on presenting products to consumers through the use of an image.

One of the first instances of catalog design was in the 1870's, with the formation of the Montgomery Ward and Sears catalogs. The arrival of these publications was regarded as a social event, because they provided people in rural America the opportunity to view never before seen items from around the world.<sup>10</sup> Thousands of illustrations, over hundreds of pages, were used to depict the wide array of products available to consumers (Fig. 3). Even though the product depictions in these original catalogs were illustrations placed on indexed pages, their impact on American culture was revolutionary.

Created as a natural extension of *Martha Stewart Living* magazine, *Martha by Mail* launched in 1996. *Martha by Mail* was a mail order catalog (Fig. 4) designed to supply readers with all the tools, materials, and ingredients needed to create the



Left: Figure 4. *Martha by Mail* cover. Courtesy of Marthamoments.blogspot.com.  
 Right: Figure 5. *Martha by Mail* spread. From: Diana Edwards and Robert Valentine.  
*Catalog Design: The Art of Creating Desire*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport, 2001, 52-53.

projects found in the popular publication. The catalog originally started as an insert within *Martha Stewart Living*, but became so popular that by 1998 was a fully functional catalog and consumers could purchase goods online through [Marthabymail.com](http://Marthabymail.com). Readers not only loved the products but the catalog itself was highly regarded and treasured because of its beautiful design. Best described as “soft, approachable minimalism,” the catalog’s look inspired and enabled readers for years.<sup>11</sup>

A key element to *Martha by Mail*’s success was the sensitivity to photography and more specifically, product styling. Each image, whether it was a full scene or individual product, was flawlessly styled. For example, instead of merely presenting an individual metal cookie cutter, full-page spreads (Fig. 5) were created showcasing beautiful decorated cookies in addition to the tool that create them. This simultaneously highlighted the product and inspired readers to decorative ideas that they could also replicate. Additionally, readers saw ideas and products they weren’t familiar with or expecting. This spontaneous discovery and exploration is a staple trait amongst catalog design.

It’s also important to note that the photography in *Martha by Mail* ran “the gamut, from evocative covers and romantic section openers to produce shots.”<sup>12</sup> The different applications of imagery worked as a whole to create



a story-like narrative with the context of the catalog. No matter what the conceptual idea or theme of the catalog, products were used as characters to tell the story. The combination of beautiful photographic styling, spontaneous discovery, and narrative pacing were, and continue to be, key principles to successful catalog design and, in turn, retail sales.

These images, photographed with design intent or depicted in a designed environment, can be considered hedonic images. Whereas a utilitarian image is deliberately presented to evoke no visceral response whatsoever, a hedonic image is created with the intention of evoking a visceral connection with viewers. Today, catalogs are less critical to the overall shopping experience, but the images they contain continue to provoke entertainment, desire, surprise, and wonder amongst viewers. Even though these hedonic factors remain influential in the buying behaviors of contemporary consumers, there is a void of catalog-like images within e-commerce design.

---

### Photocentric Pinterest Model

Images, like the ones found in traditional catalogs, are scarce on online retail sites but another digital platform stepped in and has been filling the gap. The social media site, Pinterest, allows users to “pin photos into collections called boards, which serves as a big catalogs of objects.”<sup>13</sup> Their army of 70 million users loyally pin items to more than one billion boards on the platform every month.<sup>14</sup> These pins consist of images collected from across the Internet which means there are endless sources of image generation and consequently, varied types of photos. User-generated photos and retail produced imagery are commonly seen side by side, most of which do not fit the standard, sterile model.

In comparison to e-commerce sites, Pinterest’s design puts complete emphasis on the photography and as a result encourages serendipitous discovery. These characteristics are cornerstones of Pinterest’s success but also have historical