Why Creative Automation is a Must for E-commerce Marketing Teams in 2021

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Covid-19 has unleashed many surprises. Perhaps one of the least surprising developments, however, is that so many people have turned to the safety and convenience of e-commerce during such scary and disorienting times. eMarketer predicts U.S. e-commerce sales will reach $794.50 billion in 2020, up 32.4 percent year-over-year. The researchers hadn't expected online sales to hit such a strong level until 2022.
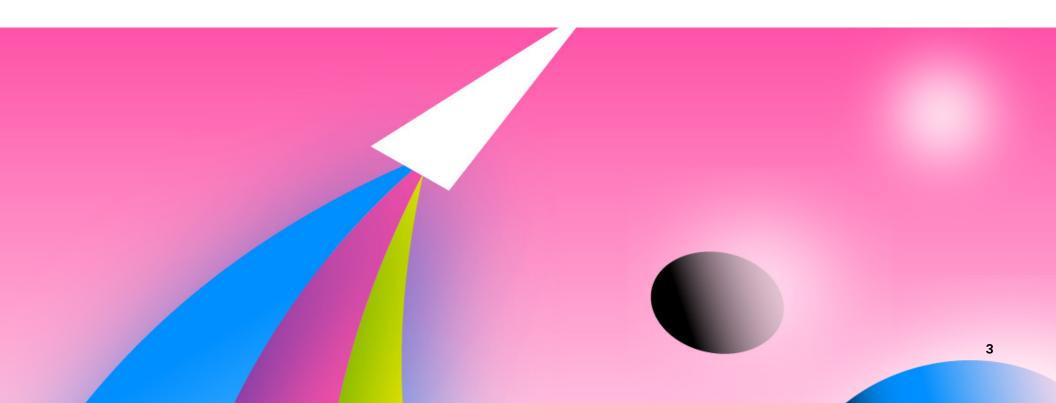
This dramatic shift in spending behavior looks likely to stick around even after the pandemic finally subsides. E-commerce sales will reach 19.2 percent of all U.S. retail spending by 2024, eMarketer estimates, rising from 14.4 percent in 2020.

The acceleration of online shopping is celebratory news for companies that rely on digital to drive growth, but there's a hitch: Brands with limited resources are now facing increased content needs to fuel their marketing.

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One powerful solution is to implement cloud-based creative automation. The software enables in-house teams to unlock speed, scale, variety and other benefits without compromising quality. "Marketers need to move at the speed of the world around us," says Vanja B. Brzin, VP product marketing at Celtra. "Producing advertising content manually is extremely cumbersome, there's too much margin for human error, and it's just not sustainable. Honestly, it's ultimately really boring, too."
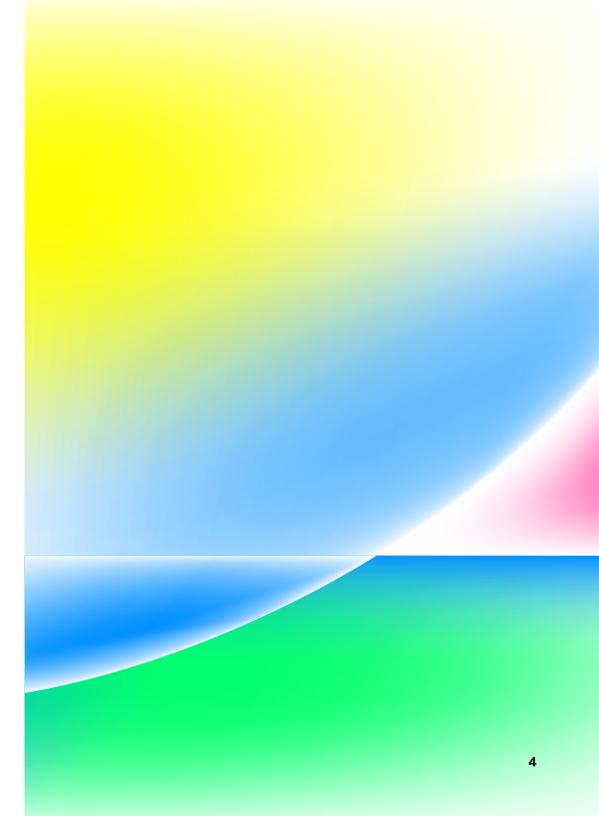
Brands Face an Explosion of Content Needs

Many companies with e-commerce in their DNA are well-positioned for the growth in online sales. These include direct-to-consumer brands, online grocers, delivery apps and streaming services.

Others, like traditional grocers and retailers, have had to quickly pivot to e-commerce due to uneven foot traffic.

In addition, besides adjusting the creative process that typically included six months of production and ads that ran just as long, many brands now have to produce much more content since the increased presence in digital brings a creative asset's lifetime down significantly.
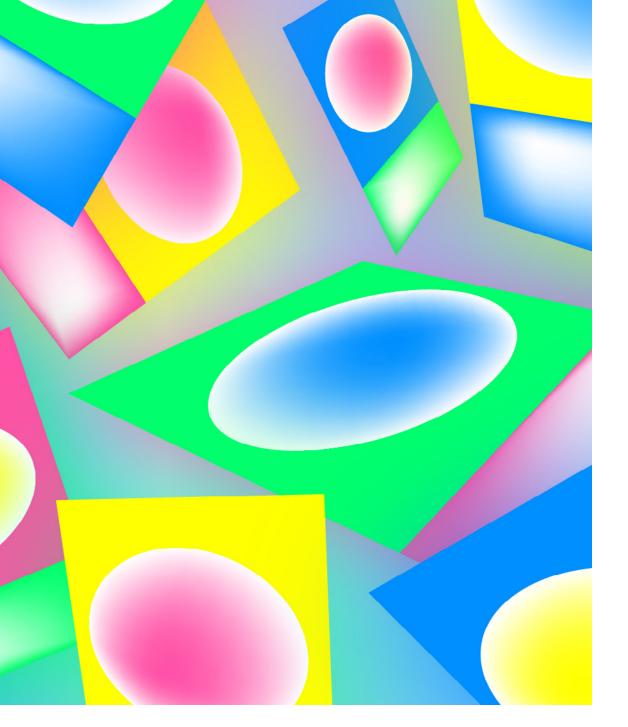
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Some brick-and-mortar retailers, for example, are finding they need to promote newly introduced contactless services like curbside pickup and buy online, pickup in store (BOPIS).

Today, they all face the mutual charge of ramping up campaigns to bring in revenue across a growing list of channels including display, social, video and email. There's an exponentially greater need to create ads that attract new visitors, retarget shoppers who have abandoned their carts and re-engage with lapsed customers. Media teams now have targeting capabilities to reach these audiences with more granularity than ever before.

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Producing Multiple Variations of Ads is Crucial

The increased demand to deliver so much content is daunting for in-house creative teams. Ads must be produced in different sizes and specifications for various channels. There's also the weighty issue of creative variety, which is key to unlocking growth and performance. Our research indicates 66 percent of surveyed U.S. consumers find ads and social media messaging from brands to be repetitive, and 67 percent want to see a greater variety in brand storytelling.

Meanwhile, consumers appreciate relevant content that shows brands understand them. That's putting pressure on marketers
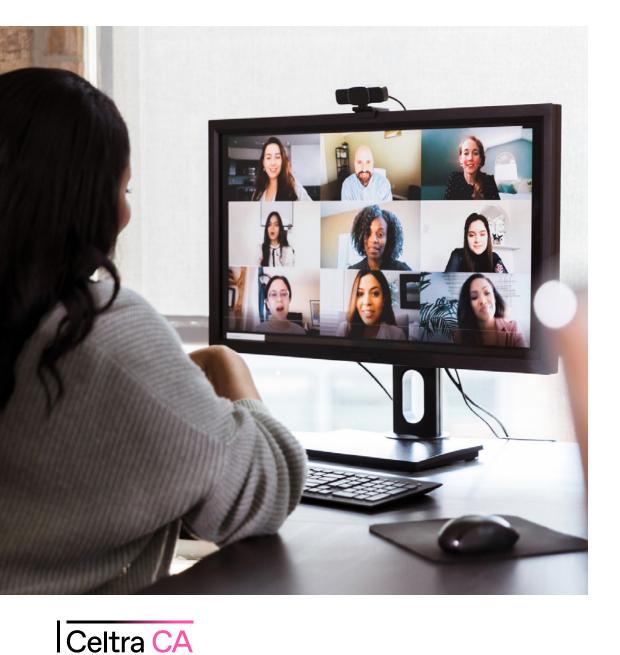
to personalize messages across platforms and produce distinct stories for different audiences. Loyal buyers don't want to be treated as new customers, for example, and single professionals don't want to be targeted with apparel ads aimed at parents of young kids. Also, ads in multiple markets must feature unique, culturally appropriate aesthetic styles, copy, imagery and language.

All this increases the volume of content that brands need to produce, and it's a massive challenge to achieve across all customer touchpoints.

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Pandemic-induced Complications

Unified creative production has always been difficult, especially when teams rely on the old-school production process in which every file lives on local computers, content has to be exported to offline creative tools and feedback is exchanged through multiple email chains. It can take weeks to produce campaign variants. Add a remote workforce to the mix and collaboration becomes even tougher.

Yet, time is not on a marketer's side during a pandemic. With health and safety guidelines constantly changing, retailers may be forced to suddenly shut

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down during an outbreak and shift from driving in-store sales to solely promoting online shopping, for example. Likewise, meal subscription services may need to alter messaging to highlight their contactless safe delivery in communities experiencing immediate lockdowns.

"Being able to react to changes really quickly is important," says Alex Barrett, Celtra customer success director. "You don't want to take all your ads offline and go through an entire production process all over again to react to something that is literally happening overnight."

In addition, companies that create products and services to address fresh needs due to the pandemic must get both the offering and message out the door urgently, as beauty brands like Orly, Megababe and Aesop demonstrated with their launches of hand sanitizers.

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Manual Creative Production Falls Short

The enormous content demands facing growth marketers are causing many creative teams to feel overwhelmed and over capacity. They struggle to find the bandwidth to come up with the big ideas that fuel creative variety and to handle the repetitious tasks associated with resizing, reformatting and scaling out campaigns for specific channels.
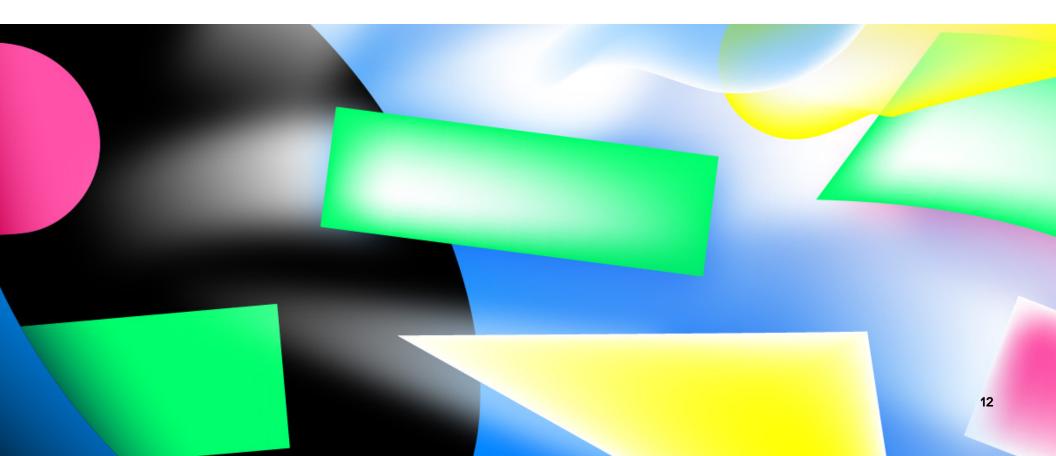
Campaign quality declines when creatives are frantically focused on producing so many assets. In addition, brands could experience what we call the Content Gap, where content needs due to new channels, products, campaigns, data and formats outpace production resources. This gap can affect the bottom line and make brands vulnerable to losing customers to more nimble competitors.

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Is it any surprise 77 percent of digital advertising decision-makers who participated in our commissioned Forrester study said their firms could benefit from a more automated digital advertising strategy?

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Creative Automation Can Help Marketers Quickly Produce Large Volumes of Varied Assets

Cloud-based automation facilitates a more efficient and agile way for in-house creative teams to collaborate on campaigns, whether they're in the same room or working remotely. Centralized assets can be accessed through the web rather than sent via different services, and stakeholders can edit in real time and leave comments directly as they're reviewing the work. This streamlined communication is analogous to the shift from email to Slack. The enhanced workflow enables quicker review cycles and a faster time to market.
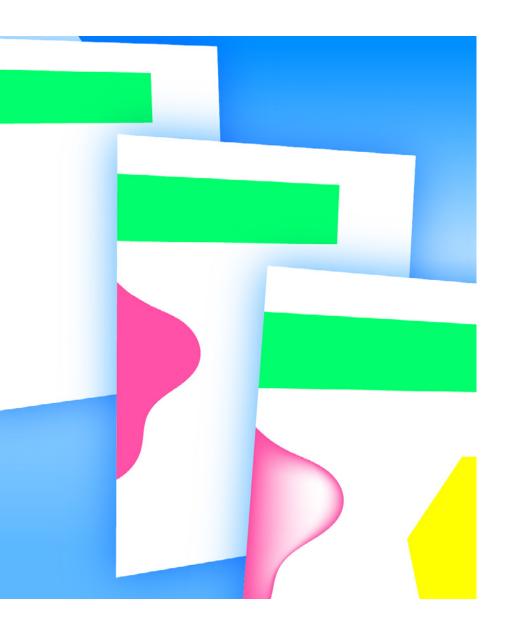
Automation makes achieving scale easier in this way: Creatives can generate thousands of campaign variations by first creating and customizing a library of master templates for various channels and sizes. Teams can then connect these templates to feeds populated with images, offers, translations and other kinds of content. From there, software performs repetitive production tasks, freeing up creatives to focus instead on groundbreaking performance campaigns.

"Creatives can spend less time versioning and more time being creative and really getting back to the roots of why they like their job so much," Barrett says.

This process, in which content is separate from design, also facilitates the development of creative variety at a time when distracted consumers are expecting more from ads. Variety helps assets stand out, reduces the ad fatigue consumers get when they see repetitive messages, increases the chances audiences will convert and enables brands to more strongly differentiate their campaigns from those of competitors.
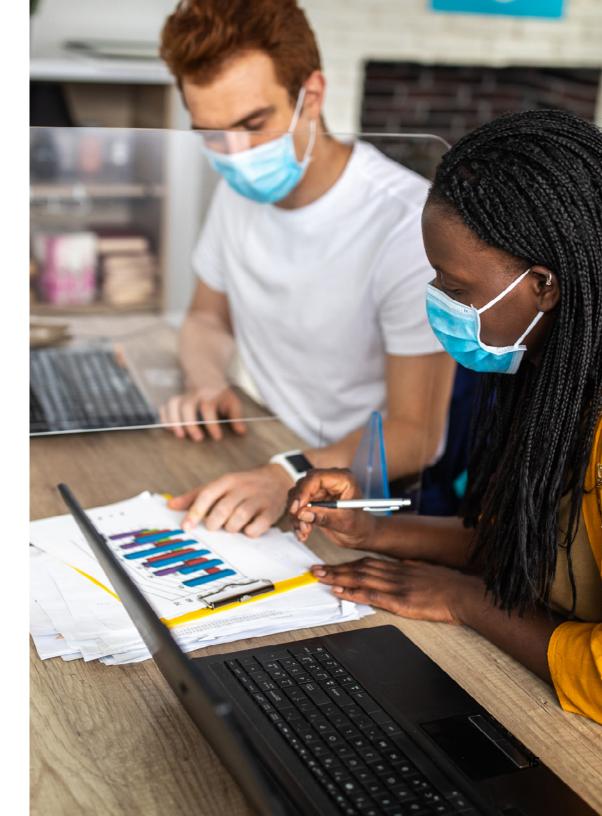
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Software Offers Additional Advantages for Working in The New Normal

Centralized teams that can operate with speed and efficiency are able to produce more content to test with audiences. Brands can create 20, 30 or even more than 40 creative versions to test elements that drive performance among different segments. Marketers can use the gained insights to improve creative quality and inform more targeted marketing. Such extensive experimentation is difficult to do when teams need to build assets one by one on local machines.

In addition, marketers can use the software to urgently update live campaigns, repurpose existing assets to fit any ad format and maintain brand consistency across markets and platforms by setting rules about which elements of centrally produced content can be changed.

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Automation can even open doors to strategies that once seemed too out of reach. With software doing the heavy lifting, teams that haven't previously tested multiple variants, activated new channels, entered different geographical markets or taken a personalization-based approach can finally move forward with those objectives.

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Creative Automation Can Save Money and Time for Growth Marketers

Companies that invest in automation are seeing game-changing results without sacrificing quality. A retail brand saved $70,000 per campaign by automating its creative assets in-house rather than outsourcing production. Automation also enabled the music streaming and media services company Spotify to produce and launch four times more content for its global summer campaign with twice as fast production cycles.

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Vistaprint and Creative Automation

As a producer of custom marketing products for small businesses, Vistaprint has a unique appreciation of the power of creative variety and actually prioritizes it in its digital advertising.

The in-house agency of the Cimpress brand produces hundreds of thousands of localized creative assets for use in email, its website experience and online display. Those display ads, which Vistaprint distributes across numerous media channels and global locales, run in multiple sizes, versions and more than 12 languages.

"Creative's role in e-commerce is significant, as it is central to producing the visual assets required for brands to advertise and market themselves in online media," says Ron Desjardins, Vistaprint's senior director of creative operations, merchandising services, technology and production. "Since performance of this media can be more easily measured than traditional media, creative teams must be able to leverage this data to adapt their creative strategies as needed."

Nonetheless, producing such a large volume of assets is one of the biggest challenges in creating content for digital audiences, Desjardins says. Other tricky tasks include sourcing and producing localized content in a timely manner as well as integrating localization and creative production workflows.

To scale quickly, Vistaprint uses proprietary creative automation tools. "This automation enables the application of localized text onto our customizable product designs and subsequent embedding of those designs into our product photography," he says. "It's resulted in at least a 10X increase in speed in producing these types of assets and eliminated a large majority of low-value "copy/paste" activities. Once created, these assets can be more quickly leveraged across our online and digital channels."
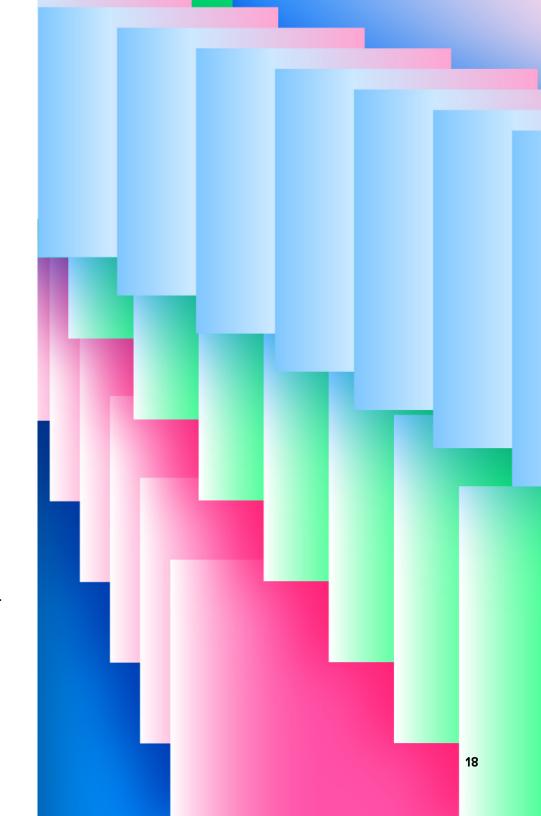
More broadly, reusing assets by creating a master template and inserting content variations — rather than creating every version manually — saves 75-80 percent on production time. Likewise, automation can help teams reduce their creative review effort by 40 percent.

Brands can simply get more done with their existing resources and in less time. Employing automation is like future-proofing your revenue.

Ultimately, investing in creative automation can help you successfully execute your e-commerce campaign goals and reach your long-term marketing objectives. "You can gain quite striking efficiencies regardless if you need to scale a little or scale a lot," Brzin says. "The ability to work faster translates into more capacity for teams, more output, more campaign launches, more audiences touched and, ultimately, more growth."

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Celtra helps creative and in-house marketing teams design, approve, and deliver digital creative across the ever-growing number of campaigns, markets, designs, and variants. Celtra's Creative Automation Software for Marketing helps brands move faster than ever while dramatically scaling content production. Companies like adidas, Spotify, Unilever, Lululemon, YETI, and hundreds more partner with Celtra to cut production costs while increasing efficiencies and output in the cloud.

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