



Gifting Outside the Box

Social shopping can be a big deal for the little guy

by BRUCE HOROVITZ

Most men don't like frilly gifts or fancy gift wrap. Still, almost every time a guy gets a gift, it comes wrapped in some shiny, fancy-schman-cy paper along with a ribbon or bow. There must be a better way.

That light-bulb moment occurred nearly a decade ago, when Jon Beekman was attending a strategy meeting at a gift company.

"In a moment of frustration, I said, 'We have to get rid of all of this gift garbage,'" says Beekman, founder and CEO of Man Crates. "Why not give guys stuff they actually like — and put it in a wooden crate?"

Man Crates is the realization of that idea. Its guy-focused gifts — like exotic beef jerky and sports memorabilia — come in wooden crates that require

a crowbar to open.

But Man Crates had another problem. It's tiny, relatively new — about five years old — with a small ad budget. So, how to get a new generation of social media-gorging folks to not only learn about the company, but purchase its gifts?

INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Social commerce is the new darling of online retailing but it's still in its infancy, making up just a fraction of the estimated \$305 billion that consumers spent making purchases online last year, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. Even then, it's intriguing for experience-focused retailers eager to latch onto shoppers who want instant gratification without a lot of online effort.

"That's where the most interesting brands are now," says Tim Schulz, chief product officer at Bigcommerce, a social shopping firm that gives smaller retailers the ability to compete with the likes of Amazon by offering consumers the ability to buy their products directly from Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or Snapchat. "It's where shopping isn't just a transaction, but about delivering an experience."

For Millennials in particular, few experiences are more satisfying than spotting something you really want in a tweet or on a Facebook post and being able to buy it with just a few clicks. Call it the dawning of the "buy" button age.

The buy button is e-commerce's hot button: They can show up in sponsored tweets from brands, or next to a tweeted product link. In most cases, users simply enter their credit card and shipping information once and are good to go.

Millions of small businesses now have access to Twitter's buy button integration. And it's companies like Bigcommerce that are helping them make the best use of it.

Privately held Bigcommerce ranks as one of the nation's fastest-growing e-commerce platforms, Schulz says, with annual sales that "have been doubling every year since we started." Annual e-commerce sales by its merchants have reached \$5 billion, he estimates.

'SEAMLESS BUYING'

That's some serious e-commerce action, and it's just what Man Crates needed. The company, whose beginnings can be traced to a two-bedroom, Palo Alto, Calif., apartment in 2001, was operating on a shoestring. The founders were trying to piece together a way to sell online, guy-friendly gifts — like camping equipment or NFL barware — packed in wooden crates.

"We were trying to reinvent the way people give gifts to men," says Beekman.

But the process needed some refining. At the beginning, there were four

"It's very easy as a small retailer to get disconnected from customers. But we've now made it very easy for them to reach us through chat."

— Jon Beekman, Man Crates

guys in a living room assembling crates of gifts morning to night. Before mailing the finished crates, they'd have to stop and take pictures of the merchandise, then upload the photos to the website so customers could see it all.

When sales started to take off, Man Crates knew it had to fine-tune its e-commerce strategy. That's when it sought out Bigcommerce.

"It was all about creating a seamless buying experience within our platforms," Schulz says, "so if you're looking for unique products and you're on Twitter or Facebook, you can get them right there."

Call it a new era of social commerce.

Now, says Schulz, "you can engage young shoppers who don't even know

they're shopping — and help them buy something in a frictionless way."

ENABLING COMMUNICATION

This year marks the first holiday season that Man Crates will have social commerce on the likes of Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest. And it's all being driven by mobile: Beekman says last year Man Crates did more business on mobile than on desktops.

The real focus is to open larger communication options with customers. "It's very easy as a small retailer to get disconnected from them," he says. "But we've now made it very easy for [customers] to reach us through chat."

For the moment, Man Crate's best-seller is a crate of personalized whiskey glasses. Soon, says Beekman,

those glasses also will come with a bottle of Scotch.

But this time of year, it's the NFL stuff that's really hot. For \$89.99, the NFL Barware Crate includes four NFL-licensed team beer glasses and four coasters to set them on. But football fans, hungry for more than a win, also get pistachios, corn nuts, peanuts in the shell and Buffalo-flavored pumpkin seeds.

And if their team loses the big game, they've got a way to vent their anger: That handy crowbar that comes standard with every Man Crate. **STORES**

Freelance writer Bruce Horovitz is a former *USA Today* marketing reporter and *Los Angeles Times* marketing columnist. He can be reached at brucehorovitz@gmail.com.