

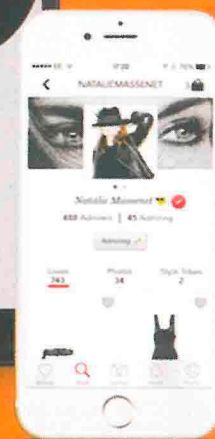
Should retailers consider following Net-a-Porter and take the plunge into social commerce? **Caroline Baldwin** reports

# ECOMMERCE

## Why retailers are paying attention to the power of social communities



Net-a-Porter's The Net Set app pushes the retailer's content through social media



It has been more than a decade since the launch of Facebook gave a new meaning to the word 'social'. Many of today's interactions between people start with a 140-character tweet, a Facebook check-in or a 'like' of an Instagram photo.

On some level, retailers have succeeded in capitalising on social media platforms, from Facebook adverts to brand engagement efforts on Twitter. But Net-a-Porter has just unleashed what it believes is the next step in leveraging the power of online communities.

Last month the luxury retailer launched its own social media platform – The Net Set – which introduces consumers to like-minded stylish individuals and recommends products, while also offering another channel from which to purchase luxury fashion items.

The iOS app – soon to be available on Android – has a live feed constantly updated in a similar way to Facebook.

Net-a-Porter has also given all of its brands individual pages on The Net Set. Each has its own login details, giving them full control of how they communicate with customers.

Net-a-Porter vice-president of social commerce Sarah Watson said at a DigitasLBi event last week that the retailer launched the platform to make the most of its customers' propensity to use social networks to share ideas and advice on fashion.

Watson described how a photograph posted on Instagram of a blogger wearing Burberry led to the customer care team being inundated with calls from shoppers desperate to know where they could buy the outfit.

And since 40% of Net-a-Porter sales are made on mobile and the retailer has 4.1 million

followers across social media outlets, social commerce "felt like the natural next step", explained Watson.

### Authoritative content

The app makes the most of Net-a-Porter's depth of content in a new way. The retailer already employs an editorial team responsible for its print magazine *Porter* as well as its website *The Edit*, and enjoys regular celebrity and vlogger endorsements.

Watson said: "Content builds authority. It's what we started with and what we're about and it's important to keep that integrity and authority in the fashion space. But social is how you amplify that content. If you bring the two together, that's what is driving the social commerce and the power behind it."

The Net Set – which began as an Instagram hashtag – already has 50,000 members through an invite-only launch on May 13.

"It feels a bit like a private members' club at the moment," says Watson. "But we're planning to open it up really soon."

**"Content builds authority. It's what we started with and what we're about"**

**Sarah Watson, Net-a-Porter**

### Buy buttons

Net-a-Porter is not the only company looking into the power of purchasing through social media.

Start-up social shopping platform Shopa launched earlier this year, rewarding users with discounts if one of their followers purchases a recommended product.

Last week Pinterest launched 'buyable pins' that enable retailers to sell their products through the platform (See Retail Lab, p28).

Google is also further monetising YouTube by introducing a 'click-to-shop' functionality for its adverts, and behind the scenes Twitter is testing a buy button to purchase directly from tweets.

But David Stover, global director of store and mobile at multichannel specialist Hybris, says retailers need to think carefully before implementing buy buttons on social platforms.

"Despite the obvious advantages of selling via platforms that attract millions of users, they will only deliver if brands take the time to fully integrate them with their wider omnichannel commerce environments," he warns.

"Consumers today expect a seamless experience regardless of the channel they choose to engage with." He says, if anything, consumer expectations of 'buy buttons' will be higher given that ease of use is a fundamental design principle of social networks.

The power of a community cannot be underestimated, and whether retailers are bold enough to launch their own platforms, or tie up with existing social media networks, there is a clear opportunity to tap into a highly engaged audience.