Personalising the online marketing experience

Make each customer experience relevant, unique, and convenient

Personalisation involves using technology to accommodate the differences between individuals. In the online marketing world, it means creating customer experiences, or interactions, that are relevant, unique, and convenient in order to build a mutually beneficial relationship between customer and business or between businesses.

- Relevance is about providing content or services that enable customers to achieve their goals.

- Uniqueness comes from the idea of 1:1 marketing. While a customer may have shared goals with other customers, that individual is unique and needs to be communicated with as such, rather than as a broad group or segment, with the aim of inspiring trust and developing a relationship with that client. Often a heavy element of operational and analytic customer relationship management (CRM) is involved in personalisation.

- Convenience refers to the simplicity and speed with which a customer progresses through the steps of shopping or interacting with a business, such as product browsing and review, selection, checkout, and payment in retail. Consistency plays a major role in making the customer experience convenient and in developing customer trust.

It is often assumed that providing these three key attributes will help increase return on investment (ROI) from marketing efforts (online and offline) by making interactions mutually beneficial to the customer and the business. Give customers what they require from a product or service and they are likely to invest more in the relationship and turn to your company when trying to achieve similar goals.

Personalisation in the offline world

Personalisation has often been touted as a digital capability, driven by Internet technology; however, it manifests itself in many different ways in our nondigital lives. Consider the following examples.

- In a high street fashion shop, personal shoppers recommend and customise a collection of garments based on requirements and situational expertise to help ensure, for example, a customer has the precise outfit needed for a wedding she is attending this weekend. They also react directly to the mannerisms and feedback from any new customer to provide “real-time” recommendations, noting whether the customer appears to be rushed or whether she prefers a more luxurious shopping experience.

- In a bank, maintaining consistency of information across multiple channels in a secure manner allows customers to check their financial state at any time. Personalisation can also take the form of pre-authorising a customer for a loan or overdraft facility, based on current available funds and previous history, or a decision in principle (DIP) for a mortgage prior to further checks in a house-buying process.

- In a telco company, offering relevant products, services, or bundles of services to existing customers encourages upgrades or contract renewals.

- Small businesses deliver a service based on handshake prior to the subsequent legal contracts. The handshake is a demonstration of trust based on previous interactions between individuals.
• A local butcher personalises an order for a customer’s upcoming dinner party by ordering specific stock and then dressing the cuts of meat appropriately, ready for collection prior to the engagement.

• A local grocer offers deals within their shops such as “2 for 1” and “Buy X, get Y half price” to help ensure the customer benefits from their knowledge of products that are often purchased together.

• A local bar prepares “the usual” once a regular customer steps up to the bar and adds it to his “slate/tab.”

• The shop “greeter” is keen to ensure that everyone who enters the store experiences the emphasis on friendliness and good customer service, which may make all the different to its customers, old and new.

Personalisation online
Online, personalisation is often described by the technicalities of recommendation engines, operational CRM, or targeted offers based on statistical scoring. The examples in the previous section, however, highlight the human need for consistent, convenient relationships that are mutually beneficial to both business and customer.

Consistency can be immensely important in a user journey; customers establish mental signposts as they “learn” their way around your digital environment. Changing that environment can result in disorientation and disrupt the natural fluency that normally builds with returning visitors.

At the same time, consistency in the way you deliver content is not the same as stifling change or pigeonholing customers. Making offers in a consistent way is important. If you are offering a discount or focusing on one element of a service, ensure you continue to do so (where it is shown to add value) in the future. Also, consistency is not the same as repetitiveness. Often, existing technical solutions for personalisation have been brittle expert systems, as demonstrated by their inability to adapt to people who buy gifts for others or to balance the introduction of new and valuable services to customers with an existing perceived preference. These systems offer the same products over and over again, regardless of category or buying behaviour.

Focusing on relevance, uniqueness, and convenience is how all personalisation should be approached, regardless of channel. With regard to the online channel, the trust that the customer places in the business to deliver advice or a key service is particularly important. Customer trust is hard to gain but can be destroyed quickly through inconsistent messaging across channels, regular dramatic changes in design, errors or delays in the site, irrelevant offers, and repetition of processes that leave customers feeling they are not being listened to.

Continuing with the theme of trust, consider the following:

Where (and when) do you place your messages and icons of security in the buying process? Or perhaps it’s easier to ask: Where do you not place your messages? Often, unfamiliar images appear to litter the checkout page in an attempt to encourage trust, but in practice, they do nothing but distract and promote apprehension.

Where (and when) do messages from social media or testimonials outweigh those of a search or recommendations engine? The simple rule of thumb is to use automatic solutions either at the beginning of the purchase cycle to focus customer search or at the end to make cross-sell and upsell offers. Testimonials and social media work better in the middle to engage people and foster an understanding of the practical value of a purchase.

What do people want to hear about products and how they are experienced or used in practice, other than just a list of specifications? In many instances, such as in the previous examples, a business should offer expertise and guidance. This can be based on either experience or practical examples of usage. Consider the success of the various technology vendors in recent years that have sold volume based on “fun” and “ease of use” rather than “processing power” and “pixels.” Customers want to buy from people, not systems.
Summary
The key goals of personalisation are not to overwhelm the customer and the online experience with a dramatically changing site or to remain static and unresponsive to new customer information. Rather, it should complement the customer journey with subtly changing offers or relevant advice (around products or services). Where information is offered by the customer to the business (implicitly or explicitly), it should be used to promote consistency across channels and convenience via smooth processes, helping to ensure that the most suitable products or services are delivered to the customer at the right time.

About Adobe Digital
Adobe Digital aims to optimise a customer’s existing site by focusing on the key themes mentioned in this paper, helping to ensure relevant messages, products, and services are delivered in a focused and consistent manner. Customers are interacted with, not sold to. Relationships are built through trust, not destroyed by bad design. And customers come back because they like what you offer, not because you paid for the top rank on Google.

Adobe Digital Consulting makes sure that improvement is indeed provable and incremental on existing online assets by testing their effectiveness and targeting customers with messages they wish to hear. Adobe Digital Consulting experts take the time to understand the needs of your business and your customers and put together a strategic roadmap of development to be rolled out across your online channel, helping to ensure maximum ROI on your online marketing efforts.

For more information
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