



Digital Personalization 101

How Testing and Targeting Can Help You Rule the World



Table of Contents

Introduction	2
The Unified Customer Profile	5
A/B Testing	7
M/V Testing	10
Headline Testing	11
Behavioral Targeting	13
Contextualization	17
Recommendations	19
Conclusion	22

Introduction

Taking a Customer-First Approach

Digital marketing has made a profound shift in focus. Today, the customer—not the company or the product—is now at the center of all marketing initiatives. This customer-first approach means that the customer is acknowledged as an individual, rather than simply being a small part of your base or audience. The best example of this is when customers directly interact with brands on social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This 1:1 interaction has created this expectation across all digital channels. The bar has been raised and now it's on the organizations to meet that bar.

No matter the industry, the goal for every organization is the same — provide a better customer experience. But how? Your customer base is growing, they are more tech-savvy than ever before, and they have shorter attention spans and higher expectations. How do you make them feel welcome and unique — not just the first time they visit your site — but throughout the customer journey?

Unfortunately, there's no a one-click solution to revamp your digital marketing strategy — being customer-first takes time and effort. But there are steps you can take to enhance the experience for each visitor every time they visit, creating more engagement and loyalty. Through data, testing, targeting, and automating, your organization can put into practice one of the most proven, effective marketing techniques of all: personalization.



Introduction to Personalization

Marketers are talking about it. Organizations are implementing it. You know you need it and that it's worth investing in. But what is personalization? How does it work? What needs to be done to provide a custom experience for each person that visits your website?

In an [interview with ZDNet](#), innovator Robert Tas, formerly chief marketing officer for Pegasystems and digital marketing adviser at advisory consultancy McKinsey & Company, defines marketing personalization by talking about what he doesn't think it is:

"The first thing [is] that people, when they talk about personalization, often confuse it with targeting. Absolutely every client that I talk to and every person in the industry, we all want to do better targeting. I think personalization has a piece of that, but I think of personalization as really helping manage a customer through their journey. That could include advertising. That could include experiences, both physical and digital. But it's that end-to-end view of helping the client, the customer, get through that journey in a thoughtful way.

One of my favorite examples is when people tease me about [how] I'm a big coffee guy, so I drink a lot of Starbucks. Everybody knows I use my mobile app to get it every day. Everybody thinks that that's where my personalization example stops. The reality is, I do love the Starbucks app. But what I think the most impressive piece of personalization that Starbucks does is they put my name on the cup. What an amazing experience that is. Being able to tie my journey all the way through with that little name on it, it just makes that whole experience work. I think companies need to figure out how to build their version of that for their customer. How do you delight them across that journey? That's where real personalization is."

As Tas' quote illustrates, personalization isn't just one thing but is the culmination of several different processes and implementations that all lead to an improved digital experience for your customers. It starts with visitor data and insight:

- Who they are
- What they want
- What they like
- Where they are coming from

All of this information helps inform what content and experience is delivered. But to deliver the best possible and most relevant experience, you need to test, including design elements, layout, and content. It also means taking a closer look at your visitors; segmenting them by common themes and targeting them based on unique characteristics: interests, location, purchase history, etc.

It means looking not just what they might have purchased or what pages they viewed, but identifying trends in their actions and serving up content and offers tailored them. It means taking all the data you've collected, consolidating it into one unified profile, and making sure that they only have to introduce themselves once.

Personalization helps customers feel like they're directly connected to your brand, your organization and/or your business instead of just being one of your many nameless, faceless customers. Who doesn't want to feel like the brands we love also love us and care about what matters to us? Giving customers the feeling that you care and focusing on getting as close to 1:1 marketing as possible pays dividends in terms of increased loyalty and conversion.



Personalization Defined

The simplest, most textbook definition of personalization is the practice of customizing a digital experience to a user's specific needs and interests, using data collected from the user. Ideally, personalization

is an automated process that combines data collection, real-time segmentation, and complex algorithms to provide users with an experience that truly resonates with them. An experience can be personalized through any of the following methods: remembering customer site preferences, tailoring recommendations and offers to their purchase history, automatically recognizing what country they are in, etc.

Since the beginning of the Internet, people have sought use the web to form personal connections. While that might sound like the introduction to an online dating app, it extends beyond just connections with other individuals. We are now following and interacting with our favorite brands; we have a direct line to them.

The same way we expect a person we've had a conversation with to remember our name and a couple key points from our discussion, today's consumers expect brands to know who we are and what we've "talked" about with them.

*Personalization Defined:
The simplest, most
textbook definition of
personalization is the
practice of customizing a
digital experience to a
user's specific needs and
interests, using data
collected from the user.*

The Unified Customer Profile

Consumers expect brands to provide an experience that shows that you've been paying attention to their needs, wants and preferences. To do this, you must collect information from both known and anonymous users. But what action do you take with that information once you have it?

Is there information that you've previously collected that could be used to improve your user's experience? And how do you manage a consistently positive, personalized brand experience for each individual customer across all of your touchpoints?

The answer to all of these questions is to build a unified customer profile — a data-level hub that pulls your most useful visitor information into one place, connecting data from all of your relevant systems to provide the best possible basis for a personalized experience.

Creating a Unified Customer Profile

If the majority of your website visitors are anonymous — and this is the case for most organizations — that means it's impossible to personalize their digital experience, right? Wrong. Fortunately, you can still deliver highly personalized digital experiences for anonymous visitors if you set up a profile for each visitor from the beginning. Even without a name or email address, you still have enough valuable information to start building a profile.

The profile can include which site referred them, what device they are using, their geographic location, and more. And as visitors spend more time on the site, you can also begin to see their content preferences, what keywords they click on, and how long they spend on your site — all which give you insight into their interest level and intent. Just like known visitors, anonymous visitors expect and deserve a customized experience.

When a visitor arrives at your website, you have mere seconds to grab their attention and make them feel welcome. Establishing a profile from a user's very first visit gives you the opportunity to create a base profile; and if/when that anonymous visitor identifies themselves by signing up for an email, purchasing a product, or registering on the site, your visitor profile is ideally automatically transferred to the "known user" list with a robust view of their preferences, habits, and interests.

Visitor profiles are progressive, meaning they don't contain all of a customer's information upon creation but rather, continue to build over time, with more data being captured and added to their profile with each subsequent visit to your site. Which pages do they view? What actions do they take? Data points like these are automatically logged into the appropriate visitor profile as they occur.

Establishing a profile from a user's very first visit gives you the opportunity to create a base profile

The moment that an anonymous visitor responds to a call to action (CTA) or “raises their hand” by using a social sign-on or entering a contest, ideally their anonymous profile would then be linked with their known profile, consolidating all their information into a single, streamlined view. This profile would continue to gather data points across customer interactions, giving you a comprehensive and continuously evolving view of who your customer is, what they like, and what they do on your site.

While aggregating customer information into a unified profile creates a better, more personalized experience for the customer, it also benefits your marketing organization. A unified customer profile enables the information to be shared amongst your marketing team and across your marketing channels and tools. With all of a

customer’s data from your CRM, email, your online store, etc. in one place, anyone who is authorized within your organization has access to a much more detailed view of the customer and can use that information to draw insights that they might not have been able to before. This breaks down silos, improves reporting and generates better customer understanding that may be used in other marketing initiatives.

The Omnichannel Marketing Approach — The Next Step

Now that you have a collected data from all of your touchpoints to develop a unified customer profile, it’s time to develop your approach to reaching out to these customers via every available touchpoint. You’re ready for omnichannel marketing.

Omnichannel marketing takes a consumer-centric approach, where the customer is at the center of all interactions. And as a digital marketer, it’s in your best interest to seamlessly interact with your audience any and all places that they’re engaging with your business across devices and platforms.

According to an Aspect Software study reported in the V12 Data blog, businesses that adopt omnichannel strategies garner 91 percent greater year-over-year customer retention rates than those that don’t. V12 Data also highlights that today’s consumers use an average of six touch points when purchasing an item, with nearly 50 percent regularly using more than four. Your customers and prospects are visiting your website (from their desktop computer at work, tablet at home and their smartphone — possibly while visiting your retail store), your social media sites, and interacting with your brand via your emails and even your apps.

Make sure that the omnichannel experience you’re providing them is one that is personalized and contextualized, and that delights them at every possible turn.

By cultivating an omnichannel approach, you not only enhance your unified customer profiles by collecting more data, but you’re building a better experience and therefore improving customer loyalty. You are showing your customer that you know what they like, you remember their preferences and that your attention to their needs extends across your entire business.

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A/B Testing

The first step to providing a personalized experience is data. You can't personalize anything until you know who your visitors are and understanding what segments or groups they are part of. Once that foundation is set, you can start to build a truly personalized experience by testing elements of your website.

What marketer likes to waste time or money on a website that doesn't perform or convert? Not any that we know! As marketers, it's our job to determine what our audience wants to see and how they want to engage with us online. That's where A/B testing comes in.

A/B testing (often called split testing or A/B/n testing because you can have "n" variations as opposed to just two) allows you to compare different website experiences to see which one is better resonating with your visitors. By testing different versions and going with the stronger performer, you'll be better prepared to reach your online goals in terms of revenue, email signups, ad clicks, etc.

This type of testing splits your web traffic randomly and evenly between your existing web page (the baseline or control) and one or more different variations of the same page. For example: visitor 1 sees the control, while visitor 2 lands on web page variation A and visitor 3 on variation B.

Once you have your first few rounds of testing done and have tweaked your digital based on the results, you should have a pretty good set of dynamic content lined up for your visitors. What's next? Go one level deeper.

Analyze what your visitors are doing on your site, what they are clicking on, what they're viewing, and what they are interested in — without them having to share any personally identifiable information (PII) or needing to self-report what they like or what they do (which, oftentimes, is well-meaning but inaccurate, as many people don't realize that what they say they like or do and what they actually like or do are two different things). This all part of setting up the next stage of personalization — behavioral targeting.

With A/B testing for a digital property, content, text/copy, headlines, menus, buttons (text and color), layout, images, or even design can be varied. The goal is simple — to create an experience that beats the conversion rate of the Control variation.

For successful A/B test, a baseline amount of web traffic (typically thousands of unique visitors per month) is needed to get valid test results. If you make your decisions based on numbers lower than that, be aware that you may be headed in the wrong direction — or at least a direction that isn't as statistically significant as would be ideal — so be careful making big decisions or investments.



Why A/B Testing is Important

There's no doubt that A/B testing takes time, a luxury not many people have when you're trying to move at the speed of the web. However, the benefits of A/B testing, which can include better conversion and increased revenue, are well worth the investment.

The more you test different web experiences, the better you will understand the traffic coming to your site. This is especially important if you're also running paid traffic initiatives. Typically, paid traffic does not have high conversion, so testing can help maximize the return on any additional spend. You'd be surprised at how much impact small website tweaks can have if they are based on experimenting with different options and measuring which gets the best results.

According to the [Harvard Business Review](#), something as simple as the way a headline is displayed can have a huge impact. For example, Bing's revenue soared by 12 percent — adding up to an estimated \$100 million annually in the U.S. alone — after making a small tweak to the way it displayed ad headlines, something it would never have known had an engineer not first instituted a humble A/B test to determine the change's potential impact.

Deciding what you want to test and what your overall goals are is a good place to start. A/B testing can be used to see which ads people are engaging with, what buttons are getting more clicks, and which headlines are drawing people in.

The insights you learn as a result of your paid campaigns can also be used to make informed decisions about messaging, calls to action and targeting for your organic offerings. For example, the headline ad copy that performs best engaging visitors to learn more about a new product offering may also be a great starting point for the landing page copy.

When tackling A/B tests, the best elements to start with are:

Content is key to the success of your website, so start off your testing with it. This includes everything from headlines to articles, from product descriptions to photos and videos. What are your visitors engaging with? When you test content, look for those elements that are increasing time on site, page views, conversion, and revenue, not just clicks.

With buttons, look into testing not just text but also the position, size and color of your buttons to see what combination best entices your makes your visitors click.

Forms are an excellent way to turn anonymous visitors into identified visitors, so it's important that you pay close attention to them. As we mentioned earlier, test different text on the form and in form's call to action, as well as testing different locations of the form on your site, and even things like having the form appear in a lightbox.

Tips for A/B Testing

A/B testing is a valuable practice for making sure you reach your online goals. Here are some tips to make the most of tests:

- Make sure you have enough testing data before deciding which variation performed best. The more time to gather information, the better. If your test is not working the way you want it to or the information is not as concrete as you'd like it to be, you can always retest.
- It's always best to test with new visitors rather than existing traffic so that your visitors don't have any preconceived expectations of the site and you're aren't creating psychological noise in the minds of existing site visitors.
- Use your test results as a guidebook, not a rulebook. Your test results should help you create a balance between what you want/need on the site and elements/content that converts. Sometimes, you'll find that what converts best is not always what you'd prefer to see on the site. If that happens, consider taking different elements and testing those against each other to find the right combination for all your business goals.

M/V Testing

What is Multivariate Testing?

In the simplest terms, multivariate testing studies website variations that have more than one page element changed. For example, instead of testing just changing a headline in Variation 1 and Variation 2 and then comparing the results, you'd change the headline and the feature image. As the name insinuates, multivariate testing allows you to test multiple elements at a time, creating many different combinations of those elements and effectively tweaking your website experience to get the best result possible.

What to Test

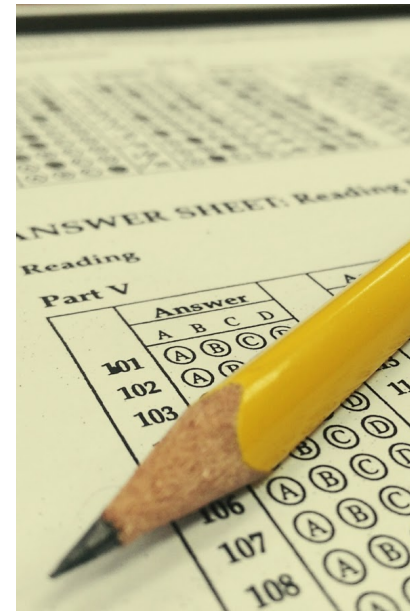
Similar to A/B testing, when conducting your multivariate test you need to first consider your goals so that you can select the right elements to test. Are you looking for more engagement on a blog post? Or perhaps you're trying to increase your email sign ups? If your goal is the latter, consider testing the following:

- Email sign up call to action text
- Sign up button placement
- Sign up button color.

Multivariate Testing or A/B Testing?

Since multivariate testing lets you test many elements at once, it's always the preferred choice for marketers, right? Not necessarily. In fact, in many cases, A/B testing should be your "default" choice for testing. Here's how to know when to choose A/B testing and when multivariate testing makes more sense:

- Short on time or budget? A/B testing is less expensive and faster.
- Testing big, dramatic changes? Choose A/B testing.
- Traffic under 100,000 uniques/month? Multivariate testing won't lead to meaningful results. Opt for A/B testing.
- Early in your business? Your audience hasn't settled enough for multivariate testing to provide insights. Select A/B testing.
- Testing minor or subtle tweaks? Choose multivariate testing.
- Testing pages with high volumes of traffic or conversions? Multivariate testing is your best bet.
- Looking to squeeze every ounce of optimization value out of your A/B testing efforts? Follow up by testing different versions of your A/B test winner with multivariate testing positioning different elements in different places.



Headline Testing

Whether it's a novel or a news article, every great story needs something that grabs you and makes you want to read it. When it comes to the web, your content needs a great headline.

But what does “great headline” mean? That it's optimized for SEO? That it accurately describes the content? While both are important, the real test for a headline is: Did it make you keep reading?

Most bloggers, journalists, and copywriters are used to the practice of submitting multiple headlines for a single piece of content. But how do you determine which one to use? This is where testing comes in.

Who Should Do Headline Testing?

It used to be that only companies in the media, entertainment and publishing industries were focused on creating catchy and engaging headlines for their content.

But these days, the reality is that no matter what your business, you're wrestling for the eyes, minds, and wallets of every visitor — and as such, you have to compete with everything else online. Having a headline that quickly shows your potential customer that you have something insightful, educational, entertaining or at least relevant to share with them is imperative.

Kinds of Headlines to Test

The first step of headline testing is crafting the headlines to test. But when you're tasked with delivering high-quality content on a daily basis, even the most talented of content creators can feel a little stuck every now and then — especially when it comes to crafting a headline that will entice visitors to click through and find out more.

Consider tips like these from Sergio Aicardi at SEMRush to help get your brain out of neutral and back into gear. Let's take a look at a few of Sergio's tips — and the results we'd get if we used them to formulate the headline for this guide based on them.

Tip

- Have some fun — make your headline accurate yet interesting enough to click through.
- Try a formula — follow a clever formula for constructing a headline
- Be provocative — ask a bold question

Result

- ⇒ A guide to marketing personalization tips your momma never told you about.
- ⇒ Stop ignoring these revenue-boosting marketing personalization techniques
- ⇒ How many customers can you afford to lose? A guide to marketing personalization that attracts and keeps customers.

True Engagement vs. Link Baiting

It's important to remember, but easy to forget that the whole point of having a great headline is true engagement, not just clicks. Testing lets you know not only what is enticing your visitors to click, but it should also set accurate expectations for the content they are going to consume. Link baiting, while effective for clicks, can often alienate your visitors by making them feel tricked into reading your article.

We've all seen the link baiting headlines that often start with "You Won't believe..." when in fact, the content of the article is typically completely believable and relatively boring. Remember, your headline is setting the tone, so make sure it's the right one. Don't overpromise and underdeliver. Test your headlines to help determine what works for your audience in an authentic way.

Behavioral Targeting

What is Real-Time Segmentation?

You're on the phone with your best friend who lives on the other side of the country, and you both visit Amazon.com's homepage to order a book you've been discussing. "Scroll down, it's right there on the home page" your friend says. You scroll down, but the book is nowhere to be found on Amazon's home page on your computer. Welcome to real-time segmentation and personalization in action.

Segmentation divides your site visitors into groups based on behavioral, geographic and/or situational similarities. This information helps you understand who is visiting your site, what they are doing, where they are from, etc. ... all without the user having to provide any information about themselves.

Once you've collected information on both known and anonymous users and segmented them by trends, you can begin to personalize for each customer segment. As you're serving up a customized digital experience, you're also testing different aspects — from headlines to button placement — to continually improve your customer's experience and increase conversion.

Marketers have always known that segmentation is important, and most marketing tools — from web analytics programs to marketing automation platforms and lead generation tools are able to segment known users. The X-factor with real-time segmentation takes into account what anonymous users are doing as they are doing it, across all channels. Users are then automatically sorted into one or more segments based on their unique characteristics and online behavior. Knowing the basics of what your known and anonymous users are doing is a good starting point for any marketing campaign. The same holds true for personalization; before you can effectively test you need a baseline of who is on your site and what they're up to. Broad-based marketing efforts just aren't going to cut it anymore.

By concentrating on behavioral targeting and developing a unified strategy for reaching customers with similar pain points, you can develop stronger messaging and spend your dollars more wisely

Increase Average Sessions, Decrease Bounce Rate with Behavioral Targeting: TNVacation.com

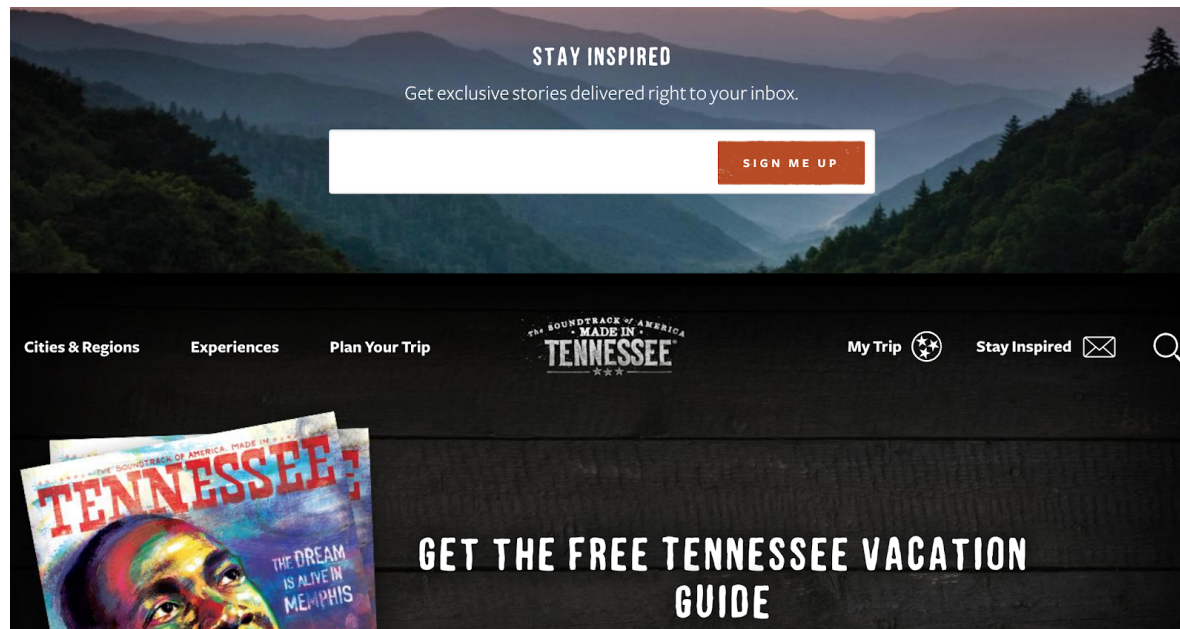
With a desire to lower the site's overall bounce rate, the Tennessee Department of Tourism Development worked with design firm VML to deploy Acquia Lift on its revamped website. The site delivers content to visitors based on their explicit and implicit behaviors, using both market research and behavioral data collected from their previous actions.

For example, if a user visits the site from a location that market research suggests their most likely place to visit would be Memphis, the site will automatically feature content and tourism partners related to Memphis. However, once the user explicitly expresses interest in a different destination, Acquia Lift updates their profile to feature that destination instead.

Additionally, Acquia Lift responds differently to the user depending on their stage in the CRM funnel — first-time visitors are greeted with a request to sign up for email updates; once that occurs, the promotion automatically changes to offer the user access to printed guides and invites to follow the state's social media channels.

User engagement metrics since the launch have proven that behavioral targeting pays off. The site's bounce rate has decreased by 19 percent, while the average session duration is up 29 percent. Average time on page has increased 8 percent and the average pages per session are up by 9 percent.

96 percent of marketers say that personalization helps advance the relationship with the customer, yet only 30 percent feel very satisfied or extremely satisfied with their own personalization efforts



The Magic of Behavioral Targeting

Ninety-five percent of traffic to your website is anonymous, known only as “users” or “visitors.” In reality, they are individual people. With the vast amount of traffic to your website coming anonymously, it's easy to forget that these users or visitors are actually individual people.

But if you don't know who is coming to your site, how can you provide them with a personalized experience? How can you recommend articles and products to them? How can you give them calls-to-action or offers that they might want to take advantage of? Through the “magic” of behavioral targeting.

Behavioral targeting leverages data such as time on site, pageviews, location, device, etc. from each unique user and stores it in a profile without the visitor having provided any identifiable information. This includes which pages of the site they visit, what they click on and how long they spend on the site. These different data points are collected to create personas based on common actions.

By looking at personas, marketers can then look for trends and tailor web experiences to better serve their visitors and ideally, turn them into customers. There are two different categories of data that is collected to create customer profiles and personas..

- Historic behavior What pages do they visit when they return to the site? What device have they used to view the site? How often do they come back? When they come back, how long do they spend on the site?
- By recording and analyzing historical data, marketers can then refine their algorithms so that targeting is based on patterns, not just one-off interactions or purchases. For example, just because you bought “Frozen” toys for your niece at Christmas doesn't mean that you want to keep seeing recommendations for toys or Disney merchandise.
- Real-time behavior What page(s) is the user on right now? Where are they located? What time is it where they are? What device are they using?

By looking at real-time behavior, marketers can improve a visitors experience while they are on the site. The most common example of this is showing a site visitor an offer for a product they just viewed. Another example would be recommending top-rated snow boots to a customer visiting the site from Northern Maine in the middle of January. Behavioral targeting gives you a clear picture of who visits your site and allows for personalization to take place, which is essential for a website's success. Behavioral targeting not only allows for personalization but also provides context. Personalization is amplified by contextualization, leading to a better digital experience and maximized conversion.

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Contextualization ensures that you don't allow a single action or purchase to dictate how a site is personalized for a user

Demographic Targeting vs. Behavioral Targeting

Demographic data like gender or age can be very useful, but don't lean too heavily on that data. Today's best brands are increasingly relying on the insights they are able to draw from behavioral analytics to better engage visitors.

AdWeek has a similar view of the importance of behavioral data over demographic data. They make the case for behavioral targeting by pointing out the limited, simplistic view that demographic data provides — by telling us about them but not providing any insight into what they need, what they worry about or what makes them happy. Additionally, AdWeek author Annalea Krebs points out, focusing on demographics can cause marketers to segment budgets, messages and even strategies, stretching resources thin. By concentrating on behavioral targeting and developing a unified strategy for reaching customers with similar pain points, you can develop stronger messaging and spend your dollars more wisely.

According to AdExchanger, consumer packaged good brands are finding that consumer data like purchase history and interests are much more valuable than traditional demographic information, with one brand noticing a 7 percent sales lift after creating morning and evening-specific ad creatives for its online audiences.

Demographic data can still add value to an overall customer profile, but as behavioral data becomes available, it should take priority in informing your marketing decisions.

Why Should You Leverage Behavioral Targeting?

Customers expect sites they visit — especially sites they have visited repeatedly — to remember them. They expect you to anticipate their desires and to know what they want to see. Behavioral targeting allows you to understand the personas of your visitors and the segments they fall into, allowing you to make quick judgments and interactions, understand their behavior across channels, and give them more of what they want. All of this leads to increased insights and ultimately, improved engagement.

Behavioral targeting also provides the building blocks for a unified profile of your customers from their very first visit to your site. As soon as they sign up for a newsletter, complete a registration form, respond to an offer, or purchase a product, they provide a unique identifier such as an email address which can be merged with the anonymous profile that you've been collecting. You aren't starting from scratch, trying to piece together their previous interactions with your site, nor does customer need to reintroduce themselves. The entire process is seamless for both of you, as you greet your now known customer by their name.

According to Cision, a Microsoft study found that the average human attention span is just 8 seconds, a decrease from 12 seconds back in 2000.

Contextualization:

The State of Personalization Today

According to a 2017 report by Evergage, 96 percent of marketers say that personalization helps advance the relationship with the customer, yet only 30 percent feel very satisfied or extremely satisfied with their own personalization efforts. Email is the most popular channel for personalization, with mobile personalization taking the last-place spot. And the data most often used to enable personalization efforts? Demographic data, followed by location data and finally pageviews; previous visit behavior comes in fifth on the list. Clearly, there is room for improvement when it comes to personalization — and we as marketers realize it.

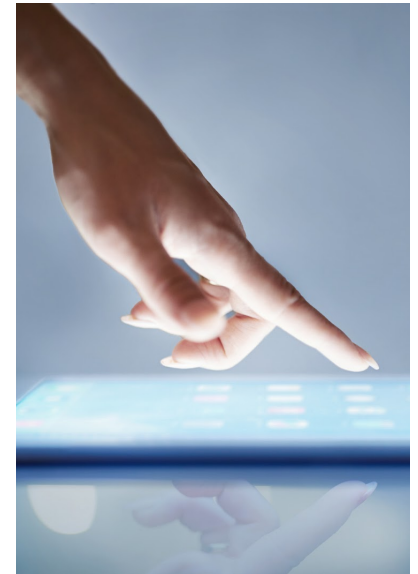
While personalization is a very customer-centric practice, it also has significant business benefits. One of the most important is helping to steer your customer along the journey you want them to take on your website. Look at what paths your customer has taken on their own and make sure all content that you're driving them to is relevant based on both paths.

Contextualization Brings the Element of Relevance to Personalization

Picture this: You're a Netflix user and you just watched "The Sixth Sense." When you log back on, all your recommendations are comprised only of other M. Night Shyamalan films. This sounds like the stuff of nightmares right? When contextualization is working alongside automated personalization, this thankfully shouldn't happen.

Contextualization is similar to personalization but takes things a step further. Instead of just showing you something based on what you read, saw or did on the website, it also takes into account factors like how you got there (for example: desktop or mobile?) and when you were there (2 p.m. Tuesday or 1 a.m. Saturday) to attempt to deliver content that is more likely to be relevant to your specific needs. In other words, contextualization allows you, the marketer, to consider the customer's place in his/her buying journey and deliver personalized content at the point they'll be most open to receiving it.

Contextualization ensures that you don't allow a single action or purchase to dictate how a site is personalized for a user. For example, one big factor often used in personalization efforts is purchase history, but if you don't keep the context of the season in mind, you may draw erroneous conclusions. After all, if your mother was on your site over the Christmas holidays buying a gift for her in-laws, she might be ready for a little something for herself by the time she visits again in February.



Getting the context right can also lead to a better, more personalized experience for your customer that shows that you've been paying attention and that you care about them beyond making a sale. Imagine that your analytics for your outdoor retailer site show you a customer that has been stocking up on camping gear, ostensibly planning for a big camping trip. While it indicates that the customer has an interest in camping, it doesn't mean that you should only show them camping equipment when they visit your site. However, looking at the list of gear, you notice that most of it is designed for colder temperatures. This is a perfect opportunity to serve up content related to camping in extreme conditions, providing the customer with added value beyond the product. By focusing not just on personalization but on contextualization as well, you can find the right balance of how much information to provide based on what pages the customer has visited, what they've searched for, how they came to your site, and if they're viewing your content on the web or via a mobile device.

Recommendations:

How To Recommend Content and Offers

Your customers not only understand that you collect information about them, but they expect a customized experience based on that data. You, the digital marketer, have tested your website, adjusted based on the results and segmented your audience accordingly. But what's the most effective way to use this information? Quickly! According to Cision, a Microsoft study found that the average human attention span is just 8 seconds, a decrease from 12 seconds back in 2000. And automatically connecting your customers with recommended content and offers personalized to their tastes and interests is an extremely effective way to keep them engaged with your brand.

Recommended articles, resources, and products are nothing new—but the key to making them a successful part of your digital marketing strategy is accuracy and automation. Providing your audience segments with relevant recommended content extends the personalized experience and is a win-win for both your customers and your business. However, recommending content that isn't a good fit or isn't relevant for your audience can drive them away.

Why Accuracy is Important

According to Marketo's 2017 State of Engagement report, 82 percent of marketers surveyed believed they had a deep understanding of how their buyers wanted to be engaged, but more than half of buyers wholeheartedly disagreed. The buyers' No. 1 reason for not engaging with brands? Irrelevant content. Clearly, accuracy and relevancy are both imperative to the success of your recommendation program. For example, it wouldn't make sense to recommend an article on "The 5 Best Ways to Spend Your Snow Day" to someone living in San Diego. To avoid customer frustration and ensure truly deliver relevant suggestions, it is not enough to simply recommend content. You must recommend the right content.

Amazon is a great example of a company that understands recommendations. Products are their content and their "library" is quite vast – maybe limitless. When you're a one-stop shop for various product categories, personalized recommendations and offers are even more important. Just because you bought your nephew a football for Christmas, doesn't mean you want to be inundated with sporting goods.

But there are also times when Amazon doesn't get it right. It's important to note that if one of the biggest companies in the world, who has made automated recommendations a critical part of their business, has been challenged by this, it's ok for anyone to be challenged by this. Even with the right technology in place, isn't easy to do, so don't be afraid to try and fail. You'll learn and get better. If Amazon and Netflix try and don't succeed, then a university or nonprofit can take heart from this reality.



Why Automation is Important

As a content marketer, your goal is to have whatever assets you produce — articles, blog posts, infographics, videos, etc. — engage your customers. You want people to read what you wrote, share it, and comment on it. You want it to help increase conversions on your site. To get your desired results, your content needs to be served up to the people who are most interested in the subject matter.

Producing useful and engaging content for your audience is a task all in itself and your focus should be on building out your content library. But once you have the content, how can you then be sure that you're delivering it to the audience segments with which it aligns? Automation is your best bet. Using the customer data you've collected through testing and targeting, you can then leverage complex algorithms designed to deliver that content to the people who would be most interested in it.

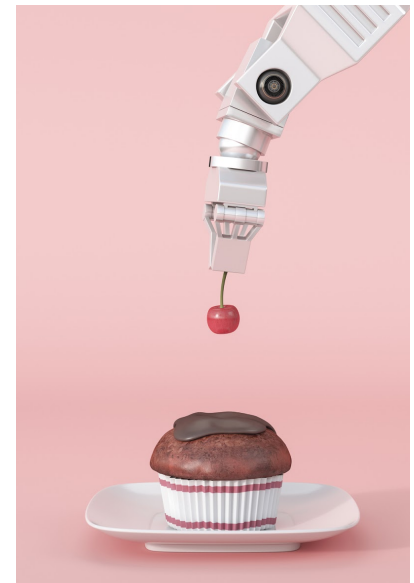
Automated Recommendations Lead to a 1:1 Experience: Tourisme Montréal

Tourisme Montréal wanted its website to serve as the destination for hosting tourists and developing destination strategies, increasing the site's conversion rate and creating a more immersive experience for visitors in the process.

Working with marketing firm Cossette, the organization developed a strategy: create a new website that provides a cohesive multiplatform, multichannel experience, made use of progressive profiling, and used technology (including a proprietary recommendation engine) to deliver real-time personalized content to site visitors. Tourisme Montréal's recommendation engine selects and recommends content that is presented to the user depending on their context, platform, previous behavior, declarative preferences, localization, seasonality and a host of other parameters the team fine tunes.

The engine's machine learning component allows it to leverage users' behavior in an exponential manner, giving users a feel for the version of Montreal that would most interest them. The recommendation engine also delivers content recommendations for newsletter and other ad hoc email communications for each and every user, allowing for true 1:1 experience.

Since the site's soft launch, the recommendation engine has delivered close to 3 million content impressions to the Tourisme Montréal ecosystem. Additionally, the site has seen a 30 percent reduction in its bounce rate, indicating that users are feeling more engaged with the content..



Personalized Offers

In addition to recommended content, personalized calls to action not only benefit your customers but your business as well. General, sitewide offers are not as successful as ones specifically tailored to your audience segments. For example, “20 percent off your order” might seem like a great offer to promote across all segments, but consider that some customers might prefer “free shipping” if they are only making a few small purchases. Personalized offers tend to encourage customers to add more to their order and boost loyalty, especially if they know that you consistently offer promotions that are of interest to them.

Customer benefits of personalized offers

Part of the reason that personalization is important to your customers is that it helps cut through the noise of the Internet. Your audience is bombarded with ads, promotions, articles, etc. every time they open their browser. By providing them with content based on their interests, you are providing a better digital experience; one that saves them time and gives them what they are looking for. By delivering a personalized experience through content recommendations and offers, you can also help your audience discover something new, providing them with additional value beyond their initial reason for visiting your site.

Personalized offers benefit your business

Besides providing your customers with what they want, recommended content can serve your business goals as well. By tailoring content recommendations, you can help increase time on site, pageviews, and engagement. And personalized offers can have a huge impact on conversion rates and revenue. Salesforce’s 2017 “Personalization in Shopping” report shows that product recommendations drive just 7 percent of visits, but lead to a whopping 24 percent of orders and 26 percent of revenue. With numbers like these, it’s understandable why content and offer recommendations are at the top of the to-do list for savvy marketers who don’t already have them in place.



Conclusion

According to the results of three studies performed by Dynamic Yield, 92 percent of marketing and communications executives said they believe in the value of personalization. Yet at the same time, only 23 percent of companies are capable of consolidating their data into a single view of the customer to offer a truly seamless, personalized experience across channels.

Certainly, companies that are able to take the lead on creating a unified customer profile and deliver high-quality, contextualized interactions at every touchpoint are poised to gain a big competitive advantage.

