How to avoid crossing the 'creepy line' when personalising your marketing

For more than a decade, marketers have used the explosion in available customer data to build increasingly personalised and complex communication strategies. As marketing channels fragment and evolve, the creation of campaigns that reach someone at the right time, place, medium and message have become essential.

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However, there has always been a fine line to tread between providing a personalised experience and getting 'too personal' with a customer. Similarly, brands often make the mistake of assuming a fancy algorithm is a substitute for really getting to know what their customers want and need.

The key to personalisation or even hyper personalisation is to be able to identify where this 'creepy line' actually is for each customer. This can be easier said than done because the latest generation of marketers are often taught that more personalised experiences are always more effective. While this may have been generally true in the past, with phishing scams becoming more intelligent, consumers generally now more aware of their data rights and online privacy becoming much more important, there can actually be more value to be found in being less personal. This does not mean going back to the old days of spray and pray marketing campaigns. Rather, it means shifting the emphasis away from personalisation for personalisations sake and looking closer at the

actual customer experience.

Put yourself in the shoes of your users or customers

What information would you want a company to know about you and use effectively? Which data points or interactions are irrelevant to you? If a marketing message even hints at making you feel uncomfortable, chances are you are going down the wrong path. The crucial thing to remember is that comfort levels differ between users. What one person may find clever and informative might feel intrusive to another. It's therefore essential to have clear insights into the profile of your customers.

This can be achieved by careful segmentation analysis to create a different category of user which takes into account all available information to assess their preferences. A/B testing of marketing campaigns can then be used to test these segments to determine, in practice, where the comfort levels of various users sit. Of course, all the fancy data science in the world is no substitute for actually asking your customers what they want. Surveying your users to see what level of personalisation they would find useful is not only the safest and most accurate way to avoid crossing the creepy line, it also has the virtue of empowering people.

Research repeatedly shows that if businesses act transparently, and consumers can see the value exchange of their data being used for more personalised marketing they are much more likely to respond positively.

Does your personalisation efforts actually

add any value to the customer experience?

There's a real difference between showing your user base you know something about them and actually providing them with a personal interaction they will find valuable. Say I buy some peanut butter every month from a company - would I find it useful that they send me emails with examples of other types of peanut butter?

After all, I probably already know what I like so a brand telling me they know what I buy and providing some alternatives I've likely already considered isn't going to be effective. Instead, what if the company sent me some example recipes that used peanut butter? Not only am I more likely to find that useful, if I do decide to make these recipes I'll probably end up buying the other products I need from the same company.

People do appreciate clever and creative experiences - but again, there is a line and what works in one interaction might feel different in another. The peanut butter scenario works well if the company actually sells peanut butter or related products. If I was marketing to a decision maker at a tech vendor and, through data analysis, I discovered their love of legumes, and then sent them a basket of these products, the likelihood of them being creeped out by it is pretty substantial. Indeed, the rules of the game between B2C marketing and B2B are very different. It is best to only use data easily accessible in the public domain when marketing to other businesses.

Finally, marketers really need to keep in mind the cultural direction of travel when designing their marketing campaigns. The line between what is useful personalisation and what is unacceptable is evolving. The recent changes to cookies is a reflection of companies collecting too many data points over the past decade and customers being wary of the vast amount of information collected. If marketers continue to over exploit customer data in this way people will become more and more wary about

sharing any information, and governments will be more inclined to further tighten legislation.

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