

Keep personalisation from getting creepy - the 5 points of data rule

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25 Nov 2022

When we interact with companies online, just how comfortable are we about sharing information about ourselves that can be used to theoretically provide us with a more personalised service? It's not just a conundrum we face as consumers, but also one faced by the companies with which we interact.



Tian Horn, Hyland account manager, Southern Africa. Source: Supplied

Any organisation that captures information about its customers, which these days is almost everyone, faces the question of how they should use that information to deliver a personalised experience without it coming across as invasive or even creepy. Perhaps more importantly: When does personalisation become too much?

The first rule of creating any sort of customer experience from marketing and sales, all the way through to support, is to know your audience. A successful company is one that can empathise with its customers and understand what it is they are trying to achieve when they interact with the company.

What problems do they have that we can solve for them? What can we do to make their lives easier, or to make them more successful? Companies that understand their audiences have greater success and more repeat business. To do that they need to collect information about who the audience is; otherwise, they are just acting on assumptions.



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The problem lies with the question of what companies should do with all that data, especially if it is data that allows an organisation to build a picture of an individual's behaviour. Is it Personally Identifiable Information (PII)? There are rules and legislation in place that aim to protect consumer PII.

South Africa passed its Protection of Personal Information Act (PoPIA) into law in 2020. The Act mandates good business practices that must be followed for compliance – hefty fines await those enterprises that fail to achieve it. These good

practices include the handling of personal data, but the question remains of how that data is used in communicating with customers.

Research by various enterprise-level corporations reveals that customers have a tolerance for voluntarily sharing up to five pieces of data during interactions with them.

Experience has shown that engagement is better if those five pieces of data are spread over a series of communications. Showing that the company knew too much about the customer in a single email did in fact cross a 'creep factor' threshold.

Mind your tone

The tone of any personalised communication also matters when determining customer reactions. Over-familiarity can instantly cause a negative reaction. Email that uses a customer's first name in an overly friendly, too-familiar manner from someone they have never interacted with before will generally be immediately deleted.

In terms of personalisation, familiarity definitely breeds contempt and is often viewed as not only unsettling but also pushy, resulting in the creation of a barrier to engagement. Perhaps the answer to issuing customer data is not personalisation on the individual level, but the illusion of it. IDC analyst Marci Maddox has often noted: "Personalisation is not about putting names on 10,000 pieces of content; it's about delivering the right valued content to 10 people."

Wouldn't it be better to be able to deliver the right content and experiences to a group of people with similar interests and problems to solve? It's an approach that shows empathy without being sinister, but still makes the customer feel that we do know them and their problems, interests, desires, and goals.

Instead of trying to manage the 'creep factor' while trying to reach the mythical one-on-one personalisation goal, perhaps we should focus on the tasks at hand. Just because we can collect data about individuals does not necessarily mean we should actually be doing it.

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