

PERSONALIZATION 101 FOR PUBLISHERS

Hotsheets

BY COLLEEN FISHER TULLY, Freelance Editor, Writer, & Media Consultant

With the potential to analyze every click and every keystroke to serve your audience exactly the content they're craving from your website, personalization sounds like a gift from editorial (and ad revenue) heaven. But is this still-emerging technology worth the investment for magazines? Here, Angus Robinson, Director of Analytics and Data Strategy for Metroland Media, explains the nuts and bolts of personalization and whether or not it could be right for your business.

WHAT IS EMAIL PERSONALIZATION?

More and more marketers have taken steps towards personalization versus one-size-fits-all communications. While sophisticated, tech-focused companies (think Amazon, Google, and Facebook) have been personalizing for years, similar technology is now available to companies that previously could not afford it.

Email is where many marketers turn for their first step into personalization because of its ability to drive a direct response. It's also relatively easy to implement, compared to personalizing an entire website or mobile app experience.

WHY WOULD PERSONALIZATION WORK FOR MAGAZINES THAT ALREADY HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR AUDIENCE?

Even if subscribers are already highly engaged with email, there's likely still room to push engagement even further. Unless your subscribers are truly a homogenous melting pot, and you only offer a narrow sliver of a given content category, there will be opportunities to craft unique communications for each subscriber.

If some or all of the following factors are true for your publication, personalization might be a good option to drive more engagement and revenue from email:

1. Your readers have diverse tastes and preferences;
2. Your publication has a large volume of long-tail, evergreen content;
3. The type of content your publication offers is diverse;
4. Either email is already a strong contributor to your website's traffic, or you believe it has the potential to be.

DOES PERSONALIZATION TAKE EDITORS OUT OF THE E-NEWSLETTER EQUATION?

Not at all, but it can change some editorial activities. In some personalization programs, an editor would no longer be directly choosing which articles are featured (and in what order) for an email newsletter. Instead, that editorial time should be spent on metadata.

With personalization, article metadata becomes increasingly important. If articles are not tagged with the appropriate categories, tags and topics, your personalization program will not perform at optimal levels. The more metadata your editors can associate with content, the better your personalization program will perform.



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Don't forget, the data collected in order to personalize can be incredibly valuable to editors for planning content, too.

A MAGAZINE WANTS TO BEGIN EMAIL PERSONALIZATION TOMORROW—HOW DO THEY GET STARTED?

1. Create a business case

Estimate the potential lift in engagement or traffic you can expect from personalization and find a way to translate that to revenue. Of course, there's some guesswork here, and each business/audience is different, but no one knows your business/audience better than you.

2. Set up a preference centre

This is a section on the website where email subscribers can refine their interests. By pushing subscribers to this preference centre (either at time of email signup, or sometime thereafter), you get great information about what content that subscriber wants from you.

Most marketers start personalization with a segmented approach, which means sending topic-based newsletters to subscribers who have indicated their preferences explicitly via the preference centre.

3. If necessary, track online behaviour

The challenge of a voluntary preference centre is that many subscribers won't go to the effort of explicitly providing their interests, thus solely relying on these explicit preferences only tackles a (presumably) small portion of your list. If this is the case, leveraging tracked behaviours can provide a much more complete view of preferences per user. For example, a user might not have set an explicit preference for parenting content, but if that subscriber has read ten parenting articles in the last two months, you can be pretty certain that parenting content is highly relevant for that user.

Tracking user behaviour can be complex, but there are some email service providers (ESPs) that have built these capabilities into their platform (such as SailThru and ExactTarget). If you have fewer than one million email subscribers I'd suggest using one of these types of ESPs; greater than one million subscribers can make this technology prohibitively expensive and place high demands on your development team. Metroland has embarked on a robust custom solution because their 3 million email subscribers drive a significant portion of their digital revenue.

4. Create a unique 1:1 communication

Likely the end goal will be to compile a newsletter for each subscriber that takes into account their unique sets of preferences, both implicit and explicit. This is the biggest challenge in personalizing email, but if you can get it right, it should provide a nice lift. Work with your email service provider to see what turnkey solutions they might have available and see if some custom development is an option for your business.

