

MULTICHANNEL

Personalization means walking a fine line between helpful and intrusive

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Personalization should be done carefully

By SARAH JONES

LOST PINES, TX - With all of the consumer data available to brands, the opportunities for personalization have grown, but marketers need to be careful that they are not stepping over a line, according to a panel April 22 at iProspect's Client Summit.

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Luxury Daily

Consumers have come to expect a certain level of customization both on and offline. For luxury brands specifically, using data to personalize requires subtlety, since consumers can become offended if a boundary of privacy is crossed.

"We tend to know quite a lot about our customers, especially existing customers, repeat customers," said Christoph Oberli, vice president of ecommerce and interactive at [Mandarin Oriental](#), Lost Pines, TX. "Because there is this very personal experience at the property so we try to gauge as much information of customers, whether through electronic channels or at property so therefore we can quite well tailor personalized messages and make them as relevant as possible with the least intrusion.

"Have we had complaints?" he said. "Sometimes, because sometimes you get it just a little bit wrong.

"I think generally speaking, we're overprotective of our brand so we're very careful of how we craft personalization. We definitely make sure we use the right data to craft the appropriate message without making it too over specific, because in the travel space, people move around, so you can't always gauge what their next step is ... so you have to be careful."

Individualized approach

In the travel industry, Mandarin Oriental finds there are a lot of variables when trying to personalize for a consumer due to the various reasons that consumers travel.

For instance, a consumer's preferences on file from a business trip may not match what they are looking for when they stay for a leisure vacation.



iProspect Client Summit panel, from left Jamie Barbour, Chevrolet; Jack Reynolds, Clinique; Chistoph Oberli, Mandarin Oriental

Gathering data is also difficult because of all of the anonymous ways that consumers can enter the purchasing funnel, and the non-linear purchase path consumers take today.

Clinique is trying to translate its in-store consultation to its digital space, offering a representative consumers can talk to and send a photo to have a more engaging talk about their needs. However, the brand is trying to figure out how much consumers want to interact with the service.



Clinique 3-step system

Jack Reynolds, executive director of ecommerce for North America at Clinique, said that it too tries not to cross the line by showing too much of what it knows about consumers, adding that the interactions should reflect what an in-store salesperson would say.

When the skincare brand reformulated its Dramatic Difference Moisturizing Plus cream, the brand reached out to its best customers to offer free products, whether through traditional mail or email, knowing that consumers would be sensitive to the change. They then monitored the responses and highlighted the positive reviews and the negative reviews that turned positive.

Social media provides a means of learning about particular consumers, and provides a platform to hear if a brand has crossed the line.

However, the panelists agreed that they are wary of injecting themselves into social conversations that do not directly address them.

Forward thinking

The panel discussed Amazon's patent on technology that will deliver products before consumers order them, anticipating their wants and needs.

While this might work in some sectors, the panelists do not expect to implement similar tactics. Mr. Reynolds said that use-up rates for Clinique's products is hard to gauge because consumers apply them differently.

Mr. Oberli said that he wouldn't expect hotels to implement anticipatory booking. However, when he worked for the Mandarin Oriental property in Bangkok, the hotel would send communications to regular Christmas guests asking them when they would be arriving.

A customized approach is typical for beauty brands, which rely on having a connection with consumers, both online and in-store.

Luxury cosmetic brands need to focus on a customer-driven messaging strategy to see results, said a L'Oreal Luxe executive at Luxury FirstLook: Strategy 2014.

The luxury cosmetic consumer knows who she is and what she wants, so brands need to find ways to listen to their customers to find ways to reach them on an individual, personalized level. By using CRM in effective ways, brands can offer a higher level of service across channels ([see story](#)).

Asking questions to get to know consumers is good, but the brand then has to deliver.

"You should never collect types of information that you then cannot operationally deliver," Mandarin Oriental's Mr. Oberli said. "[Not delivering is] actually worse than not asking at all.

"It's also trying to understand how much a customer wants to be personalized to," he said. "Some people love that kind of stuff, and some people hate it.

"So if you can find that out and then act accordingly, I think you have a big win there."

Final Take

Sarah Jones, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York

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