

## **For your eyes only – The art of Personalization**

On my recent visit to Amazon.com to order books I was happy to see that I was welcomed by name and the page listed some recommendations based on my previous purchases. So, I thought of browsing the list of recommended books but to my disappointment I already had all of the listed items. In addition, I realized that I had purchased most of the titles from Amazon.com; but the site failed to recognize that simple fact.

If you have been keeping up with the web and its buzz you must have read or heard about personalization. It is being touted as the art of marketing to an individual and delivering content that is focused on *you* and is targeted for your eyes only. I will share some insights into what I believe personalization is, its forms, how it is being used and where potential pitfalls exist – in the hope that when you feel the need to adopt personalization as a feature of your web site or software, these tips will come in handy.

### **What is personalization?**

In a nutshell, personalization is the art of changing your web site's appearance and behavior that is tailored to an individual. Consider for example, if you step into a departmental store and head towards the shoe section. Based on how much time you spend in that section, the rest of the sections transform themselves to display more shoes. The more time you spend in the shoe section(s) the more rest of the store changes, and finally the entire store 'appears' to you as a shoe store! In the brick & mortar world that may not happen but in e-space, this can happen with the clicks of a mouse.

In the traditional methods for market research, the research company often sends out questionnaires, engage focus groups, perform phone surveys to collect data about consumers and categorize it into various demographics, including region, income level, family size, age group and so on. This data can be collected for a specific audience or sold to consumer goods corporations who classify and categorize the information to support predictions and 'target' their goods and services to desired market segments. The usual intent of this exercise is to target appropriate customers for the products and services of the vendor.

In the new commerce, the opportunities are different. Now, the business offering the product or service can reduce the need for specific market research services and collect desired data directly from the consumer. Generally, the data is current, which implies that the vendor can target content and the product/service to the individual in the real time! Once the data is collected, the e-store can potentially cross-sell and up-sell by offering more content & products that are in line with your profile, preferences and purchasing patterns. There are a number of inherent issues with this approach, some controversial. I will address these issues later and include suggestions of ways to counter them.

### **Different types & methods of personalization**

Broadly speaking, there are two types of personalization – 1) Usability personalization, which, sometimes, is also termed as customization; and 2) Content personalization.

With usability personalization, the user is given a set of choices to define how they want their view of the vendor web site to appear and behave. A clear example of this

is myYahoo. This type of capability can provide the customer with a very personalized experience and should help in retaining the customer as a regular visitor.

For Content Personalization, the intent is to make the customer's visit to the vendor site more meaningful, this by tailoring the content to the customer's personal tastes. For a specific example: on the myYahoo site you can select from a list of gadgets that you would like to see on your homepage. If you select the weather gadget in your left channel (usability) then you can select the cities for which you want the weather data (content). A second example would be the Amazon.com site where a very different approach to personalization implementation is employed. Here you are greeted by your name when you revisit the site along with a recommended list based on your previous purchases. On this site you do not have any choices on usability personalization or content, however the site personalizes the content for you.

The Yahoo model represents the self-service model where the user is responsible for making all the selections, while the Amazon model is automated and based on software that comes in many flavors like collaborative filtering, statistical scoring, user profiles, click-stream and rules based logic. Both of the models have strengths & weaknesses and should be mixed & matched based on your target audience and the business purpose of your site. In self-service model the software shows no intelligence and relies entirely upon user interaction, while the automated model tries to anticipate user behavior without really understanding the real world situations.

### **Is it really for me?**

Being a regular customer of Amazon, few months ago, I was surprised to see that it recommended romantic novels & books on child education to me. I thought that their customer data may have been mixed up so I ignored the list. To my surprise, the site continued to push romantic novels to me. When I discussed this with my wife, she explained she had placed an order with Amazon for couple of romantic novels & books on child education. As we share the PC, Amazon's personalization logic did not take into account that people might be sharing an account.

Another instance where the personalization logic proved incomplete was during the holiday shopping period. One would have placed an order for family members & friends that have divergent tastes and the site assumed that all of the products are being bought for the logged on customer personal use. So, even though you would not normally purchase 'acid rock' music (this was a one-time decision to buy for your nephew), the site will keep offering similar music CDs to you. The other open question currently is – how will the personalization software adapt to the change in user's tastes with passage of time?

On the other hand, if we adopt the self-service model, it goes to the other extreme & relies completely on the user input and provides no or very little automation.

One of the good site design and personalization concepts is used by the home depot's site (<http://www.homedepot.com>). The site gathers data about your objectives & goals as you browse and you can avoid filling any forms if you wish to do so. The content is categorized based on a user's goals for coming to the site – fix it, build it etc. Once you identify your goals by selecting one of the tabs, the site pushes content in a seamless way and it never even appears that the content is being pushed.

## **Beyond personalization**

Personalization is becoming the current hype of web industry today and there are a lot of first generation players that have products that will let you apply some sort of automated content personalization. The most well known companies in this market segment are – Andromedia, BroadVision, Net Perceptions etc. As always, in the race of 'time to market', the first comers were not tech savvy solutions but merely automated some aspects of personalization. Most of the first generation tools still need significant programming support, editorial staff and other members to really make it work. With so many players involved to define a solution, or rather, a set of rules based on which content is personalized the user is not guaranteed a great experience on the site that uses these tools.

With the potential of new tools attacking the same problem in a different & more appropriate manner, it will be interesting to see the solutions they provide. An example of an intriguing approach to addressing the issue is offered a company called Younology (<http://www.younology.com>).

## **Summary**

Current deployments of personalization represent a solid start. Care must be taken to not just automate old methods of market analysis with the hope that it will give us better or different answers. In our quest to provide unique experience to every individual visiting our site, we end up intimidating the customer by collecting substantial quantities of data but are unsure of what to do with it! With increased concern regarding customer privacy and the potential of legislation, greater sensitivity to methods and approaches to the collection of profile information will be required. The following represent some tips on how to personalize your sites and also provide a better user experience so that the customers keep coming back for more.

*Do away with all the forms.* There is nothing more intimidating than filling out forms. Majority of the users lose patience halfway through and either click away or give out incorrect information.

*Spread out the questions.* If you have to collect a lot of information then embed it within the overall user experience. Ask questions that are relevant to the information the user is seeing so that s/he will not be very averse to providing the information.

*Apply better design & then observe.* Design your web site such that the user provides more information by click-stream rather than filling out forms. Observe closely the actions of the user and learn to differentiate between noise and data. If the user is simply clicking around and just browsing, do you really need to know each and every item s/he browsed? Can you just log the categories being browsed?

*Do something with the data you collect.* When you request data from the user also show how you plan to use this data to provide a better user experience. Act on the data the user has provided; for example filter out the choices that the user may have made already.

Last but not the least, *keep purging the old data* or apply logic that will age the data along with the user. If you do want to collect the user's age or income level, remember to update the information every year; either automatically or by politely asking the user.

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**About the author:** Rajeev Nanda has more than 15 years of industry experience in developing enterprise and web solutions. In 1995, Rajeev helped conceptualize, design and develop India's second oldest portal (<http://www.indiaconnect.com>) that receives 2M hits per day. In 1996 he, along with another friend, experimented in e-commerce by creating a site (<http://www.music-india.com>) to sell Indian CDs.

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