

Just Because You Can Doesn't Mean You Should

How 'personalisation' can get
altogether too personal for comfort

By Jeremy Bullmore

For years, you've been unable to do something. Then new technology comes along – and suddenly you can. So you do.

It's an entirely human instinct – but not one to be thoughtlessly followed. It's unwise to assume that just because you're now free to do something from which you were previously debarred, it must be in your interest to grab it. It ain't necessarily so.

Ever since the advent of mass media, marketing people have bemoaned their lack of precision. "I know that half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. The only trouble is that I don't know which half" is a hoary old saying that has no undisputed source, no historical validation and is almost certainly apocryphal. The fact that it survives at all is evidence of the marketing world's continuing uneasiness about what is seen as 'waste'.

You sell, say, disposable diapers. You buy, say, 30 seconds' worth of UK television time. You reach, say, 10 million households. Yet there are only 2.5 million UK households that include babies of nappy-wearing age. It follows that a considerable proportion of your media money is 'wasted'. It seems unarguably obvious.

So when the new digital media come along and seem to offer you precision targeting, even 'personalisation', you are naturally very interested indeed. Now you can talk only to families who need to buy diapers and surgically exclude all those who don't. You should certainly be interested; but not all the time and not for everything.

It's a common flaw in discussions about advertising to imply – and implicitly accept – that all advertising, all commercial advertising campaigns, are intended and expected to perform the same role; and that is to *sell*. And while in one way that's correct – all advertising should

be expected at the very least to pay its way; to be an investment rather than a cost – in another way, to believe that the specific task of all advertising is to *make a sale* can be dangerously misleading.

As Stephen King reminded us over 40 years ago, the precise role of any advertisement can usefully be plotted on what he called a *Scale of Immediacy**. At the most immediate end of that scale, advertising is designed to trigger the nearest thing possible to an instant transaction. Before the internet, you could fill out a coupon or pick up a phone, and today just a couple of clicks can set a sale in train. That's about as direct an effect as advertisements ever have.

In devising such advertising – advertising intended to get any given consumer actually doing something there and then – knowledge about that consumer can be invaluable; and on the whole, the more knowledge you have, the more valuable it is. The drive for personalisation makes total sense. To know when an individual may be in the market for a mortgage, a new car or a holiday villa, is precious knowledge. It allows you to dangle the offer enticingly in front of that person at the moment of greatest potential interest; and, very importantly, that person will probably be grateful to you for having done so.

But, of course, most advertising isn't like that. Most advertising is on behalf of staple brands, repeat purchase goods and services, and it's not expected to trigger an immediate action on the part of its audience. To return to King's *Scale of Immediacy*, advertising for most staple brands belongs at the lower end of that scale; its mechanism is indirect. It sets out to remind its audience of the brand's existence and purpose; to maintain, nourish and enhance its general desirability; to increase its brand equity; to add

What we think

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intangible qualities to its functional core. In other words, such advertising doesn't even attempt to make an immediate sale; its sole purpose to make a brand *more saleable* – and to keep it so.

This function is usually described as brand-building and indeed it does build brands. At least as critical, however, is its role in brand nourishment, brand sustenance, brand maintenance. It preserves a brand's worth, and therefore its profitability.

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This kind of advertising may well have some immediate sales effect but that's not its primary purpose.

I was once given a lift by a 50-year-old friend who'd recently sold his share in an advertising agency and had celebrated by buying himself an extremely expensive car. “I bought this car because I saw an advertisement,” he told me. “Nothing very special about that, I grant you – except that I saw that ad when I was 14.”

Not all advertisements are still paying their way after 36 years. But the value of consistent brand advertising, advertising that remains true to the brand's character, and continues to enhance it, can be almost timeless. And it's when planning this kind of advertising that agencies and their clients need to be most wary of the claims of 'personalisation.'

As a race, we're deeply suspicious of being spied upon. A cartoon of many years ago identified this anxiety perfectly. A man stands looking at one of those maps of a town centre to be found in car parks. A large arrow is labelled: YOU ARE HERE. And the man, clearly unnerved, is saying, “How do they know?”

Of course it makes perfect marketing sense for marketing people to know as much as they can about those whom they hope will become, or remain, their regular

customers. But perfect, detailed knowledge of each one of several million people is impossible to acquire; openly using partial knowledge is as likely to alienate as it is to appeal; and furthermore, it's quite unnecessary.

The best relationship of a person with a brand is not unlike the relationship between two friends. As with friends, we feel most comfortable with brands when we feel that in some sense we have discovered them for ourselves. The disciples of personalisation forget that the human brain is on constant, unconscious alert for things, ideas, people with whom it might like to connect.

We don't, on the whole, like pushy people; people who get too close at parties and who tell us that they really, really want to be best friends. And in much the same way, we won't respond well to pushy brands; brands that claim to understand us when they clearly don't. So brands shouldn't be seen to be making all the running. The skilful brand custodian imbues a brand with characteristics and character that are most likely to attract the attention of its clearly defined target audience – and then invites that audience to make that final, all-important connection themselves.

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This is by far the best way to first initiate and then cement a brand relationship – and for two overlapping reasons. First, because the individual has been an active participant rather than a submissive recipient, the relationship will be strong. And secondly, because that relationship has been in part forged by the individual, it can only be personal; it can't be anything else.

So a brand shouldn't be seen to be trying to get too close. Any attempt at personalisation will almost certainly fail. Mass media provide exactly the right balance of reach and distance. For decades, marketers may have felt they used them reluctantly because they had no choice. In truth, only mass media confer the status, the fame and the allure that make brands individually desirable to millions of wonderfully disparate individuals. ■

*Practical Progress from a Theory of Advertisements, 1975.
To be found in A Master Class in Brand Planning, The Timeless Works of Stephen King, Wiley, 2007.

