

## Pace Perspectives

A central laptop with hands typing is the focal point, surrounded by a network of icons connected by grey lines. The icons represent various digital concepts: people, Wi-Fi, lightbulbs, a globe, a magnifying glass, a bar chart, a music note, a link, a thumbs up, a bird, a location pin, a cloud, a star, and an envelope.

# Increasing Relevance and Your Bottom Line

When you get down to it, all website managers really have the same goal: increasing relevance. Whether you are the author of a small blog or the manager of a large e-commerce site, relevance drives clicks, views, searches and ultimately revenue.

You can see this principle at work everywhere on the web, from Google to Amazon to Facebook. Google's success is in large part due to its fanatical focus on increasing the relevance of its search results. Amazon and other retailers pioneered predictive technologies to analyze your purchase history and suggest other relevant products based on the buying patterns of your fellow shoppers. And Facebook's primary value proposition is that it provides users with socially relevant interactions with their friends and family. In fact, every search result, recommendation and social post you see on these sites are informed by complex algorithms designed to predict your interests according to your browsing patterns, geo-location, personal preferences and more.

The benefit of increasing relevance is obvious. In the beginning of 2013, Google captured an eye-popping 67% of search engine traffic according to Search Engine Watch<sup>1</sup>. Bloomberg recently reported that Amazon continues to boost the volume of products sold on its site, and is expected to have a 23.5% market share of the global e-commerce market by 2016<sup>2</sup>. And Facebook now represents nearly 72% of all social media traffic worldwide according to their Q1 2013 financials.

While the success of companies like Google is instructive, let's be honest: few companies can afford to put together personalization and relevance programs on the scale of these Internet juggernauts.

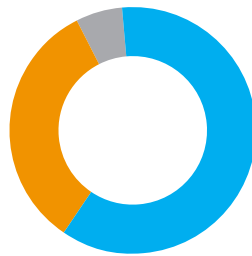
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Many marketers are achieving this through various personalization techniques. According to the April 2013 Monetate & Econsultancy's report, "The Realities of Online Personalization"<sup>3</sup>:

94% of businesses stated that personalization **"is critical to current and future success"**



**61%** Yes, Definitely  
**33%** Yes, Somewhat  
**6%** No



Businesses that are currently personalizing digital experiences, and are able to quantify the improvement are **seeing an average increase in sales of 19%.**

Adaption is slower than the perceived need: **56% of companies state that they are not personalizing digital experiences for visitors, and only 4% say that they are offering 'very' personalized services.**

**56%** Not Personalizing  
**40%** Personalizing  
**4%** Very Personalized



But this doesn't mean that increasing the personalization and relevance of your site is out of reach; it is just a matter of scale. Websites of all sizes now have access to personalization and customization options that can help improve their site's relevance—and ultimately their bottom line.

## The DIY Relevance Approach

To increase the relevance of your site without draining your bank account, the approach is threefold: customize, personalize and socialize. Similar to the major Internet players, you can significantly increase your site's perceived relevance by empowering your users to tailor their own experience. At the same time, you can quietly tune your site's content for each user, based on information you glean from them about their browsing patterns, source of origin and previous engagement with your site.

Technically speaking, customization, personalization and socialization are distinct elements of this relevance strategy. However, the overarching goal is to create a personalized experience—an experience tailored explicitly and implicitly for the individual user according to his or her stated and implied preferences.

To make your website relevant at all phases of the customer journey, a fully personalized website would:



### Offer Interest Selectors

Provide users with customization options that allow them to self-identify their interests, social affiliations and empower them to add their own user-generated content.

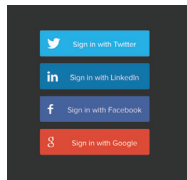
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### Highlight Content

Tailor site content (articles, images and videos) to the interests, online behavior, geo-location, platform and member status. This functionality should apply to users in both the logged-in and logged-out states.

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### Include Social Sign-In

Extend the current login model so users could also register with the site by signing in with their Facebook credentials. Better integration with Facebook's Social Graph provides you with access to friend lists, basic profile information and other Facebook information that could be used to further customize your site experience.

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### Allow Easy Social Mentions

Integrate with social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and YouTube so users can like, pin and share your content with their existing personal network.

# Get Custom

## Getting the Most Out of Customization

Customization is the tried-and-true user registration model enshrined in nearly every blogging and e-commerce platform. But few sites take full advantage of this simple yet powerful source of information.

Instead of prompting users to self-identify which kinds of content interest them most, many websites treat user registration as little more than a method to manage credit card data, comment history and email subscriptions. From a process perspective this often makes sense; users need to be properly registered to perform many online tasks. But from a content customization and website relevance point-of-view, it is a huge missed opportunity not to ask a user what it is they want to do on your site.

## Data Points Steer Content

Collecting a few data points beyond the basic registration information can provide your site with critical segmentation data that you can use to make your site more relevant to the currently logged-in user. For example, suppose you are you running a website that provides mobile application reviews; when users sign-up to rate applications featured on your site, that would be the perfect moment to ask if they are iPhone, Android or Blackberry users. Find out what type of applications they are interested in. Ask whom their carrier is. Then build logic into your site to display different content to your users based on their specific answers to these questions.

The content your site features for someone who self-identifies as an iPhone user on the Verizon network interested in entertainment apps should differ from what you feature for a Blackberry user on T-Mobile interested in business mobility apps. If it doesn't, you are engaging in a shotgun content strategy that is doomed to promote less relevant—or worse, irrelevant—content to your logged-in users.

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## Registration Is a Form of Engagement

Only a small percentage of website visitors will actually register with your site, no matter how enticing your services are; therefore, registration in-and-of itself is a sign of engagement. Take advantage of that engagement to ask a handful of questions about your users' interests and then use that data to tailor your site's content experience.

But be careful not to overdo it. Asking too many questions or questions that are too personal in nature during the registration process can discourage users from registering at all. Keep the segmentation questions focused on the critical path. If you are asking more than three or four segmentation questions you are probably asking too many. The rule of thumb is to keep your customization questions laser-focused on the core content segments of your site and nothing more.

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## Customization Requires Investment

Adding customization options will clearly require a development investment that will vary depending on the size and complexity of your site. But remember that customization is not an all-or-nothing exercise; you can apply customization strategies in phases. Even when your budget doesn't allow for logic to be built into your website to feature content based on users' customization preferences, it is a good first step to at least collect this data from users. You can use the information you gather in future customization development, and it may also inform your current content strategy.

If you find that the visitors to your mobile app review site are overwhelmingly Android users, you could tip the balance of your content distribution toward Android. In the process you will make your content more relevant simply by being more aware of your audience's interests. When it comes to customization, it is fine to start small. However, it is critical that you start since the most reliable information you get about your users will likely come directly from them.

# Get Personal

## Improving Content Relevance for Anonymous Users

While the customization information collected during user registration is a powerful source of data about what users will find most relevant on your website, it will unfortunately only be available for a fraction of your visitors. By the very nature of the Web, most users will not take the time to register with your site and will instead surf your content anonymously.

To make matters worse, improving the relevance of the content served to the anonymous majority of your users is a considerably more complex task than customizing content based on customization preferences. This is partly because the information available to us is much more general and deductive. Luckily a number of platform-independent services have emerged during the last few years that you can integrate into large and small websites alike to help achieve the goal of improved content relevance for anonymous users.

## Multivariate Testing to Gather Sophisticated Custom Data

In recent years, the multivariate testing market has expanded from its A/B testing roots. These days the market offers more sophisticated approaches that allow website owners to segment content displayed to users based on a variety of factors including online behavior, platform, referring site, geo-location and (when you are lucky enough to be dealing with a registered user) even custom data stored in CRM tools such as Salesforce.

According to "The Forrester Wave: Online Testing Platforms, Q1 2013" report<sup>4</sup>, the major players in the personalization/multivariate testing services space currently include:

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Several major enterprise CMS platforms also allow for personalization of the Web experience including Adobe's CQ5, Autonomy's TeamSite, Ektron and SiteCore. If you already use a large-enterprise CMS that provides built-in personalization tools, it makes the most sense to stick with the native personalization solution.

### **Personalization Service vs. Enterprise CMS**

Because these enterprise CMS platforms are robust systems that require both a significant capital investment and a long-term development commitment, it is often better for companies running on a lighter footprint to consider investing in a personalization service rather than purchasing an enterprise CMS to solve their personalization dilemma.

In fact, this is the very model that Adobe and Autonomy follow since they essentially integrate their stand-alone personalization and multivariate testing services into their enterprise CMS platforms as a bolt-on service. This is in place of extending the core functionality of their CMS platform as some other vendors do.

Most of the industry leaders in personalization now allow users to create complex rule sets based on a variety of factors—whether it be previous visits to their sites, cookie data or geo-location—and target multiple sectors of their site's displays for personalization, simply by adding a few lines of Javascript code to the page. Once your development team has performed the initial installation of the personalization code, a savvy administrator and your choice of service control panels can manage most rule creation and content targeting.

### **A Focused Strategy Using Personalization Services**

For a majority of the personalization services discussed in this article, the number of sectors available on a page that you can personalize on the fly is essentially unlimited. However, as with customization, it is best to keep your personalization strategy focused on a few key elements for each page type rather than overdoing it at the beginning.

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If you were to implement a personalization service such as Optimizely or Maxymiser on your mobile application review site, for instance, you would be able to leverage the sophistication of your personalization service's decision engine to test users on a variety of factors that would then inform which content you should display. For example, what website are they coming from? If the user just came from Google Play, you are likely dealing with an Android user and, you can tune content appropriately. Have they visited your site before? Have they rated an app? Have they viewed three iPhone apps in a row?

### Going Beyond Banner Ads

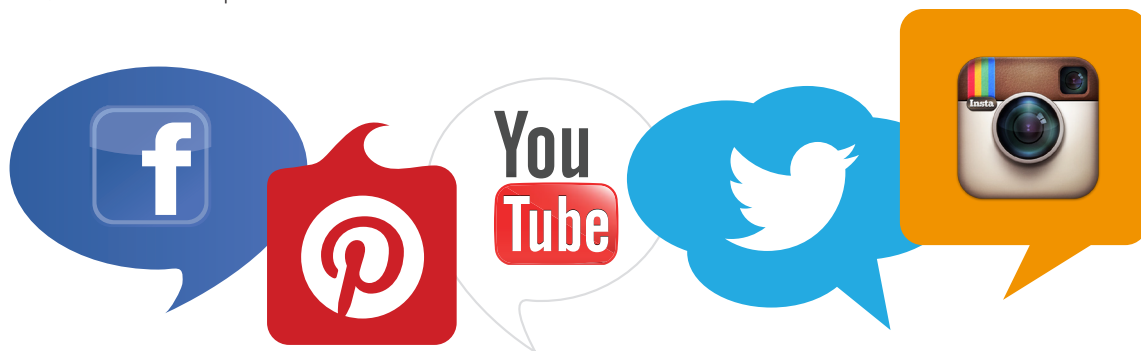
The answers to these questions form test result outcomes that in turn determine content display. Robust reporting on test outcomes is available in most services, and you can add key performance indicators to these systems to indicate if the content you are displaying is more or less effective. Mash up your personalization engine with your customization data and you end up with an extremely powerful tool to test user outcomes.

For instance, if the current visitor is an iPhone user interested in sports apps, you can setup personalization tests to determine if different kinds of sporting content are more likely to drive conversions. As a result, you can automatically show that content. In short, the new generation of multivariate testing tools goes beyond banner ad placement; they now allow you to modify almost any aspect of your site—including content—and assist you in serving the most relevant, actionable information possible for users.

## Get Social

### Tapping Into the Social Sphere

The final tool at your disposal to increase the relevance of your site's content is the social network. This takes two forms: social integration and social sharing. When most of us think about social networks, we are thinking about the social sharing aspect of these platforms—the likes, tweets and pins.



Companies spend huge amounts of time ramping up their social presence and improving the share-ability of their content, and for good reason. Content shared by members of a social circle has a serious advantage over other content they randomly stumble upon on the Web because it comes pre-recommended by a known source they trust.

The very act of sharing a video, story or image indicates that the sharer thinks it is relevant or interesting enough to merit the attention of others (your crazy aunt's posts notwithstanding). Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest have made it easy to tap into this potential source of social energy by providing website owners with a variety of plugins that allow users to like, tweet, pin, share and comment on content all over the Web.

### **Advantages of an Extended Reach**

It is worth noting that simply adding social sharing tool to your page is unlikely to give you much of a boost unless you also work hard to make your content relevant for social networks. The opportunity is huge. Facebook alone reports that it servers 665 million daily active users and that the average Facebook user has approximately 141 friends<sup>5</sup>.

Even a piece of content gets picked up and shared only a handful of users' Facebook timelines, you still have the potential to reach hundreds of users previously out of your reach. If you are one of the lucky few to hit a nerve with one of your pieces of content, you could potentially reach thousands or go viral. Given how easy it is to add social sharing plugins to your site, there really is no excuse for not marking your content shareable.

### **Targeting Facebook Social Graph Data**

Social integration is the underbelly of social networks. No one 'likes' the Social Graph, yet it is a powerful source of user data you can blend with your customization and personalization strategies to help you segment your content more relevantly.

The key player in this realm is clearly Facebook. By employing Facebook's login module you can easily allow users to register for your website with their Facebook credentials. This eliminates your ability to collect custom information about your users such as smartphone preference and mobile carrier; therefore, it short-circuits some of the customization benefits provided by direct registration.

## Streamlined Process and Improved Segmentation

However, the trade-off is a more streamlined registration process that users are already comfortable with and—more importantly—it provides access to user data from the Social Graph. Once you have connected your website's registration process with Facebook, you then have access to droves of information that you would almost never be able to ask users for through a conventional registration process, including:

Name	<input type="text"/>
Email address	<input type="text"/>
Gender	<input type="text"/>
Locale	<input type="text"/>
Age range	<input type="text"/>
Birth date	<input type="text"/>
Education	<input type="text"/>
Political affiliation	<input type="text"/>
Relationship status	<input type="text"/>
Religion	<input type="text"/>
Home town	<input type="text"/>
Time zone	<input type="text"/>

Many of these elements may be irrelevant to your website, but even simple segmentation by age and gender is a big improvement over no content segmentation at all. The kind of apps you might promote on your app review website, for example, should differ significantly for a married 45-year-old man than it does for a single 19-year-old woman. Of course, the quality of the information you received about users from Facebook's Social Graph will vary depending on how much of their personal profile they have filled in, but users are trending toward providing more information on their social profiles every year.

## Conclusion

Provisioning your site with customization options, personalized segmentation and social integration provides you with a blended personalization model for improving user engagement and increasing your site's perceived relevance.

Putting all three of these strategies in place at one time would be a lot of work, but you don't have to do it all in one shot. Instead, step into each option slowly and measure meaningful results as you go:

- Begin by capturing customization information during your user registration process (even if you aren't ready to use it yet).
- Integrate social sharing and logins to allow maximum access to the data that you will need when you are segmenting your content in the future.
- Finally, begin adding the functionality to render different content—based on your known segmentation points and the information you learn from your data collection—to inform your editorial calendar.

Once you are socially integrated and customizable, you can then tackle the bigger task of integrating a personalization service into your site to help segment anonymous users more intelligently with tools such as Adobe Target, Maxymiser or Optimizely.

In the end, combining these three approaches will arm your website with tools needed to deliver the most relevant content possible, one user at a time.



### About the Author

**Chad Hayton** Director, Content Platforms & Technologies

Chad oversees the implementation and management of content platforms and digital solutions at Pace. With 20 years of online development experience, Chad has implemented programs for Qualcomm, GMAC, Verizon, Wells Fargo, Four Seasons, and venture-funded start-ups. He has been developing scalable solutions for companies large and small in industries as diverse as financial services, technology, travel, and education since the early nineties. Chad is a graduate of the University of California, Davis and the Pennsylvania State University.

## About Pace

Pace is North America's leading independent content agency, specializing in multichannel branded content solutions that fuel loyalty, CRM, marketing, digital and social programs for many of the world's largest brands. We have a staff of more than 300 professionals that are located in five offices across the U.S. – Greensboro, NC, New York, NY, Dallas, TX, San Antonio, TX and Rogers, AR. We help our clients navigate the complex marketing landscape to develop programs that suit their needs to deliver targeted outcomes. In 2013 Pace was named Content Agency of the Year by the Content Marketing Institute.

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<sup>1</sup> Goodwin, Danny. (February 18, 2013). Google Once Again Claims 67% Search Market Share. Search Engine Watch. Retrieved from <http://searchenginewatch.com/article/2244472/Google-Once-Again-Claims-67-Search-Market-Share>

<sup>2</sup> Kucera, Danielle. (January 7, 2013). Amazon Surges to Record High on Global E-Commerce Growth. Bloomberg. Retrieved from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-01-07/amazon-surges-to-record-high-on-global-e-commerce-growth.html>

<sup>3</sup> Moth, David. (April 22, 2013). 94% of businesses say personalisation is critical to their success. Econsultancy. Retrieved from <http://econsultancy.com/us/blog/62583-94-of-businesses-say-personalisation-is-critical-to-their-success>

<sup>4</sup> Stanhope, Joe., Frankland, Dave, & Smith, Allison. (February 7, 2013). The Forrester Wave: Online Testing Platform, Q1 2013. Forrester.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, Craig. (May 25, 2013). By The Numbers: 32 Amazing Facebook Stats. Digital Marketing Ramblings. Retrieved from <http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/by-the-numbers-17-amazing-facebook-stats/>