

How advertisers should approach "curated" online experiences

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How to Reach Consumers in Their 'Content Cocoons'

Stanford professor Itamar Simonson talks about a conundrum that hits today's **marketers** right in the gut: Consumers (despite what many will claim) [dislike personalized ads](#). A great deal of interactive **marketing technology** is built around the premise that personalization is a good thing. In theory, it should make **marketing** and **advertising** more relevant. Yet when consumers detect that a brand has made crude assumptions about them, they make a few assumptions of their own. Namely, that an offer is too good to be true, not actually relevant or just plain creepy.

The problem begins when marketers rely too much on simple behavioral observations to try to infer what might be relevant. While that approach might have been novel in the 1990s with the rise of email **marketing** and **CRM**, consumer expectation has changed considerably. In fact, you could argue it has reversed.

Mining the curated web

A defining feature of **interactive media** is the sense of control it gives users. Consumers have learned to create their own "content cocoons," in which they can search for information, skip through a video or engage socially in broad or narrow ways. As people perform each online activity, their actions create "data exhaust" that informs future interaction with any website or app a consumer uses.

In this way, consumers' **online** experiences with the web are actually not totally within their active control. The experience becomes "curated" to fit their interests, behaviors and desires. With every new friend they add or product they "like," the web shapes itself more closely around the cocoon. This information produces a goldmine of data and opportunity for marketers.

Publishers spend billions on **algorithms** and new data sources to engage eyeballs and make the consumer's experience ever more relevant and curated. **Facebook's** newsfeed is a perfect example of content curation that includes both passive and active inputs. Yet marketers rarely think about their message targeting or delivery strategy from this perspective. As content and marketing have gotten further apart, consumers have learned to disdain or even ignore more

and more **advertising**.

Reversing relevance

The most famously "un-curated" experiences online come from **advertisers**. Think of examples like the "pants that stalked me" ads, retargeted to you based on a gift you got for your grandparents, or ads offering a sale price on an item you just bought. Compared to content that's passively curated for consumers based on a wide and rich set of inputs, this type of targeting seems rudimentary at best.

While marketers will always have something to sell, relevance today can best be achieved by becoming part of the curated web. Rather than sticking out, advertisers have a unique opportunity to win by actually blending in. This requires "seeing" the thousands of different indicators that make each consumer unique online, and parsing through them to find the ones which truly maximize relevance, not just optimize from within a limited set of easier-to-accumulate points.

To succeed, start with a wide and potentially non-intuitive set of data inputs. Demographics, search behaviors or browsing history are places to start, but marketers need to get into the minds of the consumer with data that explains motivations. From social media data to survey data to third-party data from **publishing** partners, there are many sources to use to build out more unique and insightful consumer profiles.

Once marketers fill out their understanding of consumers, they can begin to form more effective messages. This is not the first time that marketers have been forced to reverse course. Direct marketers embraced a similar situation years ago when they learned to adapt to **Google** search results. Rather than simply push messages to consumers, marketers had to learn to "pull" consumers to their websites through relevant search content and landing pages. iCrossing coined the appropriate term "reverse direct marketing."

Today, **marketing** and **advertising** relevant messaging demands multichannel consistency -- not just on search. There are some obvious places to get started where marketers can take advantage of sophisticated curated environments and essentially do what the publishers do. Facebook provides tools and advice to help marketers "draft" in **Facebook's** own curated experience. Their relevance score, while still somewhat rudimentary, rates marketers higher if their ads resemble content and if audiences engage with it that way. **Twitter** and **Pinterest** also reward ads that are treated as part of the **Twitter** feed or people's pins rather than sticking out as an ad. Each of these placements can be enhanced with a wide variety of targeting options.

To be relevant in an ever-more connected world, marketers need to demonstrate that they understand the consumer's mindset and motivations more uniquely. That means marrying observed behavioral data to surveys and consumer-initiated dialogue to shape highly curated marketing experiences to blend into the content cocoon consumers have curated for themselves online.