



How to Be the Center of Attention: Assessing the Effectiveness of Your E-mail Preference Center

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Perhaps your e-mail marketing strategy includes such programs as a newsletter, product updates, promotional news, or loyalty rewards. Are you using these programs as an opportunity to engage customers online with a preference center? If so, here is the million-dollar question: what are you doing with all that data? Customers who visit a preference center are answering yes to the question, "Will you help us market to you more effectively, Mr. or Ms. Consumer?" And yet this data often goes unused.

Any discussion of preference center best practices must begin with a cardinal rule: if you are collecting the data, use it. If a customer provides you with valuable profile information, use it to personalize your marketing messages. If you ask a customer if he prefers daily or weekly e-mail contact, be prepared to honor his request. If a customer takes the time to engage you in a meaningful exchange of information, use it wisely and handle that information with care.

Stepping up the data collection

Take a tour of brands around the World Wide Web and you'll encounter all kinds of online preference centers: some that ask customers effective questions that can be used to fuel e-mail message relevance, others that provide a barebones form for newsletter sign-up and nothing more. Marketers don't always recognize online preference centers for what they are – a golden opportunity to engage a customer one-on-one and forge the foundation for a true relationship.

Relevant e-mail depends heavily on the availability of meaningful customer data, which is why your preference center deserves to be a center of attention. Here are five questions to ask when critiquing your preference center's value as a data collection tool and an e-mail marketing asset, or building one from scratch.

Is your preference center promoted well?

Any time a customer is welcomed into an e-mail program, he should be invited to visit the preference center and tell a little bit more about him. Your e-mails should always prominently feature links to

the preference center. Not just a welcome e-mail – every e-mail. Include such messages as: “Is this information you want? If not, visit the preference center and tell us!” And don’t bury the preference center on your Web site. Make it easy for visiting prospects to enroll in newsletters and other e-mail programs and initiate a relationship with your brand.

Are you double-checking the facts before you hit send?

Sometimes bad information has a way of trickling in to a customer’s profile. For example, if Uncle Bob buys an American Doll tea set online for his niece, he is suddenly identified as an American Doll aficionado. Poor Uncle Bob! Avoid misappropriated profile information by asking the customer to confirm what you’ve learned (or think you’ve learned). Confirmation should be sent whenever a customer makes changes to their preferences, with clear instructions on what to do to make corrections.

Remember too that lifestyles and preferences will change. Remind customers regularly of their settings and make it easy to update them. For example, send customers an invitation to review their profile and update it every 6-12 months.

Do you have a strategy for the data you are collecting?

Let’s face it. There are countless questions you could ask customers that could potentially help you direct relevant messaging. Instead, focus on the information you will leverage in programs right away. Asking for data you may never use sets up false expectations on the part of your customer, and may sour her on providing profile information in the future when you really need it. To avoid this, collect only the data points that are directly associated with your e-mail programs.

Do you provide customers with a preview of what’s to come?

By offering examples of the e-mail campaigns a customer is signing up for, you may be providing her with all the motivation she needs to fill out a profile form. The more customers understand the value of what they are going to receive, the more willing they will be to share information – especially when that information promises to make the communication even better.

Will your customers be enticed or just incensed?

To be effective, your preference center must be easy and engaging. For example, don’t expect customers to force-fit themselves into categories defined by your brand’s messaging. Instead, ask questions they naturally know the answer to, in their own words and in a friendly format. Perhaps a fashion quiz, sports trivia game, or interactive vacation map will spark curiosity. Done right, the



preference center can be an entertaining experience that a customer will share with friends. Also, consider an incentive for customers to provide you with their preferences, such as a discount or special offer. Creating the perception of value will likely increase your rate of participation.

Just as important as enticing customers to visit your preference center, however, is avoiding moments of frustration that could drive them away. For example, show your customer that you are truly learning about them by pre-populating questions that have been answered in the past. Nothing will turn them off faster than answering the same questions again and again. And don't ask for the world – too many questions equal too many opportunities to drop out.

Finally, when it comes to preference center data, honesty is the best policy. Don't be afraid to tell customers what the information is for and how you plan to use it. It's true that customers are more concerned than ever about privacy and the security of their information online; but they also want relevant marketing and understand that they must be willing to share information in order to get it. Establishing yours as a trustworthy brand will dispel these fears and jump start a relationship.