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Digital Experience in 2021: Becoming More Customer Centric

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Digital Experience in 2021: Becoming More Customer Centric

At the start of the decade digital experiences became the center of attention. But as we enter into 2021 brands must not only adapt their digital strategies to embrace new channels, they must ensure their customer experience stands out. How can they do that? Let's see.

Brands are coming under increasing pressure as dependence on digital experiences climbs through the roof. Not only have organizations had to navigate the challenges of accelerating digital transformation, but they've also had to do so while still paying attention to swiftly changing consumer preferences.

Consumers had already begun to move away from browsing exclusively on their desktops and laptops, instead favoring mobile devices, tablets, smart speakers and other IoT connected devices. But merely having a presence on new and emerging channels won't be enough for brands hoping to compete.

Organizations with cumbersome legacy systems have already found it difficult to make pivots quickly and establish themselves as part of the new digital landscape. But this lack of adaptability will see them fall further behind in trying to give customers what they want.

Therefore, for those brands still struggling to adapt, and those who have only recently begun, but hope to solidify their digital transformations, creating a customer-centric experience is necessary.

But where should they start? How is it possible to appease consumers today drowning in a sea of options? This whitepaper will uncover the digital experiences that customers want and explain how the right technological foundation can empower marketers and developers to provide the right customer experience.

Quickly Adapting to Changing Digital Trends

Expectations have risen as many consumers find themselves spoiled for choice regarding their digital experiences, making it difficult for brands to decide which channels to target. Consumers worldwide have increased their screen time, and the once declining desktop has seen a resurgence in recent months.

According to Gartner, the global PC market has grown by its highest amount in a decade, with a 10.7% increase in Q4 and 4.8% for the year compared to 2019. Brands must therefore adapt their strategies to cope with these digital experience trends and focus on the customer.

Demand for convenience

Today's consumers want control over their digital experiences — especially when it comes to eCommerce. The ability to start the shopping experience on one touchpoint and seamlessly move to another to continue the customer journey is becoming a necessity for brands to deliver. With an increase in eCommerce sales worldwide, brands are now competing on the level of convenience offered and the quality of their customer experience. That means traditional eCommerce stores — and the platforms that power them — are losing their market share in favor of flexible eCommerce solutions that can provide the level of convenience shoppers demand.

Avoidance of digital fatigue

Screen time viewing has increased by quite a margin in the last year. Almost 60% of Americans reported an increase in mobile and smartphone usage and other channels such as tablets. Many have also expressed concern that this increased screen time could impact them negatively. With virtual meetings and events becoming a part of our daily lives, consumers are approaching a point of digital fatigue. Therefore, brands must provide customers with relevant content, building trust and relationships in a way that's not intrusive or risk being ignored.

Adoption of new mediums

The channels that consumers use are changing rapidly — especially the most popular social media platforms. For example, the younger generation has mostly moved away from Facebook in favor of

TikTok and LinkedIn has become a viable platform for brand building and engagement among enterprises. That's not to mention the overwhelming number of emerging channels like voice and AR/VR that are seeing adoption across industries. Brands need to improve their digital agility if they want to have a brand presence where consumers actually are.

Decreased sticky behavior

Since web usage has mostly moved to YouTube, Instagram, and other large social platforms with an endless stream of new content, there's been a substantial decrease in "sticky" behavior. In fact, smartphone users spend 50% of their time in one app alone. Many consumers may briefly visit their favorite brand's site, but it's becoming harder to consistently peel them away from other platforms and get them to keep coming back.

Hyper-personalization is now a staple, not a luxury

Besides a constant dose of new content, a key aspect of keeping users coming back is personalization. Today's consumers demand highly personal interactions with their favorite brands. That's why 78% of internet users said that personally relevant content from brands increases their purchase activity. One of the foremost companies leading the charge for personalization is Amazon, with product recommendations and content fueled by consumer data and past customer behavior. If brands want to compete, they need to form a hyper-personalization strategy to deliver relevant content to their customers.

With these factors in mind, it's clear that the traditional web approach won't be enough in the near future. Brands will need to adjust their strategy in order to compete. So, what's the solution?

Truly Valuable Content Always Wins

With a limited amount of attention from site visitors and a lower chance of them ever returning, these web experiences need to present a clear CTA from the start — whether it's a direct sale or email capture form for future marketing campaigns.

Brands need to have a strategy in place that offers real value where internet users are actually spending their time, and convey this value quickly and efficiently while they have the attention of potential leads.

Value starts with a product or service that's useful to a brand's intended audience but extends to the content companies produce as well. Content marketing needs to focus on relevant information that educates and entertains consumers. With valuable content, not just promotional content, brands can stand out from competitors and capture the attention, respect, and appreciation of potential customers.

But today's digital marketing efforts are equally dependent on both what brands publish and where they publish it. That means marketers need to be presenting value on the right platforms — and it's probably not just the company's website.

Companies need to provide value on the large social platforms and other emerging channels first and foremost. Only after capturing the attention of potential leads (through your consistent offerings of valuable content) is it worth focusing on bringing them back to the brand website or native app. This is a fundamental shift from the traditional approach that focused on the company website as central to a brand's web presence. For these reasons, the websites and apps that brands do build need to provide value quickly.

Good Content Educates, Entertains, and Evokes Emotion

According to the legendary advertising executive David Abbott, "sh*t that arrives at the speed of light is still sh*t".

While your channels—and their individual user experiences—are important, it's paramount that you prioritize the value of your message first and foremost.

When it comes down to the nitty-gritty of producing content that brings value, brands often struggle. Is it enough to share the latest news from your industry? Will a blog post about your product's latest feature suffice? Absolutely not. Here's what to focus on instead.

1. Educational Content

Educational content helps your audience better understand your industry and your products or services. This content should answer relevant questions that align with your audience's interests, wants, and needs. This includes educating them about how your brand can benefit them, but brand-focused content shouldn't be the only educational content you produce.

When producing educational content, it can be helpful to think of "how to" or "how did" information, depending on what you sell. "How to" content works best for software or other types of products that customers will continually learn how to use well after they buy the product. "How did" content is best for products or services that are meant to produce a particular outcome for the customer.
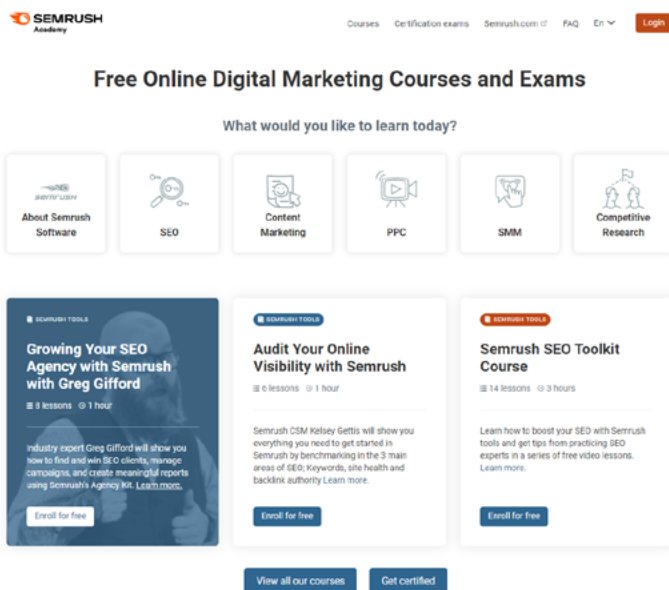
An Example to Follow: Semrush

Semrush is a popular all-in-one tool for SEO and PPC advertising research. The tool helps marketers research within their niches, and understand what they need to do to optimize their content. As part of its educational content offering, the Semrush academy provides courses related to SEO, PPC and other digital marketing initiatives.

With more of their target audience working from home or remotely, Semrush courses provide an avenue to learn more about an ever-changing industry in their spare time. These courses not only help Semrush's audience to improve their skills, but they also help Semrush to build brand awareness. The academy helps them develop their industry expertise and fosters engagement with their audience through other channels.

2. Entertaining Content

Entertaining content is an opportunity to show the personality and character of your brand. This type of content could be funny, but it doesn't have to be. An inspiring video or behind the scenes Instagram stories at the company's head office add a more human element to your brand's reputation. Entertaining content is a great way to capture the attention of your intended audience.

Creating entertaining content can be the most challenging of the three types. You need to be in tune with your audience and pop culture at the same time. Some publishing mediums are also more entertaining than others, such as memes, videos, and other audiovisual types of content.

An Example to Follow: IKEA

IKEA — the world famous ready-to-assemble furniture chain — took an innovative and entertaining approach to promote its catalogue. Its video ad and campaign "Experience The Power of a Bookbook" is a spoof on an Apple-like product promotion. The IKEA campaign uses the dichotomy between print books and the digital devices replacing them to create a satirical ad that garnered hype for the brand and its catalogue.

Using entertaining content, IKEA's Bookbook campaign reached far beyond its initial audience in Singapore and Malaysia by appealing to its global audience as well. IKEA successfully used entertainment to build brand awareness and interest in its catalogues.

3. Emotional Content

Emotional or positive content helps brands connect with their audience on a deeper level. This type of content should make consumers feel better about themselves for having interacted with your brand or even purchased a product or service from you. Uplifting stories about customers, motivational content, or supporting uncontroversial causes can create a more positive image for your brand that customers want to be a part of.

Producing emotional content requires a deep understanding of your ideal customer and what triggers an emotional response from them. Apple didn't sell its products because of its hardware, but many creatives bought their laptops, for example, because they felt it would make them a better graphic designer or music producer.

An Example to Follow: LEGO

LEGO produces toy sets for younger and older children alike. Through its advertising, however, the company appeals to the emotions of parents. In the ad above, for example, LEGO describes the proud feeling of accomplishment a child experiences when they build something using LEGOs, whether it's simple building blocks for younger children or more realistic pieces for older children.

More importantly, however, the company describes these emotions their building sets elicit to the parents. That's because parents will feel better about themselves for providing the opportunity for their children to discover a sense of creativity and pride. LEGO effectively uses emotional content to drive the sale of its toy products to parents.

Consumers Demand Cutting-edge Experiences

The frontend experiences need to follow a number of front-end best-practices to intrigue consumers and drive them to CTAs. That's because it will take enormous effort to draw web users from the large social platforms, and any compromise in quality will steer them away.

For forward-thinking brands, that means their websites and apps need to load quickly, and they need to offer smooth experiences as well as intuitive interfaces that are accessible for a wide range of consumers via an even wider range of channels and devices. For these reasons, single page apps (SPAs), progressive web apps (PWAs), and static site generators (SSGs) are gaining popularity.

When consumers do visit your website, they expect a web experience on par or better than their favorite apps and platforms.

Single Page Apps

SPAs enable brands to quickly launch new web experiences that are responsive and easy for users to navigate because they retrieve data on the fly rather than frequently reloading an entire page. SPAs make it possible to create highly dynamic and personalized experiences that drive conversions and user engagement. That's why many of the largest social networks are built with SPA frameworks like React, Angular, and Vue.

An Example to Follow: Gmail

Ever wondered how Gmail stays so agile, even when your internet connection is having a bad day? Gmail is a single page application, meaning that actions such as viewing, deleting, and categorizing emails is done without waiting for the client-server communication to happen.
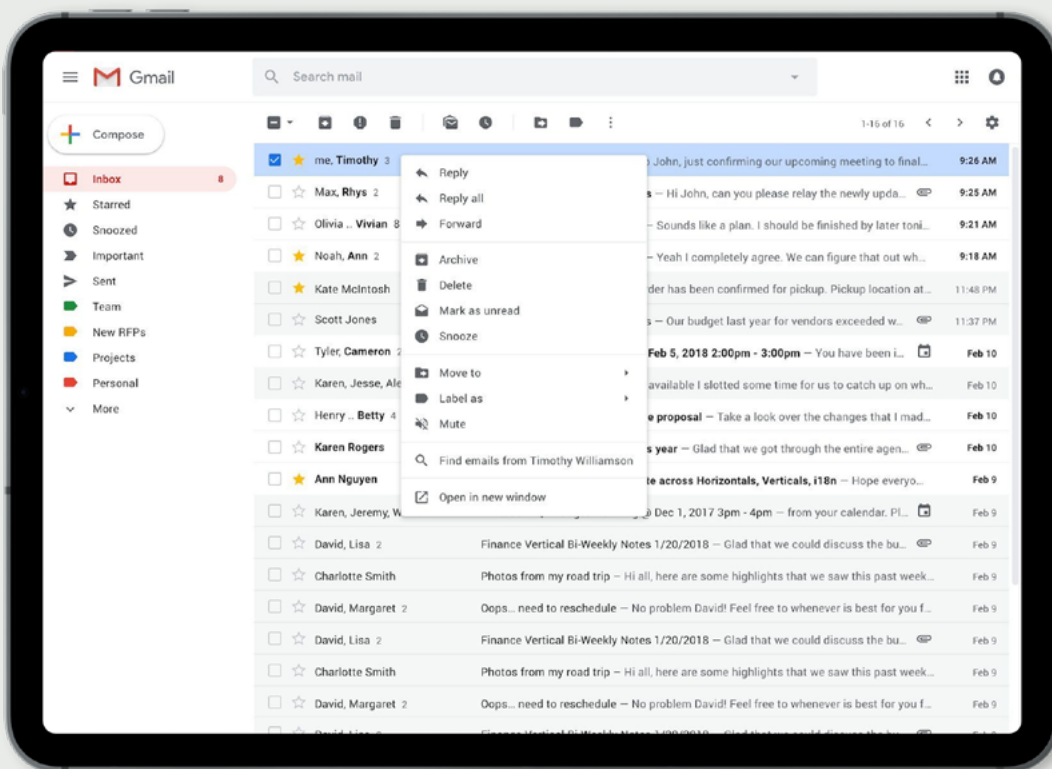

→ Learn More: Single Page Applications

Progressive Web Apps

PWAs — which are almost always SPAs — solve many of the challenges of both traditional websites and native mobile apps. While it may be true that most web usage is on smartphones, building mobile apps isn't easy for many brands. Native apps require development teams familiar with both iOS and Android tooling, which can be expensive and time-consuming to build software with. That's why many companies are turning to PWAs, which combine many of the native features (including improved speed, offline support, installability, and access to smartphone capabilities) without requiring users to download the app through an App Store.

An Example to Follow: Flipboard

Flipboard used to be a mobile native application exclusively, until they launched their progressive web application. Now, you can access Flipboard from a laptop or desktop with all the trimmings that a mobile app serves up.
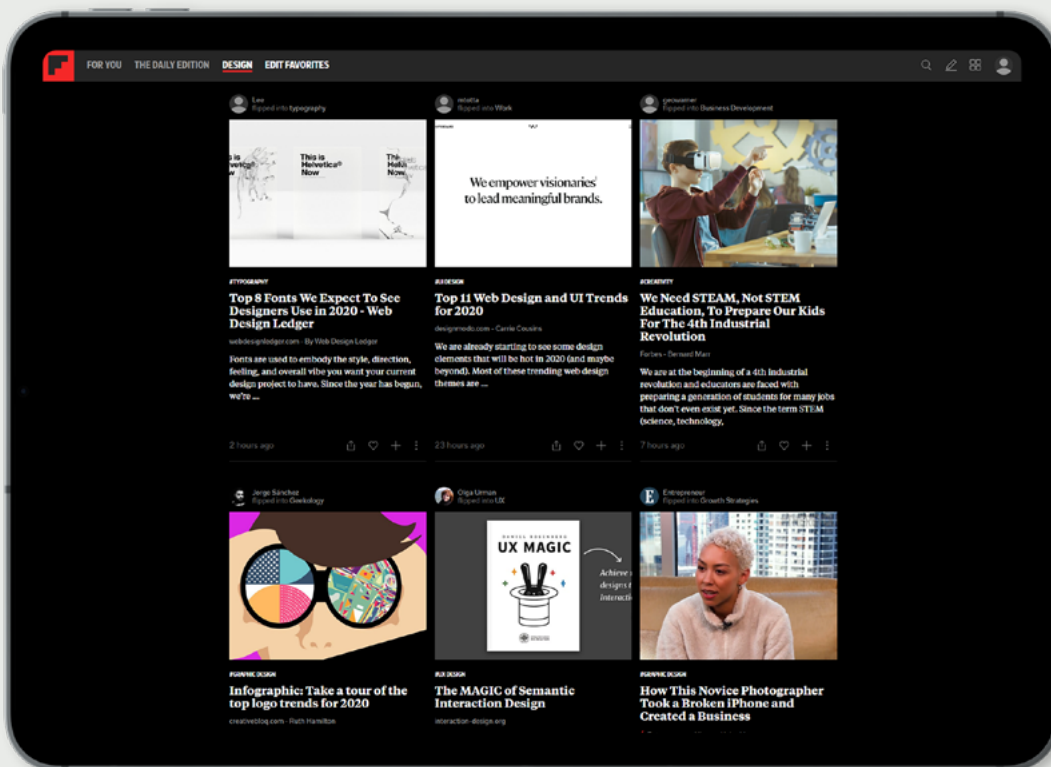

→ Learn More: How LOTTO.de Leverages a Progressive Web App

Static sites

Finally, many brands opt for a site that leverages a Static Site Generator (SSG) like GatsbyJS or Hugo. In many cases, these SSGs generate React-based SPAs that have vastly improved performance and security. They're also straightforward to deploy to content delivery networks (CDNs) to better take advantage of caching when delivering the web experiences to end-users. With SSGs, companies can quickly launch landing pages and microsites to generate leads and collect customer information without heavy development requirements.

An Example to Follow: Airbnb.io

Airbnb's engineering and data science website is a great example of a static website. It's purpose is to aggregate relevant articles from Medium and open source projects from GitHub, giving developers and data scientists a central website for research. It's simple, snappy, sleek—and static.
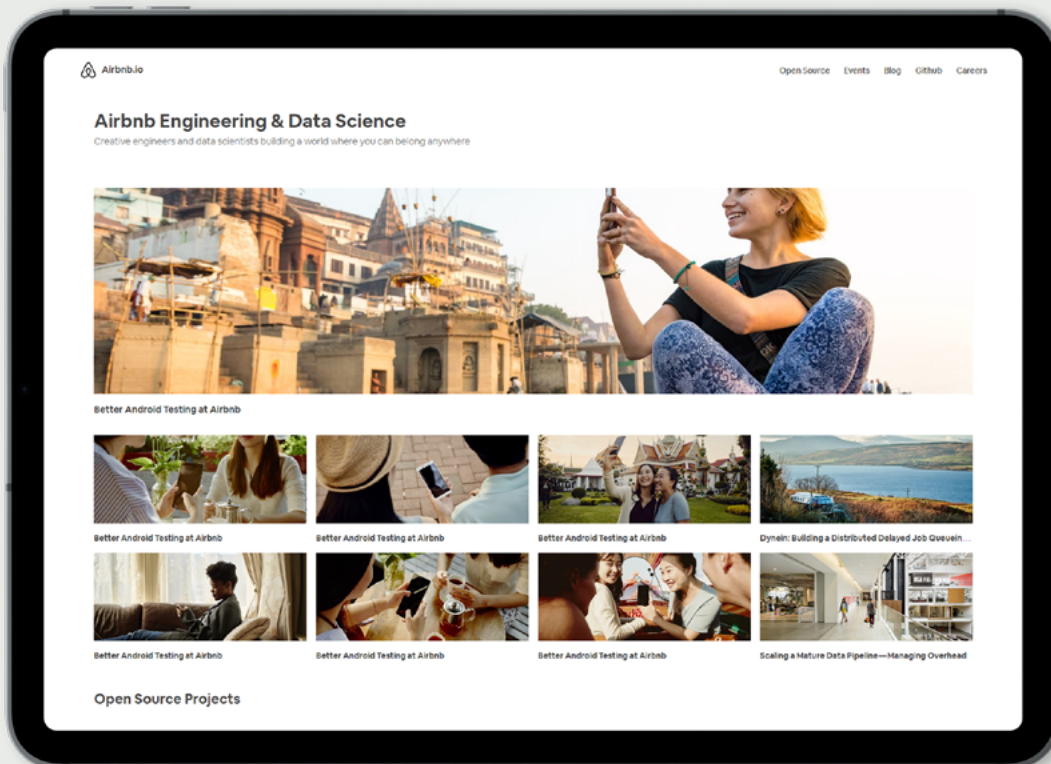
Voice is Getting Louder

While mobile may have overtaken desktop web usage in recent years, voice search using smart speakers like Amazon Echo and Google Home continues to grow. According to Canalys, the global smart speaker market is forecast to grow by 21% to an estimated 163 million units sold. With voice beginning to cement itself as a key search option for consumers, brands need to be aware of Google's increased focus on the customer experience.

The Role of Google BERT and Page Experience in 2021

BERT, which stands for bidirectional encoder representations from transformers, is Google's technique for natural language processing (NLP) that leverages machine learning. With this new algorithm, Google will better understand the context and intent behind search queries to deliver more relevant results.

Google BERT is another step forward for search engines to understand humans better. This is crucial for understanding the conversational language that consumers use when interacting with voice devices. For brands, that means the SEO landscape is changing.

The changes in SEO and the continued growth of voice search means brands will need to make changes to their content strategies. In much the same way that websites and apps are shifting towards more targeted and streamlined experiences, so too will content continue to need a more narrow focus. That's because the things consumers search for and the results Google provides are getting more specific and nuanced.

The searches most affected by Google BERT will be informational queries. That's because there is more ambiguity with informational searches than transactional or navigational queries. Therefore, brands will need to adjust their approach to top-of-the-funnel content to capture a new generation of Googlers.

Customer-Centric Content Will Be the Focus

Top-of-the-funnel — educational, informative, and thought-leadership — content is meant to answer questions consumers may have about the industry and a particular problem they're facing that the brand provides products or services to solve. With the Google BERT update, value is placed on direct answers for highly specific informational queries.

Brands, therefore, need to shift their strategy to provide focused answers to long-tail keywords and questions. That means producing snippets of content that succinctly answers specific questions. FAQs or shorter articles around a narrow topic may perform better than general long-form blog posts after the update. By putting out content that directly answers common consumer questions, brands will be well prepared for the looming increase in voice search queries.

Google also plans to roll out another update in May 2021 which focuses on the user's page experience. Brands need to ensure that their pages are mobile-friendly, and have excellent usability to provide a better digital experience for their visitors. With each of these updates, Google is directing brands to take a customer-centric approach to the digital experience.

An Example to Follow: Zyrtec

Allergy medication brand Zyrtec has a clear target market; people with allergies. Their content marketing strategy on the other hand, is far more sophisticated. They released a web app, a mobile app, and an Amazon Alexa Skill that gives their audiences access to daily allergen forecasts in their local area. Using the same data and content, Zyrtec has spread the value they give to their audience across three accessible channels. This is as well as their guides that help people live with allergies.
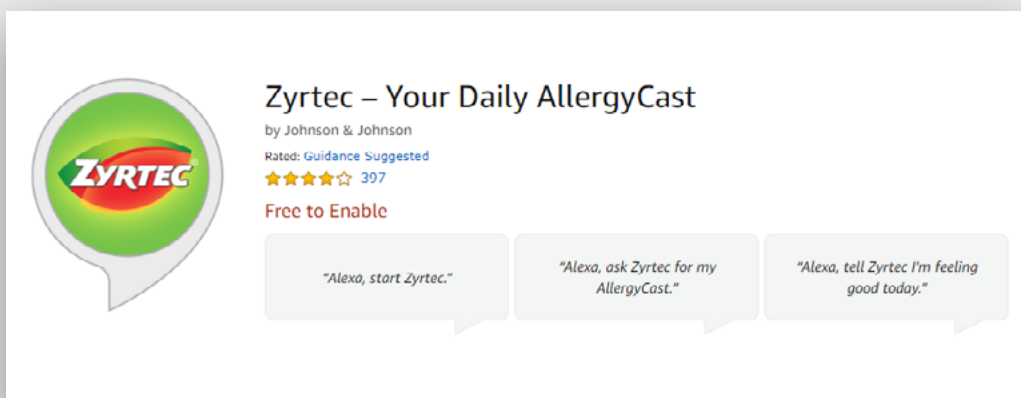
Consumer Data is Gold Dust

Along with offering convenient web experiences at informative content whenever and wherever the consumer wants, tailoring content to the individual is becoming critical as well. And this goes beyond knowing the customer's basic information to delivering hyper-personalized digital experiences.

Hyper-personalization becoming the norm

As previously mentioned, hyper-personalization is becoming a basic necessity for successful online brands. Advanced hyper-personalization strategies leverage artificial intelligence (AI) and real-time data algorithms to provide highly relevant content, products, services, or other information the user may be interested in. Modern consumers are demanding hyper-personalized experiences — not just on the website — but seamlessly across all digital touchpoints as well.

Big data is critical

Hyper-personalization requires an enormous amount of data to be effective. That means brands need an efficient way to collect, organize, and action consumer data to deliver relevant content and recommend products that lead to conversions. The data can be explicitly given by site visitors or implicitly collected by software in the background. Either way, there are implications to collecting and storing customer data that organizations need to consider.

Consumer privacy is tightening

Consumer data is valuable for organizations, but it's challenging to safely collect and store under today's consumer privacy laws. First, GDPR came out in Europe, then CCPA affected companies in California. It's only a matter of time until most companies in the U.S. will need to comply with strict consumer privacy laws. These regulations at the basic level require companies to make the data they collect accessible for consumers to view, delete, and opt-out of in the future. For many large organizations, this isn't easy to provide.

Security is paramount

Keeping all of this data safe is a huge obstacle for IT teams, but brands can't afford the bad publicity and loss of trust that comes from a security breach. That's not to mention the monetary costs and legal issues that result as well.

With all these factors in mind, it's clear that content — and the processes that drive its production and publishing — are critical for brands to provide value to their intended audiences.

Marketers Need Empowerment, Developers Need Freedom

These massive changes in web experiences, SEO, and content marketing require vastly different technologies and digital processes to remain competitive into the future. The content management system (CMS) that companies leverage needs to empower marketers to deliver personalized web experiences while giving developers the freedom to choose the right tech stack for the task.

Legacy systems limit freedom

Monolithic content management systems were great for the traditional web and app-based approach to the digital experience, but they're not ready to adapt to today's omnichannel market.

These systems tightly coupled the frontend website or mobile app to the backend data and content, which bonded developers and marketers together. Rather than facilitating collaboration, however, this burdened both teams by limiting their freedom. In turn, these monolithic systems have stifled innovation and raise the total cost of ownership (TCO) for delivering digital experiences.

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APIs brings true freedom

The first step towards freedom is choosing a headless CMS with powerful APIs. Many legacy systems have tacked on APIs after the fact, but they're not built from the ground up to be headless — and this matters. That's because APIs give developers the tools, frameworks, and languages they deem best for each project without being limited to a particular tech stack. Meanwhile, legacy systems often dictate or severely limit the tools a developer can use. Developer freedom leads to better customer experiences by bringing new functionality to market much faster.

→ Learn More: What is headless

Hybrid features are critical

While headless empowers developers, the marketing team is often left in the dark when it comes to viewing and editing the web experiences they're creating. Some CMS vendors, however, have gone a step further by offering marketers the user interfaces they need to create, modify, and preview content across devices and channels. This hybrid approach to content management empowers marketers and developers alike to streamline the development of content-driven web apps and other frontends.

→ Learn More: Hybrid-Headless

Omnichannel hyper-personalization becomes a reality

The hybrid-headless CMS not only enables omnichannel content delivery but hyper-personalization as well. That's because API-driven software is poised to connect with a disparate set of third-party systems to unify content and data. Digital marketers need a centralized interface to manage the customer experience, and headless technologies can enable this. With the right approach to building out the digital experience platform (DXP) in place, that is.

→ Learn More: Hyper-personalization

A Best-of-Breed Digital Experience Platform Holds the Key

The modern DXP needs to go beyond pure content management, and allow brands to seamlessly create and deploy hyper-personalized customer experiences across digital touchpoints. For many companies that means ditching the legacy systems and adopting a flexible tech stack that's adaptable to future customer demands.

The limitations of suite systems

The idea of a large suite system to handle all of a brand's DX needs sounds great on paper, but rarely fits the bill in practice. Monolithic systems can't keep up with the latest trends, and stifle innovation in the long run. Many brands that rely on these systems find that there's only generic functionality, and not the specific tools their marketing teams need. The problem is that these systems target the broader market, and don't expect its users to need to extend or modify the platform. Many organizations therefore cannot meet their exact business requirements with their suite solution, and a migration nightmare is looming.

When choosing a CMS brands need to look for the features and capabilities that lay the foundation for a best-of-breed approach— which is key to offering cutting-edge customer experiences across touchpoints.

→ Learn More:

[The Hidden Costs of a Suite CMS](#)

Why brands need to build their own DXP

Similar to how developers should have the freedom to select their tools of choice, a company's marketers, product managers, and sales leaders should have the ability to select apps and software to build a tech stack that suits them. Rather than choosing software at the organizational level — like with suite solutions — with the best of breed approach, individual teams can leverage niche software that fulfills highly specific requirements that drive their digital marketing efforts.

When choosing a CMS, therefore, companies need to look for the features and capabilities that lay the foundation for a best-of-breed approach—which is key to offering cutting-edge customer experiences across touchpoints.

That means numerous options for connecting to third-party systems and building out frontends such as REST APIs, GraphQL, or other integration points. Beyond this, the ability to consume, store, and action data and content from a wide range of systems is critical. The best of breed DXP needs to be ready to provide a seamless experience for marketers to leverage a multitude of MarTech software solutions, without putting a burden on IT staff.

How Sainsbury Transformed the Customer Experience and Combined Multiple Brands

The web has been making a dramatic shift over the past few years. Consumers aren't coming to a company's website like they used to, so brands need to find their audience on whichever channels they're using and adapt the experience to their needs. Brands need to adjust their SEO and content strategies to publish highly informative content that's easy to find and tailored to the customer. They also need to safely collect and leverage customer data to drive hyper-personalized experiences. The only way to overcome these lofty obstacles is to revamp the digital processes and technologies the company leverages with a best of breed DXP approach. Sainsbury did just that to provide a seamless customer experience across multiple channels.

British supermarket chain Sainsbury needed to update its web presence after its latest acquisition so that all of its brands would be connected and follow similar CMS implementations. By moving towards an intuitive and flexible modular architecture, Sainsbury created a single ecosystem that made updating content easier and enabled them to be more consistent across each stage of the customer journey. The company could leverage Magnolia's light development to provide an agile way of working for developers. Simultaneously, a flexible design and author-first approach helped create a streamlined cross-brand digital experience.

Magnolia's modular DXP platform can provide the foundation for remaining adaptable and capable of delivering digital experiences that meet customer expectations. A composable architecture and features such as a visual SPA editor provide marketers and developers with the tools they need in one experience management hub.
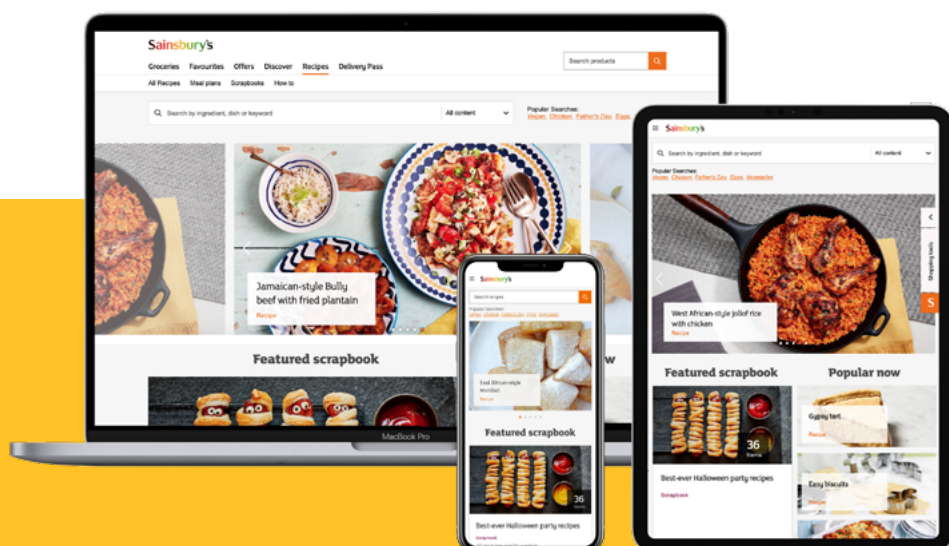
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