Listening, Segmentation, Automation: 10 Tips for Laying the Foundation for a Strong Digital Marketing Program

Many marketing white papers talk a lot about specific tactics and how to maximize your approach to one key task. Having better calls to action and delivering the best offers by working closely with your business stakeholders are excellent strategies to drive more revenue. But sometimes, the advice can (and should) take a higher look at how to remake your entire marketing effort.

Just about every marketer has to make hard decisions daily about how they spend their limited time and resources, so you want to make sure you're making the most efficient use of the tools and strategies you're employing. One of the best ways to maximize your marketing resources is to focus on mastering three key strategies and then base your future success on delivering your best work in these areas. This tip sheet focuses on the critical "Big Three" of Listening, Segmentation and Automation. And yes, you should think about them in that order – beginning with listening and ending with action.

So let's dive in to 10 tips across these three key areas of digital marketing.

Listening

Today, listening is often more important to marketing success than publishing – especially in social channels. That may sound crazy, but if you're not dedicating a large chunk of your effort to listening, then you're missing the point. Think of it this way: There's much more value in using channels to listen rather than shouting.

The chances of winning by driving more impressions to your content, SKU or sign-up page are fading. Instead, being more focused on making your chosen campaigns 20 percent or 30 percent more effective is increasingly proving to be a more scalable way to grow your business. Aim to build a core competency in customer listening — and do it closest to your most progressive executive.

TIP #1: Expand the way you think about listening.

Many marketers do an excellent job of capturing prospect and customer behaviors in some areas, but either neglect others or do so only at an aggregate level. Make it a goal to listen more closely to individuals — and at scale. Look at the customer journey and think about all the ways contacts interact with you across channels – purchases, emails, mobile apps, social, Web behaviors, etc. Where could you do a better job of listening?

Next, identify the key behaviors that are most important to your business. If you don't have a process in place for capturing and understanding these behaviors, that's where you'll want to focus your initial listening efforts.

TIP #2: Get your data in order.

One of the richest listening sources is your website, so if you haven't already begun tracking Web behaviors, you'll want to work with IT to install the JavaScript tracking code necessary to do so. This one-time effort opens up a critical customer-level view of behaviors that should flow directly into your marketing automation platform and become elements you can query on immediately.

Speaking of which, having a fully baked identity schema that flows across multiple technology systems and customer groups is critical to effective listening. If you're in growth mode, take the time to put a Customer ID project on your road map. Ensure all your touch points can at least identify your users, and begin to aggregate data in a central place — whether that's a marketing automation platform, CRM or other central repository.

You can then take steps to build out the technology integrations needed to pull data into this central location and tie it to individual users, giving you a fuller view of contacts that's emblematic of good listening.

TIP #3: Double down on social listening.

Social networks are one of the best places to do market research and keep your finger on the pulse of customer satisfaction. Almost every business has a steady stream of new products that – in a perfect world – are driven by customer demand. What better place than a Twitter search, for example, to plug in highly specific keywords and immediately see what a couple hundred million people think about a specific topic?

If you're not already, try spending a day a month searching your brand and product names across all relevant social networks. See how and when people post about your brand. Think through the types of customer dialogue your marketing is creating. Are others in your organization having two-way conversations? Or are unanswered complaints the norm?

In addition, look deeply at tools, such as IBM's Personality Insights API, that enable you to listen at scale. Leverage specific data elements into the core structure of your database and use them to further split test your best-performing campaigns.

Finally, take a deep look at what your top two or three competitors are doing in social. Look closely at the full conversations behind their tweets originating from their main account. Do their customers consistently complain about pricing or uptime? Or are there multiple customer conversations praising their support and product teams? Understanding the general social sentiment toward them is interesting data to have.

"Moving Listening to the Next Level in Your Marketing"

Listening, Segmentation, Automation: 10 Tips for Laying the Foundation for a Strong Digital Marketing Program

Tweet This!

Segmentation

Tighter audience segmentation — the process of splitting your database into many smaller lists based on criteria such as email opens, purchases or demographic elements — could mean the difference between hitting your revenue goals this quarter and missing them by 20 percent.

In a landscape in which just about every marketer has more work than they could possibly accomplish, segmentation can also help you prioritize your work. For example, it might help you spend more time marketing to your customers who spend the most. Being inquisitive in your segmentation thinking might also enable you to define new nurture streams targeted to your most-likely-to-churn customers. Done right, concerted segmentation enables you to isolate and market to very specific customers on a one-to-one basis.

TIP #4: Think segmentation first, message second.

With the growth of marketing technology, a new challenge has emerged: ensuring the "science" and "art" of your marketing coexist in harmony. With this in mind, how can you best approach the question of segmentation (who's getting the message) versus one of creative execution (what's the call-to-action in the message)?

Any marketer today can instantly become more effective and behavioral-driven by improving their thinking around audience selection. That's why you should typically look first at segmentation when considering your campaign efforts. Thinking more strongly about who receives your communications can remake your entire approach.

The beauty of applying science (segmentation) before art (message) is that you'll almost always reduce the size of your audience, but nearly always increase the relevance and revenue driven from each campaign. Once you've thought through the audience aspect of your message, you'll be able to focus on developing some awesome creative.

TIP #5: Identify your key segments and personas.

To hone your segmentation efforts, look to get familiar with the thinking and rough implementation of five to seven segments across your customer base. If you haven't considered segments at all, take a top-line crack at them before going much further in your data journey.

Make it a priority to invest the time and resources into creating a top-line set of persona models, maybe beginning with two or three and going deeper over time. (For more details on building out buyer personas, please see the IBM Marketing Cloud tip sheet, "10 Tips for Developing Buyer Personas.") Don't forget to look for newly developing segments — slicing the audience differently can be an enlightening moment for marketing, and stacking them together can really drive revenue.

TIP #6: Think both demographic and behavioral.

Demographic data is an excellent place to begin your segmentation thinking. Splitting your database by gender, family size, location and email domain can be the basis for some solid content-sharpening exercises.

You can also segment on key behaviors, such as opening an email, visiting a page on your website, downloading your mobile app, watching a video and more. Combining both demographic (explicit) and behavioral (implicit) data and considering the full scope of what someone says, does and buys can provide critical insights – not just into that individual, but also others who might act and buy similarly.

Imagine you're a clothing retailer with a contact who self-reports at opt-in as a woman. You might initially send her emails focused on women's apparel, but if she continually views men's items – perhaps in an attempt to improve the wardrobe of a significant other – you could then adjust your content accordingly. Not only would you likely see a lift in

conversions, but you'd be subtly demonstrating that your marketing is paying attention at an individual level.

TIP #7: Use scoring to quantify your segmentation strategies.

Today's sophisticated marketing platforms enable you to build scoring models that combine three key points — demographic, behavioral, and time — to get a unique snapshot of a contact based on the parameters of your choosing.

While weighting demographics and behaviors based on how important they are to the end conversion can drive big gains, it's critical to recognize the importance of time in the equation. Someone who fits a certain profile and performed several key behaviors within the last two days is likely in a different buying cycle phase than someone who did so four months ago, and adjusting your scoring model for recency can reflect this and provide a more accurate portrait of each contact.

Once your model is in place, you can then use scoring to segment an entire group (send offer A to everyone with this score) or trigger one-to-one communications (send this offer when an individual crosses this scoring threshold).
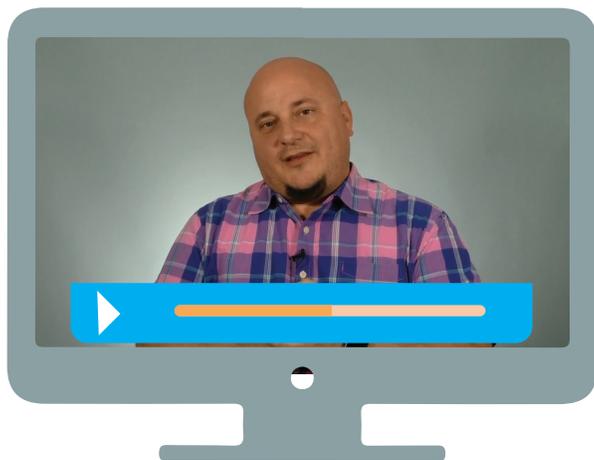
"How Segmentation Helps Marketers Decide What to Focus On"

Automation

Once you've mastered segmentation thinking, the next logical question is "How am I supposed to deal with all these little subgroups when I could barely keep up with my main list?" The answer is simply that your marketing will become more automated – and if done effectively, it'll become much more relevant as well.

The automation function is what brings your segmentation work to life and drives home the revenue opportunity. Seek to build longer, deeper relationships with your customers, which calls for tactics beyond batch-and-blast email, such as layering behavior-driven emails in with your broadcast messages.

TIP #8: Identify the automated programs that will have the biggest business impact.

There are likely dozens of automated programs you could potentially implement, so where do you begin? Welcome campaigns, cart/process abandonment messages and browse abandonment emails are generally excellent starting points, but the answer will differ for each company. Figure out your key drivers of success, evaluate the potential ROI versus the level of effort required, and then decide where to begin.

If you've mastered the basics, move to the next level of relevance for each campaign. If you're winning with cart abandonment, for example, roll out deeper browse abandon campaigns in high-value categories. If you do well driving transactions with "Happy Birthday" emails, explore other key dates like first-time-serviced or subscription renewal. Your recipients are telling you what works. Listen closely and double down when the success is spotted.

TIP #9: Take steps to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

When you're already pressed for time, adding a new automated program to the mix can seem daunting, and the dreaded "paralysis by analysis" can set in. To help avoid this, take a "crawl, walk, run" approach

and remember that you don't have to build perfect automated programs that follow every best practice right off the bat.

Secondly, set a pace that challenges you but is realistic. One of the best ways to do this is to improve in smaller chunks – execution mode on three items, and planning mode on the next three – during a specified period of time. The brilliance of this "Next Six" methodology is that you only have to architect changes in groups of three to support a larger change initiative. If you tackle three per quarter, you can absolutely remake your approach in the course of 12 to 18 months.

TIP #10: Use automation to close gaps and better nurture across the customer journey.

One of the best ways to improve the customer experience is to map the customer journey. As part of this exercise – or a periodic follow-up if you've already completed it – examine the customer journey across channels, looking for sticking points, messaging gaps and other opportunities to help contacts progress in their journey

Once you've completed this step, you can better map out automated, multi-touch programs that hit some high-level points in a buyer's journey and help the multichannel process close business, as well as cultivating an improved customer experience.

As part of this process, think deeply about the automated program logic within your programs, including the possibility of connecting across channels

"Tips for Improving Your Marketing Automation Efforts"

as appropriate. Given recent increases in mobile engagement, for example, you may find that a well-timed SMS or location-relevant push notification provide a better experience than your traditional communication methods.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that your prospects and customers are being bombarded by hundreds of marketing messages every day. Fighting for your share of attention requires an almost magical combination of careful listening, smart audience segmentation and timely automation. When you can discover the ideal combination of events that drives conversions for you, get to work automating it instantly – and continue to dial it in over time.

About IBM Marketing Cloud

IBM Marketing Cloud, part of the IBM Marketing Solutions portfolio, powers the delivery of exceptional experiences for customers across the buyer journey by leveraging customer data and behaviors, providing analytical insights and automating relevant cross-channel interactions. The cloud-based digital marketing platform provides email marketing, lead management and mobile engagement functionality to inform and drive personalized interactions in real time. To find out more, please contact us at 1-866-745-8767 or +44 20 7202 5930 and visit ibmmarketingcloud.com/contact.