White Paper //

Why website personalization matters

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Learning from the real world

There is a lot of buzz going on around personalization in the online world, such as how to use it, does it matter, won't the visitor be suspicious and other factors.

In the offline world, personalization is everywhere; if I go shopping for clothes and enter a store I have never visited before, the sales clerk will immediately analyze and segment me, according to parameters like:

- **Gender**
- **Age**
- **What I'm wearing (suit or casual clothes)**
- **Style (beard, hair, watch, etc.)**
- **Brands I'm wearing**

Say I'm 33, male, wearing jeans (Hugo Boss), shirt (Eton) and brown leather shoes (Lloyds)—the clerk will show me clothes which match the brands I'm wearing and my style. Perhaps the clerk will try to up-sell me on other more expensive brands, like Armani, but would never recommend "cheaper brands".

If I buy a new pair of shoes and return a few days later, the sales clerk will probably remember me and ask about the shoes, thereby showing interest in me. He could try to sell me a belt, which matches the shoes—and he would probably succeed. One thing is certain—he would never try to sell me the shoes I already bought.

The highest priority business objective at the clothing store, as with most companies, is to increase revenue.

And how do they deliver that? By focusing on customer service, with personal advice that treats each customer as a unique individual.

Going online

The online world can learn a lot from the offline world!

Today, even after many decades in which technology and the online experience have improved by leaps and bounds, many sites are still nineties static, showing the same content to all the visitors, even if the visitor has bought one or more products (if it's eCommerce), signed up for the newsletter or completed another action. These static sites are primitive and don't provide compelling reasons for a customer to visit again or spend more time on the site. This can result in low conversion rates.

Why is that?

The reality is many companies have not transferred and translated their business objectives to the online world and built their online presence with desired outcomes in mind.

Instead the focus has been on redesign, user experience and SEO.

There's no denying that these are also important objectives, but the main question ***"What do we want with our website?"*** is often left hidden in the background.

Therefore the entire budget ends up going to redesign, and when you're finished, you get a very nice, more user-friendly, more SEO-friendly website...that hasn't fundamentally changed from its prior incarnation.

In fact, if you compare your online presence today to your online presence in the nineties—what is the difference, besides a more appealing site with higher Google rankings?

Questions to consider

Hopefully you don't recognize yourself in the scenario above, and instead have an answer to the question "***What do we want with our website?***" that is based on your business objectives, with goals like:

- **Increase revenue**
- **Improve customer loyalty/satisfaction**
- **Reduce costs**

For example, if your desired outcome is to increase revenue, your thought process may have gone like this:

Q: "How can we increase revenue?"
A: Well, we sell a lot?

Q: "How do we do that?"
A: By identifying our visitors and tailoring our online presence around their needs and behavior.

Q: "What does that mean?"
A: Our visitors have different behaviors: sometimes they are just looking at our range of products; sometimes they are gathering information in order to confirm that their choice is right, and if you have met their needs, they will buy.

If we sense and adapt to their behavior, we can focus on getting the visitor in browsing mode signed up for a newsletter, so we can start a dialogue early.

We can show content like customer reviews, shipping details and return policies to the visitor who is considering a purchase and build trust with him or her.

For the visitor exhibiting primed to buy behavior, we make it easy with "buy now" call to actions and offers according to his or her interest.

Q: "Isn't that difficult?"
A: Once we know our different target groups, their behaviors, how they search and why they buy, we can tailor existing content and calls to action for the specific target groups according to their specific behavior.

Q: "Doesn't that take time?"
A: It's true that this approach, where you analyze your goals, segment your visitors and provide targeted content based on the visitors' needs, takes time to accomplish successfully.

Because your goal is getting conversions (purchase, newsletter signup, etc.), your effort should be spent creating proper content and defining which content and call to actions to show to your different segments.

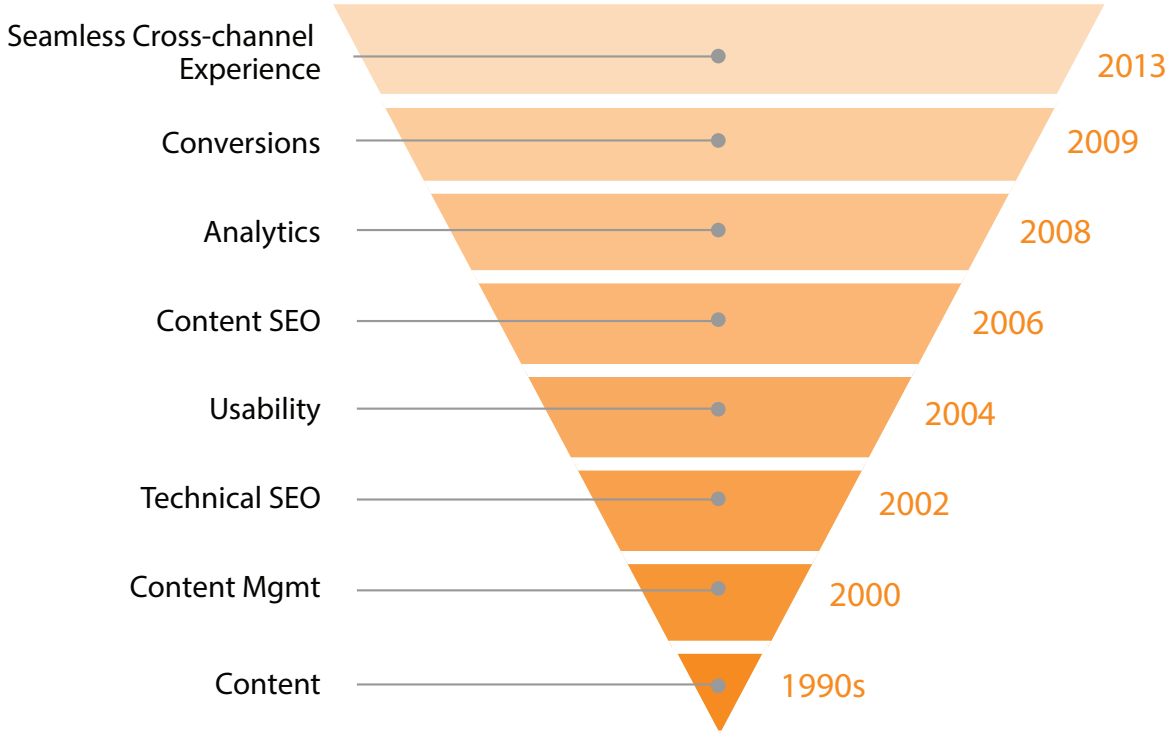
You can build the design and the user experience around appealing to your identified categories, and then focus on SEO and getting traffic to your site.

It's very exciting to see the transformation from the old static brochure ware website of yesterday to the personalized, user behavior-driven website of today.

From evolution to revolution

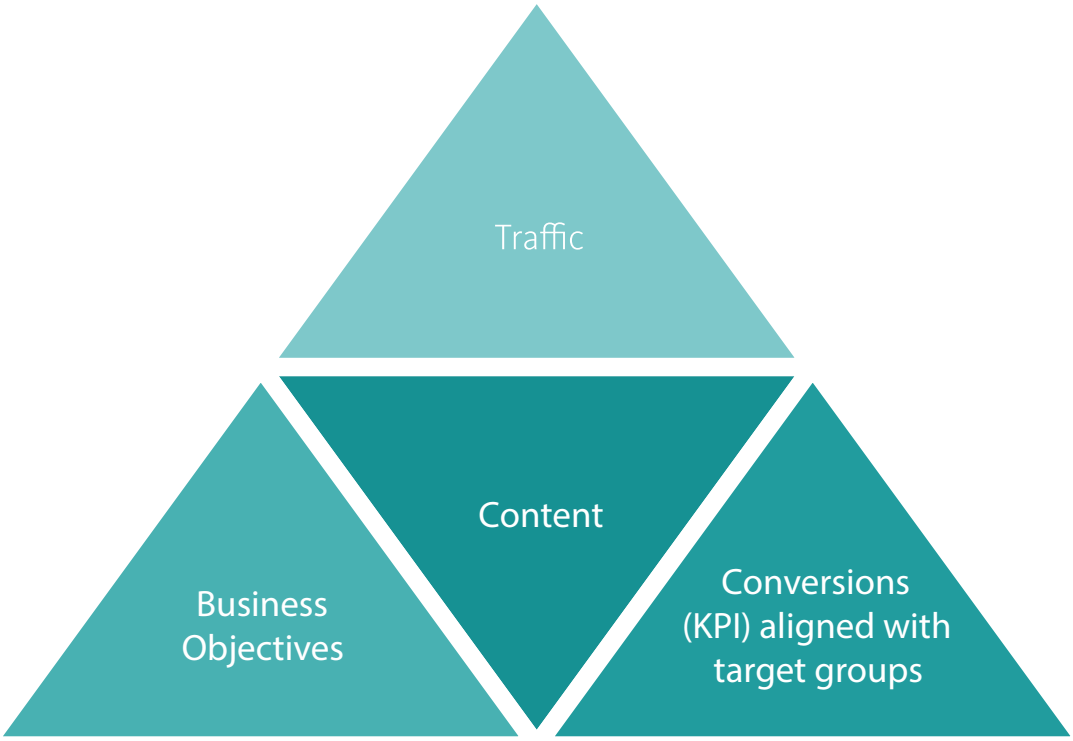
Back in the nineties, a company's website focus was primarily on writing content, which often duplicated offline material like printed brochures. In the new century, the focus has shifted to the usage of content, making it easier to manage and get access to, both for visitors and search engines.

As a company's website evolves over the years, how content is used has been extended and added to, most recently with a focus on providing customers with a seamless experience as they interact with your brand on the website, in email, social channels, and even offline.



The illustration above shows the evolution of websites from the nineties to the present. Since many websites have just added layers on top of content, the foundation for conversion is unstable.

When building a stable foundation for conversions, the focus is on creating an engaging and personalized experience for each user. The goal is to create content that can be used for different target groups and different types of conversions, depending on visitor behavior.



The illustration above shows a stable website foundation where key performance indicators (KPIs) and business objectives form a solid base on which to build a successful website experience.

Enter into the age of Experience Management

Sitecore's Experience Platform gives you an out-of-the-box solution with features and tools that include:

- **Real-time personalization**
- **A/B split and multivariate testing**
- **Visitor experience optimization**
- **Campaign management**
- **Sales enablement**
- **And more**

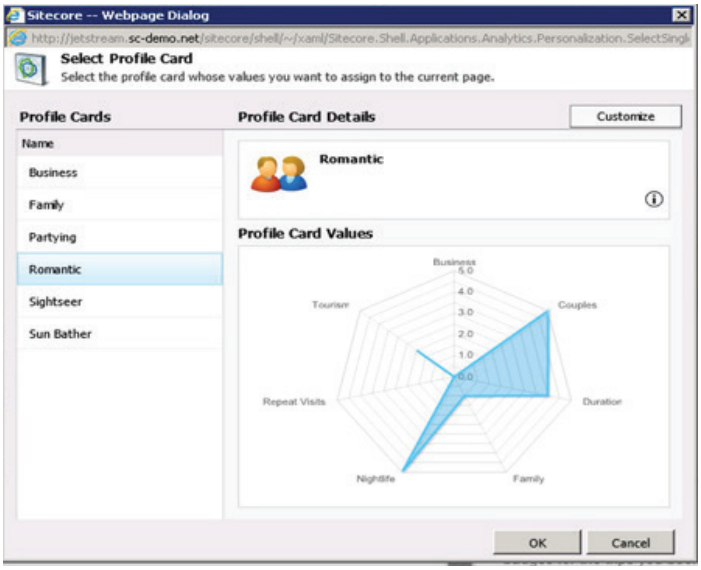
These features can help you build more engaging websites, which sense the intention of the users and adapt by showing relevant content and connect the website to other channels.

With the Sitecore Experience Platform, you can create personalization rules, based on conditions like:

- **Which country or even city the visitor is from (like showing targeted content to all visitors from London or running an A/B split test to all visitors from Iceland).**
- **Visit number to our site (for example, a popup survey that asks the visitor "what can we help you with?" when the user visits the site for the ninth time without registering any conversions).**
- **Keywords (show content related to keywords)**

Another condition can be to base rules on profiles scores. This means you can create different visitor personas and profiles to assign value to your content. Examples of profile categories could include:

- **Target group (like B2C, B2B, non-profit)**
- **Behavior (looking, confirming, buying)**
- **Lead value (hot, medium, cold)**



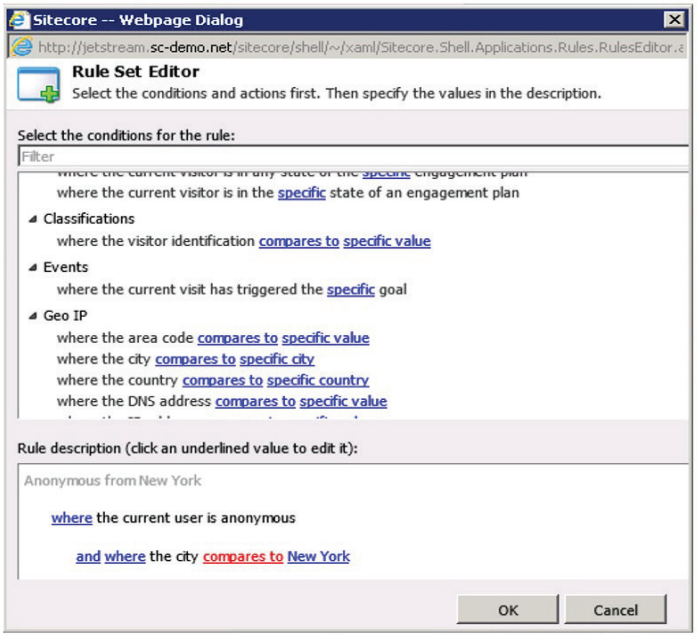
Sitecore enables you to accurately target individuals and groups with the most appropriate messaging, throughout their online experience, using all the information available to you.

All content, whether a news item, product page or contact form, can easily be profiled by giving each content item a score, according to the categories determined.

Profiling content gives you an effective way to determine how much any content "belongs" to your different profiles.

When the visitor clicks through your site, he or she will "earn" scores according to the profiling. Using these profiles, you can set up rules based on conditions such as:

"If the value of a profile score is greater than or equal to 3, then show this content."



The image above shows the rule editor in the Sitecore Experience Platform, where profile values indicating an anonymous prospect who is located in New York will trigger content specific to that location.

The personalization happens in real time and is the result of Sitecore's strong page rendering engine, which displays dynamic content and stores analytic data that reveals the individual visitor experience.

By using real-time personalization, you get a cost-effective way to deliver your business objectives. It turns your website into an effective customer intelligence engine which delivers targeted content.

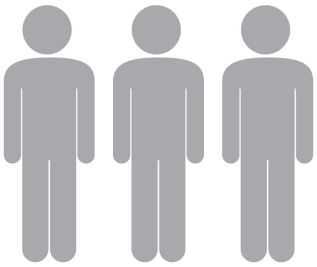
The Experience Platform makes it easy to nurture your prospects, showing the right calls to action based in their behavior and click stream, and can sense buying signals from the visitors.

By having access to past visitor experiences, you can analyze and optimize your website based on previous successful conversions. You can also track failures, and learn from what went wrong.

By using real-time personalization you close the gap between your goals and the visitor's intentions, accomplished by showing relevant content in the right context and bringing the visitor closer to a conversion.

Personalization and customer dialog

If your visitors have the same behavior, same goals and are looking for the same information, they would probably look like this:



In this case, it's good to show the same content to all visitors, because they aren't exhibiting any differing characteristics.

But if you see your visitors as a mix of people, with different behavior and different goals, they would look more like this:



Then personalization would be an effective way to transfer your business objectives to the online world, and use segmented content to start a dialogue with your visitors and move them closer to conversion as you learn more about their unique interests and goals.

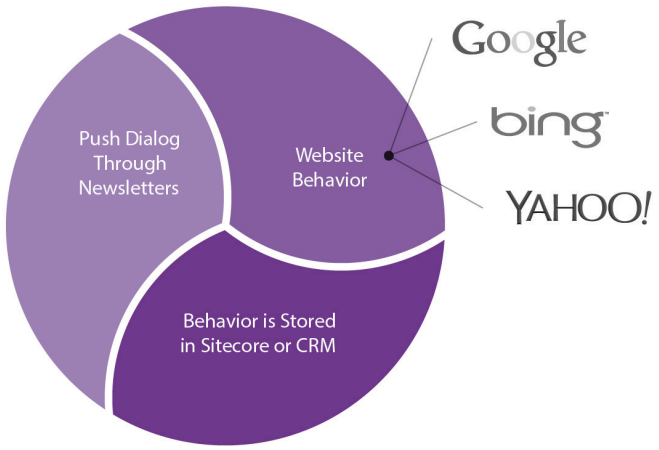
By using A/B split and multivariate testing, you can test content and optimize for what gives you the best conversion rates. Content to be tested can be everything from different versions of the home page to text or colors on submit buttons. Testing gives you an immediate response from your site users on what works and what doesn't. You can use testing on personalized spots and call to actions, to ensure you have identified the correct visitor segments for your site and work to get the best conversion rate for a new promotion.

Where do we go from here?

Once you've tuned your site to deliver real-time personalization to your visitors, the next step is to store the behavior and visitor experience for future use. With Sitecore's Experience Platform you can store this data within the application or integrate with your existing CRM system, which then becomes your customer intelligence base for all offline and offline communication and behavior.

This gives your sales force access to real-time information about a prospect's online visits, leaving them well-informed for future conversations with the prospect.

The information can then be used in campaigns such as personalized newsletters based on online behavior and offline dialogue. When a link in the personalized newsletter is triggered, Sitecore can access existing information and deliver personalized content—moving the visitor ever closer to a conversion.



The illustration above demonstrates a 360 degree customer view, where visitors find your site via organic or paid search and their subsequent web (or mobile) behavior is stored in Sitecore or a CRM. This forms the basis for personalized interactions such as newsletters, where open and click behavior is stored back in Sitecore or a CRM.

The starting point for handling more engaging personalized websites is to lay the proper foundation: once a good foundation is built and tested with website visitors, it's easy to add layers of improvement to the visitor experience and extend the possibilities of website personalization.

Start with a couple of spots that are personalized according to the visitor's behavior, such as different offers for new or returning visitors. This will have two benefits: first simple spots, such as sidebar offers, are easy to get up and running and second, this is a low maintenance way to watch and learn which kind of personalization is working for your visitors. With this knowledge you can extend the level of personalization; for example, by offering particular resources based on external search keywords used.

Website personalization is here to stay and website visitors will experience it more and more frequently in coming years. If this personalization is done well, we will be engaged by content that is tailored just for us and we will make purchases, be engaged members and repeatedly visit the sites that know us best—just like we'll return to the store that always seems to have just the pair of shoes we wanted.

Are you ready for the new age of Experience Management?

About Sitecore

Sitecore is the global leader in customer experience management software. The company delivers highly relevant content and personalized digital experiences that delight audiences, build loyalty and drive revenue. With Sitecore's experience platform, marketers can own the experience of every customer that engages with their brand, across every channel. More than 3,500 of the world's leading brands—including American Express, Carnival Cruise Lines, easyJet and Heineken—trust Sitecore to help them deliver the meaningful interactions that win customers for life.

To learn more about Sitecore visit www.sitecore.net.

About the author

Lars Birkholm Petersen has 12 years of experience with Web Content Management, starting as a developer back in the days where frames and active server pages were cool. Lars has been involved with project management and participated in over 100 different website projects and WCMS product development. Today Lars works with Sitecore, helping customers and partners with Sitecore Online Marketing Suite among others.