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What's the difference between personalisation and individualisation?

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"Personalisation" and "individualisation" are both marketing techniques that exist in a marketing director's armoury. However, despite the appetite for more relevant communications amongst marketers and consumers alike, it is common for organisations to mistake one for the other, yet they are two different practices and in the main UK companies are deploying personalisation rather than individualisation. Alistair Blaxill, executive director, Communisis plc explains more.

To make it clear personalisation is tailoring certain aspects of a communication to an individual. This can include name, address or detailing their interest in specific products or activities. Individualisation on the other hand is an evolution of this. It is the practice of creating communications that are driven in their entirety by an individual's preferences using a combination of insight, modelling and data analysis, for instance tailoring the content, both the text and images of the communication according to the individual's lifestyle, preferences or behaviour.

Right place, right time, right channel, right message is the holy grail for marketers. However, it is quoted so frequently that sometimes it's in danger of becoming platitudinal. Whilst the sentiment is spot on, sometimes organisations can get it so wrong. For example, a holiday company targeting a young family with an offer for an 18-30s type holiday. A friend recently received such a mailing and whilst it was personalised i.e. the use of his name throughout the copy, "Dave, this could be you!" – followed by a picture of young twenty-somethings clubbing the night away. Whilst I'm sure this might have been secretly aspirational to Dave, recapturing his youth, it certainly wasn't appropriate for his current lifestyle.

However, with advances in technology right message through the right channel can become a reality all the time and it doesn't have to be cost prohibitive. Document composition products now enable marketers to make customer communications a more profitable process by ensuring that the content irrespective of channel is relevant to its recipients.

The internet has altered consumer expectations. If they have a log in, they now have come to expect the site to "know" them and their behaviour. Sites such as Amazon have long been individualising the [customer experience](#) by pushing products at their customers that they think will be relevant to them based on previous purchases and applications such as iGoogle has added to this tailored medium.

Numerous surveys show that organisations that get it right on the web generally receive higher customer satisfaction. But this doesn't just have to be the domain of the internet. Data is the keystone and must be used as the basis of the communication lifecycle from delivery through to response handling. This can be applied from fully customised statements and bills to on-demand marketing collateral and self-service web applications through to individualised correspondence and proposals produced interactively by customer-facing employees.

The benefits of individualisation include better brand equity with highly customer-focused communications, improved customer satisfaction and increased cross-sell opportunities. A recent example was the work we undertook for a large utilities company. We were tasked with streamlining the communications operations to improve service, increase speed to market and provide a platform to deliver a multi-channel experience for customers. We delivered a three-phase strategy that managed the migration of six print lines and five mailing machines across to our premises, the introduction of an e-platform and a content-driven document composition solution. Through the individualisation approach we have reduced the client's costs by £8 million. The organisation has seen a 30 per cent increase in capacity and a one week reduction in time to market.

Individualisation does not just enhance the customer experience; it can also reduce costs by streamlining the marketing function. Right time, place, channel and message continues to be essential, more so in the current economic climate, and organisations that invest in making individualisation the ultimate goal for all communications will emerge stronger in the eventual upturn than those that don't.

