# Are Your Members Being Served?
# A Look at Personalized Content

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We all refer to the "Amazon.com" experience and although we have desired to implement this experience for our members, many organizations have not done so because it has been too costly.  However, with the advances in Web-based technologies and reduction in costs for these systems, organizations now have an opportunity to truly service their members through the Web. These technology advances enable us to do more things for more people on a customized basis and are fueling the quest toward personalized content.

Web personalization is about maximizing the visit to your Web site by providing specific, relevant information to defined users or user groups. Topical news alerts, localized searches and highly customized research are all forms of this.

The key factor is that personalization, properly done, creates a one-to-one dialogue between you and your members.  Personalization issues and strategies can vary dramatically based on your audience, organization type, and site structure, but there are many issues that span industries and technologies.

## *Types of Personalization*

Jupiter Research defines six levels of personalization you can deploy on your site. These are:

- Customization—personalizing the layout, language, and content of a site
- Registration—gathering personalized data by requesting or requiring visitors to register
- Demographic branching—using demographic data gathered by registration or other user input to personalize content
- Pattern matching—delivering personalized content based on matching the preferences of one site visitor to other visitors with similar tastes, derived from either information the visitor provided or observation of the visitor's online activity
- Situational—an enhanced form of pattern matching, personalizing based on predicting seasonal trends (such as suggesting holiday-related items regardless of a visitor's demonstrated preferences)
- Sensitive—detecting real-time preference changes and delivering personalization based on these sensitivities

### *How to Get Started*

So, how do we go about implementing a personalized experience and truly servicing our members? Personalized content and highly customizable information deliver starts with good architecture and flexible systems.

The key to personalization is first to truly understand our members (or your constituents). While having the tools to support the experience will be required, without understanding our customers, we are unable to put together a successful personalized user experience.

Most personalization requires a content management system (CMS). These systems range from open source and home grown systems to large-scale enterprise content management systems.

When you begin planning to create a personalized experience for your members, first determine the usage of content from the end user perspective. This is a critical step in understanding what content is valuable to your members. You should not presume what the member wants but instead let them drive what content they desire. You may want to conduct a survey to gather information on what is valuable to your members and how they would like to receive this content.

Once determined, take a look at the actual content to be delivered and then the critical taxonomy (categorization of information) and Meta data (or structured data about data) that will be necessary in implementing your strategy. In order to accomplish this, you will need to know how your users categorize content and how your visitors look at your content. This is much different than how we have looked at categorizing our Web sites in the past. Most organizations "departmentalize" Web content and provide the users with the structure of the organization as the sites navigation. Providing a personalized experience will require you and your teams to think about how the user actually uses the site, what the top activities they are trying to accomplish on the site and what are the keywords they are searching. For example, you may refer to an educational program as continuing education seminar but the users may refer to the same seminar as an educational event. If you were to search for events, would your seminar show up in the returned results?

The most common and easiest way to accomplish personalization is based upon user types. This type of personalization can be accomplished through user registrations and log-ins. By determining a user group and asking them to log into your site, you can deliver relevant content and directly market to each group based on their special interests.

Another, more sophisticated, way to accomplish personalization is through an application that creates a "cookie", a parcel of text sent by a server to a Web browser then sent back by the browser each time that server is accessed.

"Cookies" are used for authentication, tracking information such as site preferences and contains specific information about the user. This requires some programming that can be written or you can purchase a content management solution such as Results Direct, Vignette or RedDot which allows Web sites to collect information and analyze each user's typical behavior.  By reading this information, the systems then deliver content suited toward the behavior or expressed interests.

Enabling personalization through your Web site requires strategy and project planning first. And perhaps more importantly, remember that personalization starts in your CMS, as content contributors assign attributes to content items in order to make the right content available in the right way to the right people at the right time.

You will need to conduct a thorough content audit and tag content based on user types.  The content should also be associated with description words and Meta data then align with your new taxonomy.  You may also want to determine how the information can or will be received such as via the Web site, PDA, etc.  Once completed, only then should you evaluate the infrastructure necessary to support your organizations strategy for personalization.  While your association is the subject matter experts, determining a strategy for personalization and tagging your content for specific user interests can be time consuming.  Hiring a consultant or Web firm with experience in this area might be the most cost effective way to help you with your personalization strategy and project implementation.

You can begin to implement a basic personalized experience through adding news feeds specific to your interest groups or sending out broadcast emails based on specific areas of interest.  These are very cost effective ways to begin to provide added value.

Know your goals and stay focused on long-term improvements by following these steps:

1. Define your business goals.
2. Convert your business goals into personalization business requirements.
3. Convert your business requirements into use cases.
4. Define the user profile and formally define the user segment(s).
5. Determine which metrics you will use to evaluate the initiative.
6. Implement.
7. Repeat.

Correctly executed, personalization of the visitor's experience makes his/her time on your site more productive and engaging.  By creating a personalized experience for your members, your organization will enhance your relationship with your members through the Web site by providing a great customer experience.

**About the Author**



Sherry Budziak has extensive experience in providing organizations with technology and online marketing strategies. She has particular expertise in Web site strategy, branding and usability, project management, content planning, vendor selection and management, e-learning, and Internet marketing.

Sherry served as the Associate Executive Director of Information Technology and Web Services (AED) for a major medical association and Chief Operating Officer of an Internet company which serviced the not-for-profit and association community providing solutions to more than 150 organizations. She is an active participant with the Association Forum serving as a frequent author and presenter for the Online SIG.

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