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5 tips for personalized mobile messaging that breaks through holiday noise

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By Rupert Thorp

The decorations are coming out of attics and basements, stores' shelves are being stocked with seasonal goods and somewhere in the background, there is a rendition of White Christmas being piped through the speakers. That means one thing: the holidays are here.

During the Christmas and holiday seasons, shoppers tend to think very personally about all the special "someones" on their gift lists, keen on finding just the right thing for each one. And if they did not nail this year's birthday present, then now is the ideal time to get their gifting right.

So why is it that many retailers still are not connecting with their customers using the same approach of getting personal, especially now that 84 percent of shoppers are armed with mobile devices the epitome of personalized communications?

The question is particularly pertinent because three-quarters of mobile-empowered consumers 77 percent, according to ResearchNow are willing to share their location data with marketers and brands as long as they receive sufficient value in return.

Just think of all the location-based marketing opportunities available to reach these time-starved shoppers, ready and willing to share their information in exchange for an offer that is contextually relevant and all about them.

Season for busy, distracted shoppers
Those opportunities for personalization and relevance are even more evident during the holiday season when consumers are on the hunt for items of value and meaning.

Because mobile applications deliver far richer sources of behavioral and activity-related data than email campaigns, for example, marketers can target their customers with far greater precision and knowledge, offering value-laden Christmas discounts, coupons, promotions and other rewards based on their known interests, location and the recency or frequency of interactions with their mobile app.

And it is worth the effort.

Consumers who receive relevant offers take action, according to Infosys, whose 2013 "Rethinking Retail" study found that 86 percent of consumers say personalization "has at least some impact on what they buy," and they are especially fond of personalized coupons (67 percent), offers and promotions that are framed by previous experiences (62 percent) and recommendations based on previous purchases (58 percent).

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The result is that knowing customer preferences using mobile data can provide the fodder for mobile campaigns that are as personalized as the holiday lists that shoppers have stored on their smartphones and tablets.

Mobile data feedback loop

The payoff for marketers? Personalized marketing is perceived as more relevant, meaning customers will be more likely to engage, less likely to ignore or delete the attempts to reach them on their mobile devices.

And the more customers engage, the more data marketers have to continue deepening relationships by using the mobile-enabled feedback loop to inform message content so that customers feel personally validated, understood and appreciated.

Aided by beacon technologies and mobile consumers' willingness to engage, mobile messaging can be targeted by shopper, mobile device, language, location, personal preference, rewards status and many other factors that frame the concept of value in very personal and relevant ways.

Earlier this year, for example, Starbucks used a trivia contest to engage personally with its customers, while L'Oreal used image-recognition technology for a personalized hair-color mobile campaign.

With many brands relying on the holidays for a good portion of each year's revenues, more foot traffic, more satisfied customers and increased income are welcome outcomes for marketers.

Five to celebrate

1. Acknowledge Christmas and the holidays. Shoppers expect to hear carols and see twinkly lights in stores. What can surprise them, however, is a message indicating that the marketer who sent it truly understands the holiday experience at the store or mall.

A "Happy holidays!" greeting delivered to a shopper's smartphone is a tangible clue that marketers understand the season. It becomes even more impactful if it arrives on the smartphone of a known-customer mom, packed with information about the holiday train display or that day's hours of photos with Santa.

Personalization supports that kind of relevance and specificity for targeting and re-targeting messages.

2. Timing is important. Every shopper has a style and a pace, ranging from casual and enjoyable, to frenzied and "let's get this over with."

Make sure messages arrive during relevant shopping hours, not at inconvenient intervals (e.g., rush hour or 3 a.m.).

Even more importantly, use data provided by the app itself to determine the times of day that create the most responses and engagement, and build on that excitement and activity. Respect shoppers' schedules and pertinent factors such as language, time zone and frequency.

3. Consider geo-specific strategies. Geo-fencing, beacons and other so-called in-location technologies make it possible to target shoppers in specific locations, such as a single address or within a pre-defined radius of a certain store, mall, restaurant or hotel.

How delighted would a shopper be, for example, to check into a hotel and receive a mobile message from the department store a block away about a 25 percent holiday promotion that weekend?

4. Make app messages friendly and relevant. A well-targeted personalized in-app message can feel like a friendly virtual-mobile shopper is helping out. Because in-app messages are immediate, they need to be relevant, timely and valuable enough to convince the shopper to click through and engage.

Consider sending in-app alerts that acknowledge a shopper's presence ("Welcome to the store!") or previous activity ("Returning to the shoe department today! Don't miss the new the clearance rack!").

Let relevant data from ongoing customer interactions and app activities inform each new cycle of messages for an even more personalized flair.

5. Consider a fewer-but-deeper approach. Some marketers cast a wide net, hoping to lure any and all new customers through the door, but there is value in targeting known, already-loyal, already-valuable shoppers and inviting them deeper into the store, into the relationship, into the consumer journey.

Offer to make a valued customer a member of the VIP rewards program. Use a frequency metric to reward frequent shoppers with a link or code for a today-only discount.

MORE THAN EVER, marketers understand the need for personalized campaigns and promotions that capture

consumers' attention.

But to do personalized marketing, marketers need the underlying analytics and data about shopper's mobile activities, shopping preferences, behavior, frequency of engagement and timing to craft campaigns that truly have that personal flair and do more than pay lip service to the term "personalized."

The holidays are a perfect time of year to start thinking about and executing mobile campaigns that truly connect with consumers and then using the insights gleaned from this busy shopping season to shape best-practice mobile campaigns into 2015 and beyond.

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