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There is no mobile customer: Leveraging omnidevice data to boost ecommerce performance

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We are now living, working, innovating and selling in a world in which our best customers are making important decisions from wherever they happen to be at any given moment. We call that "mobile shopping," and we develop strategies to accommodate our "mobile customers."

This way of looking at consumers made sense for a long time in Internet years, but it is too primitive a foundation for today's online marketing strategy. This is because the whole idea of "selling to your mobile customer" misses two critical details about the modern connected consumer.

First, as retail adjusts to an omnichannel reality, stores and brands have had to recognize there is no such thing as a "mobile customer." Mobile shoppers are not a segment. They are just customers using their smartphones to keep their personal conversation with you going.

Mobile conversions were up 30 percent in 2014 compared to the year before, but they are still a small piece of the pie.

People use their mobile devices twice as often to research as they do to make a purchase, and for every dollar they spend on mobile, they spend four dollars on desktop. We have seen some brands achieve a nearly 80 percent email open rate while conversions increase in other channels.

As the omnichannel reality of ecommerce sinks in, it has become harder and harder to ascribe any meaningful significance to a particular mobile channel's conversion rate by itself.

The concept of the "mobile assist" has spread quickly among online marketers to frame the more relevant analysis: finding out how your customers' mobile behavior contributes to the final sale.

The other big reason that the "mobile customer" concept is outdated is that, simply put, the mobile customer is not always all that mobile.

As tablets, plus-sized smartphones and phablets, tablet-laptop hybrids, and smartwatches are readily adopted by consumers, "mobile" can just mean on the iPad in the bedroom instead of on the desktop in the family room. "Mobile customers" are not just omnichannel, they are omnidevice.

Google tells us 68 percent of mobile searches take place at home, despite a customer's close proximity to desktops and laptops.

"Add to bags" and conversion for mobile shoppers are both up, but time spent on mobile sites is way down. Smartphones make up 33 percent of traffic but only 16 percent of orders, while tablets make up 14 percent of traffic and 17 percent of orders.

Clearly consumers, who were first liberated from the desktop, are now being liberated from having just one mobile option. They are learning they like to do certain things in certain places using certain devices. They are learning how to use multiple technology products to manage their life, including their shopping strategy. And research indicates that retailers who do not recognize this trend may be seriously outperformed by those who do.

The good news is that creating an omnidevice solution for your business is not the same thing as creating an omnichannel solution. It is easier. Here are the three key components to any successful omnidevice strategy:

1. Identify your customer across devices. Ecommerce marketing is now about engaging with the same customer over multiple channels and devices.

We still like to think about the "mobile customer," or the "smartphone customer" and "tablet customer," but this is only because our current analytics programs are parsing data along these lines.

The only way to really see how your customers are using multiple devices is to proactively leverage a customer identifier strategy to do it for you.

Usually this starts with driving as much activity toward signed-in account use as possible through rewards cards, account-dependent promotions, and other financial and experiential incentives.

2. Leverage third-party technologies. Several enterprise-level solutions are now available to help you track your customers across devices, discover their unique paths to purchase, and develop campaigns driven by the data.

Forrester Research has recently published a critical overview of some of the best players. Do not underestimate the advantage of leaning heavily on outsourced expertise in this area. You are essentially investing in the next-level analytics infrastructure your business will need to survive in the future.

3. Tailor messages to your customers' unique device path. Once you have created compelling ways for your customers to identify themselves across devices and the numbers reveal their usual path to purchase, the rest is up to you.

Your customer communication strategy will need to adapt quickly to initiate and maintain conversations tailored for different devices and channels. You will need to create icebreakers designed for the first touch point device, for example.

Your campaign will need to integrate motivators that reduce known friction in the most common paths to purchase. And your user experience will need to include features that make it easy to pick up on one device where you left off on another.

FOLLOWING THESE THREE steps will ensure you have the data, help and retail conversational strategy you need to make a relatively simple omnidevice strategy successful with minimal investment.

More important, it will give you details about your evolving customer that will ensure the future success of your evolving digital business.

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