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October 20, 2003 New Thinking: Why personalization hasn't worked

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October 20, 2003

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Why personalization hasn't worked

By [Gerry McGovern](#)

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Personalization hasn't worked because most people don't have a compelling reason to personalize. It hasn't worked because the cost of doing it well usually significantly outweighs the benefits it delivers. It hasn't worked because managers have seen it as some Holy Grail of content management.

Many personalization projects are duds according to a new report by Jupiter Research entitled "Beyond the Personalization Myth." This is no surprise. What is surprising is that some organizations still cling to the hope that portal and personalization software will solve their content problems.

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Gaining competitive advantage through high-quality web content

It is easy to understand why people turn to software to solve problems with content. You specify what you need. You buy and install it. And, hey presto ... But content doesn't work that way. Publishing quality content is a difficult, time-consuming task. It's messy. It requires long-term planning, training, evangelism, promotion.

Most websites are very basic. The quality of the writing is average and sometimes awful. Text is presented in a way that makes it difficult to read. Navigation is confusing and the search process is often appalling.

Many websites simply don't work. I tried nike.com recently and it was an absolute joke. An infuriating navigation combined with a continuous stream of error messages to create an experience of total frustration.

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The essential guide for online writers, editors and managers

"Given flexible, usable navigation and search, Web site visitors will be more satisfied with their experiences and will find fewer barriers to the profitable behavior sought by site operators," the Jupiter report states. "In fact, good navigation can replace personalization in most cases."

The best definition I have found for a portal is as follows: "A portal costs four times more to buy and operate than a normal website. It delivers half the benefits." Yes, that big, cumbersome, complex portal of your dreams may well make you long for the days when you were running a simple but effective HTML website.

Not surprisingly, the Jupiter report finds that personalized websites are four times more expensive to run. It also finds that personalized websites are twice as likely to attract visitors who will never pay for anything. Worse still, it finds that 25 percent of consumers actually avoid personalized websites because they fear that their personal information will be abused.

"Gerry's insight on web content has become a standard by which we are building our next generation web content style guide."

Tom Beddingfield
Manager, Global Presence, Sch

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Garbage in, garbage out. Do you want your content to be personalized?

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Lloyds



Why do so many organizations plan the strategy for their websites like they were writing a letter to Santa? "Dear Santa, I hope everyone is well at the North Pole. Please, please, please, can I have personalization for Christmas? It'll make me look so cool."



Personalization software sales people are trained to sell to the ego, vanity and emotion of managers, the Jupiter report finds. What's new? The technology industry excels at the art of hype. But it is not the only guilty party. Too many managers are only too willing to believe that software can do the impossible.



When I come to your website I want your view of how you will solve my problems. I want to get in and out quickly with as little effort as possible. How do you keep me happy? Simple.



Teach your staff how to write well. Design a layout that allows me to read easily. Spend time creating a navigation that is simple and intuitive. Fix your search engine. Get the basics right. Garbage in, garbage out. Do you want to pay four times more for personalized garbage?



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