IRON HORSE

MISAPPLIED PERSONAS, OVERRELIANCE ON TECH, AND WRONG METRICS

An examination of three forces driving lackluster marketing.

Good marketing is evident. Everyone knows good marketing when they experience it. It feels right, aligns with your current needs and future aspirations, and fits your personality.

Bad marketing is equally clear. Generalized “persona based” messaging is easy to spot, as are automated-trigger based sequences that don’t match your current level of engagement, knowledge, or interest. Poorly honed messages, irrelevant offers, and badly integrated campaigns create poor customer experiences—and that negatively impacts marketing’s ability to drive company growth.

IN THIS BRIEF WE’LL EXAMINE:

- **How common marketing practices have led marketers astray**
- **Questions to ask to uncover problems in your marketing approaches**
- **How to humanize your marketing**

Based on our review of the current state of marketing messaging, offers, and engagements, we believe that every marketing organization should review their programs, tactics, and processes to better understand the types of customer experiences they bring to market. In most cases, such a review will highlight the need for a conscious effort to scale back existing practices and realign for a more one-to-one, human-to-human approach. In this brief, we will explore the three primary drivers of bad marketing experiences: the misapplication of personas, an overreliance on technology, and erroneous metrics.

Misapplying personas skews relevancy of marketing tactics.

Stereotyping is illegal* by law, but it's an entrenched practice in marketing. And though it's an oversimplification, the reality is that the vast majority of demand generation tactics are persona driven.

Personas are fictional depictions and generalizations of a group of target customers, users, or prospects that hold common behaviors, goals, and attitudes in a specified area. They're a snapshot of the relevant and meaningful similarities of these groups based on research and observation. Using personas, one can better predict how that group will interact, engage, and respond in addition to identifying where problems may be encountered. This helps create user-centered deliverables and provide quality input without necessarily needing in-depth interactions and experiences with the group. Personas also improve communication alignment as they provide a shared vision of the group being targeted and help ensure that all team members (such as sales, marketing, and customer success) align on the attributes of that group. And ultimately, personas minimize grounding; they help ensure your offers and engagements resonate with your target audience rather than just your internal team.

The fundamental flaw with personas: One size fits none.

- **Personas need to have a specific scope.** Personas aren't one-size-fits-all. For personas to be useful, the information conveyed in the persona must reflect the goal for that group of individuals within a specific scope. For example, the persona used for a website project will be different than that used for customer onboarding for a 30-day software trial and different again than the personas used for user interface changes to your actual software offering. Unfortunately, most personas aren't specific; the majority of marketers use a generic persona (e.g senior marketing executive in Industry X) and don't layer in the context of where that person is both with respect to their level of relationship with your company or their scope of engagement.
- **Personas are not customer engagement.** While not a flaw of personas themselves, many marketers and product managers make the mistake of thinking of personas as examples of real customers. Though personas encapsulate many features of your target audience, they are not a reliable proxy for staying engaged, connected, and in touch with your organization's target market. Marketers should continue to engage with prospects and customers on sales calls, at events, and online to develop a rich, nuanced, and up-to-date understanding of their needs.
- **Shortcuts undermine accuracy.** Personas are frequently built by an organization's perception of a group rather than by research-backed data analysis, actual customer conversations, and focus groups. This "shortcut" results in a skewed understanding of what the customer actually wants, leading to messaging, offers, and engagements that don't resonate and consequently drive lower engagement while increasing customer apathy.

Assumption-based personas inhibit marketing's ability to drive impact. Good marketing requires relevance. To create truly user-centered offers, messaging, and engagements, marketers must begin with an understanding of the real behaviors, interests, and attitudes of their audience.

? QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT PERSONAS:

Use of personas.
How do you currently use personas? In what ways did you make them precise to the goal for that group of individuals in your specific focus area?

Customer conversations.
How many times have you spoken with customers or prospects in the last three months?

Activation.
How do your personas align with the way you store and track contacts in your marketing or sales systems? Can you pull a full list of all "Persona B" from your CRM?

* Under US Federal law, employers generally cannot discriminate against employees on the basis of: race, sex, pregnancy, religion, nationality, disability, age, military service or affiliation, bankruptcy or bad debts, genetics, or citizenship.

Overreliance on technology erodes customer connection.

Every process, campaign, program, and tactic in marketing is either fully dependent on, or heavily enabled by, technology. Martech helps organizations achieve scale, drive better insights, improve the predictability of marketing efforts, and drive cost efficiencies. Without it, marketing would create significantly less impact and the CMO would not have a seat at the executive table.

Unfortunately, while technology is a marketing enabler, it also creates barriers to relationship development.

- **The cost of "free".** Many marketers view the cost impact of driving additional engagements as negligible. For instance, the cost difference between sending an email to 100 or 100,000 people is negligible. And to be fair, it will incrementally increase the tactic's performance by number. More leads will be generated. However, though it may not cost more dollars, the lack of relevance increases customer/prospect annoyance and negatively impacts an organization's brand, which cumulatively costs more than the incremental value generated by over-targeting.

- **Generic personalization.** Tech-dominated marketing approaches create an environment where individuals are treated as "leads" that may map to a persona or account but are devoid of individual personalities or interests. The result is marketing outreach and offers that amount to boilerplate dressed up with field inserts, segmentation, and smart content (show an oil truck if the person is in the energy sector)—and that's not lost on prospects and customers. It's only the rare marketing program that delivers one-to-one, meaningful engagements that take into consideration the individual's needs, wants, and aspirations.
- **Not choreographed.** Marketers tend to view their campaigns and programs as sophisticated plays with several acts. In reality, audiences rarely see every message in the campaign, and experience the messages they do see as disjointed sketches which lack alignment with other interactions they have with the organization, including communications from sales, customer support, and billing, and offers made in previous marketing campaigns.

Automated engagements might move a "lead" down "the funnel" but they don't create a human relationship between that person and someone in your company. That makes it hard for sales to meet their individual needs and for them to develop any sort of loyalty or attachment to your offering and organization. Does all marketing need to be human-to-human? Of course not; for example, newsletters don't need to be, though they still need to be relevant to the recipient. Is there a place for highly automated marketing engagement? Yes. Should marketing leverage technology to achieve scale? Definitely. But should all marketing engagements be technology led? Definitely not.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT TECHNOLOGY:

Message management. How do you currently monitor the volume and relevancy of messages you send to your customers and prospects? What is the approval process? How do you calculate the "cost" of including additional people in a marketing message?

Boomerang customers. In what ways do you engage clients who left and joined a new company and have just become a client of yours a second time (new customer, former relationship) differently? How do you identify them as such in your systems?

Duplicate engagements. What steps are in place to prevent the same offer from being sent to the same person twice? For instance, if a contact downloaded a report, how do you ensure the same report is never sent to them again?

Relationship identification. How do you track the level and types of relationships you have with customers, influencers, and your target addressable market?

Nuanced relationships. Where are you using technology to foster engagement and relationships where a more manual approach may drive more value? How are you using technology to drive relationships that should be rethought or stopped?

Erroneous measures skew perspective and action.

Data-driven marketing comes across as progressive and fact-based. Of course, organizations should use metrics and KPIs to guide the marketing tactics, program investment, and optimize them for impact. It's equally clear that metrics and KPIs should influence the actions and decisions of the company.

However, what's measured isn't necessarily valuable and what's valuable isn't necessarily measured.

- **Requested reports aren't needed reports.** Not everything that matters is measurable, and unfortunately, in the quest to be data-driven, a majority of marketing teams focus on what's easy to measure in black and white. Metrics such as emails opened, impressions made, links clicked, and leads generated, are easy to access and readily understood. Though these metrics can be telling, especially when applied to tactical decision making, exclusive focus on them ignores insights that, though more difficult to produce and less straightforward, provide better indications of a company's health and trajectory. Unfortunately, there is no authoritative standard on what should be measured in B2B marketing, at what level in the organization, and with what frequency.
- **Incentivised to help oneself.** Marketers are goaled on lead generation (really, contact/name/email acquisition) or sales accepted leads. As a result, marketers focus on securing additional downloads and pushing more leads to sales, in hopes of meeting targets for sales accepted leads. But this incessant drive for more is rarely compatible with a good customer experience, resulting in lower sales, higher churn, and fewer advocates. Until marketing is compensated for driving better experiences—for instance, based on how valuable customers and prospects view the demand generation activities—we won't see the strong shift to relevancy that creates long-lasting relationships, more conversions, and higher sales.
- **Unanticipated downstream impacts.** Measurements may align with your stated goals and be easy to quantify, but they also can manifest subtle counterproductive consequences. For example, if an organization's primary measurement of marketing effectiveness is marketing qualified leads (MQLs), a marketing manager will prioritize tactics that maximize the number of MQLs sent to sales—even if that decision adversely impacts the organization's other offerings.

The power of measurement comes from the insights they create and their ability to drive and alter the behavior of others. This power can help drive positive impact within an organization, but can also create a skewed understanding of what's important leads to value-eroding behaviors. For measurement to drive value it needs to be aligned and in support of the organization's objectives and the actions that will move them forward.

? QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT MEASUREMENT:

Incentive compensation.
How is your incentive compensation influencing what you focus on? What is your bonus tied to?

Goal alignment.
Are your goals aligned with your team's goals? What about those in other functions?

Missed opportunities.
What things do you think would actually drive value to the company but you're currently not doing because of how you're measured?

Tracked, not valuable.
What does your organization currently use as a measure of success that you don't see as a critical driver of company success?

Not tracked, valuable.
What aren't you reporting on that would help you gain a more accurate picture of company success or challenges?

The Iron Horse insight.

The way many marketing organizations use personas, martech, and metrics has led to end customers being treated more like concepts and opportunities than people, and that doesn't drive a good customer experience. Marketers don't need to throw away the tools and processes that have allowed their organizations to scale, but they do need to bring focus back to the humans who make up their customers, coworkers, and communities. It's that focus—a focus on the individual—that creates good marketing and fosters growth.

Iron Horse helps you grow.

Iron Horse creates growth for the companies that are driving innovation. We help you reduce friction throughout the buying journey to forge relationships that stay even as roles grow and change.

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