Don't be a stranger

Scarcity of data shouldn't stop brands from delivering their best

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Shopping online has spoiled us. We expect extraordinary perks as part of the everyday shopping journey both online and offline – whether it's having unlimited product ranges, personalised recommendations or flexible service and delivery – and we will no longer accept anything less.

Call it consumer empowerment or entitlement, but more brands and retailers are bending over backwards to serve and provide for these expectations, even though many of their customers don't actively impart any of the necessary effort or data themselves to make their shopping journeys so smooth and intuitive. How is accommodating such difficult demands possible and why is it worth persevering for the customer who remains obstinately off the grid?

The decision is yours

If you consider how consumers struggle with making autonomous decisions, it's well worth reaching out. Providing too much freedom of choice means customers become frazzled when they have to make decisions for themselves, which ultimately leads to fewer sales.

"A large array of options may discourage consumers because it forces an increase in the effort that goes into the decision. So consumers decide not to decide, and don't buy the product," says Barry Schwartz, author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*.

Too much choice and the associated uncertainty of buying online means customers will attempt to cushion the mental blow of making wrong decisions by buying extra and returning items they don't need. Placing the burden of responsibility on the customer can be a waste of time and energy, considering that as many as 30% of online goods are returned, according to management consultancy Kurt Salmon.

Mott & Bow, an online jeans retailer, has dealt with this problem by sending out a second pair in a different size with every purchase, free of
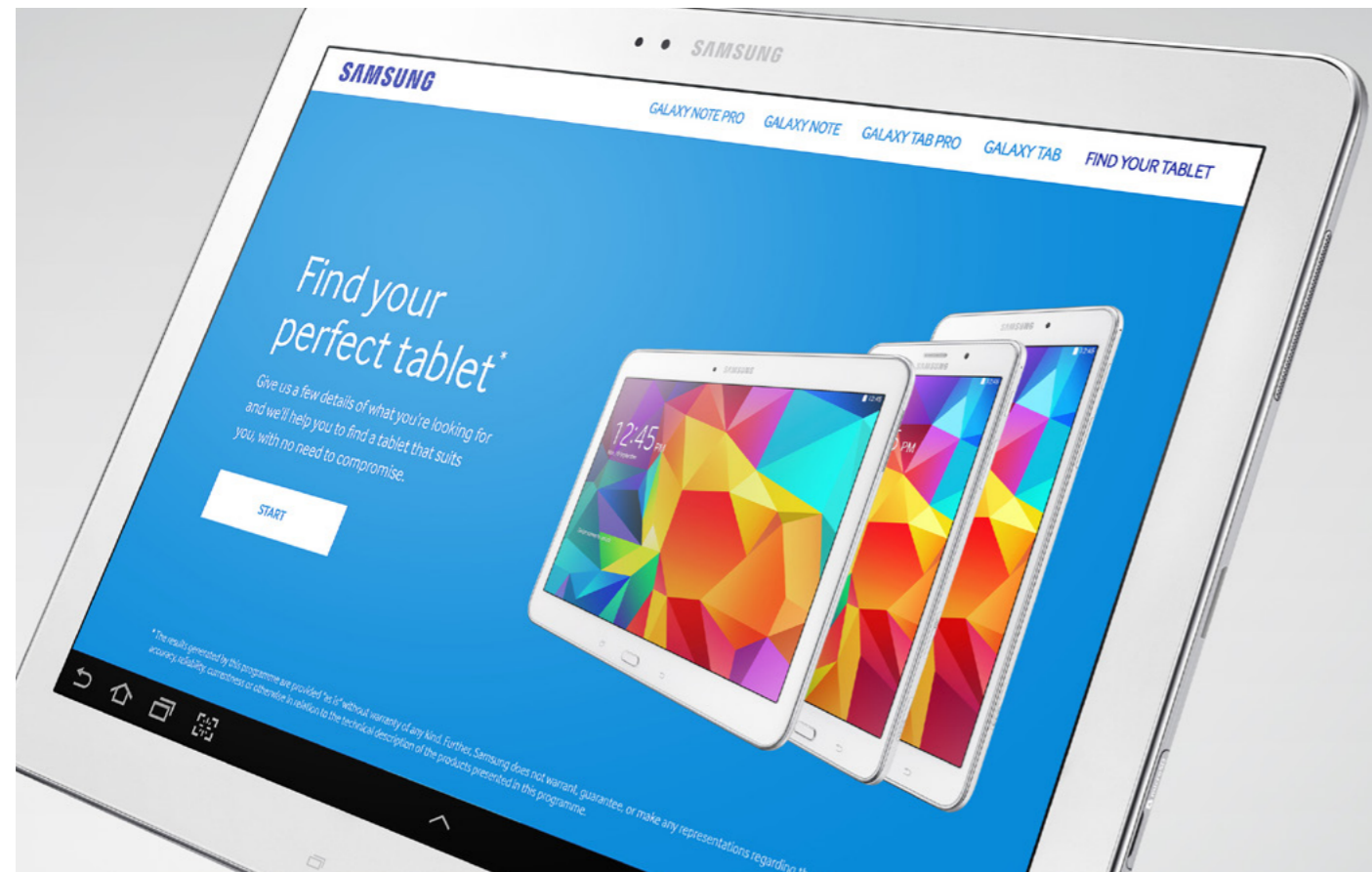
charge. Customers at home choose between the two pairs and send back the one they decide they don't need.

Following this instinctive approach, there is competitive opportunity in pre-empting and simplifying a customer's experience to alleviate the anxieties of choice. Whether it's a customer's first or fiftieth time, setting up careful structures to intuitively guide each individual and to support their anticipated needs makes every purchase seem polished and personalised. Clever direction and management of choice can help even the most elusive customers.

Beg the question

Last year, marketing research company IPSOS revealed that 44% of US adults opt out of targeted advertising to protect their online privacy. As customers become reluctant to hand over their data, brands and retailers have to find other ways to bring intuitive service.

Forget long surveys and in-depth screenings. Asking a careful combination of ingenious questions can inspire the most accurate and relevant answers to guide customers. Samsung's product selector uses only three quick resourceful questions to recommend the best tablet device.

"These systems aid decision making and offer recommendations, but that's only half of their role," says Joey Scully, StartJG's creative director of experience design. "They also help a user

Above: shoppers at LICK can scan a staff member's badge to carry the conversation on with them at home

Left: Samsung's Product Selector asks three questions before recommending a tablet

79% of customers are more likely to provide personal information to what they consider a trusted brand
Source: SDL

formulate a rationale to explain why they would go through with a purchase. It gives [customers] stronger belief that they are buying something that will solve their problems."

More retailers are asking the right questions and using the most low-key and non-invasive data. Lee Wrangler in Poland trains its staff to spot customers wearing its branded garments to tailor in-store conversations against different scripts.

Concierges in London's Watches of Switzerland similarly direct patrons to separate floors of the three-storey flagship depending on their specific needs. Identifying what a customer wants with little input on their part can be

achieved. Shrewd simplicity is the key as, according to CEB, brands that simplify decisions are 115% more likely to be recommended.

True&Co is an online lingerie retailer that has rewritten the rule book about bra fitting. It relies on a small amount of data entry and its powerful algorithm to suggest the best fit, which is communicated by its own unique colour-coding system. By understanding the challenges facing its customers, True&Co has unburdened the decision-making process and, significantly, if a customer has a positive experience, they are locked into the brand's unique terms of reference.

"The more a retailer knows about how a

Above: the Microsoft Connected Fitting Room offers personal advice to shoppers based on the combination of items the are trying on

Right: the bareMinerals concept store merchandises by complexion to help shoppers ignore the 80% of products that are irrelevant to them

shopper behaves, the better they can serve that customer," says Kit Yarrow, author of *Decoding the New Consumer Mind*.

Better data

Of course, data can be subtly acquired to augment a customer's experience whether they're newcomers or devotees. Microsoft's Connected Fitting Rooms, being rolled out in Kohl's stores, fit RFID tags in hangers to recognise groups of items brought. This allows the brand to make personalised suggestions on style combinations and sizes available in-store.

Audi's instant valuation billboard campaign in Brazil covertly tagged vehicles in a car park so that when they were driven out, each car's value and

the payments needed to trade it for an Audi were displayed on a digital screen. This resulted in a 45% traffic increase at local Audi dealerships.

The ideal scenario is when a customer does nothing and still receives a seamless, personalised experience, and it is certainly achievable. When it comes to accessing the data needed to make such elite service a reality, the approach has to be simple, subtle and offer genuine benefits to win them over. It goes to show that the extensive archiving and wrangling of complex streams of customer data is by no means the only way to give customers what they really want.

"Big Data is not a replacement for creativity or the insights that come from experience. It doesn't create the new ideas. So far, that's still a job for humans," says Yarrow. **GDR**

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Joey Scully, creative director of experience design at StartJG

"The more a retailer knows about how a shopper behaves, the better they can serve that customer"

Kit Yarrow, author of *Decoding the New Consumer Mind*

in 2013

64% of organisations planned to invest in big data technology with only 8% following through
Source: Gartner Inc.

37% of consumers are more likely to share data with a bricks-and-mortar retailer after a positive in-store experience
Source: ClickFox

Brands that simplify decisions are 115% more likely to be recommended
Source: CEB

Customers return **30% of** online goods
Source: Kurt Salmon

92% of US retail sales still take place offline
Source: Forrester