Personalization & Privacy:

How content can bridge the gap

The future of personalization

Personalization describes the process by which businesses collect consumer data and analyze it to deliver content targeted to an individual's geographic location, interests, search habits, and channel preferences. In 2020, Gartner predicted that 80% of marketers will abandon personalization, however recent research in the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services suggests the opposite. It's predicted that businesses will invest 30% more in personalization over the next three years (Lambillotte et al., 2022), increasing the value of the personalization software market from $620 million in 2020 to **$2.2 billion by 2026**.

Understanding current research

This projected growth is backed by **41% of marketing leaders who consider personalization a priority to deliver a superior customer experience** (**Forbes Insight, 2019**). Personalization increases the likelihood that consumers perceive content to be more relevant, which boosts satisfaction, and strengthens buying intent. However, it's worth noting that there's little empirical research that confirms personalization directly causes a more positive customer experience — mainly because we don't yet fully understand the psychology behind how it influences consumers' choices (**Lambillotte et al., 2022**). Something that's been explored is the difference between *actual personalization* and *perceived personalization*. If you're already confused, hang in there, this becomes relevant when we start to talk about what this means for your content strategy.
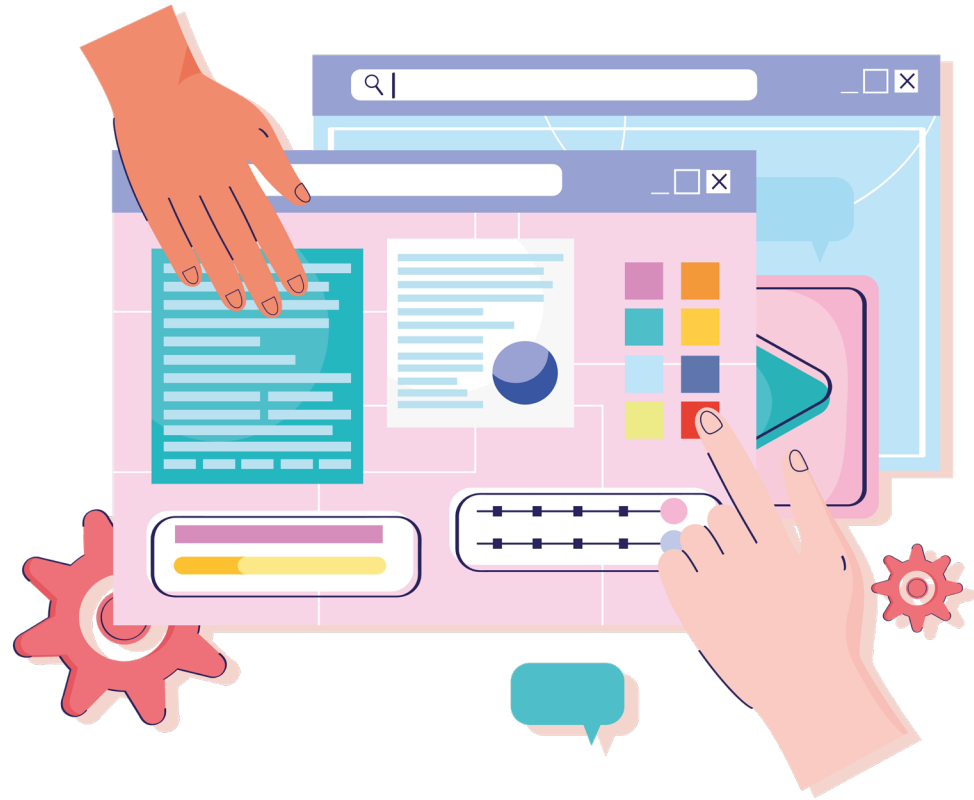
Actual Personalization

- Adapts content according to consumer data

- Business is in control of the personalization process

- Uses AI or technology to individualize each step in a campaign

- Interpreted by consumers as creepy and annoying

Perceived Personalization

- The subjective experience of the consumer who perceives how personalized the content is to them

- Asks consumers for their input

- Consumer is in control of the personalization process

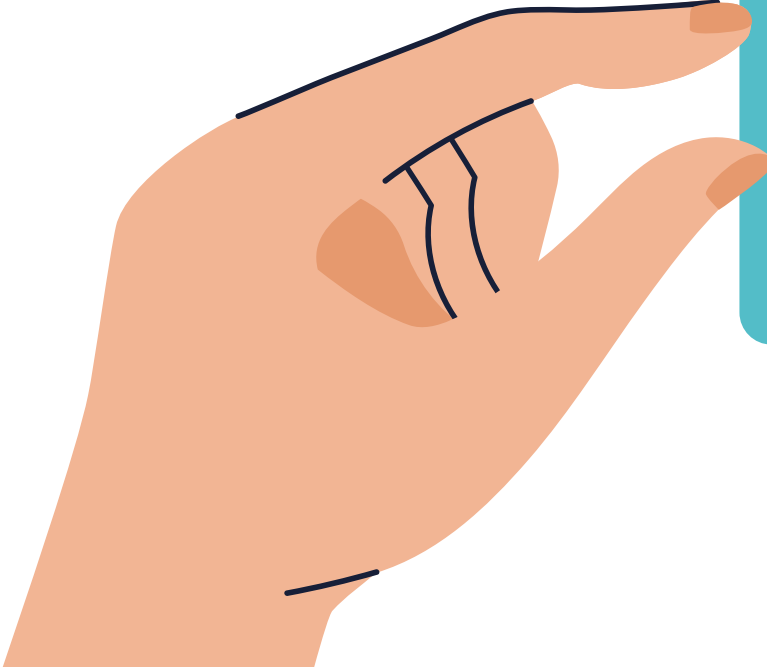- Interpreted by consumers as inclusive and collaborative

Note: If these terms are new to you, you should know that there's another way to talk about actual versus perceived personalization. Actual personalization is sometimes called **implicit personalization** and perceived personalization is sometimes called **explicit personalization**.

The reason we're drawing your attention to these two definitions is that despite your best interests to personalize content, the extent to which your audience perceives it as personalized is purely subjective. Here's some of the challenges associated with actual personalization:

Data security laws, such as the **GDPR**, **the California Consumer Privacy Act**, and **PIPEDA (in Canada)** means marketers have less access to consumer data than ever before.

It's not just data security laws. Companies like Apple **will soon mask user IP addresses** so they can't be linked to online activities or location. Google will follow suit in 2023.

The data that's available to marketers doesn't come with actionable insights that help improve the impact of content. Consumers aren't always certain about their own preferences, and their preferences may change when they need to make decisions.

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Another challenge is that, with the oversaturation of media and content via the internet, consumers have developed the ability to consciously or subconsciously ignore ads (Lehnert et al., 2021, p.3). Quality content has never been more critical — by creating value that aligns with the needs of your target audience, you can stand out from the competition in a world of information overload.

So why say that personalization is dead? That's because businesses struggle with understanding increasingly limited data and how to use it — which leads to poorly judged attempts to personalize the customer journey that don't resonate with consumers. So while personalization certainly isn't dead, it's shifting into new territory. You simply can't rely on data alone to create an exceptional customer experience — which is why we'll explore how excelling with content is the key to creating a perceived personalized experience, regardless of how much data you have access to.
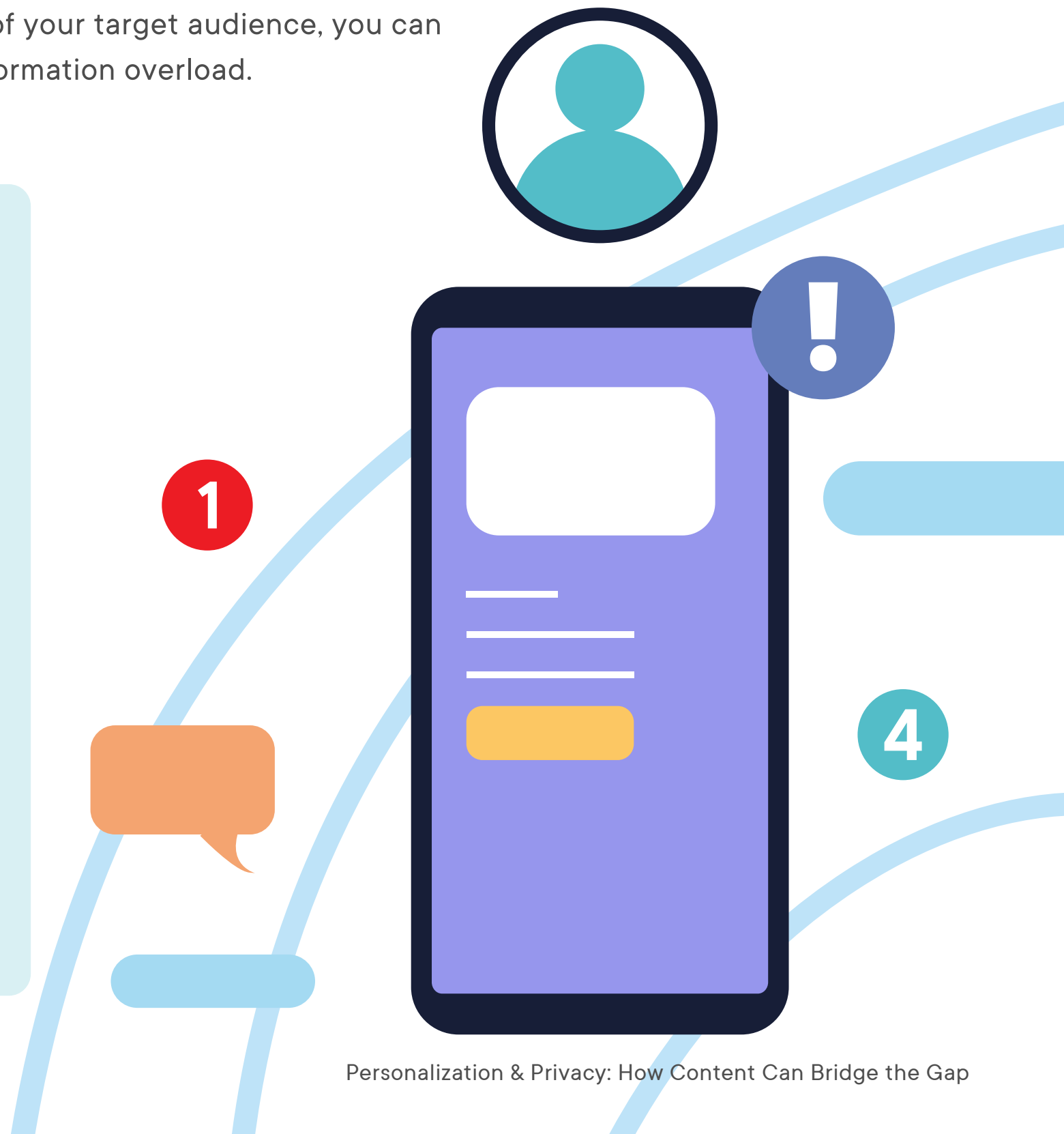
The role of data privacy

What's also interesting is the increased investment in personalization technologies coincides with greater consumer literacy around data privacy. Recently, the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) highlighted the importance of data security as a topic for marketers. In its 2020-2022 research priorities report, marketing researchers questioned:

"In the age of GDPR and the increasing importance of preserving customers' privacy, what is the appropriate tradeoff between privacy and personalization, and what are the ethical ramifications of customer data collection and use? How will regulation/compliance affect marketing?" *(MSI, 2020, p.7)*

These are questions that modern marketers must grapple with until we conduct further research. What we do know is that we live in an age where the use of ad blockers is standard and 71% of countries worldwide currently have privacy and data protection laws, with 9% drafting legislation and only 5% without (UNCTAD, 2021).

That said, Twilio found that **48% of consumers** appreciate the convenience of personalization so long as their data is secure. This is somewhat related to what business researchers Fehrenbach and Herrando (2021) refer to as the privacy paradox. This term describes the discrepancy between how freely consumers sometimes give their personal data, and their contrasting privacy concerns. They suggest the privacy paradox exists because we're missing both a data market that includes the consumer and a valid metric to measure the value of data.

This research tells us that consumers still want to feel understood by businesses, but not at the expense of their privacy, or the autonomy of how and where businesses share their data. Which is actually great news for the commercial storyteller, also known as marketing teams!

The strategy to balance privacy and personalization

As it happens, there's a strategy to give consumers the level of personalization they want, while safeguarding their privacy and data. **SmarterHQ** reported that consumers enjoy personalization when it helps them to:

Receive exclusive discounts on products	**90%**
Have issues resolved and hassle-free	**87%**
Receive back in stock alerts for a product of interest	**85%**
Receive personalized product recommendations	**82%**
Find products faster and easier	**81%**

Data Source: SmarterHQ

While personalization is often thought of as in-app notifications and recommendations similar to your last search query, there's one thing these points have in common — they all use the written word to communicate with the consumer. Which is why we consider the role of content as a more compliant, more compelling, and ultimately more satisfying experience of explicit personalization.

Content saves the day!

It's expected that marketers are always on the lookout for ways to improve conversions. But with less data to feed into attribution marketing, it's okay if you don't know where to start to balance personalization and privacy.

The aim of personalized content is to deliver a customer experience that's both compelling and sticky. What does that mean? A compelling experience helps users find exactly the information, products, and services they need. Who says you need a ton of data to do that?

Here's where it all comes together:

You don't have to employ actual personalization for a great experience through content. You can create an experience that feels personalized simply by creating relevant content. Top quality, compelling content has characteristics that help convert customers via perceived personalization.
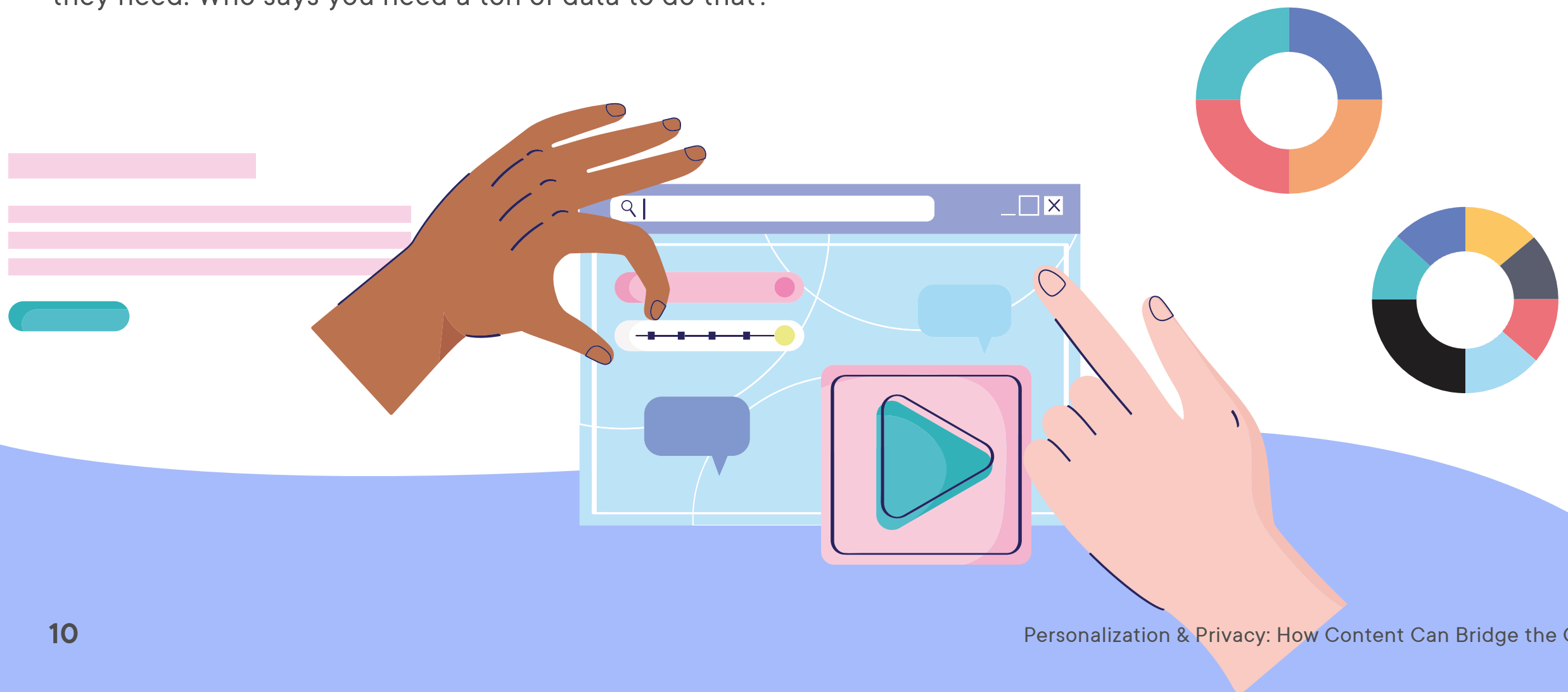
It's time then to get back to basics with content creation. Marketers tend to get lost in data and forget why people engage with content in the first place. There's a lot of marketing analytics platforms that can tell you which content performs best and where, but we need to put ourselves in the consumer's shoes.

Why do they engage with our brand's content in the first place? Most likely because it speaks to them, and makes them feel understood and supported on their path to find more information or a solution.
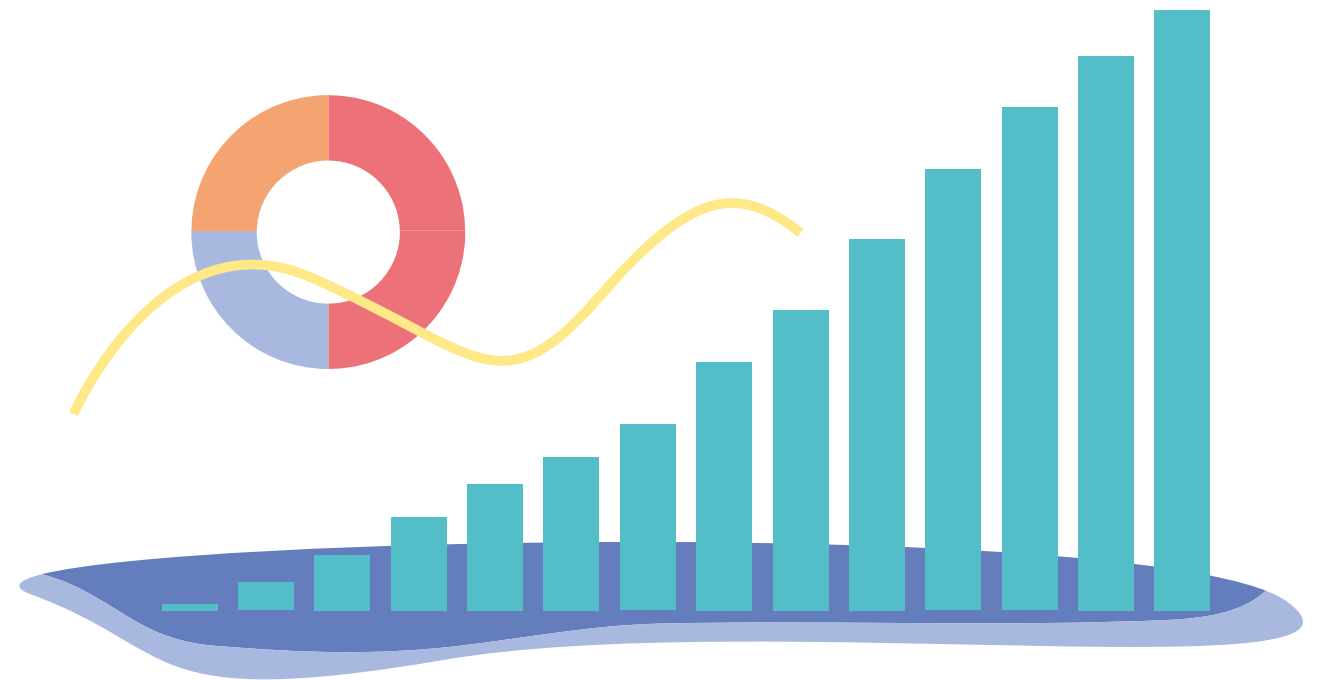
Data can only get you so far in understanding your target audience. You still need to delve into your buyer's motivations, concerns, anxieties, and resistance towards buying. A lot of this information isn't quantitative, because it's emotional. Therefore, you need content that demonstrates you understand the feelings behind what's compelling your prospects to even begin searching for a solution to their problem.

When it comes to content creation, the path to impactful content that delivers that perceived sense of personalization starts with the first word on the page. There's a huge opportunity to use the content creation process itself to improve conversions — all while maintaining a customer's right to data privacy.

What kind of content converts?

Remember the two concepts of **actual personalization** and **perceived personalization**? Let's revisit those. Perceived personalization is the subjective experience of the consumer. How well they think you've met their unique needs on the channel that means the most to them, at the time they think they most need it. The thing is, perceived personalization doesn't always align with actual personalization (the efforts of the company to use data to create tailored experiences) because humans are fickle.

The way to perceived personalization is honing your audience's tone of voice in your content, publishing relevant content that answers their questions, with the clarity and words they feel most comfortable with. And, you have to tell a good story that's inclusive and emotionally appealing. It sounds simple, but it's way more than simply good spelling and grammar and too often, marketers are still not seeing the results they want from their content strategy. Hear it from Cynthia Spiers, our VP of Content and Product Marketing at Acrolinx in our recent webinar called **How to Build More Convertible Content.**

Cynthia Spiers

VP of Content and
Product Marketing
@ Acrolinx

"Every content and digital marketer wants impactful content. We want it to deliver certain results — and we expect it to convert at a high rate. But if we're not seeing those results, why might that be? Maybe our tone of voice isn't working for our target customer. Maybe we're writing too formally or using a lot of meaningless buzzwords. Or maybe our content uses lots of passive voice, which makes it really confusing and unclear. So our messages feel complicated. Or maybe there's a lot of inconsistency in how we talk about our brand across all of our content — the words and phrases we use — and people are confused and can't really trust our messages."

Desirable characteristics of content

Content that ultimately delivers a satisfying customer experience has some common elements. Your marketing stories and messaging are most compelling (Aaker, 2018) when they're presented in a way that's:

Authentic	Content that contains credible information that's trustworthy.
Involving	Content that draws the audience in by addressing their needs.
Intriguing	Content that tells a story that people can understand and that catches their attention and invites a response.
Strategic	Content that's meaningful to its target audience. It has substance and value to both the audience and the brand.

Ideally, your content strategy should be to include all five of these areas in every content piece you publish. But how do you break these elements down into the nitty gritty characteristics of the written word? After all, you can tell content contributors that content needs to be "involving," but what does that look like on the page?

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At Acrolinx, we've broken down the qualities of impactful content into the following characteristics:

Correctness

Accurate and correct language builds credibility.

Clarity

Easy-to-read content improves engagement.

Accurate terminology

Consistent use of brand terms fuels brand recognition and trust.

Scannable text

Structured content is easier for readers to skim.

Consistency

Reliable use of language avoids confusion.

Relatable tone and emotion

Tone of voice and emotive language foster a connection with readers.

Inclusive language

Respectful and accessible content increases your total addressable market.

Findability

Easy to find content creates a better customer experience.

Data privacy tip: It's these very same characteristics of content that matter most in highly regulated environments. Especially when communicating to consumers about how you use their data, and where it's stored. Clear and readable privacy policies are absolutely essential in all communication around data privacy and security. Make sure it's findable, and written in plain language, with clear definitions of commonly misunderstood words and acronyms.

The role of data in creating impactful content

When we say content can be the bridge between personalization and privacy, we want to be careful not to "throw the baby out with the bath water" as the old phrase goes. That means data still has a role to play in creating impactful content. Marketers can't deny the need to measure outcomes, because in digital marketing, your gut feelings can only get you so far. Which is why analytics platforms exist! Data allows us to continuously monitor, improve, and test what we're doing.

The trick is to become data-smart more than data-driven. Engagement with content needs to be approached strategically, meaning your content goals need to align with the experiences those consumer touch points are intending to create.

So what data do you need to create content goals that trigger perceived personalization? In consulting recent research by Lehnart et al. (2021) in the Business Strategy Journal, you should build out your content goals according to your customer personas. When building your personas, you want to collect information for these five key areas:

Demographics	How it helps personalize content
Authentic	This data helps you build out the beginning of your persona's personality. It can help you think about the solutions that are relevant to someone's life or career stage, which then informs content that's tailored to a target audience in that stage.
Values and Emotions	This information is hardest to get from simply looking at a metric. Instead, try asking your target audience directly what they care about through interviews or polls. What other content does your target audience engage with in their free time? This information helps you overcome barriers to reaching your target audience and communicate with empathy in your content.
Motivations and Intentions	These are the overall desires of your persona. What's driving them and how do they approach their challenges? This information helps you differentiate your message and target specific consumer needs through content in a way that's helpful and informative.
Concerns	What's stopping your persona from solving a problem? Is it lack of knowledge? Lack of access to budget? Consider a company or consumer's natural resistance to change. This helps you write content that considers all stages of the customer journey, and how the needs of your target audience could change as they progress through the buyer journey.
Communication and Search Styles	It's important to understand communication styles. What kind of biases might your target audience be subject to? How and where do they want to communicate with you? Some target audiences like in-app notifications, others want to join a forum or virtual event to network, while others want time to read through an eBook in their own time. This information allows you to make sure you're communicating a message that resonates, in a format where it lands well.

Resist the temptation to collect more data than you need! To keep data privacy a top priority during any kind of data collection or analysis you should:

- Get consent every time you collect consumer data

- Be transparent about how data will be used and who can access it

- Limit processing of personal data to what's absolutely necessary

- Protect data against theft

- Grant consumers the right to be forgotten

- Make data governance and privacy policy considerations a part of your marketing organization's standard operating model

The next logical step after gathering this information is to start formulating your messaging that includes the key event that triggered your target audience to start looking for a solution. A great approach is to interview new customers after you've closed a deal, to document what started their search and why they chose your brand. All this helps you create tailored content that's emotionally compelling enough for your target personas to consider your solution. The key here is to remember that there's someone on the end of every piece of content your enterprise creates (a real human being!) and while it doesn't need to be creepily personalized, it still needs to communicate real stories with integrity, authority, and empathy.

The next challenge is making all this information accessible to everyone in your enterprise that creates content. Thankfully, that's where technology can help!

Acrolinx: content metrics made human

Let's summarize what we've covered so far and revisit a challenge we defined earlier. The level of actual personalization that's possible is increasingly limited as consumers expect more data privacy. Perceived personalization is entirely possible, and quite possibly the next big thing. In the meantime, **content can improve conversions by playing into perceived personalization, with certain characteristics that make content more relevant to your target audience.** There's still plenty of data involved, because we need to measure our results. Often, that data is performance data. It tells us how content is meeting the needs of our audience, but doesn't really point to what exactly in the content is yielding those results.

Technology can help address at least two of the challenges we mentioned earlier. Namely:

- Content performance metrics don't come with actionable insights that directly correlate to content qualities. Basically, they can't tell you how to improve the content to improve performance — you have to work that out on your own.

- With the data you do have, you've built a fantastic content strategy with detailed content guidelines about how to speak to different target audiences, with different types of content across various channels. But you have no way to know if all content contributors remember there's someone on the other end of their content, let alone that they're regularly consulting your content guidelines.

- Because of the above two points, you're missing out on maximizing the value of your content by improving conversions at the moment of content creation.

How does technology help?

Firstly, it should analyze your content to find performance issues, and provide guidance to make adjustments to the various characteristics of your content. Then, you need to be able to test those changes and see the correlation between your content goals and the performance of your content. That's how you drive conversion!
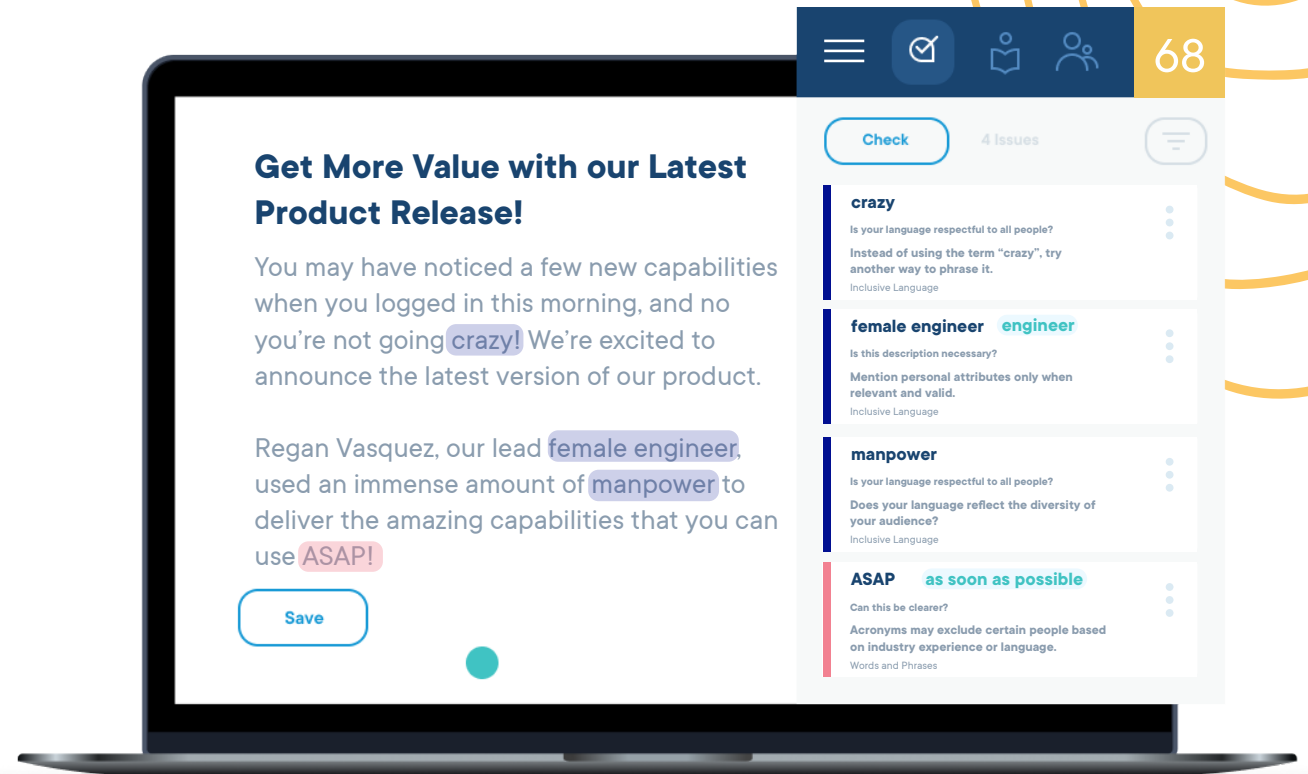
ABOUT ACROLINX

You might be used to collecting your content performance metrics in one place and your marketing metrics in another, and relying on your best marketing savvy to interpret how the two connect. Acrolinx now gives you both, conveniently in one place.

Acrolinx is an AI-powered software platform that improves the quality and impact of enterprise content. We help some of the world's most valuable brands meet complex content challenges at immense scale — across writers, languages, and cultures. Acrolinx delivers a unified content experience across all digital touchpoints, all while avoiding editorial bottlenecks, quality issues, budget overruns, and compliance risk.

Do you have a data security or personalization question for us?

Talk to us!

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