

Too Much Personalisation? Too Little Respect?

Shôn Ellerton, January 20, 2020

Never assume that personalising newsletters, distribution letters or other forms of mass communication is the way to go.



The other morning, I received and opened a letter from a utility company. It seemed a bit thicker than usual to be the regularly quarterly bill so I expected it to be one of those ‘informative’ letters explaining what’s happening in the future, what you can do to save energy costs, what it means to be that customer, that kind of stuff. It was, in fact, a kind of newsletter containing various bits of news about the energy industry in the state. What captured my eye on reading the newsletter was how it addressed me.

It read, ‘*Hi Shôn,*’, after which, after a few sentences, my name was mentioned again. ‘*Shôn, do you know how to get the best advice on storage and battery solutions?*’ This occurred a couple more times until I reached the end of the newsletter.

This technique, of course, is known as personalised mail merging, a technique which has been at play for decades where names, addresses or any other data stored in a list or a database is embedded, or merged, into a letter for mass distribution.

I first came across it during the 90s using Ami Pro, a word processor made by Lotus, in the days where Lotus products, in my opinion, were significantly better than Microsoft’s. Even [WordPerfect](#), an amazing word processor of the late 80s and early 90s running on the slowest of machines for its time, had this facility. Today, in the world of e-mails, many use software service providers like Mailchimp to distribute personalised e-mails.

Back to the letter I received from the utility company with my first name scattered throughout in several locations, I can't help but feel that this crosses over the line of what is respectful or disrespectful. Some of us wouldn't bat an eyelid not minding at all, some of us may not have even noticed, and some may even find a small glow of happiness that the letter is addressed 'especially to you'. However, I am sure that there are some, myself included, that find it a little disrespectful and fake. After all, you don't know me from Joe or Adam. Why would I find it more 'personal' knowing full well that the letter was generated using an automated mail merge process? A simple 'Sir' or '*Dear Customer*' would suffice. By addressing letters with '*Sir/Madam*', one is not trying hard to be personal, especially for something which is, quite frankly, not personal at all; an informative letter from a utility company which, possibly, might pertain to you. Perhaps, in this day, using words like Sir or Madam have other woke and politically correct issues which I won't get into. Perhaps, as emotionless as it might sound, '*Dear Customer*' is the right way in this case.

I call this whole thing as 'insincere personalising'. I'm sure some out there like to be pandered by this, but many can see through the charade as being disingenuous.

This recalls to me, one of the funniest moments in cinematic history. The scene in *Falling Down* where Michael Douglas wanders into a Whammy-Burger outlet, a fictitious burger fast-food chain, and wants breakfast but he cannot because they are now 5 minutes into the lunch menu despite having breakfast items still under the heating element ready to be served. The staff have first names on their badges and Michael starts asking Sheela, one of the servers, if he can have breakfast. Then he starts questioning why he is calling her by her first name and it all sort of gets ugly from then on whence he starts shooting holes into the ceiling by accident with a machine gun he managed to obtain on an earlier 'adventure'. Far-fetched, but in an interesting way, not too implausible. Funny enough, I still find it oddly disconcerting when the barista calls out your name when your coffee is ready to be collected.

Paradoxically, personalising emails *can* make them unintentionally formal or just downright wrong. For example, if I was to send an email to my team of co-workers, the natural way to address the email would be to write something like, '*Team*', '*Hey everyone...*', or some other friendly opening. Replacing it with first names of those in the team would be plain weird.

Examples of ultra-personification of e-mails or ads can make many feel quite threatened and uncomfortable. The use of AI to determine what products should be recommended based on prior shopping or browser search history is a growing trend. However, there is also a growing trend in the use of private browser technologies and ad-blocking which is highly understandable. For example, I'm sure many would not want ads plastered all over their browsing sessions for weight-loss products just because they are searching for gyms and exercise regimes. We could be at the pinnacle or just clambering down over the other side in meeting the general public's acceptance of being targeted by personified ads and now furthering to make moves to make our lives more anonymous or private.

There are occasions where personalising e-mails or letters may be appropriate, but it is, in my opinion, highly specific. For example, my wife distributes an e-mail newsletter out on a monthly basis for her Tai Chi students. She doesn't want to make her group as informal as, say, a bunch of her best friends or her team colleagues at work by writing something like, '*Hi y'all!*' or '*Hey there,*' or whatever comes into one's mind when addressing a group of your mates together in a room. However, she still knows everyone by name and knows them individually, so writing something more formal like '*Dear Sir/Madam*' is going to come across quite detached and unemotive.

Personalising e-mails, letters or any form of communication for the sake of attracting business has long been a mainstay for marketers. Now whether they are truly effective or not is open for debate as it largely depends on the situation for what its intended for.

I'm curious as to how personalised e-mails would be taken in countries like Germany. Having had grandparents who lived in Germany, I frequented to see them until they sadly passed away. I remembered how formal even colleagues were with each other, often calling each other by their last names for years and years. Perhaps this is changing, but I'd be surprised if a utility company would start off with a personalised letter with '*Hey, Otto, would you like to save more on your next energy bill?*'.

As mentioned earlier, some take the meaning of personalised emails, letters or other forms of communication, particularly with regard to marketing, as being insincere or disingenuous with the notion that all that is intended is to ask for something without knowing who you're really are. For others, they may view

the meaning as being a little more personal and thoughtful than a straight-up generic '*Dear Sir/Madam*'.

If I was to offer advice on anyone choosing whether to adopt personalised mail merges or other forms of communication to a group of people, I'd give one answer. If you reversed the roles completely, establish what you would feel more comfortable with; being addressed in a personalised way or in a generic fashion.

Never, flat out, assume that personalisation is always the way to go.