

WHY CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT

By Melanie Rodney, Ph.D.

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I read an article recently on contextual advertising and behavioral marketing. It seems that the marketing folks are catching on to what we have known for years – understanding people’s behaviors and the context in which they use a service or product is much more predictive of outcomes than knowing their demographics or psychographic profile.

In the context of the aforementioned article, marketers are finding that they are much more successful with their online advertising for mini-vans when they target web users who have used the keyword in their online search. This tells the marketer that they are interested in minivans and that they are likely looking for a new vehicle now. It turns out that this is more important to know than whether the user is a male, age 25-34 with 2 kids and a house in the suburbs. While those demographic characteristics may describe the population of mini-van owners, they don’t accurately predict who will purchase mini-vans in the current time period. What behavioral marketing is doing is not only displaying ads in context (of someone looking for the product) but altering the content based on individual consumer behavior.

Similarly, with web design, it is more important to know what users are doing on the site (frequent tasks) and why they have come to the site for that particular visit than what their demographic characteristics are. Organizations spend a lot of money on research to understand who their users are. But without knowing why those users come to the site and what they are trying to accomplish on the site at that particular moment a marketer may end up annoying a new customer with advertising for a product that they recently purchased or missing the opportunity to market to a customer who is ready to purchase.

In the same fashion, government services websites might need to know whether users are coming to the site to find information or complete a transaction (request for service) or both. If both, how will they complete their tasks – will they start to complete a form and then go search for more information on a topic before returning to complete the form? What questions might they need answered before they feel comfortable submitting a form? These are the kinds of questions and issues that arise when considering user behaviors and the context in which different behaviors occur. It is this type of contextual information that will help the site designers determine if an automatic save should be implemented to allow users to leave a partially completed form and return to it later or if a direct link to FAQs should be available from the electronic form page.

While demographics and user opinions are useful for describing the characteristics of the user population, they won’t provide effective design guidance as will observing user behaviors and the context for those behaviors.

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