



Dear Publishing Professional,

The main focus of this issue is the need to regain control over your own destiny and re-establish a direct relationship with your customers. There's also an operations tip on page 3. But first, the big news ...

Lessons from the Google about face

The big news to hit the publishing world is that Google might not deprecate third-party cookies after all -- which wasn't that surprising after all the delays.

It was obvious from the beginning that Google's goal was to increase their dominance over customer data and online advertising. I had thought the motivation behind the third-party cookie play was something like this: if you want data on your audience, we're the only game in town.

Now it seems they're trying to push everybody into using their Privacy Sandbox. I haven't investigated it, but I'd bet dollars to donuts it results in Google getting even more user information.

In any event, here are four thoughts to guide your strategy going forward.

1. **Quit jumping through hoops.** Publishers have been doing Google's bidding for decades. We need to stop doing that and get our destiny back in our own hands.
2. **Don't trust platforms.** They want to take your customers and make you obsolete. Why are you helping them do that? If you try to build a business through a platform, they'll just change the rules on you. Stop relying on fickle partners who want to steal your business!
3. **Reassert control.** Create your own connection with your audience by collecting email addresses and first-party data on your customers. Keep control over how you communicate with your audience.
4. **Keep a weather eye on any form of dependence.** Regularly ask yourself "what would happen to my business if Google (or some other platform) disappeared?" Do the same before signing up with any new service. □

Don't make your customers think!

There's an old book on website design titled *Don't Make Me Think, A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. That basic concept applies to more than web design.

"Cognitive load" is a concept used to measure how much mental effort is required to process information and make decisions.

Here's a story about "cognitive load."

One night, years ago, I was on my way from work to an evening class. I was exhausted. I wanted a candy bar and a cup of coffee so the sugar, fat, and caffeine would get me through the lecture. I pulled into some rinky dink road-side shop expecting an old pot of coffee and a Snickers. They had 10,000 types of candy bars and 14 varieties of coffee.

For the first and only time in my life, I wished I was in the Soviet Union and there were only two choices: “candy bar” and “coffee.”

I eventually got my Snickers and coffee, but seeing all those choices felt like a wet, heavy blanket of despair descending on my soul.

“However,” you may be thinking, “people like to have options. There’s a reason why there are 14 varieties of coffee.”

Yes, and you have to find the appropriate balance between the “choice paralysis” when there are too many options and the frustration when there are too few. Phones seem to have managed this by putting relatively few options up front with an endless array of options deep in the settings.

Personalization is one way publishers can lessen the cognitive load on their readers. Consider Spotify. If I want to listen to a song, I don’t have to wade through the entire universe of music. Spotify recommends things that I will probably like.

Here are some ways you can use this concept to make your service easier to use.

Filter out what’s irrelevant to the reader. Don’t try to answer every question or provide every option on every page. Focus on what 80 percent of the people want. Make the long tail accessible, but not prominent.

Align choices with the reader’s interests. Use a customer data platform to find out what customers want and make those activities easier for that customer.

Eliminate friction. Make decisions as easy as possible. The question is not necessarily how many clicks or how many pages the user needs to endure, but how easy each of them are.

Make things familiar and predictable. If people are used to seeing a feature a certain way, do it that way. Salt is still salt if it’s in a square box, but when people are looking for salt, they’re looking for a cylinder, not a box. Don’t contradict their expectations.

Following these suggestions can help you lower the cognitive load of using your service and make people feel more comfortable with it. □

A “relationship” with your readers

An ad in an industry newsletter said, “In the age of AI, it’s more important than ever for publishers to have direct relationships with their readers.”

It’s a lovely thought, but what do “direct” and “relationship” mean in the context of publishing?

Here are some possible characteristics of a “direct” relationship.

- You communicate with them without any intermediary. E.g., you control the means of distribution of your content and do not rely on third parties or platforms.

- You address your customers as individuals and personalize their experience.
- Your customers pay you directly, not through a third party.
- You're collecting first-party data about your customers.

A "relationship" might imply ...

- You strive to build trust and credibility.
- Your interactions are bi-directional. You speak and you listen – with surveys and questionnaires. You communicate on social media, on the phone, in email, etc.
- You meet with your customers in real life.
- You respect your customers' values and opinions and create content that's relevant and useful to them.
- You respect your customers' relationships with other customers and either build a community for them or take part in the communities they're already in.
- You take complaints and concerns seriously.
- You're consistent and reliable.
- You create ways for your customers to show the same loyalty towards you.

Are you pursuing this kind of relationship with your customers?

From the operations desk ...

How to make better project timeline estimates

We're all bad at estimating the time, cost, and risks associated with a task, and we usually overestimate the benefits. The problem increases with the complexity of the project. This is called **The Planning Fallacy**.

Here are three tips to make your projections more reliable.

1. Break down a complicated task into its components so your estimations are more granular and specific.
2. Compare these tasks with relevant experience from previous projects.
3. Don't make one estimate. Give a pessimistic, a realistic, and an optimistic assessment for each task, and explain when and why each might apply.

Following this method can help to mitigate the effect of the planning fallacy.

What do your customers value?

The editors at *The New York Times* probably believed people bought their paper because they wanted "all the news that's fit to print." They learned that many people wanted Wordle.

The editors at *The Guardian* probably believed people wanted their "original reporting and incisive analysis," but it's their recipe app that's catching on.

Conference organizers like to believe people attend their events because of the great presentations and keynotes, when often their real motivation is to see and be seen by their colleagues.

Is there a disconnect between what you think your customers care about and what they actually care about?

When I worked on legal loose-leaf books for the energy industry, a lot of our customers told me they only subscribed because having our books on their shelf made them look like they were informed and up to date.

Some people buy a magazine because it looks good on the coffee table.

The point is not that people never consume the content. They do. People listen to podcasts, and those things don't sit on coffee tables or look good on the shelf. But publishers need to be clear-eyed about incentives and value.

Do you know *why* people are buying your product and which parts of it they value the most? The answers might surprise you. ☐

Is an AI backlash brewing?

No.

It's likely that artificial general intelligence is way farther off than the tech lords hope. If that becomes a common view, investments in AI will be redirected towards improving existing technologies that actually work.

Early attempts to introduce AI-generated characters into our lives will have a strong ick factor with some people – at least for the short term. Don't be a leader in that field. People will warm up to the concept sooner or later, and you can afford to wait.

For all the criticism aimed at AI-generated content (especially from people who are threatened by it), it's actually quite good and helpful – so long as a skeptical human reviews it.

AI is here to stay and will work its way into most of what we do. There will be complaints, bumps, and readjustments, but go ahead and use it ... cautiously. ☐

Sincerely,



Greg Krehbiel



P.S. – Are you measuring how engaged your digital subscribers are with your content? You should be. Give me a call if you need help with that.