7 Best Ways to Leverage First-Party Data Capture Strategies for a Competitive Advantage

ZUORA

Contents

Introduction

Collecting and leveraging first-party data for better personalization isn't a new concept. Yet many digital publishers are still seeking to develop better audience insights from first-party data. It's clear that using visitor information effectively to grow subscribers and stand out from the crowd remains a challenge for many digital publishers to this day.

Personalization is paramount, and consumers have become increasingly wary of unconsented data collection. Digital publishers who gather their own data openly and are transparent about how they use it will not only put customers at ease, they'll also gain a competitive advantage too.

What do acquisition and retention mean for your technology stack?

Now more than ever, building a robust first-party data strategy is crucial to success. That's why we created this guide to dive into some of the ways you can collect and use first-party data effectively to stand out and be heard in a populated market.

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> First-party data collection should have always been a priority for businesses, but many had an arm's length relationship with their customer data, offloading the collection and analysis to third parties. With recent changes, first-party data has become a focal point for many businesses. To gain the most from their first-party data, businesses need to ensure it is part of an organization-wide data strategy and that data plays a role in all parts of the business. Until data is valued for what it is, it can never truly serve as a competitive advantage.
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> **Shorful Islam**
> CEO, Be Data Solutions

01 Sources of first-party data

Before we dive into the ways you can leverage your first-party data, here's a recap of some of the main sources you can use to capture that vital information.

In-article forms

By far the easiest to implement today, in-article forms allow you to capture information about site visitors' from names and email addresses to visitors preferences. Once a reader has registered, additional activities can be tracked such as what content a reader consumes most often and when.

Mobile login

Although mobile app or website data may be similar to the desktop version of your site, not all reading behaviors are the same on mobile devices. Failure to track these instance will mean you lack a full picture of their subscriber journey. To gain better understanding of reader activity and track these instances effectively, encouraging user login is recommended across all apps and devices.

Customer care teams

While collecting data from real customer interaction might be a bit more of manual process, the rich information being generate here should not be neglected. There are still key insights to gather about customer segments, demographics, account issues, and preferences.

Email and SMS

Tracking who opens emails and whose interest is piquing allows marketers to segment audiences and run specific campaigns based on the different levels of engagement.

We'll expand on these later in the guide. For now, let's take a look into how you can make the best use of reader data for a competitive advantage...

One of the first and most essential steps in making the most of first-party data is to ensure your website is optimized for data capture[2].

That means setting everything up to track user behavior efficiently across your different web pages, and utilizing the insights you gain straight away.

Optimization usually involves the use of the following tools:

Registration walls

A registration wall asks visitors to input their email address or other contact information in order to gain access to content or downloads. This can be presented in the form of a pop-up window or an in-article form. Registration walls are an effective and transparent way to collect first-party data, as they require active consent from the visitor (inputting their contact information) in exchange for greater value. Often, digital publishers will set word limits on articles or allow access to a limited number of content pieces before asking a user to register — this gives an excellent incentive for people to sign up.

Thank you messages

A vital piece of the puzzle that can often be forgotten is at the immediate upsell stage. Once a visitor has provided their contact information and registered, this is an ideal time to show other offers while they're considering more use of your service. After they've entered their details, be sure to thank them, re-iterate the benefits they're receiving, and tell them what their other options are.

Free trials

As well as pushing readers to register in order to continue reading an article, you can also encourage registration with other options, such as gaining access to a free trial. That could include access to a set number of articles per month, access to all of your content for seven days, or even access to premium features they won't have seen before. Not only will trial offers entice readers to eventually subscribe, but they will also give you excellent data insights into precisely what content readers look at during their trial, so you can fine-tune that content for maximum engagement in the future.

Include CTAs in your articles

While this step might sound obvious, many digital publishers fail to include calls-to-action (CTAs) at the end of articles and miss potential data collection opportunities. Presenting new offers at the bottom of articles or on the sidebar is a great way to get views where you want them and encourage visitors to provide their contact information. You can offer a free download, remind them of your premium subscription, or offer entry into a contest in exchange for email addresses. Including these offers in an article you know your readers like means you'll get more chances of sign-ups.

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[1] https://www.zephr.com/blog/data-capture-for-publishers-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-so-important-to-your-bottom-line

03 Make it easy (and valuable) to share data

A reader's likelihood to share their information can be based on three factors: the level of trust they have for your brand, the level of value they perceive from using your service, and the ease of sharing their data at the lowest inconvenience. Here's how those three factors break down:

Trust

Customers are extremely wary of receiving unwanted marketing messages and being talked at when they're not interested in receiving communications. To help encourage new readers to share their information, transparency and integrity are key. The reader has to be sure you're not going to misuse their personal data, and that they can easily unsubscribe at any point should they want to. With clear preference options at sign up, customers can choose their preferred method of communication from the start, and will feel a lot more comfortable sharing personal information.

Value

Digital publishers have to think about data collection in terms of value exchange. You must give readers a reason to want to sign up, and the value they perceive needs to match the value of sharing their personal information. Unfortunately, there's no one-size-fits-all for this perceived value exchange. Sometimes simply enticing a user to continue reading an article will be enough, other times they might need more to commit to registering. Ultimately, finding the right value balance for your business comes down to testing different incentives and seeing what works best.

Ease

Since any inconvenience can cause a barrier for a reader to share information and decrease your chances of receiving their data, consider how you can make it as easy as possible for someone to fill out a form. Only collecting essential information is crucial, but some digital publishers also consider easy-to-use form options such as social login. Social login is a process that allows users to sign in to your website using their social media credentials instead of typing out their details (you've likely seen and used the "Sign in with Google" and Facebook options before). This makes it extremely easy for the reader to share information and register quickly — usually with just one click!

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> Customers and consumers face discomfort in giving away too much information nowadays. We have a newly empowered consumer, and you really need to earn their trust to be able to acquire that information. The most informative journey that any of us can start with is building some value exchange in the registration process to make sharing information feel easier and worthwhile.
>
> **James Henderson**
> VP GTM Subscriber Experience
> & former CEO of Zephr

04 Optimize your data capture

In today's digital world, **90 percent of users move between devices to complete a task**[2]. **That comes with even more advancements in future technology, meaning customers are no longer limited to just one touchpoint with your brand. They're now engaging via mobile apps, browsers, tablets and smartwatches, and the number of accessible devices will only increase.**

To really make use of your user data, you should expand collection past the desktop version of your website and start building a bigger picture by collecting data on other devices as well.

Here's where cross-device tracking comes in.

Cross-device tracking is the ability to track a user through all their interactions with the different versions of your site, analyze their activity across devices, and gain a complete picture of their usage and behavior.

For example, behavior data might suggest that a user reads sports content on desktop but only watches sports news bulletin videos when on your mobile app on their daily commute. With this knowledge, efforts can be made to recommend new sports videos at this time (instead of full articles) or show short, mobile-friendly content to fit the commute time and keep the reader coming back for more. The more real-time your data and insights are, the more agile your business can be in focusing marketing efforts.

The easiest way to implement cross-device tracking is to encourage readers to log in every time they interact with your content. Whether that's to log in on your desktop site, or through a mobile app or another device. With login encouraged across all channels, cross-device tracking becomes relatively easy, and as a result, you can attribute the right actions to the right user profile instantaneously, without relying on any guesswork.

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[2] https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/search/shift-to-constant-connectivity/
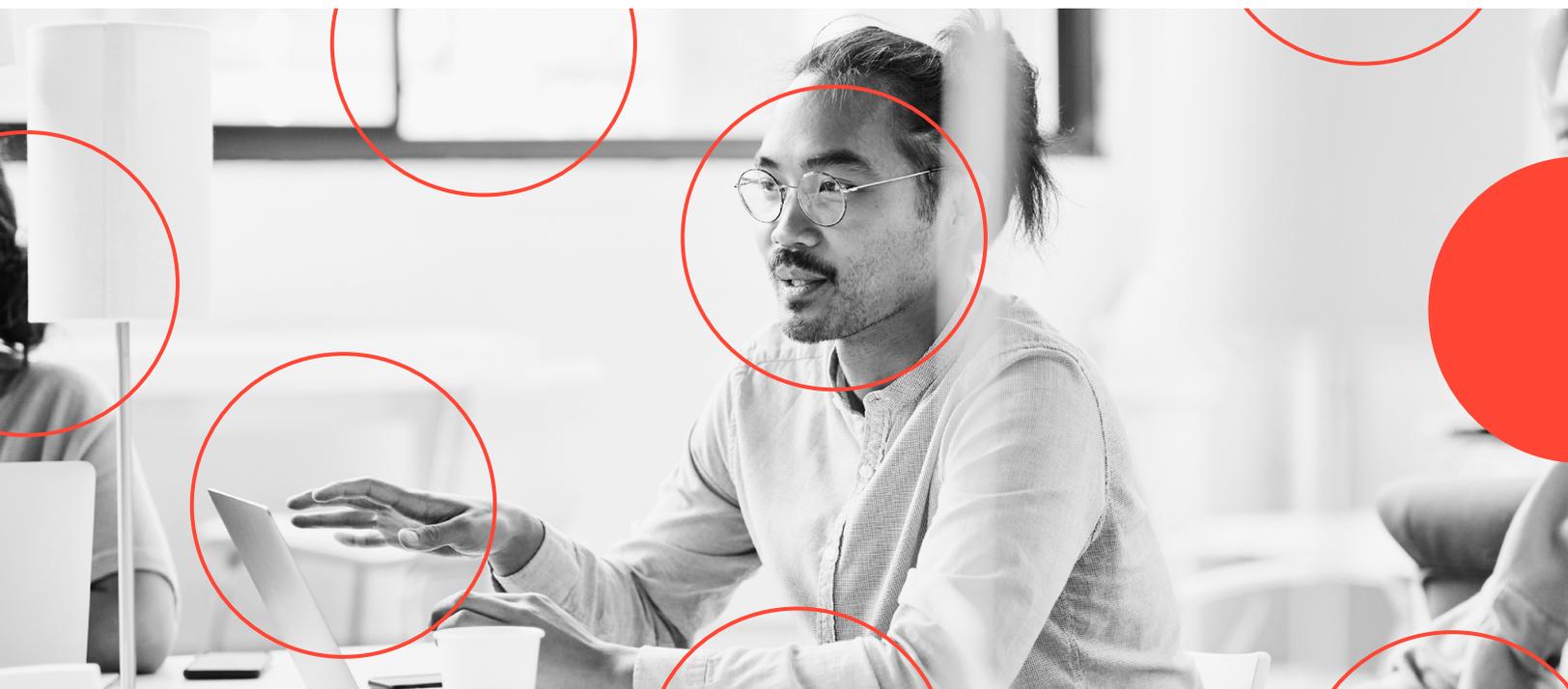
05 Use progressive profiling

As collecting data is essential to the overall subscription success, digital publishers should consider tactics to increase their chance of a potential customer sharing their data. If new readers are suddenly hit with a registration form with 18 different fields asking personal questions, there's a strong chance they might feel put off or lose interest.

That's why many companies try to optimize their data collection process by removing intrusive questions or cutting down the number of fields in their registration forms. Take Imagescape, for example, which cut its form fields from 11 questions to 4, increasing its conversion rate by **120%**![3]

With stats like that, it's easy to see that digital publishers need to forget long forms and think out of the box when collecting meaningful amounts of data. Instead of having one extensive form to fill, you need to employ progressive profiling. Progressive profiling is a method for gradually collecting data and creating a profile of your readers over time.

Progressive profiling works by spreading out relevant data collection throughout the customer journey and through various different means. This way, you can keep initial registration forms to a minimum, reducing sign up friction without sacrificing data collection overall.

Picture the journey like this: You have a user register to continue reading your article at the beginning of their experience with you. When they register, they share a few simple pieces of information regarding their interests. This allows you to track each time they log in. A few weeks later, you then offer a free trial to your premium subscription product in exchange for more data, and during this free trial, you collect more behavior preferences as you see what content they browse most regularly.

Finally, you present them with an offer to pay for your subscription and ask some more questions about preferences upon sign up.

In a snapshot, this is how progressive profiling enables you to collect the same amount of data as a long form, but over time and with far less inconvenience to the customer.

As well as the various data collection forms mentioned above, remember you can also utilize collection from other sources we mentioned at the start of this guide. Stats like open and click-through rates, for example, will provide insight into topics that readers engage with, and feedback from your customer care teams will help you determine the best features to push in your premium subscriptions.

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> Businesses need to balance the need for data against many factors. These include respecting customer privacy; is it absolutely necessary to know a customer's date of birth? Or compromising the functionality of your product; is worsening page load worth collecting that additional behavioral data on a form? Or even the customer experience; is asking for a customer's wedding anniversary date too intrusive or likely to put them off?
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> **Shorful Islam**
> CEO, Be Data Solutions

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[3] https://unbounce.com/conversion-rate-optimization/how-to-optimize-contact-forms/

06 Test and refine

A good first-party data strategy[4] doesn't just stop once you create a registration form or paywall. Digital publishers looking to stand out from the competition should continue to iterate and optimize. By tracking conversions and A/B testing different strategies, you can ensure you're getting the absolute most out of them. Here are a few areas you can experiment with to help improve form conversions:

When to show a form

You might see best form conversions after users have read three free articles, or maybe it's after just one. The only way to know is to run a split test with varying durations. Think not only about how many articles a user can view for free, but also how far through an article they can read before a registration form is presented. Some digital publications might find that 200 words is enough to entice users to read on. For others, it might be more.

What form messaging to use

One of the easiest tests for your forms lies in changing the copy. Try framing calls to action differently, highlighting different benefits in the messaging to encourage sign up, or adjusting the form fields or button text. You might be surprised how a minor tweak to your wording or form questions can have a significant impact.

Frequency of registration forms

If an anonymous reader has seen one of your registration forms once but chose not to sign up, it might not benefit you to show them the same form over and over again. Testing a sequence of different forms can help you determine the optimum journey to get users "over the line."

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Not only does running experiments help publishers find ways to diminish friction when trying to earn reader data, testing also helps deepen knowledge of reader preferences and develop the capabilities to improve online experiences.

James Carter
Pre-Sales Solutions Consulting Lead, Zephr

Which device to target

If you've set up account login across multiple devices, you can test and understand if users convert more frequently on a mobile, tablet, or any other device. With this information, you can focus your marketing efforts on the most successful channel.

Which articles to put forms on

If your data shows that some articles receive more traffic and engagement on your site than the rest, it might be an idea to try placing forms on those specific articles to see if you increase conversions there.

[4] https://www.zuora.com/products/first-party-data-strategies

07 Personalize every stage of the subscriber journey

SmarterHQ[5] **says that 72% of consumers now only engage with marketing messages that are personalized and tailored to their interests.**

With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that personalization is at the forefront of a good subscription experience. Incorrect assumptions about a user's preferences can result in quick unsubscribes and prevent readers from purchasing your subscription products.

This is where good first-party data utilization can make the biggest difference. Used effectively, first-party data can help you create unique experiences for the customer at every stage in their journey.

Here are a few areas you can experiment with to help improve form conversions:

Suppose you know information about a reader's behavior (types of articles they like, etc.). In that case, you can use that information to persuade them to purchase your subscription products by offering packages that meet the reader's needs (e.g., if you know a reader consumes world news in the mornings on mobile, you can recommend a paid mobile news-based package to fit). Or if you know they prefer to watch videos instead of reading content, you could offer them a video package instead. Providing specific value like this can help maximize revenue.

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> One of the biggest pitfalls for digital publishers is assuming the subscription journey ends at subscription! If a subscriber is going to stick around long term, you want to be continuously improving their experience at every stage and learning from them as much as possible.
>
> **Mark Whistler**
> Head of Product Marketing & Enablement, Zephr

5 https://smarterhq.com/blog/personalization-statistics-roundup

Custom content recommendations

We've all seen "recommended" or "you might also like" sections at the bottom of articles. But often, those recommendations have nothing to do with the article you're reading or your interests in general. Using accurate behavior data to recommend articles that users are actually interested in will boost engagement and keep readers coming back for more. Recommending content they have a high likelihood of engaging with will increase the time they spend on your site, improve their overall subscriber experience, and grow the relationship they build with your brand.

Here are two key areas to consider when personalizing content:

> **1. Localized:** Think about geographically relevant articles (e.g., sports or news) in a reader's area.
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> **2. Demographic:** You wouldn't present an article about retirement options to a reader in their 20s, so think about how demographic segments have varying interests and how you can meet the different needs.

The more detailed and granular you are with the user attributes and preferences you collect in your data, the more likely it is that you'll assist your reader in locating what they're interested in.

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Once you've discovered the stories that individual readers are willing to pay for, and the stories that keep them paying, you can finally move from reach to relationships.

Nick Tjaardstra
Head of Global Advisory, The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers

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Micro-payments could become the future of digital publishing. Readers can subscribe for a specific period of time and pay a one-off fee for access to niche content. In this way, everything can become packaged, and you reduce the friction with getting a user to sign up for a large package with features or content that might not interest them.

Mark Whistler
Head of Product Marketing & Enablement, Zephr

(08) Get creative

Leveraging your first-party data doesn't have to mean following the same pattern as every other online magazine or newspaper. Savvy digital publishers today might take note of personalized campaigns from different industries, such as tech giants Spotify and Snapchat. Both succeeded in running memorable year-end story campaigns that gained big engagement almost overnight. These year-end campaigns provide users with a recap of all their activity on the platform.

Campaigns like this not only demonstrate a personal touch and make users feel valued, but they also remind users of just how much they use, depend on, and value the service (making them more likely to renew their subscription).

Creating your own personalized campaigns and experimenting with creative ideas is a fun way to keep long time customers engaged. Try delivering a reader's own monthly or year-end recap messages if you have the data. Sending customers a reminder of their usage and the service they're getting will help reinforce their relationship with your brand.

You can also consider other creative approaches to collecting data as well. Sometimes the simplest way to figure out why a consumer does (or does not do) something on your site is to just ask them directly. If you have the resources to do it, try conducting a survey, competition, or poll to engage with readers and gather data. Surveys and polls can be a fun way for users to feel like they have an impact while providing you with powerful insights for the future.

09 Next steps

Collecting and storing valuable data can be tricky for digital publishers, it is a fairly new concept, involves creating the right registration form at the right time and requires means to store the data in an accessible place that's secure, GDPR and CCPA compliant. Getting past this hurdle is just the beginning, as the real challenge with first-party data strategies comes in being able to tie all your data together into something useful. Having the capability to analyze vast amounts of data and uncover important, actionable insights is where the biggest impact can be made.

Trying to build all those essential functions in-house is costly and time-consuming, so a lot of leading digital publishers opt for subscription experience platforms to simplify the process.

Platforms like these are designed to automate data collection and progressive profiling, segment audiences based on demographics or interests, and split-test new ideas with ease. All while providing you with clear, actionable data that you own.

It's important to note that if you do choose to go down this route and partner with technology vendors, you need to think long term. That means asking questions like:

- "What will data capture look like in 10 years?"
- "Will we have the infrastructure in place to collect all the data we need?"

Ready to make the most out of your data?

Speak to someone on our team

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