How to build up loyalty amongst users in the Internet business
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The portals that offer personalised treatment to users can retain them more easily and avoid their going over to the competition.

One of the principles upon which initiatives on the Internet have been kept going is that the competition is now closer than ever before, a mere click on a mouse away. Thus the ability to create loyalty amongst users is fundamental to the success of any given project and all marketing techniques orientated to this end become of great importance. These techniques, known as marketing relationships, try to encourage the establishment of lasting relationships with customers which are both interactive and of added value, and which compensate for the costs of acquiring these users.

The Internet is able to resolve three key objectives of marketing relationships: listening to the customer, improving the customer's experience of the service and offering personalised treatment. In order to sound out their customers' opinions, companies can utilise web registration pages and electronic mail, which allow them to gather valuable information about their customers and to design personalised marketing strategies. Improvement in customers' experience is obtained by multiplying the means of contact and information available. Thus, sending instructions by e-mail, downloading service support software or responding to frequently asked questions is becoming more and more common.

Differences
The most distinguishing aspect of the Internet lies in its ability to make a personalised offer to the customer. An example of this can be found at Amazon. From customers' behaviour and the data obtained from the process of registration, Amazon offers a shop window of products adapted to the needs of their more than twenty million clients. Yahoo! is another pioneer in personalisation services. Through My Yahoo it offers the customer the possibility of creating his own page on the Internet. The benefits are twofold: on the one hand the customer is satisfied, they only receive the services they want, and on the other, the company is able to gather information about the user. Thanks to this information Yahoo! can offer products and services of personalised added value.

Personalised contents are looking to hook the frequent visitor (stickiness), whose purchasing potential is theoretically superior to that of the recent arrival. The fact that it is the user himself that defines the contents of the web links him to it and generates elevated costs of change, which could prevent him from going over to the competition (lock-in). Moreover, knowledge of the contents that interest the user allows the
development of sustainable personalised marketing campaigns. But personalisation on the Internet is not limited to contents. There are many other functions designed to offer personalised treatment online. Some of the most outstanding ones are self-service functions, interactions via voice and personalised electronic mail, the possibility of carrying out monitoring of purchases and requests and, the most important, customer care services with actual knowledge of the history of the relationship between the company and the client. The combination of all of these benefits succeeds in automatically improving the user's experience of the service. This was demonstrated in a study carried out last year by Cyber Dialogue and the Association for Personalisation, according to which, 56 percent of habitual online buyers prefer to buy at sites that allow personalisation and 63 percent opted to register themselves with webs that included this option.

This conviction is on the increase amongst companies with a web page, which is leading to a steady growth in personalisation technology online. According to the consultancy firm Datamonitor, in 2001 companies around the world invested some 562 million euros in personalisation, a figure that will rise to 2,360 million euros in 2006. 67 percent of this business is centred in the United States while Europe only corners twenty-five percent of the market. The United Kingdom comes first in the list, followed by Germany, France, and the Scandinavian countries. By sector, half of the resources spent on personalisation are directed at banking and commerce, although telecommunications and the leisure industry are also targeted. Spain is not even mentioned in the study. With all this, although there is not that much research into the matter, a quick look at the main electronic commerce webs in Spain reveals that only a minority have a personalisation option on offer. Furthermore, when they do exist they are local versions of North American webs.

"Why is personalised treatment so rare in Spain?"

Customers can not be held hostage by companies

Lluís Renart, IESE Teacher

In Spain a lot of web pages are only informative. They are not even interactive, that is to say, that they permit active and intelligent dialogue with the potential customer. And they are even less transactional, in that they allow an act of buying and selling to take place online. Likewise, very few web pages are truly built on relationships, in a way that the customer can decide if they want to maintain a relationship with the supplier. To reach the relationship phase it is necessary to set in motion processes of organizational transformation and of continuous improvement of supply, being careful to adapt it to different client sectors. However, this can not be done with a mechanistic mentality. It is not a question of succeeding in taking the customers hostage and keeping them stuck to the web page inexorably and involuntarily but rather one of the company being capable of identifying, winning over, serving, and building up loyalty amongst client friends who they value and respect.
Without technology there is no solution

Javier Vello, Senior Manager, PwC.

This is determined by the level of maturity reached in the company's approach to the virtual world. In order to personalise ones needs, on the one hand, to know the customer and, on the other, to have made an investment in technology that allows us to exhaustively analyse the information gathered. Knowledge about the customer is determined by our capacity to gather, store and analyse the information received during our interaction with customers, irrespective of the sales channel used. This knowledge usually only resides in commercial power, and companies do not take great advantage of this. Once this knowledge is gained one has to ask oneself how to use it without limiting the customer's freedom of choice. For the moment, electronic commerce is still incipient in companies and its level of penetration is too scarce to be able to draw definitive conclusions about the consumption habits of cyber customers.