



Listen  
Customer-centricity  
Dialogue

In this brave new consumer world, businesses have the perfect opportunity to break some mindsets and become genuinely customer-centric, says ALAN THORPE of Acxiom. And it doesn't have to be as painful as you might think.

# Five secrets of working in a 'messy kitchen'

**M**aking the leap from being a provider of products and services to a company capable of recognising and engaging customers can require a seismic organisational shift.

A decade ago, the single customer view (SCV) offered a unified plan to drive rules of consumer engagement and campaign frequency. But the world has quickly moved on, thanks in large part to the explosion of the internet and smartphones. The 16- to 24-year-old demographic is particularly adept at channel juggling, cramming nine and a half hours-worth of media into six and a half hours of actual time, using computers, mobiles and other gadgets for 58% of their waking hours.

This is changing the model of customer relationship management (CRM) to one of customer-managed relationships: a move from push to pull that means brands must listen harder instead of shouting loudest, empower people instead of seeking to control them, and develop mutually beneficial conversations rather than marketing monologues.

But it's hard to know how best to reach people. I recently heard a social media expert sum this up neatly by saying marketers need to get used to working in a "messy kitchen". Audience empowerment has re-ignited the importance of data-driven marketing, and represents an unprecedented opportunity for brands that get it right. We need to harness the vast amount of consumer data available to create cross-channel, real-time recognition and response modelling, giving a true picture of the communications landscape.

Thanks to rapid advancements, technology is no longer the main limit to building customer-centric operations – the organisation is. Businesses could ignore all of the environmental changes driven by modern media. But, in doing so, they run the risk of changing from an end-consumer provider to a simple manufacturer.

The good news is that this brave new consumer world gives siloed businesses the perfect opportunity to refocus around the one thing that should

matter to all divisions: the customer. And the move to customer-centricity doesn't have to be as painful an evolution as you might think. The necessary shift in mindset is to look through the other end of the telescope, work out who the consumers are and ask the question, 'what's in it for them?'

Some years ago, at the point of inking a deal with the consultancy I worked for, an IT director at a major financial company hesitated, turned to me and said, "Alan, this single customer view is fantastic – but how do I actually leverage a customer data asset?" The answer lies in how you use your data. If I had the opportunity to pin a plan on that IT director's office door to show him how to get from SCV to driving marketing to individuals, it would go something like this:

**Step one:** where is your business now, and where do you want to get to? The first requirement is to build a change programme that will provide you with short- and long-term goals classified by importance, value and current state of effectiveness.

An important decision in these early stages is to consider whether it's worth hiring someone to look after this process internally, or to outsource the task to consultants. External experts can benchmark your business against best practice from beyond your vertical industry – and can circumvent difficult internal politics.

**Step two:** select an activity that can demonstrate the true value of customer-centricity to the business. In these straitened economic times, no FD worth their salt will sign off a transformation programme without evidence that it will improve revenues.

The well-known personal customer manager service delivered by MORE TH>N used data analysis to identify valued individuals and offer them a differentiated customer experience. The days when you knew your

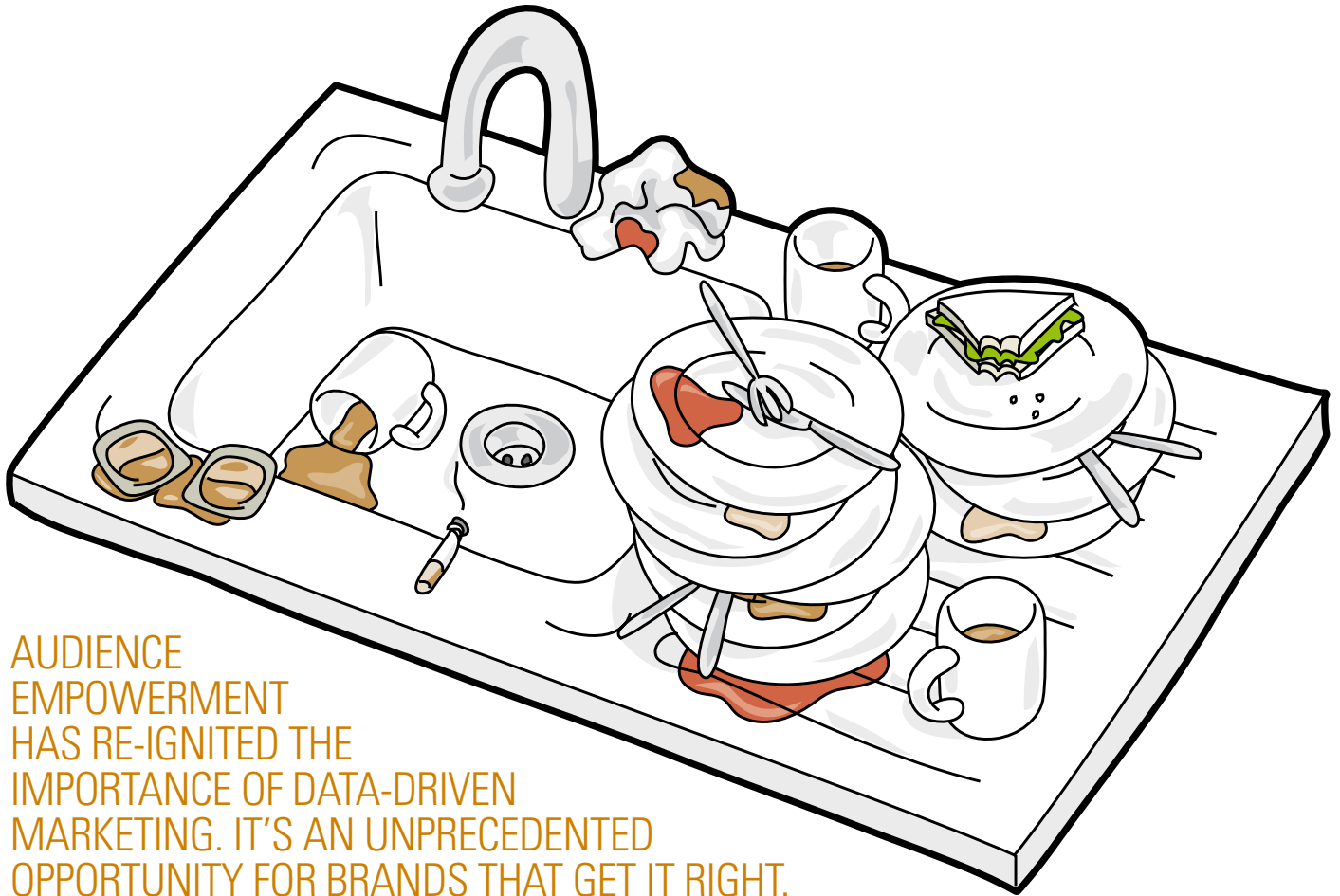
bank manager by name may be long gone, but MORE TH>N's strategy created a dialogue for customers with named contacts, providing a significant uplift in retention and cross-selling, increased advocacy and reduced mid-term cancellations. So now you've got a proven business case.

**Step three:** underpin that vision with strong foundations. While in-



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HARDER INSTEAD OF  
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### AUDIENCE EMPOWERMENT HAS RE-IGNITED THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA-DRIVEN MARKETING. IT'S AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY FOR BRANDS THAT GET IT RIGHT.

house teams are often needed to refocus on other work, potentially delaying a project, an external team with easily deployed technology can work to deadlines to provide the joined-up conversations you desire.

Typically, they can deliver solutions within three or four months that incorporate the cleansed, de-duped and enhanced SCV, multi-channel strategy, and inherent business rules that govern marketing and service delivery. Businesses can't always determine what's missing from their strategy: stare at something too long, and you sometimes can't see it.

**Step four:** include other data besides what you already own to build a complete picture of individual customers. Old CRM systems made marketers too insular, and in the consumer's world, the company itself is often the single biggest silo. It's fundamental to understand the wider context of people's lives beyond your brand: who's socially influential; what's the composition of their household; what can they afford; what are their relationships with your partner providers?

**Step five:** review the customer's entire experience. That means everyone involved in delivering the brand experience, at any touchpoint, should be aware of the specific needs of the individual. This can often be tricky because of data protection rules, but is another benefit of having a third-party data processor who can share insight securely between a brand and its partners, to the benefit of all.

It's just as important to align organisational structures and rewards so that they're customer-centric. The way to change mindsets is to refocus around customer groups, rather than products or channels; tailor the employee reward programme around sales of products per customer, not product sales per quarter.

Whether you decide to reorganise completely around segments, create new customer-centric brands or layer customer initiatives over the existing

structure, they're just different paths towards the same goal. But remember the most important rule: none of this will mean a thing unless you understand what your market wants. If your business recognises only one area of common ground, make sure it's your customers. Then, using the wealth of information already at your fingertips, you can turn disparate data into long-lasting value.

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*ALAN THORPE has a rare mix of marketing, data, business management and consulting skills developed in financial, data services and advertising agency environments. In addition to his activities with Acxiom clients, Alan has delivered marketing solutions for brands including Norwich Union, Prudential, Fidelity International and GE Money. With more than 20 years' experience in the FS and marketing industries, Alan joined Acxiom from WPP's G2 Data Dynamics where he was commercial director.*

