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Why Wait for Perfect?

6 minute read

Now more than ever, businesses must make the most of every advantage they have. But too often, companies leave their data (one of their greatest assets) underutilised as they wait for it to be in a perfect state before unleashing the opportunity to use it in a way that's relevant for their customers. Simply put, no business has perfect data, and your business certainly isn't the only one to grapple with these siloed, complex and oft-broken technology solutions. Marketers and IT departments seem to have a perpetual fear that everyone else has their data in a better state, and that the ability to be relevant and impactful is restricted by the lack of the latest piece of tech that'll bring their data to life.

Best-in-class martech is not the only solution for business impact and it's not always what's needed to have an immediate effect on the bottom line. Businesses can achieve excellent results by getting on with what they have right now, regardless of its current state.

A company that proves this conclusively in New Zealand is McDonald's, a team of highly driven people focused on customer and shareholder outcomes, who understood that relentless growth could be achieved by using data and technology to be relevant to their customers in a whole new way. The following steps encapsulate some of TRACK's learnings from a journey that reveals how you can have an immediate effect on your business without being in the perfect place from an awareness, functionality or customer-data perspective.

STEP 1: HAVE A CLEAR AND CHALLENGING VISION

Too often we see businesses skip this step and immediately focus on the solution instead. When you see that happening, stop and reassess against the opportunity you're trying to realise. When you find yourself in a room with the tech teams and analysts, ask yourself, "Is this solving my business problem? Is this solving my customers' needs?" Defining the vision of what you're wanting to achieve and not the solution for how to achieve it can be particularly difficult for action-orientated teams, but it's the foundation for success that the solution is built on.

After you've aligned on a vision, don't be shy about sharing it with the wider team. Continual focus on this will take shared effort and without it, the vision will wither and die. At each stage in the journey, relentlessly ask, "Is this a step closer to our vision, or a step away?"

When beginning the journey with McDonald's New Zealand, TRACK helped the company come up with a three-year data and tech road map based on the good-better-best approach. This took into account everything McDonald's knew was coming their way from global and also incorporated their local-market aspirations into a simple one-slide document that could easily be explained to all the key stakeholders in the business. Did we get everything right and 100 percent in line with the agreed road map all the time? Of course not. However, with a clear vision of where we want to be in three years time, we were able to learn fast, minimise the impact and do so without incurring technical debt.

STEP 2: BE HONEST ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE NOW

Evaluate every aspect of the technology critically against the good-better-best scale, and during this observation and investigation phase, do it without trying to solve the issues. Digital mindfulness is essential – understanding the issues and accepting them as something to be handled differently next time, rather than identifying solutions and trying to solve them in a piecemeal fashion. If you don't do this, you'll lack a clear understanding of the current state of your data and technology, and a lack of clarity that'll exponentially exacerbate the risk of underutilising your platforms, stifling your data in its siloes and implementing improvements that fail to deliver measurable and definitive results.

At the start of their journey with TRACK, McDonald's had neither the tools nor the tech in place to realise their vision. Together, we made a decision to prioritise momentum and velocity, rather than making everything best in class, but we had to be honest about what was achievable and what wasn't, based on the existing capabilities. Being blunt about the current state of things was sometimes painful, but it allowed both McDonald's and TRACK to focus on what's important and start from the right place at the right time.

STEP 3: DON'T EXPECT TO SOLVE EVERYTHING JUST BY HAVING THE DATA

The normalisation of the word 'data' in everyday conversation has introduced

an oversimplification of what lurks below the surface of this four-letter word. Data flows through your technical ecosystem much like water down a river. You have to get what you need as it flows past or store what you can for later, and to understand what you should store, you have to understand the need and intended use. Few businesses have a transactional system that stores the data correctly for marketing needs because they're focused on traditional billing solutions.

Marketing is a specialised skill set and takes a unique way of understanding data and the tech that underpins it. Very early on, we recommended that rather than leaving it in a transactional environment or other various platforms, McDonald's 'own' their data. This allowed us to structure and store data in a way that worked for the marketing requirements; furthermore, it extended the modular

development approach to platforms. Quick testing of offerings could be extended to other channels without having to re-implement complicated logic in each platform.

The need to integrate new sources of data cross-platform has largely been mitigated, as once it's integrated with the environment, it's integrated with all outbound channels. Understanding how the data needs to be captured and stored alongside the vision meant we could capture information from any inbound channel to increase the relevance of any outbound channel.

To understand the nature of the data you need to achieve your marketing goals – and not only what's needed from a transactional perspective. There's a vast gap between what keeps the auditors happy and what you need to be relevant to your customers. McDonald's didn't have the best-quality data, nor did they have the desired scale at first. But by carefully building scale and adding more data flow into the database, they gradually moved towards being able to use the data to inform business decisions. This wasn't done in a day. Critical assessment of the data quality was crucial to success; having the data at hand didn't necessarily mean it could be used meaningfully. This changed over time, with McDonald's dialling up their data-insight-driven work.

STEP 4: GET STUFF DONE

Apply the good-better-best approach to every aspect of the data and technology. Not everything has to be 'best' immediately. Ensure that at every step, you're delivering complete functionality that has a purpose, then assess its impact and ensure you're achieving the expected results. Keep in mind the immediate needs versus the blue-sky desires. It's vital to get this balance right, because if you don't, you'll be overwhelmed in technical debt and unable to iterate toward your needs quickly.

For McDonald's, instead of bespoke, one-off solutions that tried to solve every issue at the same time, we implemented a modular solution of mechanics that could be re-skinned and reused. This approach allowed for future expansion without costly delays. The gauntlet of business outcomes was the deciding factor in how we modified each mechanic during the next iteration, which decided if the mechanic was worth progressing further.

STEP 5: ASSEMBLE A TEAM

It's not necessary to be an expert in every area, but it's vital to have an expert on hand in every field. There's a plethora of people who've been through the journey before you, so leverage this. Ask for advice and critically interpret the results

against what you know. If someone suggests new technology, evaluate it against your vision, and identify the gap that it fills and the overlap with your existing platforms. If you find yourself nodding along and agreeing without an in-depth understanding of what the person across the table's saying, you could be headed for a disaster. Have a trusted advisor who can critically interpret what you hear from an independent perspective. This could be a friend, a professional network contact or an agency. The important thing is to get independent advice without any agenda beyond achieving the agreed vision.

The secret sauce of the McDonald's success is the way they work with their partners. Being 100 percent clear about the business problems and allowing the partners to come up with ways of solving them creates a collaborative environment between client and agency at all levels that's a true enabler of success. It'd be fair to say that even five years since the McDonald's/TRACK partnership was formed, we still haven't achieved perfection, and likely never will. The good-better-best approach proved to be a great way of planning 'what's next' for both McDonald's and TRACK, winning us the Grand Prix and Nexus Supreme awards at the Marketing Association NZDM Awards in 2019, and a Gold Effie for Most Effective Use of Digital Technology in 2020.

In conclusion, remember that the solution doesn't have to be perfect, you have more than you may realise and you don't need the latest three-letter-initialisation or a new acronym to solve the business need. Embrace imperfections, unleash your data and start doing stuff to move the dial for your business and customers.

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