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Apple iOS 15: The end of free-for-all data tracking isn't the end of your business

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With conversations about data access and usage reaching a fever pitch in the middle of 2021, Apple's commitment to the technical enablement of privacy has set a new benchmark – a change that continues the direction data tracking should be moving in, and one that is rightly putting control back into the hands of customers.

Building on the changes first announced in Apple's iOS 14 update last year, which drastically cut down on data collection and tracking from companies like Facebook, iOS 15 introduces even more privacy controls to help protect user information – most notably from email marketing metrics.

Apple customers have spoken, and it's clear that privacy is what they want. A whopping 97% opt-out rate for tracking at the time of writing clearly shows that customers will jump at the chance to avoid online surveillance.

Apple has widely been heralded as progressive for their stance on data privacy, but the real issue at hand concerns the relationship between businesses and their customers.

First-class commitments in physical safety, ethics and hygiene are standard between businesses and their customers – so why does the same level of respect not apply when it comes to their data? Transparency should be the minimum standard we expect

from businesses when it comes to how our data is handle. Furthermore, this expected transparency should be driven from inside businesses, not enforced by IT vendors.

Not many businesses are purely altruistic, and the iOS updates are undoubtedly a continuation of the clever ploy by Apple to be the champions of privacy while simultaneously sideswiping their competitors. At the same time, it's provided an important wake-up call to major tech companies like

Facebook and Google, and is encouraging many businesses to reconsider their unhealthy reliance on unearned third-party data.

For too long, the AdTech industry and organisations like Facebook could covertly track, record, and use prolific amounts of second and third-party customer data. Broadly speaking, customers have accepted this is happening, and trust that this information is being used in relatively harmless ways – albeit without consciously considering the impact. Humans are wired to forget, so the infrequent indignation of being duped by companies like Cambridge Analytica means that customers happily continue to have their every online move tracked and reported on as if living in a digital Orwellian state. In parallel, businesses have become hooked on these metrics, gradually losing sight of developing lasting relationships with their customers and replacing genuine connection with impressions and clicks.

Metrics like clickthrough rates and email opening rates are the bread and butter of many AdTech and MarTech companies, and for some marketers have provided a veneer of success in lieu of pointier measures of success. After the initial shock of losing vanity metrics like these wears off, it should force businesses to think differently about their customer relationships, prioritising real conversions: sign-ups, downloads, and, heaven forbid, actual sales as the measure of success. In many ways, the removal of short cut media metrics should be the rebirth of traditional CRM – a ‘customer-first’ mindset that asks businesses one question: what are you doing to get customers to want to have a relationship with your business?

Creating long-lasting, meaningful relationships with customers has never been more important for businesses. Providing transparency around data from day one is key to unlocking these kinds of relationships. So if you’re asking customers to opt-in to sharing their information, tell them why they’ll benefit from doing so. Make it easy for your customer to tell you what they want, and be the business that has the relationship and mechanisms to honour their requests. Be better than Facebook, better than Google, and yes, be better than Apple.

So, how should your business embrace this approach and pivot away from second and third-party data reliance?

Embrace the learning that customers don’t want to be tracked across their digital lives. Stop any effort to work around these limitations and changes. Instead, ask your customers what they want more of and less of and when they do respond, listen and take actions to enable their requests.

Develop and clarify your business principles for what each customer can expect from your business – establishing what you will and won’t do as it relates to customer data. If you’re allowed to share this, do so loudly and with pride. If you can’t share this openly with your customers, then there’s a

pretty good chance you shouldn't be doing it in this new world of transparency.

If you don't have a relationship with your customer through direct addressable channels, develop an ethical approach to achieve this quickly. Build a data strategy anchored in transparency (using a simple and understandable privacy policy alongside granular permissions), and zero party data – data that your customers intentionally and proactively share with you. Improve or implement Voice of Customer (VoC) and other feedback mechanisms to enhance this zero-party data. Give your customers the ability to say they don't want to hear from you or your partners and honour this. Yes, this will have an impact on some revenue channels; it's true, a principle is only truly a principle when it costs you money.

Stepping beyond first-party data should be considered carefully against the 'can vs. should' criteria. Put the word relationship into conversations when discussing business strategy and understand in human terms what this means.

Understandably, this may be a hard concept for businesses to grasp when mining as much customer data as possible has been the status quo for years. A customer-first mindset in relation to data privacy is a pioneering one, requiring businesses to secure the right to capture and use customer data based on trust, permissions and shared value.

Ultimately, the data debate can be summarised quite simply: just because you can do something, doesn't mean you should be doing it. If you want a relationship with your customers, if you want to know more about them, if you want to be there in the moments that matter: earn it. The days of buying that access from third parties might soon be over.

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