

The Personalization Paradox: How Standardized Content Creates Personalized Experiences by Val Swisher

****Contributed by Meg Schulte****

The video that I enjoyed most from the online collection of LavaCon videos was the one by Val Swisher on what she calls “The Personalization Paradox.” She explained that, to provide each customer with the personalized experience that they want and require to pay for the product, the company must make a standardized site and navigation for the client to find what they are looking for, and it allows for easy updating and content creation.

Overview

What were Val’s main ideas?

The main point of the presentation was that standardization is the tool that allows both personalization *and* scalability in a company. She argues that this is done by creating small, reusable pieces of content that combine with each other creatively, quickly, and differently for each customer. She states that the emphasis must be on the content itself and then how it is managed; how the content is delivered is less important.

The way that you can achieve the desired standardization (and therefore personalization and scale) of your content is through a process that Val calls *planned development*. This is customization within a set of parameters, so a customer gets to choose their own content by selecting from a small set of options, and they then get exactly what they are looking for with a fast delivery.

Key takeaways

What are the key takeaways for technical communicators?

Val laid out some tangible instruction for technical communicators watching the presentation. The first was that you have to focus on content. She stated that people focus on new tools and deliveries much too often and need to re-center their work around their content. Secondly, without personalization—showing the right content to the right person at the right time—you will not provide the customer with what they want and they will not buy from you. Therefore, technical writers must first write good content, and then allow the customer to access it easily. Lastly, she laid out exactly how you can standardize your content by providing a list of standardization dimensions:

- Output Types: the category of content you are delivering
- Components: the units of content that combine to deliver an experience
- Paragraphs: how you define the tone and voice of your company
- Sentences: the grammar, style rules, and word combinations that you use
- Words: terminology management

To standardize your company and deliverables, Val suggests that you create your own standards that fall into each of these categories and ensure that all of your content sticks to those rules. Then, while your content itself varies, it will be easier to produce and easier for the reader to navigate and personalize.

Reflection

How does the presentation extend your work in this class?

This presentation was incredibly interesting to me because of the connections that she made between user experience and standardization. I think that sometimes people think that standardization is the opposite of personalization, but Val argued that it actually is the only way that you can consistently present good content to the people who are looking for it. In many ways, it is exactly what the customer wants to see.

Her ideas from the presentation also help me understand how standardization can assist myself as a content writer. Standardization allows myself to increase the amount of content that I create in a shorter amount of time, which allows “scalability” of my own content. I will use her tips and categories as I move forward with projects in order to make them easier to update in the future and to make them look more cohesive, and therefore easier to navigate by the consumer.

Related to this topic, I was able to find an article called [How to standardize communication across your organization]

<https://www.quill.com/blog/tutorials/how-to-standardize-communication-across-your-organization.html> which discusses how you might standardize communications differently for stakeholders with different levels of involvement and different communication needs. I think that this article takes a different approach to standardization than Val, but that they both emphasize its importance and offer ways to provide a customized experience for customers without the limitations of doing it by hand.