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— The marketing industry has rightly championed first-party data as a strategic priority. In a world of rising privacy expectations and increasingly fragmented cross-channel identity, having a direct, permission-based relationship with customers is a vital asset. It allows brands to personalize experiences, measure impact, and stay connected through owned channels.

But as competition for loyalty intensifies, so does the pressure to collect more data, raising a different concern: are we focusing too much on **data capture** and not enough on **relationship building**? Could our efforts to gather more signals, identifiers, and attributes actually be eroding the trust and human connection that direct marketing is meant to foster?

This tension between understanding customers and overwhelming them is one all marketers should understand and leverage. And while it's easy to frame the debate as data versus relationships, the more constructive question might be **what kind of relationship earns the right to use data in the first place?**

Keep Value-Exchange Well Balanced

There's nothing inherently intrusive about using data. What matters is **why** it's collected, **how** it's used, and **whether the customer sees any benefit in return**. Too often, data requests are embedded in experiences that offer little context and even less value: sign-up walls, loyalty schemes with no meaningful rewards, or "personalized" emails that don't reflect anything the customer has actually done or asked for. In these moments, the customer is right to question the exchange. The brand is asking for information (sometimes quite a lot) without giving much in return.

But when the value exchange is clear, the dynamic changes. Consider how the use of biometric data has sped up the air travel experience – removing friction at key moments in the process. Or how smart brands through their loyalty programs, invite customers to share preferences and purchase history in exchange for curated recipes, health tips, and exclusive product samples — a tangible, personal reward for data sharing that reinforces trust. If a customer receives early access to something they care about, then data sharing can feel like a natural part of the relationship, not a cost of entry.

Thus, it feels imperative every data capture opportunity in the direct marketing calendar be clearly aligned to a distinct value exchange – a factor that's historically missing from most marketing calendars, personalization roadmaps, and test and learn plans.

Find Reasons to Engage Between Purchase Moments

Much direct marketing still revolves around purchase events and the surrounding lifecycle. Campaigns are triggered by abandoned baskets, lapse windows, or predicted conversion moments. These are important signals, but they're **only part of the story**.

If we want to deepen relationships — and by extension, earn the right to use data in more meaningful ways — we must be present in the spaces between transactions. That might mean sharing useful content, celebrating milestones, offering support, or simply acknowledging a customer's loyalty without trying to sell something.

These touchpoints aren't always as easy to justify in typical reporting, but they contribute to the kind of relationship that endures. These moments and their metrics should be treated as high value behaviors in their own right and form part of the overall measurement model as predictors of loyalty, LTV etc.

From Collecting to Earning

Shifting our posture from thinking about data as something to collect, to something we earn, is critical. That starts by being intentional about what we ask for — and why.

Here are a few guiding principles we've found helpful:

→ **Context creates comfort.**

Customers are more likely to share when they understand how their data will be used and what value it brings. That value might be better recommendations, access to exclusive content, or fewer irrelevant messages, but it must be visible.

→ **Relevance comes from reciprocity.**

Personalization works best when it's not just based on what the brand **wants** to say, but what the customer has **invited** us to say. That invitation comes from sustained, reciprocal engagement — not just behavioral tracking.

→ **Trust is built over time.**

Every interaction is an opportunity to reinforce — or undermine — credibility. Are we using the data responsibly? Are we honoring preferences? Are we making the experience better, or simply more targeted?

When brands get this right, customers often want to engage more deeply.

Data becomes not a commodity to extract, but a signal of connection.

Marketers should consider their own **Principles of a Data-Driven Relationship**, which is unique to their brand values, category and products or services.

So, is first-party data strategy killing real human engagement?

Not inherently, but it might if we treat data as a goal rather than a byproduct of genuine connection. The most resilient CRM strategies will be those that prioritize the long game: creating reasons for customers to come back, even when they're not buying, by offering value that feels personal, not just personalized, in the spirit of an enduring customer relationship

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Jon Taylor
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Jon is Global Chief Data Officer at MRM, where he leads a worldwide team of data strategists, audience specialists, analysts, and data scientists dedicated to helping clients build enduring customer relationships. With two decades of experience in data-driven marketing, he has played a hands-on role in the evolution of the field—shaping platform-based media, establishing global programmatic networks, creating new audience data products, and building high-performing teams that serve some of the world's most valuable brands.

About MRM

MRM is a modern relationship marketing agency that builds enduring relationships between people and businesses.

MRM's core capabilities help grow relationship lifetime value, and span across CRM & Loyalty, Customer Experience, Commerce and MarTech, underpinned by Data & Analytics.

MRM operates in a borderless, integrated way, to allow for greater collaboration and velocity. MRM is part of McCann Worldgroup and the Interpublic Group of companies (NYSE: IPG), and spans 35 offices across North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia Pacific.

For more information, please visit www.mrm.com