

'It takes two to tango'

In the statement below, we, as a representation of the Belgian Direct Marketing Association, try to create a mind set for the industry, the consumer and the political environment (lawmakers) to understand the role of data in a fast growing digital economy. With respect for the right balance between privacy and data protection regulations on the one hand and creating business opportunities on the other hand.

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Big data: the subtle consumer-business balance

We are experiencing a Data Tsunami where citizens– apart from businesses and public administrations – have also become data users.

The quantity of data is growing exponentially originating all around us. But we especially create data ourselves through our interactions with the Internet. This data contains highly detailed information about the interests, networks, habits and behaviour of individuals.

“Big Data” refers to any collection of data which is too big or complex to deal with using traditional processing systems. The term describes the exponential growth and availability of structured or unstructured data which can lead to more correct analyses aiming to increase the reliability of decision-making and operational efficiency for the economy. This is supported by decreasing storage costs.

Data are unstructured or structured, numerical from traditional databases, created by applications, e-mails, videos, audio formats ... Data sources are subject to a fast and continuous flow of new information generating large quantities of data, in real time as it were. Managing, gathering data from different sources is a challenge.

To continue growing and making profit, businesses initiate a customisation process in this context: the production of strongly adapted products. Personalised products. To achieve this level of tailor-made products, consumers participate in the production process by specifying their demands for product design. They decide which yellow shirt they want, with purple flowers on it. Through e-commerce websites, call centres. As a "prosumer". Goods are no longer simply purchased in a shop surrounded by thick walls. Consumers are increasingly having them delivered to their doorstep, on the day and at the time that suits them best. Customers already use their mobile phone to compare prices when they are in front of a shop window. And tomorrow there will be the "Google car", driverless, which you can order using your mobile phone to pick you up at home and go on a ride. "Uber" is outdated already. All this is data driven. The economy is data driven. More and more.

Legislation can barely keep up with the rhythm of technology. Inventions are no longer a matter of years, but of months, even days. Speed is the norm. Speed is also the comfort helping consumers to choose from an extensive offer of products, which can be bought in a convenient personalised version. Often with no more than a few simple mice clicks.

Mass distribution is giving way to personalisation. Data driven. That is why privacy accents are evolving rapidly. From the protection of personal data like 20 years ago, surrounded by thick walls and locked up in well-guarded spaces with strict access conditions, with data stored in large computers, we have evolved to an Internet where almost everything flies. With both public administrations and business collecting citizens' data, preferably proportionately based on their targets, which means no more than necessary for the data processor's requirements.

In general, the purpose of the collection of all this data is no longer pre-determined and usually there are several purposes which are not defined before the data collection happened. That constitutes a fundamental difference with the past, when data was only collected for one single purpose, when collecting data was a complex and expensive operation. Was.

Able citizens are more than consumers. On blogs they are also editors. Through social networks we have evolved to a conversation society between businesses and consumers. Consumers have become prosumers. The roles producers and consumers play are beginning to blur and merge in a highly saturated market of standard products.

In this context the voluntary transfer of privacy data is a consumer opportunity. If you want to buy a tailor-made coat on the Internet, it is best if you can indicate your size. Buy your favourite colour or shape with a few clicks, from a trustworthy business where after a few positive experiences you do not have to worry about leaving your personal data. So that you do not have fill in the Internet form again for every purchase. All of this from the comfort of your sofa. This is where privacy legislation must enable citizens to pass on their personal data to third parties to have their wishes fulfilled. And enable the industry to develop further.

Also, third parties including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google as Internet platforms, receive plenty of data they do not own. It is therefore important that these players help support economic development, under the strict condition that they use the data proportionately, based on reasonable targets in respect of consumers. Respecting the rules that are applicable to businesses established in Europe, abiding by European legislation.

Personal relations are stronger if they respect individuals and their privacy. That is why "direct marketing is respect marketing". Making this relation transparent for citizens is a major challenge. So that economic development can go hand in hand with consumer interests. Businesses and consumers: "It takes two to tango."

What matters is the right balance between consumer interests and commercial interests. With tools that are proportionate in respect of targets. So that a cannon is not used to kill a mosquito. Privacy is no longer exclusively about protection, but is becoming a challenge in terms of offering opportunities to strike the right balance between businesses and citizens. Because today's society is a data society.

Biographies of the authors:

Ivan Vandermeersch worked almost 30 years in communication of which 10 years in media research and then more than 10 years in industry representation. In 2003 he signed up with BDMA (Belgian Direct Marketing Association www.bdma.be) and is currently their secretary general (previously director). In parallel he is also active with FEDMA, the Federation of European Direct and Interactive Marketing (www.fedma.org) as special adviser to the board (previously vice president and secretary general). His expertise regarding media, data protection legislation and interest in new developments makes of him an excellent trend watcher on media.



Burt Riské has a more than 30 years' experience in data driven marketing. Currently he is general manager of Roularta Business Information, one of the leading Business-to-Business data providers in Belgium (the synergy between Euro DB and Trends Top Database). He is also president of the Data Taskforce (www.bdma.be), board member and treasurer of the BDMA, board member of the 'Do-not-call-me' association (as a representation of the direct & digital marketing industry) and member of the 'Committee of Surveillance' which handles with customer complaints in the direct marketing sector.

