Best Practices FOR Personalized URLs

Learn what Personalized URLs are, how to use them and how they can bring your business success

It started as a trickle and now it's a flood –

the use of personalized URLs as a way to gather customer and prospect data, score leads, start conversations, and turn marketing into an interactive process. In this exclusive whitepaper, learn what PURLs are, how to use them and how they can bring your business success.

What is a personalized URL?

Personalized URLs are URLs that take recipients to their own personalized microsites (www.lacrosseworld.com/bobsmith). These sites greet respondents by name, personalize content based on stated preferences or information from a database, conduct short surveys, and record visitors' behavior while on the site. Sites can range from extremely simple to vastly complex. These URLs can be generated for print, email, and even QR and other 2D barcodes.

www.lacrosseworld.com/**bobsmith** ——————— variable
personalization

The most recognizable term for these applications is "PURL," which is short for "personalized URL." However, while the software for producing personalized URLs is available from dozens of manufacturers, the exclusive right to use the term "PURL" is claimed by Nimblefish. For this reason, you will see them referred to by other names, as well. These include "personalized URLs," "response URLs" (RURLs, trademarked by XMPie), "personalized landing pages," "personalized websites," "one-to-one micro-sites," and even "customized websites," although the latter is technically inaccurate.

Regardless of channel, these applications have a wide variety of uses, including direct sales, sales prospecting, customer surveying, event registrations, information dissemination, fundraising, enrollment and obtaining customer and user feedback. But while personalized URLs have generated a lot of success, they have generated disappointment, too, primarily because of misplaced expectations.

Best Practices for Personalized URL Campaigns

The reality is, while personalized URLs play an important role in a marketing campaign, it is not the personalized URL itself that is the most powerful influence in generating the response. Personalized URLs are simply one of many response mechanisms and facilitating technologies that marketers have to choose from. Basic marketing rules still apply.

Here are some simple best practices that increase your chances of success:

Use personalized URLs as a tool, not a means to an end.

Personalized URLs are a great tool, but they are only a tool. While we sometimes talk about "personalized URL campaigns" as if they are a type of campaign in themselves, in reality, these are just marketing campaigns like any other.

Maintain the personal connection.

The value of personalized URLs goes beyond the survey page, so take advantage of it. The personalized URL is delivered in a personalized email or piece of direct mail. Don't lose that personalized connection by sending the respondent to a generic landing page or website. Even if you don't use a survey as part of the campaign, personalized URLs can be used to maintain that personal connection begun through another channel.

Take the example of Saint Francis University. In a highly successful fundraising campaign, it targeted 10,000 alumni using five channels: social media, online video, e-cards, direct mail, and personalized landing pages. All direct mail and email was personalized by the alumni's name, area of study, extra-curricular activities, and other known interests. Alumni were sent to personalized URLs to continue the conversation. While those microsites did not survey alumni, all of the pages used the same content as the email and direct mail, so even when the respondent changed channels, the personal connection was unbroken. The school saw a 4% increase in donations.

Make call to action go beyond the personalized URL itself.

"Log into your personalized URL and complete a survey!" is not a call to action. It might be what you want the recipient to do, but the call to action itself has to be of value to the person on the other end. "Log in and

see how much money you can save with our program" or "Log in and see how your donation helps pets in your area!" are much better. These CTAs focus the value on the recipient, not the marketer.

Successful programs follow the best practices for 1:1 printing in general.

Personalized URL campaigns are a sub-set of all 1:1 (personalized) printing campaigns, so follow the best practices of 1:1 printing. These include investing in the database, segmenting before personalizing, focusing on relevance (not the number of variables you have), and being sensitive to privacy concerns.

Mail to highly targeted customer bases.

While some marketers have been successful with basic mailing lists (name and address only), most successful personalized URL campaigns tend to be more targeted. Marketers may target specific segments of their customer base or highly targeted prospect lists.

For example, the Gwinnett Braves and a local church, 12Stone Church, sent out a personalized URL mailing based on geography. They found their game and worship schedules overlapping and causing traffic jams, so they decided to offer free baseball game tickets as a goodwill gesture.

Each mailer included a personal URL inviting each responder to a landing page where the organizations apologized for the traffic problems, offered sets of free tickets, and the team could gather more information about these families for future contacts.

Utilizing other elements, such as over-sized postcards or lumpy mail.

Studies show that you have about three seconds—often less—to grab recipients' attention before they toss the direct marketing piece into the trash. By layering on additional design elements that get people to spend just another half second looking at the mailer, you are buying valuable time. Additional elements might include images of money, brand logos, and simulated barcodes or express mail packages.

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In one example, the marketer received up to a 75% response rate by mailing fully personalized, lumpy mail packages to high-value targets. The incentive to log in was the promise of a high-value gift ($100 value) for setting up an appointment. In another campaign, the "wow" factor was that the mailer opened into eight accordion-style

folds for a total of 62 inches. In both cases, the campaigns had attention-getters that went beyond the appeal of the personalized URL.

**Successful campaigns utilize the benefits of multiple media to reinforce the message.**
The most successful campaigns don't rely on a single channel to accomplish the results. They use multiple channels to amplify and reinforce the message. It's not unusual to see campaigns that utilize direct mail, personalized URLs, email, text messaging, and even social media in a single integrated, branded campaign.

"Multi-channel" doesn't have to mean complicated, either. One marketer, MindZoo, achieved a 24.6% response rate to its seminar invitation, including 14% classified as strong leads, simply by starting with a personalized postcard (containing personalized URL) and then following up with email. The idea is reinforcement and follow-up, not complexity. Consistency of message, theme, and brand is what's important.

An increasing number of campaigns are incorporating social media, particularly contests utilizing Facebook and Twitter.
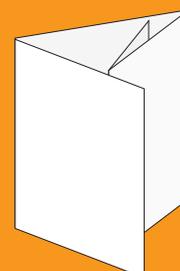
Wow Factor Formats

Iron Cross
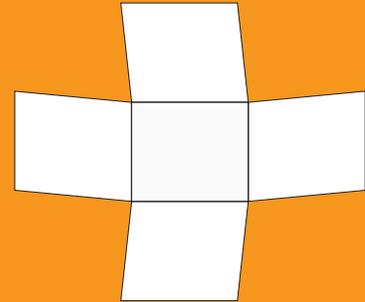
Visit **blog.johnroberts.com/ironcrossdirectmail** to view a super-cool storytelling iron cross in action.

Self-Mailer with Zip Strip

Visit **blog.johnroberts.com/foldoftheweek** to view a self-mailer with zip strip

Roll Fold

5

Maintain consistency in design and business rules across all channels.
At minimum, personalized URL campaigns use two channels: the printed piece or email and the personalized micro-sites. Many campaigns use personalized email follow-ups, as well. In all of these channels, you want to present a consistent message and branding. Some personalized URL solutions handle this automatically. Other times, it is done manually.

Offer a high-value incentive.
If the campaign is a data-gathering mission, the contact can be of far greater benefit to the marketer than the recipient. In these cases, the marketer will use some kind of incentive to get the recipient to respond. This might be a gift card, entry into a sweepstakes, or other gift in proportion to the value to the marketer.

When one sales company wanted to add value-added resellers (something with a very high value long-term value), for example, it offered a sweepstakes featuring a trip to the Caribbean. When another marketer was attempting to access extremely hard-to-reach prospects (high-level executives), it offered remote control cars personalized with the recipient's name.

An incentive doesn't need to have a high

An incentive doesn't need to have a high dollar value to be motivating... sometimes the value is in the information itself.

dollar value to be highly motivating, however. One marketer used the "hook" during its Christmastime promotion of allowing respondents to help select the charity to receive its end-of-year donation. Another gave away free saplings around Earth Day.

Sometimes the value is in the information itself. One marketer provided secure job search opportunities in which the "prize" was a new job. A regional bank provided secure micro-sites that allowed recipients to answer questions that would match them with the right one of its debt-relief programs.

Offer multiple options for response.
Even if getting people to respond to their personalized URLs is the primary goal of the campaign, don't lose potential customers, prospects, or donors by using only a single response mechanism. Not everyone who receives the printed piece will want to respond over the Internet.

In one campaign, the marketer offered recipients the opportunity to respond to the survey using a personalized URL or by filling out a tear-out card. It found a surprisingly

high percentage of tear-out cards returned, many of them from older recipients who were not comfortable giving out certain information online. In another campaign, the marketer found 65% of responses came by phone and 35% by personalized URL, even though this was a more Internet-savvy audience.

Give recipients multiple response mechanisms (phone, tear-out forms, personalized URLs, Web links, even personalized QR Codes) depending on the target audience. By doing so, you may catch prospects who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

Tracking more than the basics.
We are seeing more and more emphasis on trackability in these campaigns. Among the leading practitioners, we see them tracking far more aspects of the campaign than one might think. These marketers look, not just at who responded, but their demographics, timing, and other factors.

For example, you may ask about the percentage of people who click through the mini-site pages, but how about tracking how long they spent there? Which pages kept them lingering the most? Think about the implications of geography. Are there regions that are responding more than others? If so

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what does this tell you? Are people logging in more frequently at certain times than others? Is your primary audience women over the age of 40 from California? What are their Internet surfing preferences? Do they prefer blue buttons over green ones?

This is information many marketers are finding critical to understanding customer and prospect behavior and optimizing their landing page experiences for the future.

Use the surveys to really learn something.
In most personalized URL applications, there is a standard survey page that includes three to five questions. Many marketers use these questions to personalize some kind of incentive. They might ask about respondents' favorite color or sporting activity, then personalize a calendar or event ticket to show off their personalization capabilities.

But the value of personalized URL surveys goes beyond the ability to personalize a gift or incentive. It goes to the ability of the marketer to get to know the respondent and develop a relationship that will help build

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relevance in communications. That doesn't happen by asking about preferences for personalizing some kind of novelty.

One marketer surveyed its customers and prospects about their business pain points and then used this information to get a 74% conversion rate. The Animal Rescue League of Western Pennsylvania used information from its survey to consider making a critical change in its media mix and address potential bottlenecks in the adoption process. Penn Herb, a specialty retailer, used its personalized URL survey to develop new products and services in response to customer requests.

On the survey page, you have a powerful opportunity to do lead scoring and get inside the mind of the prospect or client. Take advantage of it.

Focus on the Web portion of the campaign, as well as print.

We often think about personalized URL campaigns as being print campaigns, but print is only the first half of the contact. Print drives traffic to the personalized mini-sites, but once respondents are on the site, the

printed portion is over. There is still a lot of marketing to be done. Understanding the power of Web communication is critical to making the second half of the communication as powerful as it can be.

Test, test, test — it's worth the effort.

As with any marketing campaign, test, test, test. Study the metrics. Run A/B tests. Experiment with different combinations of channels, timing, and media. Figure out what works, then refine it.

The importance of this strategy is well illustrated in an analysis of the ongoing campaigns of one personalized URL software company's customers. The company, a provider of personalized URL and cross-channel marketing software to the marketplace, found that in 2009, its customers achieved a 5.1% visit rate and 3.8% response rate on average when deploying campaigns using its software. Just one year later, as its customers had added channels, learned from previous campaigns, and wrapped those results around to future campaigns, they were achieving visit rates of 6.5% and response rates of 4.5%.

Don't skimp on the testing!

Your Turn: JR University

Experience your own PURL in action through our JR University site - visit info.johnroberts.com/jru

In addition to the utilization of a PURL, most successful campaigns don't rely on a single channel to accomplish the results. They use multiple channels to amplify and reinforce the message. Consider the use of direct mail, email, personalized PDF downloads and analytics.

Direct Mail

In addition to a PURL on a direct mailer, consider using content served specifically to your audience based on prior behavior, life stages, segmentation, demographics and other relevant data. Response rates for direct mail with PURLs are reportedly 5% vs. typical industry averages of 2-3%.

Email

To use PURLs to their full advantage, invest in the long term, as they're best utilized to trigger future communications, like email, based on the data they can collect.
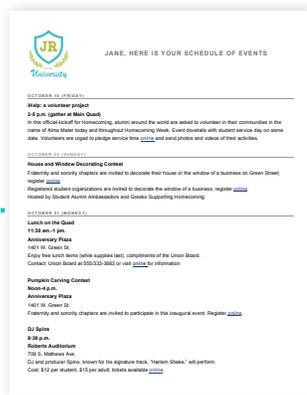
Personalized PDF Downloads

One Size Does Not Fit All: Some mini-sites have a single page and others have a multiple-page structure with downloadable personalized attachments such as a PDF Agenda.

Analytics

PURLs make measurement easy, so a marketer can determine the ROI with a high level of certainty. Tracking your prospect and how they're responding such as what part of the landing page they're using, is fundamental to PURL success. It's what sets up lead nurturing programs and up-sell opportunities.

A vehicle for response, not a motivator -

Overall, if there was a theme in the "best practices" above, it is this: the personalized URL is simply a vehicle for response. It is not the reason or the motivator to respond in the first place. Personalized URL campaigns must still follow all the best practices for any kind of personalized direct marketing. In the case of personalized URLs, the best practices discussed here are the ones we see most often.

About The John Roberts Company
The John Roberts Company is a fully integrated marketing services company located in Minneapolis, MN. Our full-service approach to integrated communications will improve your response rates, simplify your project management and keep your costs down. You only need one partner to manage it all – that's us.

About Heidi Tolliver-Walker
Heidi Tolliver-Walker has been a commercial and digital printing industry analyst, feature writer, columnist, editor, and author for more than 20 years. Her industry commentary can be found in today's national printing publications, top industry blogs, and behind the scenes in well-respected industry and private newsletters and marketing publications.