

Pinterest: Too User Centered?

Time is a universal concept. We want it, we waste it, we wish we had more. It is such an ingrained part of the human experience that whole industries are dedicated to managing, saving, and maximizing every minute of our day, particularly now that technology provides an abundance of time-sucking opportunities cloaked in phrases like “browsing” and “netflix binges.”

If time is at the center of all we do, then intent, attention, and need are the spokes extending from that core. In the limited 24 hours we all share, what do individuals intend to do with their time? What captures their attention? What do they need? Social media companies have already caught on that personalization is the key to unlocking these questions and increasing their revenue by attracting users through personalized experiences. However, of the dozens of social media companies, Pinterest appears to be outshining their competitors in putting user needs first, or at least that is the claim Naomi Grewal, Insights Leader at Pinterest, put forth at the 2018 Dawn or Doom presentation, “The age of personalization: How technology enables more custom experiences.” Grewal’s presentation was decidedly “dawn” focused, touting Pinterest as a positive, empowering service that “provide[s] more value than they are extracting” by analyzing user data to provide personalized advertisements.

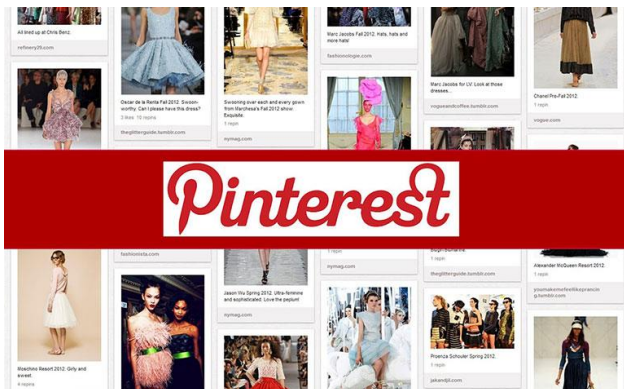


Figure 1

By the end of the presentation, I felt confident of the sincerity of Grewal’s message. After some outside research, I felt convinced. Now, I feel concerned. In my opinion, it’s not that Pinterest isn’t good at putting their users first, it’s that they are *too* good. But first, allow me to share the arguments that persuaded me to get on the Pinterest bandwagon in the first place.

Does the research collected by Grewal and her team support the idea that users benefit from personalization to the point that Pinterest

“provide[s] more value than they are extracting”? Assuming the information Grewal shared is accurate, then most definitely.

According to Grewal, “pinner really demonstrate consumer intent through their boards.” The ideas pinner save are for projects they actually intend to carry out. A whopping 92% of pinner take action on a saved pin, a high statistic compared to other sites such as Facebook where only 71% of users would take action after liking something. This means that pinner aren’t just browsing, they’re buying. In fact, half of the pinner population uses Pinterest for shopping, compared to an average of 18% of users on other social media sites (keep in mind that Amazon was excluded from this conclusion).

Users welcome advertisements because they want recommendations, they *want* to be influenced on their purchases. It's only common sense that Pinterest should use personalization to fulfill that desire. A person searching for baby clothes obviously doesn't want to see advertisements for garden hoses. Pinnerers are 30% more likely to engage in an advertisement that they find relevant, and Pinterest is ranked as the third most relevant US consumer brand - higher than any other social media.

Clearly, Grewal's research supports the idea of users benefitting from personalized advertisements, and her claim of Pinterest being more user-focused than other social media sites is not unfounded. Users claim that 68% of their time spent on Pinterest is fulfilling, a rating second only second to Amazon at 69%. Pinterest has achieved results by listening and responding to user needs, which I applaud. I also admire that Pinterest respects their users time. Unlike their competitors, Pinterest isn't aiming for more visits or longer visits by users. They state, "at Pinterest we are actually interested in the concept of time well-spent." As a college student who wastes far too many hours in the time-sucking vortex of social media, this is a concept I can get behind.

By the conclusion of Grewal's presentation, my feelings toward Pinterest had warmed from neutral apathy to positive admiration. The company seemed friendly, innocent, even charming – almost like an adult version of Disney. It was this last thought which made me cringe. We all know that The Mouse has more skeletons in his closet than Norman Bates. Was Pinterest also hiding something? They had fully justified their use of consumer data to create personalized experiences, but what about the privacy of their users?

In search of an answer, I browsed the Pinterest terms of service and I must say I was impressed.

Pinterest breaks up their policies in short, clearly labeled sections using a readable font size instead of the dense, tiny type almost every other company uses. It translates the legal geek speak of their terms of use page into actual English (see figure 2) and clearly defines the types of data it collects from users and how it is used. Pinterest also lists multiple ways for users to opt out of the data collection for greater privacy (transparency, what a concept).

As a Professional Writing Major, it was clear to me that Pinterest truly wants users to be informed and was making a monumental effort to clearly communicate in ways users could understand.

So, if Pinterest is so great, what's my problem with them? Nothing. Yet. Pinterest is extremely

b. How Pinterest and other users can use your content

You grant Pinterest and our users a non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sublicensable, worldwide license to use, store, display, reproduce, save, modify, create derivative works, perform, and distribute your User Content on Pinterest solely for the purposes of operating, developing, providing, and using Pinterest. Nothing in these Terms restricts other legal rights Pinterest may have to User Content, for example under other licenses. We reserve the right to remove or modify User Content, or change the way it's used in Pinterest, for any reason. This includes User Content that we believe violates these Terms, our [Community Guidelines](#), or any other policies.

More simply put

If you post your content on Pinterest, we can show it to people and others can save it. Don't post porn or spam or be a jerk to other people on Pinterest.

Figure 2

good at giving their users what they want and communicating in ways users understand. For now, this good. However, the more you understand your audience, the easier it is to hide things from them. Pinterest knows about their users tastes and lifestyles, but more importantly they know how to use make users feel safe, just as Grewal's presentation was carefully designed with positive messages that made me feel that Pinterest truly was like Disney. This combination of knowledge and rhetoric can be a dangerous combination.

Even if their altruistic motives are sincere, the fact remains that Pinterest is a business with a bottom line. If someday the company's focus of putting users first changes for the worse, Pinterest fans may find themselves blindsided by an organization that knows exactly what to say to keep them in the dark.