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How marketers are using flexible datasets
to power successful campaigns



For decades, businesses have operated under a widely accepted mandate: Build massive datasets in pursuit of a complete view of their customers. While many companies have succeeded in the first part of that goal, the second half of the project — putting the data they've gathered to effective use — has remained out of reach for most.

Fifty-seven percent of marketers around the world feel overwhelmed by the amount of data they receive and, according to Gartner, half of marketers don't trust their modeling techniques. There's clearly a disconnect between where the analytics teams are and where they are striving to be.

"One major challenge customers encounter when working with massive datasets is that data stems from different parts of the business and different phases of their customer funnel," said Nicolas Hinternes, digital analytics strategist at Piano. "So, heterogeneity can really be a challenge. The missing interoperability between the data points and not being able to cross-reference and combine data from all those different streams is another pain point — data is often siloed."

In the sections that follow, Digiday and Piano unpack some of the top challenges marketing teams face as they race to secure as much data as possible while implementing tactics that actually power successful campaigns.

Determining data accuracy and ending the mass-data cycle

In a recent Digiday survey, 41% of respondents cited lack of communication among teams and departments and 39% cited inconsistency and inaccuracies around first-party and zero-party data as main challenges to extracting the clean and consistent data they need to power campaigns.

Making sure data is clear and accessible is vital for cross-team collaboration.

"Coherent and unified datasets are needed to really assess the success of campaigns long-term," said Hinternes. "But instead of evaluating campaigns based on a

comprehensive analysis, individual teams often use short-term metrics from within their own data silo for evaluating the success of digital activities."

Breaking down silos certainly helps improve communication between teams and departments, but that's only part of the battle. When it comes to reporting, segmenting and targeting, organizations need a single source of truth that serves the needs of different business users and teams. This requires **tools that unify, onboard, augment and activate all data points in a single view.**

Many marketers and business users are stuck in a cycle. They've gotten used to collecting large amounts of data for so long that the way out is too hard for them to see. However, there is a way for these teams to turn things around — starting with a conceptual strategy, then a technical solution.

"When a product is being built, measurement and data collection are usually sprinkled on top, kind of like a seasoning, when they should really be an ingredient," Hinternesch said. "The challenge is embedding analytics early in the process, when you start designing a product. Then you can cater to the technical feasibility of data collection, so you can eventually measure and determine success based on the business objective at hand.

"There needs to be a mindset shift from, 'Let's collect a lot of data first, then see what we can do with it,' to, 'Let's think about business first, then collect the data we need,'" he continued. "Then, it's about identifying how to get the data to the right users and give them the right tools to use it and embed it into their business context, coming full circle. The business decision is first, then collecting and analyzing data, but in the end, you have to make the data 'dashboard-able,' for lack of a better term, for the business side. And for that, you need an end-to-end analytics platform rather than siloed solutions."

For example, some companies rely on just one metric to inform their decisions, which means teams across the board must have a clear understanding of how that metric is defined, what it means and how they are to execute that metric.

"Large broadcasters and multimedia platforms, such as Radio France, tend to inform content decisions and acquisition strategies using a small set of performance metrics," said Hinternesch. "Sometimes they even rely on a single one, such as videos or audio played. In this context, it's crucial to have a thorough definition of the metric and its meaning, and to have the right functionality to implement and execute the metric. This includes being able to rely on the quality of data processing and calculation, and, more

importantly, being able to tailor and customize implementation. For this example, this would mean that things like scrubbing scenarios, varying playback speeds or cross-platform streaming sessions are accounted for when evaluating a multimedia content as being 'played.'"

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Create a unified view of data to break down silos and improve communication.



Analytics should follow the goals of the business, with the steps to analyze lining up with what marketing teams identify as critical to growth and audience expansion.



Democratizing access allows data to flow to the right teams to achieve their business goals.



Build measurement into products and processes from the start, rather than leaving it as an afterthought.

Understanding the roles of 'light' and 'flexible' data

Concepts like "light data," "data minimization" and "flexible datasets" have gained popularity as business users work with massive datasets in pursuit of better outcomes. And while marketers are generally after a "unified" view, this refers to one data model for the whole business, where "flexible" refers to the ability to collect data from multiple sources and "light" is about avoiding unnecessary data.

A flexible data model provides a comprehensive view of users based on data from various applications — websites, apps, smart TVs and more. A unified data model ensures all teams within the organization operate on the same set of data, using the same vocabulary for analysis. This improves efficiency and accuracy across the organization.

Light data is all about identifying what's truly necessary and avoiding the burden of excess data that can bog down end users of an analytics solution.

“Imagine you’re learning how to cook and you’re starting with a simple recipe,” said Declan Owens, digital analytics strategist at Piano. “You go to the grocery store and buy everything on the shelves so you can be sure to make any meal you’d like in the future. Once you get ready to make your dish, you look for the specific ingredients and it becomes difficult to find them among all the other ingredients you bought. What if you had only purchased the ingredients for what you knew how to make? They would have been stored in the same place and would have been easy to find.

“Data works much in the same way,” he continued. “If you have too much of it and don’t know how to use it, then you don’t use it — and worse, it gets in the way of the data you know how to use. And, like cooking ingredients, data expires and becomes irrelevant in time, and therefore useless. So, stick to the data that you know how to use and that you can exploit and maintain with the resources you have at hand. This is the most economical, ecological and efficient approach.”

Light data can also provide a clearer understanding for building out datasets and data models more strategically. Organizations working under a light data philosophy can hone the flexibility they’ll need to work on more sophisticated projects, while aligning teams along the same standards to enable this flexibility.

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Light and flexible data go hand in hand. Businesses must identify the data necessary to inform desired outcomes and ensure it’s collected accurately.

Unify both data and vocabulary

Teams should not only be working with newly democratized access to all needed datasets, they should also be sure they’re defining terms that apply to the data in the same way. To do this, processes for storing and analyzing data need to be in place with everyone using the same language to ensure seamless cross-team collaboration.

“What you really need is one centrally-managed data model,” said Hinternes. “There has to be one place where you can manage data points in terms of dimensions, properties, metrics and segments.”

One group in particular found a way to truly streamline their process while unifying data and analytics.

“Industrial group Schneider Electric has a digital ecosystem of over 400 sites and 50 apps in over 100 countries,” added Hinternesch. “The entire process of data collection, sharing and exploitation is now managed by just two people. They manage 900 active users by leveraging a variety of analytics tools for data collection, tag debugging, stream inspection, pre-processing rules, data model management, advanced alerting systems and data democratization. All of these are ideally offered in a unified analytics platform by a single vendor.”

A successful approach to data vocabulary should include documentation, descriptions of data points, properties of dimensions, and tags and categories tailored to the end user — the teams that will act on the data.

“In the data model documentation, there should be a business user-friendly description for the end user, explaining what information a specific piece of data carries,” Hinternesch said. “Ideally, these definitions are embedded in the centrally-managed data model. That will help the end user understand what they’re actually looking at in their language.”

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Build a centrally-managed data model to create a foundation for standardizing data vocabulary across an organization.



Every team needs to be aligned on documentation, descriptions of data points, properties of dimensions, tags and categories.



Centralized data also needs to be organized in a way that’s easy for the end user to navigate so they can ultimately understand what they’re looking at.

Identify the right tools to build a flexible data model

It’s crucial to have tools in place that allow business users to prepare and democratize the important data. For analytics tools, Hinternesch at Piano stresses the importance of visualization features.

“You wouldn’t believe how many times just good data storytelling with proper visualizations are looked down upon,” he said. “Painting an accessible picture is really what drives the point home. We have to have the data tell a story and annotation, explanation and visualization features are incredibly important components.”

When it’s time for organizations to think about specific partners or analytics solutions that can help them keep track of their data management, there are three main components to consider.

1 Data: Managing data models, privacy, compliance and quality

Making quality decisions requires quality data, which should be evaluated based on five dimensions: Accuracy, completeness, cleanliness, timeliness and consistency.

Organizations should ensure any solution’s data model will work for their business, and understand how they will be able to audit data quality on a regular basis, such as through debugging tools.

2 Tools: Support for sharing data within an organization

When different stakeholders are using data across an organization, they need multiple layers of reporting capabilities. Offering standardized reporting for analysts, nuanced data mining for advanced data teams and business user-friendly tools such as dashboarding or browser extensions are vital for helping teams be more agile and self-sufficient.

3 Relationship: Experts to help with constant improvement

As technology continues to evolve, so should data strategies. Just because something worked last year — or last week — doesn’t mean it’ll work now. To support this constant iteration, organizations need technical and strategic support they can rely on for advanced consulting, benchmarking, best practices and more.

The set-it-and-forget-it mindset is no longer feasible when it comes to analytics. Fortunately, organizations are finally ending the cycle of massive datasets by working with only the data they actually need, using flexible data models to accommodate growth and change, and ensuring everyone across teams is aligned on a single source of truth. Streamlined data strategies will lead teams of all kinds into the future and help them clear the obstacles that challenge true data-driven decision-making.



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