

Newspaper Tests to Boost Sign-ups to its Online Dating Site

Optimizing landing pages, navigation, and the homepage grew subscriptions

Introduction: With more than 6 million weekly readers, The Guardian is the third most popular newspaper globally. The paper's strength lies in its strong "digital-first" approach and data-driven culture. They have been testing with Optimizely since early 2012 to grow online readership.

The Guardian uses A/B testing across many of its webpages and properties. Product managers like Kerstin Exner are encouraged to run A/B tests whenever possible, as long as a strong business case can be made for each experiment.

"Different teams have different objectives and sometimes it's challenging to get buy-in from everyone," Kerstin says. When planning her testing strategy, Kerstin gets buy-in from other teams by communicating a clear hypothesis before each test and showing the value for business goals across the organization. For example:

UX teams: Why test again if we already provided our designs through user research?

Kerstin's answer: We should complement qualitative insights with quantitative data in order to verify it.

Business teams: I am not interested in clicks. Increasing paid subscriptions is what matters most.

Kerstin's answer: Emotional engagement is almost as important. In the end, this will lead to more subscriptions.

Engineering teams: Why test if we could build new, top-of-the-line features?

Kerstin's answer: Let's test first to understand what performs well before we devote resources to building new features into our site.

One property The Guardian optimizes frequently is its dating site, Soulmates. Launched in 2004, Soulmates monetizes via paid monthly subscriptions that allow members to interact with other members.

Challenge: As a dating site, Soulmates' primary goal is to convert visitors into paid subscribers. They drive a majority of their traffic directly from ads placed on The Guardian's news pages. But while Kerstin found these ads performed well in terms of overall click-throughs, she noticed that the majority of these visitors were not converting into subscribers.

Kerstin wanted to learn what site changes would drive more visitors to subscribe to Soulmates' dating services. She aimed to gather learnings through a combination of qualitative data from user research and quantitative data from A/B testing.

At a Glance:

Customer:

theguardian

Website: soulmates.theguardian.com

About: The Guardian is a British daily national newspaper and the third most read newspaper in the world. Soulmates is The Guardian's online dating site.

Goal: Increase subscriptions to its dating site, Soulmates through optimization of its landing page, navigation, and homepage.

“ At the Guardian, we are very much driven by data and not individual opinions. This is one of the reasons website testing has become an important discipline for us, in an effort to make the website better.

Kerstin Exner

Product Manager, The Guardian

Hypothesis: Working closely with the UX team, Kerstin frequently employs user research to shape her A/B testing hypotheses.

Based on insights gleaned from research, Kerstin hypothesized that showing more information upfront, like a wider variety of profiles and more facts about existing users, would increase subscriptions. Kerstin coined this approach, a “people first” strategy. Using Optimizely, she built several experiments to test it out.

Test #1 - Landing Page Optimization: Kerstin opted to start with one of Soulmates’ main entry points – landing pages visitors entered upon clicking through an ad on The Guardian’s website. The ad feature photos of various Soulmates users; when a visitor clicks on a photo, they are directed to a landing page displaying the user’s profile and a “Join today for free” call-to-action (CTA).

While a clear CTA is necessary to drive subscriptions, Kerstin wondered if the current landing page was confusing first time visitors. The page provided no context about the dating site itself and few alternative actions if the user did not like the profile they saw or was not yet ready to join.

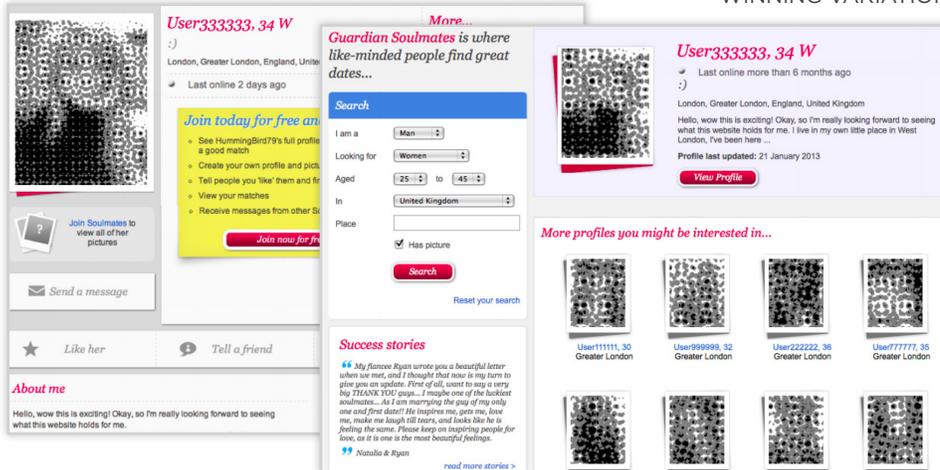
Using Optimizely, Kerstin decided to test the “people first” strategy on these landing pages, giving users more options and a wider variety of information. The variation landing pages still showed the profile from the ad, but also displayed a few similar profiles of the same age range and gender. The variation pages also showed a sidebar with search functionality and customer testimonials.

“ In user research we heard frequently that the primary consideration for joining a dating site is the people users expect to find. Will there be enough people they like on the site, and therefore, does the site offer value for money?

Kerstin Exner
Product Manager, The Guardian

ORIGINAL PAGE

WINNING VARIATION



The original landing page displayed the user’s profile with a large yellow call-to-action box in the center of the page. The variation gave site visitors more options by showing the user’s profile, similar profiles, search functionality, and user testimonials.

Kerstin allocated 50% of site traffic to the test in order to get to a statistically significant result quickly. She used Optimizely to track the number of successful registrations for both landing pages.

Results: The variation landing page, which included search functionality, user testimonials, and related profiles, improved conversions by more than 46%.

Once Kerstin realized there was a statistically significant winner, she used Optimizely’s traffic allocation feature to push 100% of site traffic to the winning variation while the engineering team built the changes into the site’s code.

Test #2 - Navigation Testing: After the success of Soulmate's first test using the "people first" strategy, Kerstin decided to run a second test on the site's navigation bar.

The original navigation bar displayed six default tabs: "Top matches", "Your matches", "Soulmates who like you", "Soulmates you like", "Views", and "Recently viewed".

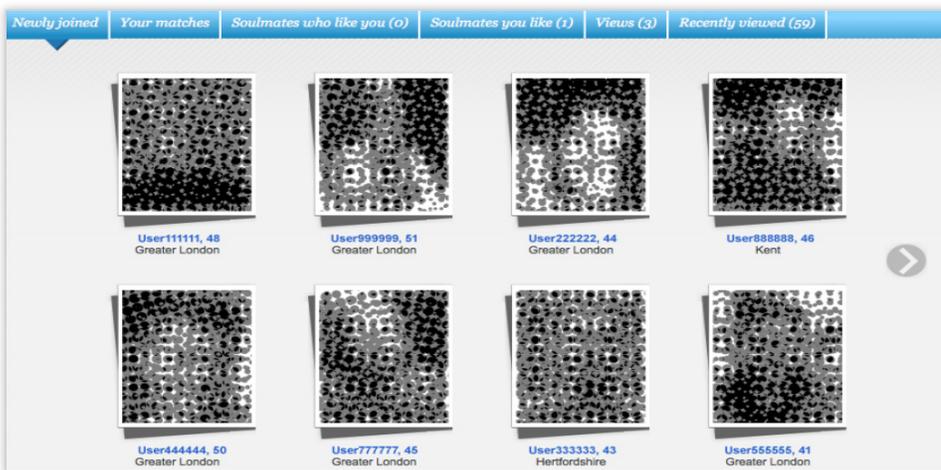
Because a site visitor's "Top matches" do not change frequently, Kerstin hypothesized that visitors thought the site looked stale and lifeless. She wondered if changing "Top matches" to "Newly joined members" would garner more engagement and increase click-throughs to individual profiles. Kerstin built a test using Optimizely, tracking click-throughs on individual user profiles as the primary conversion goal.

Results: After running the test for just a few days, Soulmates saw a staggering 137% increase in click-throughs from the "Newly joined members" variation.

Test #3 - Homepage Optimization: Additional user research around Kerstin's "people first" hypothesis revealed that many site visitors craved more information on Soulmates' homepage - which displayed photos and quirky taglines for several single men and women on the site.

Using Optimizely, Kerstin built a A/B test that pitted the original homepage carousel with one that replaced the quirky taglines with the age and location of each featured user. She tracked successful subscriptions as a the primary conversion goal for this experiment and also measured profile click-throughs as a secondary goal.

WINNING VARIATION



The variation that replaced "Top matches" with "Newly joined members" increased conversions by 137%.

Results: The homepage test provided surprising insights for Kerstin. After running the test for just a few days, she found the primary conversion goal of site subscriptions actually decreased with the new variation. Additionally, the difference in profile click-throughs between the original page and the variation was so small that it never reached statistical significance.

Rather than archive this as a failed test, however, Kerstin found the learnings to be just as valuable as those from the two prior experiments. The negative and insignificant results helped her plan for future tests by honing in on new ways to increase conversions.

About Optimizely:

Optimizely is a world-class website optimization platform that enables users with and without technical expertise to make dynamic changes to their websites, test the variations to live traffic, gather immediate results and start achieving goals.

Optimizely helps more than 7,000 clients drive more leads, sales and conversions through simple website testing and optimization.

Optimizely By the Numbers

(As of May 2014)

7 Billion

web experiences delivered

500,000+

experiments run since launch

7,000+

customers

Happy Customers:



ORIGINAL HOMEPAGE



WINNING VARIATION



The original homepage carousel displayed photos and quirky taglines for several single men and women on the site. The variation homepage carousel replaced the quirky taglines with the age and location of each featured user.

Rather than focusing on improving the general effectiveness of the homepage carousel, Kerstin decided that future tests should focus on ways to personalize each visitors' experience by showing relevant profiles more quickly.

Testing Takeaways:

1. Agree on a hypothesis and goals before the test. Setting a hypothesis before building each test makes executing and interpreting experiment results much easier. According to Kerstin, agreeing on clear goals upfront helps remove the debate aspect when her team looks at test results and also influences ideas for future experiments.

2. Every test provides a learning. "Of the 14 tests we have run so far on Soulmates, seven have been successful, three have been negative, and four have been inconclusive, in that the differences did not generate big enough changes to reach statistical significance. To know what doesn't work has been just as informative as to know what does work. A negative test is just a challenge to improve on what has failed and test it again," says Kerstin.

If you define a clear hypothesis and goals upfront, any test result, whether positive, negative, or insignificant, can yield actionable data. Use negative or insignificant results as data points to brainstorm and shape future tests around the same aspects of your site. Iterating on negative or insignificant tests will help you hone in on the best possible variation. According to Kerstin, each test always informs the next.

3. Create a testing culture in your organization. At the Guardian, different teams have different objectives. When planning her testing strategy, Kerstin gets buy-in from other teams by showing the value for business goals across the organization. She also makes it a priority to clearly communicate the hypothesis, metrics, and goals of each test – ensuring all team members are on the same page. By employing these strategies, Kerstin has made A/B testing a quintessential aspect of The Guardian's product development process. Her testing team sits alongside qualitative user research and web analytics as an equally important source of insight that informs a data-driven product strategy.

“The test helped us realized that the homepage experience was very generic. It doesn't know what age or gender a visitor is looking for and was not providing a personalized experience that would motivate an individual visitor to subscribe”

Kerstin Exner
Product Manager, The Guardian

See Results Today.

Businesses testing with Optimizely achieve major conversion increases for key business objectives.

Media

29.2%
pageviews

14.38%
reader engagement

Online Retail

21.19%
revenue

13.41%
shopper engagement

SaaS

28.91%
pageviews

17.52%
user engagement

Source: Survey of baseline-beating Optimizely experiments since October 2010.

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