

Why Leverage Captive Portals To Uncover Hidden Customers

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No one likes unnecessary friction. And technology has been the primary driving force in reducing friction, replacing long lines at the airport counter with self-service kiosks, long call wait times with instant chats and paper concert tickets with mobile devices. Businesses know that removing friction from the customer experience is essential to retaining happy and loyal customers.

Customers also want fast, reliable onsite connectivity, but when it comes to allowing unknown visitors onto a guest network, however tempting it may be to remove all friction in the name of ease, the goal should be to reduce friction for customers, while also providing a safe and engaging experience for end-users. That's where captive portals come into play.

As the CEO of SocialSign.in, I have worked closely for years with captive portal and guest Wi-Fi marketing solutions that allow businesses to engage with their customers onsite and gather first-party data with a customized captive portal. But what does all of that really mean for you and your business? Let's start by answering the obvious question first.

What are captive portals?

Captive portals are the process of identifying and interacting with guest users upon their connection to a Wi-Fi signal. Digitally, this is no different than greeting customers as they enter a store or verifying a ticket at the gate. For organizations that operate commercial spaces, it provides an opportunity to identify new customer profiles and learn about them to better inform marketing, as well as gain permission to contact them and provide content and calls-to-action to improve their experience.

All of these benefits should be a priority for any organization; however, they are often drowned out in debate as to what the purpose is of providing guest Wi-Fi access at all. The debate around adding a captive portal to a guest network continues to rage on with no clear end in sight. The reasons for disagreement come from the same place most disagreements arise: a difference in perspective.

Businesses participating in these debates often have different goals. For example, if someone measures their product or function's success by the total number of devices attached to a network, removing all friction makes sense as a goal. However, for a customer experience manager or marketer who is responsible for driving additional revenue and needing to capture net/new promotable customer profiles, zero friction can often equal zero new customers.

Why do captive portals help with marketing?

Nothing is ever one size fits all, so when an organization is looking at a decision to leverage Wi-Fi for marketing purposes, it is helpful to answer the following questions:

- Does your organization benefit from an increase in valid new profiles in your CRM, email or marketing systems?
- Are you spending resources to connect with qualified prospects or new customers?
- Does your data coverage on shoppers, fans and visitors have some gaps?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, optimizing the Wi-Fi process and adding a low friction captive portal becomes the most likely decision.

Optimization is rarely a binary choice of either do or do not. It's very often the case that optimizing a captive portal experience comes down to balancing the friction for the visitor with the goals of the organization. Poorly executed captive portals definitely influence this debate within organizations.

Having spent about a decade helping organizations make the right decisions around Wi-Fi marketing, it is clear to me that a business's prior experiences with

captive portals are often accompanied by poor creative and branding, are lacking multi-channel or omnichannel awareness or are simply too repetitive for guests. These issues tend to push the conversation toward forgoing the untapped value of a guest Wi-Fi portal and defaulting to a frictionless experience.

What type of captive portal experience should businesses provide to visitors?

A common way for businesses to implement a captive portal is to use the “built-in” functionality which comes with the network devices. This approach generally offers a way for a business to get approval on terms of use, display their logo and possibly collect a name and email address. The “pro” of this option is the relative speed of deployment and the “con” is poor branding, unvalidated and often low-value email addresses and no personalization.

Another approach is to use the connection request to redirect the user to a webpage with advertising or some content. The “pro” here is the ease of set-up, while the “cons” are losing attention from any Android device (as they will not complete the redirect), lack of first-party data collection and having your ad or marketing message displayed after the user exits the captive portal.

For those businesses which care about the end-user experience, personalization and validated first-party data collection, they can take a more data-driven approach and engage with a service provider to create a customer channel via Wi-Fi and the captive portal. The “pros” for this approach include high data quality, omnichannel experiences, personalization and ease of connection to other marketing systems, while the “cons” tend to focus around the possibility of selecting the wrong vendor partner and increasing the time to deployment as the strategy, plan and experiences are executed.

When used correctly, captive portals can increase customer profile growth and engagement. Know there are a few tools and people out there that can help this customer touchpoint live up to your brand’s promises.