The Surprising Benefits of Failure

Yazan:
Casey Carey

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Creating a culture of growth should rank at the top of marketers' New Year's resolutions, but how to best go about it? Casey Carey, director of Google Analytics Marketing, suggests instituting a "quarterly failure report" in 2017 – a surprising way to shift how a marketer's team works and grows.

An old saying goes, "Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan." What if we flipped that idea, though, and started not just admitting our missteps but celebrating them and sharing what we learned from them?

That's the idea behind the quarterly failure report, a useful tool for testers, conversion rate optimisers, and marketing leaders who are trying to instil a culture of growth. "I've learned tons from failed tests," says Krista Seiden, global analytics education lead at Google. This kind of report "really just highlights the biggest, most miserable test results that people have had recently, and what they've learned from it."

The quarterly failure report has two goals. The first is to share what has been learned. Failure is a fact of life for testers, and every flop represents a fact uncovered. Sharing those defeats in a routine way promotes institutional memory, ensuring history will be less likely to repeat itself. The losses don't

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have to be huge; they can be tests of buttons, imagery or calls to action as well as more ambitious tests of user flow at checkout or new features.

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The second goal is to reinforce the culture of failing – and learning – fast. Failure is the by-product of good testing. "Our test success rate is about 10%," says Jesse Nichols, head of web and app analytics and growth at Nest. "But we learn something from all our tests."

Whether sharing successful experiments or highlighting the duds and lessons learned, strive for simplicity. The more digestible the information, the more likely people will learn from it. "Capture an entire test on a single slide: the description, the hypothesis, the variations, the outcome and next steps," Jesse says. "You've got to leave some asterisks and full details in the appendix."

The one-slide approach makes it easier to establish a template and communication process that can be replicated. "Stakeholders know exactly what they're going to get every time we run a test, and it doesn't feel like I'm painting a picture that just tells the story that I want to tell," Jesse says. "I admit our tests that don't succeed. I give credit to the teams that have participated in the tests that do succeed."

An experiment gone wrong doesn't have to mean someone goofed. In a culture of growth, it should mean that you tried something new, measured the results and learned that the change didn't help the bottom line. If your tests are always successful, you're probably not testing often enough or aggressively enough.

Still, it's important that failures, like testing itself, be directed and carefully measured. Before you start issuing a quarterly failure report, make sure that you've trained everyone on best practices for driving growth through testing and experimentation. You should have clear, repeatable frameworks and methodologies for testing that everyone can (and does) follow.

"You need a great experimental design that will produce two things: growth and insights," says Chris Goward, founder and CEO of WiderFunnel, a digital agency focused on conversion optimisation. "If you view your optimisation programme as a strategic method for learning about your customers and prospects – for truly understanding their mindset – rather than a tactical tweaking programme, you can take a broader perspective and find the gains in every test."

No one knows anything until they test. That's one of the basic truths of the digital world, and it's a compelling reason for testing everything. When you take that mantra a step further and begin celebrating failures, there are no orphans and, ultimately, everybody wins.

Download How to Build a Culture of Growth to learn more about leading your marketing team to focus on testing and continuous learning.