

The CMOcircle

A Global Room of Distinct Voices

Scaling Personalization When Volume Explodes

Circle 02: Mumbai | 13th March 2026



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This playbook follows the journey of a garment being made, each stage bringing personalization closer to the right fit.

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The Fabric

| About TheCMOcircle

TheCMOcircle began with a simple realization. CMOs are among the most connected leaders, and yet when it comes to honest, no-posturing conversations, they are often the most alone.

Today's marketing leaders are expected to do it all. Drive growth, navigate AI-led disruption, protect brand credibility, and influence across functions, often all at once. Most forums, however, reward visibility over vulnerability and performance over perspective.

TheCMOcircle was created to change that.

It is a deliberately small, invitation-only gathering built for honest conversations. No panels. No pitches. No performative storytelling. Just peers in a room, sharing experiences from the trenches, challenging assumptions, and learning from one another without the pressure to impress.

The Bengaluru edition was the first Circle. It set the tone, depth, and intent for what this community could become.

The Mumbai Circle, held on 13th March 2026, builds on that foundation. With new voices and a shared focus on personalization, the conversation moved forward, deeper and more reflective of today's marketing realities.

What follows is a reflection of that room.

The Tailors at Work

| Speakers



Alok Ranjan

Co-founder & Partner,
Tauran Advisors



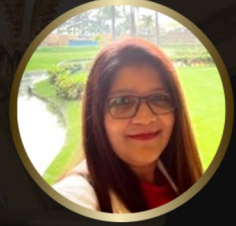
Elisha Saigal

Founder & CEO,
El Sol



Gaurang Sinha

VP - Revenue & GTM,
Titan



Hiral Saimy

Head Service Excellence, CX
Aditya Birla Capital



Neha Sawant

Marketing Head,
ZebPay



Nikhil Asopa

Head of Customer
Experience, Tata Digital



Prasann Shrivastava

Chief Marketing & Digital Officer,
ASK Asset & Wealth Management



Rajeiv Malik

Visiting Faculty at IIM-A,
Founder, Only Ladders



Supriya M

Industrial Parks, SEZ,
Business Development,
ARISE IIP



Swati Gusain

Head of Growth,
CoverSure



Vishesh Sharma

Chief Marketing Officer,
PL Capital (Prabhudas Lilladher)



Zubin Kutar

Founder,
AI Fluency Labs

Taking Measurements I Social Ice

Before anything is tailored, you measure.
The evening opened with a simple question:

“What’s the worst or funniest personalization attempt you’ve seen from a brand?”

Rajeev opened the discussion with a retrospective.

Back in 2012, when digital marketing was still treated like a side experiment, he launched a Facebook page for a brick-and-mortar business. It hit 500,000 followers in six months. He was mocked so much for his “digital obsession” that the sales team even made a skit about him.

Fast forward a few years, and everything had flipped to digital-first.

Sometimes, what looks irrelevant is just early.

Swati brought it back to basics.

She recalled asking a marketer about their personalization strategy. A marketer proudly claimed their strategy was... addressing users by name. That was it.

Even today, she pointed out, not much has changed.

Alok shared a story of targeting that missed the mark.

A product with limited relevance was repeatedly promoted to CFOs through persistent email outreach, eventually leading to spam blocks. The issue wasn’t execution.

It was a fundamental misalignment in identifying the right audience.

Zubin shared an example drawn from a familiar, everyday context.

He bought a SIM card that previously belonged to someone else. From that moment on, he was consistently targeted with women's clothing ads. The system had made a simple assumption and never questioned it again.

One misassumption repeated endlessly gets it completely wrong.

Gaurang highlighted a growth tactic that proved unexpectedly effective.

During the signup process of a website, a live support agent would pop up and greet users by name. It was meant to feel helpful. Instead, it felt intrusive.

That's when they learned:

Personalization has a boundary. And users can feel it instantly.

Neha shared examples that made the room shift from laughter to realization.

In crypto, where portfolios swing wildly, users would receive automated messages saying, "Great job!" Even when they were losing money! At another point, during early campaigns around credit scores, messaging implied that an employee's job depended on it.

Personalization without realization can be insensitive.

Nikhil highlighted the complexities that emerge at scale.

Users being congratulated for earning 0.25 coins, and AI chatbots in regional languages going completely off track that one even told a customer to try a competitor's platform.

Funny, in hindsight. Costly, in reality.

Most personalization mistakes don't come from a lack of intent.

They come from bad data and poor testing.

Vishesh added a story that got a knowing reaction across the table.

Early attempts were made to respond to vernacular messages in the same tone without actually understanding them. They later realized they had been replying to curse words.

That was the moment it clicked: Personalization isn't a grand strategy. It's common sense.

Speak the customer's language. Be where they are. Understand before you respond.

Supriya brought in a quieter, more reflective note.

She spoke about personalization as an ongoing journey. Not a title. Not a capability. But a continuous effort to understand what customers are saying, across channels, moments, and experiences.

At its core, it's about two things:

Reducing what frustrates people, and increasing what delights them.



The First Cut

I TheCMOcircle Context

With the measurements on the table, it was time to make the first cut.

Kavitha opened the evening with a warm welcome, setting the tone for a room that had chosen conversation over a typical Friday evening.

The intent behind TheCMOcircle was straightforward: Marketing leaders operate across growth, technology, data, and brand, yet rarely have spaces to speak openly with peers. This was designed to change that.

Vinay shared the origin of TheCMOcircle.

While many leadership roles have communities, CMOs often do not. And when they come together, conversations don't need prompting. They happen, openly and strongly.

Vishal brought a practitioner's lens on managing customer conversations at scale, a perspective that would shape what followed.

The theme for the evening was simple:

“Scaling Personalization When Volume Explodes”

Every brand wants to be personal.
But at scale, can it still feel meaningful?

The question was set. The conversation was ready.

Pinning It Together

I The Conversation

If the icebreaker revealed the cracks, the roundtable started pulling at the threads. Ideas and insights were tested, stretched, and occasionally pulled apart.

The conversation opened with a simple question:

“At what point does personalization stop feeling personal and start feeling automated?”

Prasann:

“Personalization feels automated when brands simply repeat known data points, like generic ‘Happy Birthday’ messages that most people ignore, unless it comes from someone like Narendra Modi. Without deeper insight, it becomes monotonous and meaningless.”

Vishesh:

“In the race for data and automation, brands often lose creativity and storytelling, making personalization feel mechanical. When communication lacks emotion and narrative, users start tuning it out.”

Swati:

“Personalization breaks when brands rely on isolated data points or push constant sales nudges, ignoring the user’s actual context. At that point, it feels less like understanding and more like a desperate attempt to sell.”

Rajeev:

“Personalization goes wrong when brands don’t update context, like continuing to send insurance reminders for a car that’s already been sold or showing washing machine ads after one has just been purchased. Done right, it feels invisible, like Netflix recommendations based on the movies or shows you watched. I can sum up personalization with 3 R’s: Relevance, Respect, and Reciprocity.”

Nikhil:

“Not every category needs personalization, and what feels personalized today can become automated tomorrow. It’s a moving target that evolves constantly, so brands need to be careful. Poor execution can quickly irritate users or even lead to negative public perception.”

After unpacking, when personalization risks feeling automated, the conversation naturally shifted toward strategy.

“Should brands aim to personalize every interaction, or should personalization be reserved for high-impact moments?”

Alok:

“Transactional messages can become annoying if overdone, especially in sensitive industries like healthcare. Personalization should focus on high-impact, intent-driven moments, and AI needs a human in the loop to avoid mistakes.”

Elisha:

“Personalization can delight when done thoughtfully, like remembering a pet’s milestone and suggesting relevant products. Small gestures make the experience feel human and attentive. Simple fields like ‘Are you a customer?’ can help target messages effectively.”

Hiral:

“Understanding the personal boundaries of users is critical. What’s helpful for one may be intrusive for another. High-impact personalization can backfire if not handled sensitively.”

Zubin:

“Brands need a clear framework defining personalization, key events, and audience boundaries. ‘Wow’ moments should be structured and iteratively updated to prevent intrusive or misaligned experiences. Guidelines must include data management to purge irrelevant info.”

Nikhil:

“TRAJ guidelines help block discontinued numbers, preventing misdirected personalization. Constant updating of these lists is key for accuracy.”

Supriya:

“In financial services, deep personalization is non-negotiable for intelligent engagement. AI still has a long way to go to replicate the nuance humans provide in B2B and B2C interactions.”

Prasann:

“Personalization requires balancing data (hardware) and user acceptance (software). Privacy, regulations, and multichannel considerations mean brands must focus only on impactful personalization moments.”

Swati:

“Feedback matters more than guidelines. Without it, personalization frameworks can exaggerate hypotheses and fail to measure real impact. Multivariate personalization experiments are rarely done rigorously.”

Gaurang:

“I’m curious if anyone’s actually measured how personalization impacts metrics like NPS or CSAT. It would be fascinating to see what truly works. From my experience, marketing is only getting harder with tracking restrictions and regulations. The right context makes it magical, but the wrong context makes it creepy; that’s where I’d draw the line.”

Rajeev:

“The balance between loud reach and quiet personalization is crucial. Recognizing customer tribes can make targeting more meaningful and less intrusive. Most established brands recognize tribes as an important lens.”

At this point, Vinay couldn’t resist cracking a light joke to break the seriousness:
“Our CMO tribe might just start getting ads for TheCMOcircle today! ”

Vishesh:

“Start personalization by understanding what the customer actually prefers, not just what data you can use. The hero-hub-hygiene approach helps deliver high-impact moments while tracking ROI effectively.”

Neha:

“Too much personalization can overwhelm post-COVID digital users. Human judgment is needed to package messages smartly, ensuring the experience is seamless and relevant.”



With that mental model in place, we naturally dove into the next question.

“At true scale, personalization is just sophisticated segmentation with a better story. Is real 1:1 connection a myth?”

Zubin:

“Personalization must deliver ROI, or it’s just a marketer’s game of sending endless messages for fun. Start with low-hanging ROI opportunities and reverse-engineer from there. Personalization should go deeper into systems, segmentation, and strategy, not just messaging.”

Nikhil:

“Measuring ROI on personalized campaigns is tricky. Models are flawed, and assumptions abound. It works best for B2B and HNI audiences, but we can’t always separate the effect of personalization from the campaign itself. Cohort behavior, campaign effectiveness, and algorithm use all affect outcomes.”

Rajeev:

“Simple celebration or festival greetings can unexpectedly drive sales. In my experience, a well-timed and mellow Teacher’s Day mail reminded principals to close a pending order, resulting in multiple school bus purchases.”

Prasann:

“ROI doesn’t have to be revenue. It can be engagement, like email opens. Defining ROI is flexible, depending on what you’re measuring.”

Vishesh:

“Personalization drives ROI when done with insight. For example, understanding why dormant stockbroking clients disengage allows tailored interventions that outperform generic campaigns.”

Hiral:

“In large systems, what seems like success may mask real issues. Continuous monitoring ensures personalization doesn’t create friction or disservice, especially for evolving segments like HNIs.”

Alok:

“Context is key. I’ve seen how a small tweak, like adjusting a subject line during COVID lockdowns, dramatically improved responses. Micro-segmentation and AI-driven enrichment tools now enable more precise targeting in B2B.”

The Trial Room

| Keynote

The participants were invited to engage in a simple exercise: to reflect on what digital systems already know about them.

Open ChatGPT and ask: **“What all do you know about me?”**

What began as a light activity quickly revealed the depth of data trails individuals leave behind, and how these can be used to shape highly personalized experiences. The discussion extended to how everyday technologies, often operating in the background, capture behavioral patterns, raising both possibilities and concerns around personalization.

The evolution of personalization in business

Historically, personalization was manual and relationship-driven, but its scalability depended on the introduction of systems such as CRMs and automation platforms. Today, while customer expectations for personalization have significantly increased, consistent delivery remains a challenge due to fragmented data and disconnected systems.

Scale alone is no longer a competitive advantage; precision in timing, relevance, and intent is what drives impact.



Adjustments & Alterations

| Co-Create

We asked everyone to stitch their thoughts into a single line or two:

“If you had to describe TheCMOcircle, and personalize it, what would it look like?”



Rajeev Malik:

“A highly personalized forum where personalization itself was the subject; truly enriching, with amazing people.”



Swati Gusain:

“A one-of-a-kind experience; valuable conversations with fellow CMOs, reminding us that even at our level, we’re still figuring things out.”



Alok Ranjan:

“A personal, networking-driven experience, connecting meaningfully and exchanging insights beyond formal learning.”



Supriya M:

“Unique, enriching, and engaging. A truly valuable session.”



Zubin Kutar:

“Rare opportunity for thought-provoking conversations with peers. I would attend again, even if not invited!”



Hiral Saimy:

“Even as a non-CMO, I learned from diverse perspectives and industry lenses. A truly enriching session.”



Gaurang Sinha:

“Reminded me why I love marketing. It’s a mix of psychology, math, and science. A phenomenal, engaging journey.”



Neha Sawant:

“Felt like a micro, personalized MBA refresher; close-knit, specialized, and insightful.”



Nikhil Asopa:

“Loved the casual, cross-industry sharing; the format and the food made it stand out.”



Vishesh Sharma:

“Peer-to-peer learning is timeless; TheCMOcircle is crucial for upskilling and staying market-aware. Plus, the trends presented were spot on.”



Prasann Shrivastava:

“A creative, mindful, and original circle, filled with brave marketers willing to experiment.”



Elisha Saigal:

“A tribe of like-minded marketers sharing insights, learnings, and real-life case studies, like a monthly booster shot.”

The Final Fit

| Key Takeaways

The discussion evolved from highlighting the flaws and challenges in personalization to a clearer, more grounded understanding of what effective personalization requires at scale. It was recognized as an ongoing discipline, one that demands understanding customers in context. It balances data with judgment, volume with boundaries, and automation with empathy, so that brands show up at the right moments, in the right tone, for the right reasons.

The participants left seeing personalization less as a tech feature and more as a way of building trust: respecting privacy, listening for feedback, and continuously fine-tuning journeys so that customers feel understood rather than targeted. In that sense, the Circle itself became proof that intimate, well-curated conversations can still shape how leaders think about complex, AI-driven realities, reminding everyone that marketing is, at its core, about human connection.

And these are the quiet truths that stayed behind:

01

Context-first

Personalization fails when assumptions, context, or signals are wrong.

Moment focus:

Reserve personalization for high-intent, high-impact moments.

02

03

ROI with discipline:

Define ROI clearly, or personalization becomes noise.

Human guardrails for AI:

AI scales personalization; humans decide what's respectful.

04

05

Segmentation over vanity:

"1:1" at scale is smart segmentation plus storytelling.

Human-scale systems:

Scaling personalization means designing systems that keep context, respect limits, and still feel human.

06

Where the Circle Goes From Here



TheCMOcircle is structured to spark meaningful discussions and let insights emerge organically. Without the pressure to perform, leaders share, engage, and challenge ideas respectfully.

The next edition of TheCMOcircle will take place in Delhi, built on the same principles: a closed-door setting, a carefully selected cohort, and a focus on the leadership challenges that matter most.

Senior marketing leaders interested in participating, collaborating, or learning more can reach out to us at: TheCMOcircle@verbinden.ai

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