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Consumer motivation: Home truths and marketing myths

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Abstract

In the light of strong indications that consumers were becoming steadily more dissatisfied with marketing approaches, e.g. soaring Telephone Preference Service (TPS) and steadily-growing Mailing Preference Service (MPS) registrations, CCB Research set out to discover consumer attitudes to various marketing methods, creative approaches and media and simultaneously record what marketers presumed these consumer attitudes to be.

The contemporaneous sets of research results were designed to reveal any gap between the two and so help marketers to achieve a better understanding of consumers.

Areas examined include:

- knowledge of and response to the TPS
- preferred method of marketing communication
- direct mail – amount received and response to mail packs
 - whether opened
 - reasons for opening/throwing away
 - response to unsolicited mailings
- awareness of and response to the Data Protection Act
- attitudes to text messages and marketing calls to mobiles
- Unsolicited email and who should be responsible for policing it
- Local newspaper readership
- Conclusions

In a fast changing world where consumers are increasingly influenced by the internet and the speed of information, a real-time research panel was used to keep up to date with the changing face of media and consumers' reactions to it.

Introduction

Direct marketers have always claimed to take a more scientific, measurable and targeted approach to marketing than their advertising and sales promotion colleagues. They take pride in their ability to generate and store information about the population as a whole and their own customers in particular, and claim to boost response by targeting the people who are most likely to be interested in their offerings. So it would be expected that their knowledge of the marketplace, skill in influencing buying decisions and ability to detect and change attitudes to products and services would be highly developed.

But are direct marketers really in tune with the UK consumer?

Keywords: consumer, TPS, data protection, donor marketing, local newspaper readership, CCB Marketing-GAP Research, real time, FastMAP, marketing data, online research

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This paper summarises the results of the 2005 CCB Marketing-GAP Research survey to measure the extent to which marketers' perceptions of consumer attitudes and motivations are correct. It is the opening survey in what online research company Coad Cole and Burey (CCB) plans to continue as a non-commercial, real-time, annual tracking study of the buying behaviour of UK consumers and their attitudes to marketing, and marketers' ability to keep up with those changes.

The pace of change is accelerating, largely because of digital and technological advance within the media, communications and promotions industries, to the extent that people's attitudes and behaviour can be influenced or even changed within days or hours, rather than years or generations. CCB's intention is to measure these changes year on year and monitor marketers' ability to observe and respond to them over time. The questionnaire for this first survey was thus designed to allow continuity as the tracking study rolls out. The same questions will be asked of similarly constructed consumer and marketer panels next year.

Methodology

The research was conducted during August and September 2005, online, in real time, using the FastMAP research tool, among two separate panels of respondents: 4,000 consumers and 200 marketing professionals. Each panel responded to a separate survey.

Both surveys contained the same questions, but while the consumers were asked to express their own views, the marketers were asked in each question to use their experience and judgment to predict how the consumers would respond to that question.

The consumer research panel

The larger panel comprised 4,000 consumers recruited from the Acxiom lifestyle database, selected to mirror the UK population profile in age and gender and be responsive both online and offline. (Traditionally, Acxiom data have been collected via postal lifestyle surveys but also include information collected via the web. Thus it was possible to buy data on a set of consumers who were selected because they were both mail and internet responsive.) CCB chose Acxiom data when it was constructing the consumer panel because of the readily available depth of demographic information Acxiom could provide. Without these pre-existing data it would not have been possible cost-effectively to construct a panel which mirrored the UK population profile.

These pre-existing data also make it possible for CCB to examine in detail the demographics of a group of people who respond to a question in a specific way. For example, it might choose to investigate their age, sex, income, family or marital status to establish whether there are any significant similarities.

The advantage of the CCB panel — which has been running for more than two years and has achieved accurate results for marketers within sectors including automotive, finance, charity, catalogue and mail order, telecoms, internet, fast-moving consumer goods and medical — is that it is extremely representative of a direct-marketing-responsive audience. It

**Consumer panel
mirrored UK
population profile in
age and gender**

is therefore what CCB normally uses, in tandem with FastMAP, to gain feedback on marketing, advertising (print/web/mail) or sales activity, eg testing different creative treatments or scripts, data planning and purchase and media planning.

According to the National Statistics Omnibus Survey published on 23 August 2005, 55 per cent of households in Great Britain (13.1 million) had internet access in May 2005 and almost two-thirds (60 per cent) of adults had used the internet in the three months before interview, of whom 58 per cent had bought or ordered goods, tickets or services. This might invite criticism that the online panel was therefore not representative of the 45 per cent of people who do not have home internet access. But precisely because CCB was anxious to identify what constitutes an 'online person', the company researched this very issue and found it could not distinguish between the profile of a UK representative sample and the profile of the customers on the panel.

Benefits of online research

Online research offered two benefits which were overwhelmingly important for the CCB Marketing-GAP study. One was the availability of Axiom's wealth of demographic and lifestyle data on panel members, which allowed the profiling of cluster groups of those who respond in specific ways. By relating these profiles back to the database, it was possible to identify and quantify the number of other individuals who fitted the same profile. The second benefit was that the research could be done in real time to gain fast — or even continuous — feedback. This means that, for example, if people change their views following, say, a government announcement, a disaster, a product recall or a rise or fall in the interest rate, it is possible to track this change instantly and factor its effect into the findings.

The marketer research panel

The second panel comprised 200 marketers drawn from the CCB marketing professionals' panel, who were e-mailed the questionnaire. Additional responses came from the readers of *Precision Marketing* magazine, who were invited to access the questionnaire via a website address printed in the magazine each week the survey remained open.

Validity

When looking at the validity of research findings four things are of prime importance — recency; sample size (that a statistically relevant number of people took part in the survey); whether the respondents form a representative sample; and the manner in which the question is posed. The representative sample and statistical relevance aspects have been covered above. The research was conducted among a very large sample of 4,000 consumers and is therefore more statistically relevant than similar research done among a smaller sample: the bigger the panel, the more accurate the results.

Since the order in which multiple-choice answers appear can influence response (it has been shown that for some individuals items higher up a list are more likely to be selected than those lower down), the order items

Four important factors

appeared on all multiple-choice lists was randomly changed throughout the survey to avoid bias.

Results can also be biased by the way in which responses are collected. A very obvious example would be to ask the question ‘Do you donate to a charity at least once a month?’ face to face — or, even worse, for the question to be asked by someone easily identifiable as being connected with a charity. In such cases guilt will become a factor and people are likely to lie to save face rather than admit they have not given to charity recently. With an online, anonymous survey, people are more likely to give honest answers to awkward questions.

Recency

One of the greatest benefits of online research is that it takes place in ‘real time’, so that at any moment it is possible to monitor response levels and observe progress. Since answers have been input by the respondents, the delay which occurs because written data have to be entered by a third party is avoided.

Also, it has been shown that data-entry errors are less likely to occur when people enter their own responses online, partly because sometimes a third party has difficulty in deciphering someone else’s writing and therefore makes an error in data entry and partly because if an individual takes the trouble to fill in an online questionnaire, he or she is likely to enter the data more accurately than a keyboard operator whose attention may wander during a day of monotonous, repetitive data-entry work.

Using traditional face-to-face surveys or paper questionnaires it would be several months (typically two or even three months) to achieve responses to 34 multiple-choice, complex questions from 4,000 people who mirror the UK population profile. Firstly it would be necessary to identify individuals with the right demographic profiles and get them to agree to participate. Then the questionnaires would be mailed or delivered, or a large team of qualified researchers would need to be assembled nationwide to perform the interviews. Responses would then have to be returned to base for input, so that the data could be processed and results presented in usable form.

The CCB Marketing-GAP Research was carried out during August and September and the findings were released within a week, so the results represented an accurate ‘snapshot’ of topical opinion.

Comparison of marketing specialist and consumer respondent findings

In the marketing specialist questionnaire it was necessary to collect responses in a slightly different way from the consumer questionnaire. So that one set of findings could be compared with the other, it was necessary to organise responses into class intervals.

For example, when consumers were asked to provide a yes or no response to the question ‘When providing details about yourself do you always look for the opt-out boxes so your details are not passed on to a third party or used for marketing?’ this resulted in 82 per cent answering ‘yes’ and 18 per cent answering ‘no’. Marketers were asked ‘What

Comparison of findings

Analysis of the findings

proportion of consumers do you think always look for the opt-out box when providing details about themselves, so their details are not passed on to a third party or used for marketing purposes?'; their responses are shown in Table 1.

These findings can be reported in several ways: for example, that 1 per cent of marketers correctly predicted that more than 80 per cent of consumers look for the opt-out box, or that 99 per cent of marketers are more optimistic than reality suggests or that, on average, marketers are more optimistic in thinking that only 37.5 per cent of consumers opt out compared to a reality of 82 per cent. If 50 per cent of marketers had underestimated and 50 per cent had overestimated, then the overall assessment of consumer attitudes by marketers would have been correct.

The findings

Marketers are an optimistic group as far as their work is concerned. Despite being consumers themselves and being members of families who presumably do not share all their enthusiasm for the discipline, according to the findings of the CCB Marketing-GAP Research they have certainly overlooked some of the clues to how consumers feel.

Consumers and marketers responded to detailed questions about 34 marketing issues — some controversial and topical, others traditional concerns which have been the subject of heated industry debate for years.

The questions ranged from consumer understanding of the Data Protection Act to their preferred method of marketing communication. A panel of 200 marketers answered the same questions but were asked to predict what they thought the 4,000 consumers would respond, rather than revealing their own opinions.

Any marketers who missed the BBC TV show *Brassed Off Britain* (June 2005), in which junk mail came out as consumers' biggest bugbear, can hardly have failed to notice the furore it engendered in the marketing press. Indeed, five months later it continued to be cited in the letters and opinion pages of all the large-circulation trade publications. Likewise, any marketer ought to be aware of the news that Telephone Preference Service (TPS) registrations have passed the psychologically important 10 million mark — as reported, for example, in a front page article in *Precision Marketing*¹ and a news story in *Marketing Direct*² — and realised that telemarketing is not the flavour of the month. But when it

Table 1: Marketers' views on proportion of consumers using opt-out boxes

Proportion %	Response %
0–10	7
11–20	13
21–30	22
31–40	16
41–50	16
51–60	7
61–70	13
71–80	5
81–90	1
91–100	0

came to predicting how many people had heard of the TPS, only 13 per cent of marketers accurately selected the 31–60 per cent bracket. The majority (72 per cent) ticked lower percentages, and 48 per cent expected less than three-tenths of consumers to have heard of it.

Marketers are thus clearly ignoring the facts by underestimating the growing strength of feeling against marketing calls. This is surprising, because at the time the research was being done BT was running a high-profile television and print advertising campaign which offered ‘free’ TPS registration to its subscribers as a way of stopping nuisance calls. It is therefore reasonable to expect that marketers would realise consumer awareness of the TPS had been heightened and that this would impact on people’s responses. In fact, 59 per cent of consumers said they had heard of the TPS and 29 per cent of those claimed to have enrolled. But several significant age clusters could be identified among respondents, with 61 per cent of 18–24 year olds not having heard of the TPS (Figure 1 and Table 2).

Marketers were better at predicting the main reasons why people enrolled in the TPS (Figure 2), another topic which has been the subject of much industry controversy, Direct Marketing Association concern and both trade press and consumer mass-media coverage. On average the marketers (M) were within 7 per cent of the consumer (C) percentages for being disturbed in leisure period (C 75 per cent, M 80 per cent), silent

Figure 1: Have you heard of the TPS?

Table 2: Have you heard of the TPS?

Response	18–24 %	25–34 %	35–44 %	45–54 %	55–64 %	65+ %
Yes — I have heard of it	24	27	28	33	33	32
Yes — I have heard of it and enrolled in this service	15	30	29	31	33	33
No	61	43	43	36	33	35

Figure 2: Why consumers enrol with the TPS

calls (C 69 per cent, M 62 per cent) and pre-recorded messages (C 64 per cent, M 67 per cent). They placed the fourth and fifth reasons in the correct order — overseas call centres (C 59 per cent, M 48 per cent); hour of the day (C 47 per cent, M 43 per cent) — but were less accurate when it came to other responses: disturbed TV programme (C 36 per cent, M 56 per cent); foreign accent (C 34 per cent, M 31 per cent); and just got in from work (C 28 per cent, M 47 per cent).

Eighty-three per cent of the marketing professionals correctly judged that nearly half of consumers would wait to find out the subject before deciding whether to hang up or listen when receiving a marketing call. But they underestimated the significant 38 per cent who said they would hang up straight away and the 4 per cent who left their phone off the hook deliberately to tie up a call centre line.

These results indicate that marketers face a challenge if they are to find ways of combating the negative publicity the BT advertising and radio and TV news coverage has exacerbated. But there is undoubtedly also an opportunity for those who can successfully harness this valuable marketing medium in a way which pleases rather than repels consumers.

It was surprising that marketers were unaware that e-mail has overtaken direct mail as people's preferred method of marketing communication — 26 per cent selected it, while direct mail was chosen by only a fifth of respondents, putting it firmly in second place (Figure 3). More than half of marketers (55 per cent) assumed direct mail was still the favourite, and predicted that only 15 per cent would state a preference for e-mail. Those readers who might consider this finding to be suspect because it stems from research done online may find their misgivings are addressed in the methodology section at the beginning of this paper.

Unfortunately for the marketing industry, almost half the respondents (47 per cent) said they would prefer not to be contacted at all — though marketers had optimistically expected only 18 per cent to give this response.

On some points the marketers' judgment closely matched consumer opinion. For example, they correctly predicted no one would prefer to be

Challenges and opportunities for marketers

Figure 3: Preferred method of communication

contacted by mobile phone, and erred only 2 per cent on the optimistic side when no respondents expressed a preference for SMS messaging either.

Direct mail

One of the most important questions for the direct mail industry is 'What makes you decide to open/read a mail pack?' And for the majority of marketers this question definitely generated some unexpected responses.

The good news is that three-quarters of individuals said they opened and read some items of marketing mail (Table 3). This came as a pleasant surprise for the marketers, almost two-thirds of whom expected less than half the consumers to respond positively.

A third of the consumers said they received between six and ten pieces of direct mail a week, as correctly predicted by 44 per cent of marketers (though only one in five accurately identified that 15 per cent of households received more than 15 items).

Examination of the consumer responses by age group (Table 3) revealed that the likelihood that direct mail would be opened and read increased steadily with age — 71 per cent of the 18–36 age group answered yes; 72 per cent of the 35–44 group; and 77.5 per cent of those aged 55 and over.

A perceptive four-fifths majority of marketers predicted that the key deciding issue for consumers was 'from a brand/company that I know', and indeed more than half of the consumers selected this (Figure 4). Half also chose 'interested in the product or service' (which two-thirds of

Table 3: Do you open and read any direct mail packs?

Response by age group	18–24 %	25–34 %	35–44 %	45–54 %	55–64 %	65+ %
Yes	74	68	72	71	75	80
No	26	32	28	29	25	20

Figure 4: Reasons for opening direct mail

Reasons for opening direct mail

marketers selected); 44 per cent ‘can clearly see it contains a free sample/voucher’ (selected by three-quarters of marketers); and 28 per cent of consumers ticked ‘local services or events’ (M 30 per cent). Just under a quarter selected ‘interesting package’ and ‘because it’s a competition’, which tied for fifth place (M 53 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively).

The marketers were not too far out in the order of items selected, but their percentage levels were far higher than those of the consumers, who were very selective in their choices. This was because the marketers ticked far more reasons for opening packs, boosting results for aspects of the pack with which they were most involved, for example aesthetics such as colour, design and attractive envelope. The consumers’ chief priorities centred around the pack’s relevance to them, whether that was the brand, product, company or the locality. For example, though less than a tenth of consumers selected ‘the design’ almost a third of marketers ticked this box; there were similar discrepancies with ‘attractive envelope’ (C 8 per cent, M 29 per cent) and ‘the colour’ (C 4 per cent, M 15 per cent).

A breakdown by age showed that younger age groups, particularly 18–24-year-olds, selected more reasons for opening items than the older groups. These multiple selections significantly boosted the aesthetic reasons such as ‘looks humorous/fun’ and the ‘interesting package’, ‘attractive envelope’, ‘colour’ and ‘design’ categories. This response seems to contradict the findings above, where a greater number of the mature consumers than younger people said they opened their direct mail.

There are ways in which these apparently opposing findings can be explained.

Firstly, younger people tend to receive less direct mail for several reasons. Many live in their parents’ house, where the mail is most likely to be addressed to the householders; because many go away to pursue further education or find work, they are more likely to live at a variety of temporary addresses which marketers find difficult to track; because their history as consumers is shorter, data about them are less likely to have been collected; and because relatively few young people fill in the lengthy lifestyle databases which provide direct marketers with a good deal of

their target material, their names are simply not available for targeting purposes. Therefore, since less direct marketing is targeted at them, they have had less chance to become jaded with it and so are more enthusiastic about things they perceive to be design or aesthetic innovation.

Conversely, older, easier-to-target consumers who have to cope with larger quantities of direct mail are understandably more likely to be of the opinion that they have seen it all before and are less likely to be impressed. But older people do tend to go out less, and particularly those who are retired have more time to spend opening and examining their mail.

The converse question, 'What makes you decide to throw away an unopened mail pack?', generated responses which served to reinforce the replies received above (Figure 5). But almost three-fifths of consumers said they did not open mail packs because they objected to being sent marketing pieces and a third did not open mail which was not personally addressed. This challenges marketers to improve their targeting skills and enhance the industry's image if they are to have any chance of converting these groups to appreciating the efficiency and convenience of direct marketing. The DMA hired a public relations company in October 2005 for exactly this reason.

Unsurprisingly, because of the strong ethos of targeted 'precision' marketing espoused by many direct marketers, they rated 'not personally addressed' to be twice as important as did the consumers, who felt it was only half as important as the product or company being relevant to them.

Marketers' responses concurred with the four things about which consumers do not mind receiving unsolicited mail (Figure 6) — although they were significantly optimistic in their hopes, averaging 10 per cent higher ratings on all of them. Again, this was because they included far more items on their lists than the more discriminating consumers did on theirs.

The majority of consumers (57 per cent) did not mind receiving information from supermarkets and stores they use; almost half found contact from local restaurants and takeaways acceptable; and a third

Figure 5: Reasons for not opening mail packs

Figure 6: Subjects about which people do not mind receiving direct mail

Unpopular subjects

selected 'events and entertainments' and 'local services, trades people and shops'. Younger age groups were more likely to include DVDs.

Other subjects were much less welcome — none being acceptable by more than a quarter and fewer than 15 per cent tolerating charities, cars, customer magazines, sales and mobile phones. Fewer than one in ten wanted to hear about loans and credit cards, financial services and insurance.

Since households receive overwhelmingly more financial product and service direct mail than any other category, followed by charity communications,³ it could be argued that they are bored by the sheer volume of literature on these topics. It can hardly help the industry's image that consumers receive most of what they dislike and least of what they do enjoy — samples and pharmacy/beauty offers.

Marketers' predictions were very inaccurate on charities; the reality was a third of their expectation and customer magazines (C 15 per cent, M 22 per cent). A fifth of consumers selected 'none of the above' in terms of topics about which they would not object to receiving direct mail, when marketers predicted only a tenth would choose this response.

Number of people giving to charity is falling

Perhaps the marketers were working on outdated expectations, because the number of people giving to charity is dropping rapidly. Between 2003 and 2005 the number dropped by 17.5 per cent, according to research by market intelligence providers Key Note, the results of which were released in the summer of 2005.⁴ Its Charity Funding report found that while in 2003 80 per cent of the adult population had given to charity, by 2005 this figure had decreased to 66 per cent. In addition, 26 per cent of the 2005 respondents had only given to the tsunami appeal.

The same research announced that over the same period there was also a distinct change in the views of the public about the way charities operate and how they raise funds. In 2003 54 per cent thought charities did not need as much money from the public because they got money from the National Lottery. By 2005 this figure had dropped to 3 per cent,

but 39 per cent thought charities spent too much on advertising when only 12 per cent thought this in 2005.

Research commissioned among 1,000 people in England and Scotland by the Samaritans, released in July 2005,⁵ found that many Britons are apathetic charity givers who, on average, would put up £4.22 to save their favourite charity from closing. Two in five do not make a regular charity donation and one in five does not give at all. And a Charities Aid Foundation survey showed that 81 per cent of Britons made a donation to the tsunami appeal, yet only 10 per cent who gave for the first time will give more to charity as a result.⁶

As the above findings illustrate, it is difficult to find charity marketing studies which concur, thus the marketers' lack of accuracy when predicting public opinion of charity giving is understandable. The CCB Marketing-GAP Research was designed to give a 'snapshot' of consumer opinion at a specific point in time (see methodology, above), and it was carried out at a time when there had been no significant disaster or appeal for some time

It is accepted within the charity sector that specific disasters and the flurry of publicity and appeals which surround them increase both people's propensity to give and their interest in charities in general. Had this survey been done in January, as was the Samaritans' research, in the wake of the tsunami, no doubt people would have been more open to the idea of charity marketing and the research would have mirrored this.

For the many marketers who share an affection for direct mail, the findings about why people open or discard mail packs should act as an alert rather than a reason for despair. It is hardly surprising that the direct mail industry needs to reinvent and reinvigorate itself, because it is a sector which has been growing steadily for more than a decade and in such circumstances it is easy for complacency to creep in. These findings highlight the need for improvement and innovation, and indicate that more research of this kind needs to be carried out.

Already there are signs that both the regulatory bodies and industry associations are tackling some of the most unpopular aspects of direct marketing, such as the silent call. The DMA has issued new telemarketing best practice guidelines and Ofcom has ruled that all outbound call centres using automated diallers (which, if wrongly set, can generate silent calls by dialling the next number before there is an operator available to speak to the recipient) must use recorded messages and calling line identification (CLI), and bring silent or abandoned call rates down below 3 per cent.

Ofcom's five new rules apply to both UK and overseas call centres that have been commissioned by a UK company. A recorded message must identify the source of abandoned calls and offer the recipient the opportunity to decline further calls; CLI must be presented on all outbound calls, allowing recipients to dial 1471 and find out the number of the organisation calling them; telephone numbers dialled then abandoned should not be called again by the automated dialler for at least 72 hours, unless a dedicated operator takes the call; abandoned call rates must be

Direct mail industry needs to reinvent itself

Ofcom's new rules

below 3 per cent of total calls for any 24-hour period for each campaign; and records must be kept to demonstrate compliance with the other rules.

Data protection

As with the TPS, marketers greatly underestimated the three-quarters of people who said they are not only aware of the Data Protection Act but also understand it (Figure 7). In fact, almost three-fifths of marketers believed that fewer than 30 per cent would understand it, and a third predicted that half to seven-tenths of consumers, although aware of data protection, would not understand it.

The professionals also failed to appreciate that more than eight out of ten people looked for the opt-out box — only one in a hundred got that right! Three-quarters gauged it would be less than half. The professionals were also incorrect in their assessment of how many people ticked the box to stop the company which sent the communication and other third parties from contacting them again. In fact, more than a fifth of consumers said they do so 'always'; almost three-quarters do so 'sometimes'; and only 3 per cent say they 'never' tick the box. Older consumers are more likely 'always' to do so.

Text messages and marketing calls to mobiles

People expressed very strong objections to 'receiving text messages' (91 per cent) and 'marketing messages via their mobile phones' (93 per cent). Marketers significantly underestimated this strength of feeling, with only three-tenths expecting a response of 81–90 per cent on each. (These responses refer to unsolicited marketing messages, not those requested by customers who have signed up for update services, such as match-day results.)

Objections to text messages and marketing calls to mobile phones

Figure 7: Are you aware of the Data Protection Act?

With regard to objections to receiving text and marketing messages, only 11 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively, of the professionals made the correct prediction by putting objections at between 91 and 100 per cent. In fact, 17 per cent (text) and 11 per cent (marketing messages) of marketers proved to be completely off the mark by expecting fewer than one in five people to object.

The same over-optimism was evident when only 8 per cent correctly realised that 85 per cent of respondents sometimes opted out of receiving marketing messages from a particular company — more than half thought only between a fifth and a half would have opted out.

When consumers were asked if they would enrol in a text preference service if one were available, more than two-thirds said yes — yet only 14 per cent of marketers gauged there was this strength of feeling; more than half expected fewer to enrol.

There is very little enthusiasm among the public for receiving any marketing calls, but 17 per cent did opt for competitions (the most popular), 12 per cent for holidays and travel and 9 per cent for health and beauty offers. Other subjects were ticked by fewer than 5 per cent.

Who should be principally responsible for unsolicited e-mail communication?

Marketers judged consumer opinion on who should be principally responsible for unsolicited e-mail communication (ie splitting prime responsibility between the marketing industry, ISPs and themselves) reasonably accurately. A minority of consumers (especially young males) believed the government should be responsible, while older age groups were more likely to select ISPs.

Local newspaper readership

Only three-tenths of the consumer panel did not read a local newspaper of some kind (Table 4) and, as was to be expected in an arena comparatively rich in sales and readership research, the professionals accurately predicted the proportions of readers for each type of local newspaper, correctly allocating leading position to weekly free newspapers — although they did overestimate the proportion of people reading the other types of newspapers.

Readership figures when broken down by age and sex reveal that 18–34-year-olds are least likely to read any local newspapers, females tend to prefer weekly locals and males are more likely to read morning or evening locals.

Those consumers who revealed that they read a local morning or

Table 4: Do you read a local newspaper?

Response	Consumers %	Marketers %
Weekly free newspaper	42	41
Weekly paid-for newspaper	25	37
Local evening newspaper	21	31
Local morning newspaper	12	25
None of the above	30	30

evening newspaper were then asked how frequently they did so, but the marketers failed to predict that the larger proportion were regular rather than occasional readers (Tables 5 and 6).

Marketing professionals and local newspaper readers were generally in accord when it came to their views on these publications — although marketers expected the readers to rate the fact that ‘my local newspaper is a good place to advertise when I have items for sale’ more highly (Figure 8).

Although the internet has opened up a world of new information and people are using it to learn more about products and services, it is clear that the quest for local information, suppliers and news offline remains strong.

Marketers are not fully in tune with consumer attitudes, motivation and activity

Overall significance/conclusions

The findings of this research indicate that marketers are not fully ‘in tune’ with consumer attitudes, motivation and activity.

In one respect this is understandable, because as the pace of life has accelerated and communication has improved, public opinion has become

Table 5: How often do you read a local morning newspaper?

Local morning newspaper	Consumers %	Marketers %
Regularly (5–6 times per week)	60	18
Occasionally (1–4 times per week)	36	57

Table 6: How often do you read a local evening newspaper?

Local evening newspaper	Consumers %	Marketers %
Regularly (5–6 times per week)	55	22
Occasionally (1–4 times per week)	41	67

Figure 8: Views on local newspapers

more fickle. News of events can be disseminated within hours — or even minutes — and have an instant effect on public perception.

But many of the attitudes recorded should have come as no surprise, because the issues involved had been well documented and debated, not only in the marketing press but by the mass media, such as the boom in TPS registrations prompted by the controversy over silent calls and boosted by the controversial nationwide BT ads which offered its customers a ‘free’ (actually TPS registration is free anyway) service to stop them getting marketing calls.

There is little sense in holding on to established marketing practices when the traditional rules no longer apply. More marketers could be taking advantage of digital communication methods (which are having such a huge effect on their customers’ and prospects’ attitudes) to keep track of changing public opinion and, more importantly, use this feedback to interact with consumers in ways which please rather than alienate them.

It is no longer an expensive or lengthy process to keep carefully targeted individuals informed, interested and involved in the marketing of goods, products and services, yet many organisations continue to pursue mass-marketing techniques which too often miss their mark. On average, only two or three people out of every 100 respond to the direct marketing messages they receive — which means 97 out of every 100 find them irrelevant or even irksome. Amazingly, such low response rates can still be justified by return-on-investment criteria. But as more consumers are prompted to opt out of receiving marketing communications in response to the deluge of irrelevant and intrusive promotions and privacy protection regulation becomes more stringent, the prospect pool is shrinking rapidly and the industry is flirting with self-destruction.

There is still time to improve public opinion of the marketing industry, but to do so it is necessary to discover what customers want and respond to their preferences. Marketers can no longer presume it is permissible to promote to the masses; they need to find ways of initiating a dialogue with them.

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