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Opinion Piece

Sites for sore eyes: Direct mail and the Internet — Allies or adversaries?

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Prophets of doom

Gurus who speak with forked tongues

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The advent of every new medium of communication has prompted confident (and, for the most part, false) prophecies of doom for those already on the scene. But the telephone has not stopped people writing letters, and radio has survived TV — which has not, as forecast, been the death of cinema. And the printed word in the shape of newspapers, books and magazines has contrived not just to survive, but to thrive in the shadow of death.

The latest to join the long list of media which have been disconcerted to find themselves the subject of an alarming prognosis is the direct mail industry, which (marketing pundits tell us) will be driven out of business by the Internet. The Internet's explosive growth has attracted the excited attention of marketers who are not only pushovers for a new fashion, but who like to believe that something so large which is growing so fast has to be better than anything already in existence.

To some extent this belief is well founded. The Internet is a marvellous tool which is going to revolutionise the way in which many of us do business. But it has, I suspect, rather more to offer buyers than sellers, particularly sellers who have made a substantial investment in an extensive and sophisticated database.

Increasingly, the sages of the direct marketing business seem to be speaking with forked tongues in advancing with greater fervour than logic two contradictory propositions. On the one hand, 'relationship marketing' is said to be the future ... one-to-one interactive marketing made possible by a database that contains information about a customer's tastes and interests — as revealed not only by his purchases, but also by responses to questionnaires. Such information enables marketers to target their best prospects with offers of services and products which are relevant to their known tastes and interests.

In this process of actively and directly targeting prospects with *relevant* offers, direct mail would seem to have a substantial advantage. It is therefore confusing to be told by the gurus that the marketing tool of the future is the Internet, whose growth is going to spell the end of direct mail. But before signing the death certificate it might be instructive to look more closely at the characteristics of direct mail and the Internet to see what each has to offer.

Let's start by taking a look at how direct mail developed. The industry must have taken its first halting steps when a few small-time traders hit on the idea of encouraging those who came into their shops

to buy merchandise on credit. In order to know where to send the bills, shopkeepers were obliged to make a note of the customer's name and address.

Emboldened by the success of this novel marketing technique, the more enterprising traders soon cottoned on to the fact that this primitive 'database' would make it possible to take active measures to increase their sales. Instead of having to wait for people to drift in off the streets, they could actually seize the initiative by writing to customers whose details were now on file to advise them of an impending sale, or the arrival of the latest fashions in the shop. True, customers still had to visit the shop. But at least the proprietor felt that he was being modestly 'proactive', dynamic in targeting customers and approaching them with an incentive to do business, rather than being totally dependent on them approaching him.

One achievement of the Internet as a tool for marketing has been to restore — at some expense, and with no little hype — the *status quo ante* the birth of the direct mail industry and to reinstate the trader in his former passive role, waiting for visitors to his website to come along and buy. Rather than take the initiative and mail his customers, the e-marketer waits hopefully by his computer for customers to e-mail him. For those prepared to spend long hours peering at a computer screen, the Internet does indeed provide many a site for sore eyes!

Apart, then, from restoring to customers the initiative for making contact, what are the other features of the Internet as a direct marketing tool?

One (as the Prudential spotted recently) is the fact that it enables you to lead a quieter life. Unable to cope with the interest shown by the public in its *Egg*, or to deal with the orders flooding in through such outmoded channels as the post and telephone, the company decided that the way to stem the flood would be to put all its eggs in one basket, and chose the Internet. For marketers who fear getting knocked down in a stampede to buy their products, a medium which currently only 16 per cent of the population is equipped to use has obvious attractions, offering as it does a quiet life *and* the satisfaction of being at the forefront of technological development — *otium cum dignitate*, in fact.

Along with the initiative for concluding a sale, the e-marketer must also be prepared to sacrifice some major creative opportunities that the direct mailer enjoys. Let's just remind ourselves of some of the things that a letter can do in the hands of a skilful copywriter with access to a database.

The first and most basic use of a database is to personalise the letter, with a salutation that does not say 'Dear Reader', 'Dear Friend', 'Dear Customer', 'Dear Supporter', 'Dear Contributor', 'Dear Subscriber', 'Dear Music Lover', 'Dear Motorist' — or any other generalised, impersonal form of salutation. Instead it is possible to address the reader personally:

'Dear Mr Smith, Here's an offer that should interest everyone at 14 Acacia Avenue.'

Next, a letter provides an opportunity to salute the reader's individuality by demonstrating that he is known, and valued, as an individual:

Sites for sore eyes

Opportunities for writers

Personalisation

Individuality

'As one of our best customers (I see that you have been buying from us since 1995) you are naturally one of the first to be told about our latest widget.'

Familiarity

Another use that writers can make of the file is to signal recognition. The reader can be made to feel as he does when he goes into a shop where he is known, where the staff are familiar with his tastes and interests:

'We know you as a connoisseur of fine wines, with a discerning palate and a particular interest in the delicious white wines of the Loire Valley. So you will I hope welcome the chance to be among the first of our customers to sample our latest discovery ... a crisp and fragrant Sauvignon from one of the region's most respected growers. I know that you will recognise it instantly as offering excellent value.'

Relationships

The information held on file can also be used by the writer to help build a relationship with the customer. The reader can be flattered by reminding him that this current offer is not a one-off intrusion on his privacy by an aggressive marketer, but part of a pattern of service from a company which is interested in, and responsive to, his needs.

'It is, I see, nearly a year since you bought a dozen of our new variety of rose. And I am sure that, as spring approaches, you are looking forward with keen anticipation to enjoying a garden that is full of colour and fragrance. Bearing in mind your preference for perfume, I believe that you will derive much pleasure from our new introduction, Sir Les Patterson.'

Information from the database can also be used to dramatise timing:

Timing

'Looking ahead to 30 November, I would like first of all to wish you a happy birthday, and many happy returns of the day. At the same time I'd like to do something practical to make that wish come true by bringing to your notice a new kind of policy, designed especially for someone approaching retirement.'

The database can also be used to dramatise the relevance of an offer to the reader's lifestyle:

Relevance

'As a motorist — worried as we all are about the soaring cost of petrol — you will, I am sure, welcome the chance to increase substantially the number of miles you get from a gallon of petrol.'

Finally the database can be used to dramatise the process of selection and create a sense of privilege:

'Not all our customers are getting this opportunity. We are making this offer only to those, like you, who we know are

Privilege

interested in exploring places off the beaten track. I am sure you have happy memories of the time you spent last year in Kurdistan. And this year you are one of the privileged few whom we are inviting to join us on a camel train to Nigeria.'

It is in the opportunities that it provides to write this kind of copy — copy that helps to build relationships with customers — that direct mail is so valuable.

Perceptions of mail

Direct mail has one or two other things going for it, too. Some of its success can be ascribed to the way in which letters are perceived, and to the curiosity that they arouse. There is something about receiving mail — a personal, private communication, individually addressed and hand-delivered by an employee of the Royal Mail — that provides a frisson of interest and anticipation which few other forms of communication are able to provide. (It is, incidentally, interesting to note that when people wish to imbue an electronic message with some of the attractions of a letter they choose to describe it as 'mail': the dowdy old 'answerphone' is now described as 'voicemail', and an Internet message as 'e-mail'.)

Selling or providing information?

It has been said that the Internet's future is as a 'selling medium'. But doesn't it depend what is meant by 'selling'? If your hope is that people who want a widget will purchase it from you, the Internet can help you to make a sale. If, on the other hand, the bulk of your profits are achieved by persuading people to part with money for something that they had not previously contemplated buying, direct mail seems a better choice. Although an excellent vehicle for providing information to interested parties, the Internet seems less than ideally suited to the traditional advertising function of persuasion.

When considering direct mail and the Internet as media for marketing, it might be more intelligent not to see them as rivals, or even as alternatives. Perhaps before too long they will come to be regarded as allies — each with advantages to offer the enlightened marketer.

Integration

Much is heard today about the potential for integrating various technologies of communication. What does not yet seem to be widely recognised is the scope that now exists for integrating direct mail — the pre-eminent medium for active, targeted selling — with the Internet, which has, in terms of both speed and the virtual elimination of transaction costs, so much to offer buyers who know what they want.

There are intriguing opportunities for profitable interaction, with mail being used as the means of approaching customers, and the Internet as the medium through which potential buyers can interact with sellers, either to seek further information or to order and pay. Once a mailer has established contact with a buyer and generated the desire to make a purchase, the balance of advantage passes from one medium to the other, as the purchaser moves into the driving seat. And of course a swift, easy, convenient and cheap way to order is via the Internet.

After all, marketing is not like football — a game in which one's allegiance is totally and exclusively given to a single team. It should be perfectly possible to support, at the same time, both Internet Rovers and Mailers United, and to derive satisfaction and profit from following both.