
Opinion Piece

Creativity in direct marketing

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The Internet moves the customer from back-seat passenger to front-seat driver

Abstract

Traditionally, direct mail has enjoyed a cluster of creative advantages over other media. This paper proposes that smart Internet marketing must employ all of these tools in order to make the Web-enabled customer king.

In the second edition of the *Journal*, Stuart McKibbin made a powerful argument for the creative pre-eminence of direct mail over the Internet as a medium for marketing communication. While concluding that both media can and should work together, his analysis leaves unanswered the question of how to characterise the new genus of interactive creativity. More purposefully, can we do any more with our understanding of direct marketing creativity than produce electronic brochures on screen?

The purpose of this rejoinder is to propose that we most certainly can do that by recognising certain differences in the way that the Internet and other digital media are approached and used by consumers and businesses, and harnessing a number of new communication dynamics. These powerful drivers of attitudes and behaviour enable the customer to move from being back-seat passenger to front-seat driver in the marketing mobile.

Before advancing this thesis in detail, it is worth redrawing the frontiers of digital territory mapped out by McKibbin with some more recent data. Far from being relevant to only 16 per cent of the UK population, the Internet attracted some 14.1 million adult users in 1999, or some 30.7 per cent of the population.¹ In addition, the total audience for digital TV now stands close to six million.²

As for the brands themselves, it would be unfair to portray the groundbreaking Egg initiative as the quiet backwater for surplus business. Just six months into operation, analysts were observing that it had already met the Prudential's ambitious five-year target for customer volume. In just one year, Virgin's Trainline has become the largest retailer of train tickets in the UK, credited with growing the whole market by a third. And in less time than it takes to create and print a mail pack, WH Smith Online had gone from pipedream to implementation, adding some £480m to the retailer's market capitalisation with a verifiable effect on store sales.³

Do brands like these really 'sacrifice the major creative opportunities that the direct mailer enjoys' when they communicate with customers? Let us see. Personalisation, individuality, familiarity, relationship building, time sensitivity, relevance, privilege. Surely these are precisely the hallmarks of successful Internet creativity too?

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Can the Internet finally deliver what direct mail has always promised?

To believe otherwise is to deny the critical role of the customer database in Web-enabled communications. The image of the 'geeky Net addict' surfing on 'dumb' websites belongs to an earlier age. It fundamentally misrepresents the creative potential of the Internet to engage and stimulate customers in a relevant, timely and purposeful way. Of course, there are non-responsive Internet sites that provoke little more than higher sales of Optrex to the weary-eyed — just as there are millions of mail pieces that exhibit none of the desiderata noted above and amount to little more than mass marketing by post.

Smart direct creatives will, therefore, recognise and seize upon the congruence between great mail packs and great websites. But they will also be attracted to a singular difference, one that is best viewed in its historical context. Back in days when a guru like Herschell Gordon Lewis could compare direct marketing copywriting to 'prodding rats through a maze' the creative paradigm was one of manipulation. Along the precisely linear curve of Attention, Interest, Desire and Conviction you were pushed, goaded and bribed until you came to Action. Although only a small percentage of mail recipients ever made it that far, this depressingly behaviourist model was seen to be good because it made money more often than not.

The growth in brand-focused direct marketing in the 1990s, accompanied by the mushrooming of genuine direct 'access' brands in every sector, from Direct Line and First Direct to Daewoo and Tesco Direct, created a new model. While the linear AIDCA progression went unquestioned, each step was infused with softer, emotional values, echoing the tone and content of advertising and promotional messaging. Not surprisingly, response rates also rose.

An extra dimension to AIDCA

The development of Internet-enabled creativity brings us to a third way that offers an extra dimension to the earlier models of direct manipulation and, latterly, brand integration. This is the paradigm of cooperation, of real-time, consensual interaction between brands and their users. It spells the end of tell-and-sell marketing and is as pertinent to the Web-enabled today as it will be to interactive TV viewers in their millions tomorrow.

So what are the fresh creative opportunities concomitant with the paradigm of cooperation? It will help to start with a reappraisal of the familiar AIDCA formula:

Attention + Interest + Desire + Conviction
Choice = **Action**

In this proposed paradigm of cooperation, the element of choice is critical at every stage of the process. The consumer chooses which aspects of your product or service to review and in which order. The consumer chooses which product or service configuration suits their needs and wants in the expectation of having their choice portrayed on screen before them. The consumer chooses the appropriate delivery mechanism and payment option. The consumer chooses — at any point in the process — to access with speed and ease any other information

**The tacit contract
of cooperation**

that may be relevant to your transaction with them; for example, the balance of funds that he or she has in their bank account.

But the most important choice is very the first one of all, the active decision to find out more about you, the brand owner. By doing so, the consumer establishes a tacit contract of cooperation with you: ‘my time and interest in exchange for relevant information and diversion’. Naturally, the authority to terminate that contract rests — *de jure* and *de facto* — with them (the buyer) not you (the seller) and may be exercised at any time.

While you are no longer in the driving seat, as you would be with a well-crafted piece of direct mail, at least it is your car. Your next challenge is to turn choice and the feeling of enablement it confers upon consumers to your advantage, to make the driving experience as positive as possible. To do that, you need to start with exactly the kind of motivational and preference data that support relevant and powerful direct mail.

A technical appraisal of the effectiveness of different creative approaches to registration of those personal details, the navigational techniques that will keep callers with you, the hotlinks and range of content that will engage and inform them — all of these belong elsewhere. (Although if you are looking for two excellent examples at the time of going to press, try *boo.com* or *virgin.com*.) For the moment, those of us who are excited by the hastening approach of smart websites would do well to observe the learning of colleagues in traditional advertising circles.

Having already lost ground to both brand and management consultants in the boardroom, the ‘e-business’ revolution looked like eroding their strategic clout even further. Worse still, with multinationals like General Motors setting up shadow e-corporations and big spenders like P&G dropping TV from the schedule, it all looked lost in a fog of dot.commery. Then they discovered that every dot.com wants to be a brand. And as we all know, brands need advertising almost as much as they need direct marketing. Not just for launch but for ever.

References

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