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# Opinion Piece

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## Permission is not enough

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Received (in revised form): 5 October 2000

It sounds like something you would tell your teenage daughter, doesn't it? But since Seth Godin invented the phrase 'permission marketing', it has become the Holy Grail of e-marketing.<sup>1</sup> The theory is that all you need to do is get people to agree to receive your e-mail (to 'opt-in'), and then you can market to them happily ever after. In practice, it is a lot more complicated, and even *dangerous* to your brand and your company, and that is what I would like to explore in this paper.

May I have your permission to continue?

### How I became an e-vangelist

No one is denying that e-mail — for the moment — has become the true killer application on the Web. According to Forrester Research, e-mail volume will jump 52.3 per cent to 61.1 billion messages by the end of this year, and multiply four times over by 2003.<sup>2</sup> And that is just in the USA. There is no faster, cheaper or more effective way to reach prospects, generate response, and even build customer relationships. And if you are not making e-mail an important part of your marketing, you are missing an important opportunity.

My own introduction to e-mail came when a client called me on a Monday and asked me to come in for a meeting the next day. They needed to get a special offer out to their customers as soon as possible. 'Um . . . I can't really see you until Thursday,' I explained. What difference could two days make, I remember thinking. Ah, but I was thinking in direct marketing terms — not e-marketing. When I arrived for my Thursday morning meeting, the client greeted me with a Cheshire-cat grin on her face. She explained that when I could not show up on Tuesday, she decided to do an e-mail instead. What happened? 'We got a 2 per cent response in two hours, and an 11 per cent response within one day.' She then looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Why do we need *you*?'

I had seen the power of e-mail.

Since then, this company has almost exclusively used e-mail as a way of communicating with their customers. They even took their customer newsletter and converted it to an e-newsletter.

And that is when the problems began to start.

### Permission marketing is not new

The terminology and the technology may be new, but the practice of permission marketing is as old as direct marketing. Every time you enter into a relationship with a company, or provide any information to them, you are, in effect, giving them permission to market to you. And it is all too frequently abused.

**E-mail is an  
important  
opportunity for  
marketers**

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**The temptation to abuse e-mail is always present**

Consider the last time you gave to a charity. You began receiving dozens of different mailings throughout the year — each one asking you for more and more money. You may have also received telephone calls at home. Plus — you cannot pay them to stop. Ironically, the more you gave, the more likely they were to keep pursuing you. It seems as if they were never satisfied. And, chances are, you also began receiving donation requests from other charities that you had never given to. Because — at least in the USA — once you have been identified as a ‘donor’ your name is sold and traded more often than an Internet stock. The result is that you may stop opening any envelope from the charity, or any other charity, and you may no longer support what you originally felt was a very worthy cause. Everyone loses.

These same problems are exacerbated with e-marketing.

The reason why is that it costs the charity a substantial amount of money to keep marketing to donors through traditional channels. Direct mail can be expensive. Telemarketing even more so. But what happens when it costs a company almost nothing to bombard consumers with updates, sales pitches, product news, special offers, items of interest, press releases, messages from the president — just about anything. Once again, everybody loses.

### **The evolution of e-marketing**

As you may have noticed, I said that e-mail is the Web’s killer application *for the moment*. Why did I qualify it like that?

For the moment, e-mail is still a relatively new medium. The average person receives fewer than 20 e-mails a day. And they are so easy to click through that most people do not resent going through them.

**Marketers may have only a small window of opportunity**

Most marketers have still not taken full advantage of e-mail. So it is still possible to stand out. But what happens when you open up your Internet service and you hear, ‘Welcome! You’ve got 832 messages.’ Just as it is easy to go through e-mail, it is even easier to delete a message without even opening it. In fact, many people already do because of the danger of computer viruses. It is only a matter of time before this medium begins to become as cluttered as all the other media. And that will be the beginning of the end of its effectiveness. But permission marketing is supposed to be above all that. After all, it is not as if your ad is interrupting me, is it? I did give you my permission. . .

### **Permission to do what?**

Yes, I did, but I do not recall giving you *carte blanche*.

Permission should not be abused. It should be limited to the specific information that the individual has agreed to receive. And it must be carefully nurtured, so that a trusting relationship will grow. You must be extremely careful to protect your ‘opt-in’ customers, and make sure you only send them information that is relevant and meaningful to them. And keep asking them if they want to ‘opt-out’ or if they want to change the kind, or amount, or the timing, of the information you are sending them.

**You must protect your opt-in customers**

You also need to reassure them that you are not going to sell their name to anyone else. Here is an example:

‘Please note: your e-mail address will *not* be provided to any other company. You will only receive updated industry and technology information from (name of company).’

How many e-mail contacts are appropriate per month? This will vary, but MotherNature.com, a leading natural remedy company, finds that they have to limit the number of e-mail contacts to customers to four to six a month. Otherwise, the ‘opt-out’ rate tends to rise.

And they are sending news about people’s *health*.

### Permission versus personalisation

Permission marketing carries an implied obligation — and one that most companies are not fully prepared to fulfil. The obligation is that once I have given you permission to market to me, you should *know* me, and only send me things that are relevant to my needs. This, however, is almost never the case.

The September issue of *Business 2.0* featured ‘Online Marketing Hits and Myths’. One article began like this:

‘Melissa Shore hardly bothers to open email from Northwest Airlines preferred opt-in list anymore. It is not because she’s not interested. She travels a lot in her work . . . and she’s always looking for travel deals.

“‘Every week I’d get another email from Northwest offering me discounts on flights to Chicago or Atlanta,” she says, mystified, “I kept hoping to receive a message that read ‘Melissa, we’ve got discounts on those trips leaving from New York’, but I never have. I’d rather not get *anything* from them than something that is not relevant.”’

The article goes on to say that businesses should forget about gaining as much market share as they can, and concentrate instead on building sustained relationships with their top customers.

But there is a far bigger problem with permission marketing than just getting the message or the offer right.

### Poor timing and permission

Relevance can also be a function of *timing*.

While we never actually discussed it, my wife has granted me *de facto* ‘permission’ to kiss her whenever I like. So the other day, I sneaked up behind her while she was working on the computer, and kissed her gently and sweetly on her neck. She leaped up as if she had been shot. ‘Not now!’ she cried.

One of the problems with permission marketing is that it is usually based on the marketers’ schedule, and not the customers’ schedule. E-mails are sent out when the company is having a sale; or pushing a particular product or service; or trying to generate leads. These e-mails may have nothing to do with where the customer is in the relationship; what they want; or what they are interested in. That’s a problem with all marketing programmes — however, it becomes markedly worse when you are working in a permission environment. Not only will people not

e-mail involves  
certain obligations  
for a company

e-marketing must be  
customer-focused,  
not company-  
focused

respond — but they also may begin to think badly of your company and your products.

### **Can e-mail harm your brand?**

The answer is unfortunately yes.

When a consumer sees a TV commercial that is not relevant to them, they just tune it out. When they receive direct mail that is untargeted or just uninteresting, they simply throw it away. However, these other media do not *promise* to be relevant — the way permission marketing does.

**e-marketing must be carefully considered**

They do not clog up a personal communications channel — the way e-mail does. And they do not alarm people when it comes to privacy issues, which are becoming more and more important.

The decision to use permission marketing is a major step — and one that no company should undertake until they are completely confident that they can fulfil on the promise. Otherwise, you can do far more harm than good — and to your closest, most trusting customers.

### **Beyond permission marketing**

When properly applied, permission marketing is a good first step. However, it is only the beginning of a true interactive marketing system. Beyond permission is participation. It happens when consumers not only agree to be marketed to, but become involved in creating their own products and service offerings, like they do for Dell Computers. It happens when customers create their own contact strategies, and companies respect that.

**Participation marketing may be the answer**

Streamline.com, the home grocery-shopping company, offers customers a chance to register for their ‘Never Run Out’ service. You select the items — such as milk and bread — and you never have to worry about ordering them again. Streamline will guarantee that you will never run out of them. And that is way beyond permission.

Yogi Berra, a former baseball player for the New York Yankees, was once asked about a certain restaurant. He said: ‘It is so popular — no one goes there anymore.’ Permission marketing may become so popular and so pervasive, and so frequently and badly abused, that the real danger is that no one is going to trust it anymore.

Remember I mentioned the client that converted all their marketing to e-marketing? They began e-mailing their customers on a daily basis. They sent out product news, internal news, almost anything — because it costs so little to do so. You can guess what happened. Their customers practically revolted.

And today, they still use e-mail, but very carefully. And they do more direct mail than ever before.

### **References**

1. For more information on Seth Godin’s *Permission Marketing*, see the book review on p. 292.
2. Forrester Research (2000) *The Email Marketing Dialogue*, p. 12.