

Recognising Digital & Direct Marketing Media Channel Pros and Cons

By German Sacristan, X1 Head of Marketing and Customer Experience, UK and author of 'The Digital & Direct Marketing Goose'

In order to be successful, marketers today need to interact better, more quickly, more often, and more cost effectively with their targets. That is why all new digital vehicles – including digital printing – with their flexibility and speed, are very relevant. These vehicles also complement each other and can effectively support your strategy.

These channels or vehicles will help make your next direct marketing campaign more successful. All of these channels are very powerful if used properly, but none of them guarantee success without a good strategy behind them. In order for you to choose the right communication channels for your next campaign, you will also need to understand each one of their strengths and weaknesses.

Email and Mobile

Digital channels have many strengths, but they also have weaknesses. For example, many companies routinely send out emails as a part of their marketing campaigns. But people receive hundreds of emails every day, so why should they open yours, especially if it is a generic message not designed specifically for them? People generally won't open your emails if they don't know who you are. The other day my daughter told me that I had 832 unread emails, and they were all marketing messages from people that I don't know. You are actually lucky if your message makes it to someone's inbox—most of the time it will end up filtered as spam.

Email and Short Message Service (SMS) marketing are ways to excel at promoting existing relationships. Once you start a relationship with a prospect, email becomes very powerful. It is more interactive, faster and cheaper to execute, and easier and cheaper to track. With email, you can add audio or visual attachments; you can also quickly direct a prospect to a relevant site by simply adding a link. But remember, if not tailored, prospects will quickly be turned off by your impersonal effort. The new capabilities of smartphones, including email and Internet access, offer a great channel to communicate with your target.

SMS can be very powerful if used properly. Like email, it works better once you have a relationship with a prospect. SMS marketing is very effective when used to quickly communicate something relevant, like telling your customer that a parcel will arrive for them tomorrow.

A few months ago I received an email in which the subject line read, "German Sacristan, Marketing Gold Medalist." I do not recommend using a target's first and last name when you personalize. If you were meeting face-to-face you would not say, "Hi, German Sacristan." You'd either say, "Hi, German," or "Hi, Mr. Sacristan." "Marketing Gold Medalist" doesn't do it for me either. You wouldn't say "Hey

marketing gold medalist" if you were face-to-face, and what is a marketing gold medalist anyway? It really doesn't tell me anything interesting or helpful and it does not set the tone that there is something relevant or interesting in the email.

Postal Mail

Regular postal mail is seen as a non-digital channel till we add the flexibility of digital print to personalize and the interactivity of QR codes *or* even better Augmented Reality (AR) to send customers online. Postal mail may be most effective in certain scenarios—especially for initial contact with prospects. In this case, where you are marketing to people who are not acquainted with you and likely wouldn't open or even see your email, printing and sending by the regular post may be a better vehicle. People don't have two mailboxes in their homes, one for spam and the other for relevant mail. Postmen around the world do not scan and sort mail before delivery to eliminate the junkmail. Most importantly, people don't receive hundreds of letters in their regular mailboxes every day like they do in their email inboxes. As a marketer, that means you have less competition with a traditional mailbox than with an email inbox.

When people open postal mail, they are often more relaxed. They have often just arrived home and like to sit down and go through it slowly. Most importantly, everyone expects and accepts the fact that there will be some promotional material in their mailboxes. This doesn't mean people will welcome an irrelevant solicitation, or that they will act upon any recommendation that comes through the postal service. It is still up to you to effectively use imagination, creativity, and personalization to surprise and capture the attention of your recipients in a less competitive arena.

A home address also provides more relevant marketing information than an email address. The geographic location gives you demographic information about your target that can be used to increase the relevance of your communication. Also, people generally change their email address and phone number more often than they change homes. Therefore, a postal database is more reliable than an email or phone database.

With a postal message, you can also attach a promotional gift. With email, you are limited to one subject line to convince someone to open your mail; you can't add images and colors, so your creativity is limited to words. They say that an image is worth a thousand words, but when it comes email, the right word is often worth a thousand images. Using postal mail, you can add more creativity through images and colors in print. Recipients can touch and feel the mail, which offers a tactile sensation and a sense of quality. Postal mail is a direct one-to-one contact, the same as email and mobile, but on the Internet there are literally millions of marketers vying for people's attention.

It is also said that traditional print catalogues bring more customer loyalty than online versions. When your customers have your printed catalogue in their hands, your competition is far away. Online, your competition is closer, often only a click

away. With postal mail, your message is usually seen by more than one person in the household, while email or mobile messages are only seen by the recipient.

It is clear the postal mail is still very relevant in today's marketing environment.

Internet

For store owners, the Internet is a global virtual shop where you can receive visitors from all over the world in a matter of seconds. It is also a place where customers are often offered free consultation services and interaction in real time. It is, without a doubt, a key place to be—the place where many consumers hang out these days. Online stores also benefit from unlimited shelf space while still allowing customers to easily find what they need or want. The cost of running an online store can be considerably less than having a physical shop in a good location.

The Internet helps us track and collect relevant information from visitors to our sites. Give visitors incentives to tell you who they are, and try to track their preferences and behaviors while they are visiting your site. The more relevant information that you have from your visitors, the easier it will be to sell them something.

You will need to drive visitors to your site. One method of doing so is to add an effective search engine optimization (SEO) strategy. There are some basic SEO principles that should be part of every website, yet many miss them:

- Write relevant, interesting content for your target audience. This is the #1 principle, and you will see why below.
- Put the content into good HTML structure, so both people and search engines can read it.
- Include descriptive meta tags on all key pages, in particular the title tag. Include a marketing message in your meta tags to encourage people to click on your search engine listing.
- Add proper tags on all graphics, photographs, videos etc., which describe them and what they contain.
- Provide clear navigation to show people and search engines what is on your site.
- Add a site map to help search engines navigate complicated sites.

The good news is that these are not difficult to do, and you can control the content. However, while these steps are important, they have only a limited effect on SEO. A good linking strategy is much more important for good SEO rankings. Links from relevant, trustworthy sites back to your site are essentially recommendations by others, and search engines note the sites that link to you. The more links to you from recognized high-quality websites, the more they increase your ranking as well.

Steps to build a linking strategy for your website include:

- Link to other relevant, interesting sites from your website. This is fairly easy to do and shows that your site provides interesting information for your visitors.

- Get links to your site from other relevant, authoritative external sites. This is much harder to do because you cannot make external sites link to you. They will link back to you only if you have content that they find interesting and valuable.

Many people will hire an expert to help them develop and implement an SEO strategy. While the basic on-site work is relatively straightforward, obtaining external links back to your site is where many SEO companies make promises that they cannot fulfill. They promise to get you a specified number of external links to your site but the quality of the links might not be very good.

Developing a linking program takes time and effort, but it also shows the best results. If you want to rank high, you need to work at getting good sites to link to you by having high-quality, relevant content.

There are other things you can do to publicize your website and encourage others to link back to it. Some ideas are:

- Start a blog on a relevant topic.
- Participate in other relevant blogs, forums, discussion groups, etc.
- Write and post articles, press releases and white papers.
- Participate in relevant social media.

Although having a good SEO strategy is extremely important, it may not be enough. Don't forget the benefits of some of the other channels mentioned earlier, such as postal mail or email to drive visitors to your place of purchase with relevant direct messages and QR codes or email links.

The bottom line is that it is imperative to have a good strategy to drive visitors to your website, but it is just as critical to create a website that makes it easy for your customers to find what they want and that also provides you with as much information as possible from your visitors.

Social Media

Social media is relevant today for 3 reasons:

1. You can collect more information more quickly than ever before.
2. You can build more relationships more quickly than ever before.
3. You can interact with more people more quickly than ever before.

Social media is about building the right information that will help you be more relevant when communicating with your target. The right information can also help you launch the products and services that the market wants to buy. Social media is also about building the relationships that will generate the trust that makes customers want to buy from you, and it is about interacting and providing value to the different communities in which you participate.

Social media is not about selling products, but encouraging your target to buy from you. There is nothing really new about social media. Many years ago we went to social

events to build information and relationships. Today, new technologies simply allow us to do so more often and with more people.

A good rule of thumb for a social media strategy is to ask yourself how you would interact with potential customers face-to-face and apply similar fundamentals.

Social media has become an important part of the marketing mix, and companies are investing in it heavily. As with the other channels mentioned above, you will need a proper strategy to be successful. It isn't about randomly advertising everywhere, but rather knowing where and how you need to advertise. The main challenges for a marketer are, as always, identifying one's target, capturing their attention, and telling them what they want to hear. The benefit of social media is that you can hang out in different places and observe. Listening to people sharing their thoughts is very powerful for obvious reasons. Knowing what your customers and prospects are thinking is priceless. It will help you identify the ones that you want to talk to and better target them with the amount of information that you have been gathering. You'll also quickly find out what the market wants and needs so you'll be more likely to bring the right products to the market.

When marketing via social media, it is all too easy to contact prospects too quickly, using the same media we use to retrieve their information. This makes what you know about your targets too obvious, and it makes it look like you are just looking for a quick sale. It is always effective to respond quickly and directly to the needs of your target audience, but it's the way that you do it that will make you succeed or fail. Sometimes it's appropriate to wait just a bit to provide relevant information and use other communication channels besides social media to do so. This will make it less obvious that you know what you know and make you seem less aggressive and more helpful.

Word of mouth has always been the strongest channel because you are using someone to promote and sell your products and services to someone they know better and have a better relationships with than you have. It even works well when they promote a product to a person they don't know because a prospect will likely trust another consumer more than they will trust you. Word of mouth works faster than ever before, thanks to social media and the Internet—but be careful because it can be both positive and negative and unsatisfied customers can spread their messages faster than ever before.

There are different social media strategies depending on whether you are on a B2B or B2C model. Consumers join a social network looking for discounts and coupons, while companies join to gather valuable information and build relationships.

Being the host of a social network will require a different strategy than being invited or joining one. Consistency is imperative. Once you start, you need to keep going, otherwise people will wonder what happened to you and your business. It is good to start slowly as you learn. Start walking before you run, but be consistent.

Use Multiple Media

The value of individual media is great, but when multiple channels are used to complement one another it is even greater. For example, you can capture the attention of a prospect that does not know you by using a direct mailer. You can use a PURL, QR code or AR on that direct mailer to send them online where you can track them and collect relevant information, which can then be used to follow up with a personalized email or direct mailer. By combining channels, you go from anonymous, generic communication to a message that is personalized and will likely increase your chances of building relationships and selling your products.

In a different scenario, you may have already collected a lot of relevant information from your prospects online and wish to follow up with a direct mailer or an email. A smart phone can be used to scanned a direct mailer that either has a QR code or is AR enable to easily and quickly drive prospects back online and drive specific desired actions.

If you're interested in a personal assessment to help you improve your chances of a better direct marketing campaign ROI please contact German Sacristan on 01753 215307, or email german@x1.ltd.uk

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