



The Incredible Bulk? Direct Mail – Greener Maybe, But Still Huge.

By Ken Peattie

Recently, concern about junk mail through our letter boxes has been overshadowed by the rather more modern and high-tech curse of “Spam”, which is seizing up our email in-trays and threatening to overwhelm the abilities of internet service providers to provide a service.

Today, paper based junk mail is the focus of concern again, with a new announcement from DEFRA and the Direct Marketing Association (DMA) agreeing new recycling targets for direct mail. Currently only 13 per cent of such promotional material is recycled, and the aim is to bring this up to 30 per cent by the end of 2005; 55 per cent by 2009; and 70 per cent by 2013. This will eliminate some of the waste associated with junk mail, but leaves other dimensions untouched. Research from the USA, spiritual homeland of junk mail, shows that the average American spends 8 months opening junk mail over the course of his or her life, even though they end up throwing 44% of it away unopened.

Recycling is only part of the answer, and in environmental terms is less valuable than the other R factor of “Reduce”. This is something that consumers have picked up on. In a recent Wales Consumer Council online survey on recycling and reducing waste, nine out of ten respondents thought that recycling alone is not enough and we should do more to reduce waste at source. Junk mail, along with overpackaging, was seen as major sources of frustration and irritation, and also major opportunities for more action to reduce waste (<http://www.wales-consumer.org.uk/englishite/survey/results2.htm>).

This point has not been lost on the DMA, and one of their promises is to improve the targeting of materials, as well as to improve the collection for recycling of unwanted leaflets and brochures. Achieving this will require a significant change in attitudes amongst those who provide and use direct marketing services however. For all the talk about precision and the use of sophisticated database marketing techniques and lifestyle profiling of consumers, the bottom line in direct marketing services always seems to come down to their reach. Direct Marketers still tend to promote themselves on the number of consumers they can reach for a given price, not the proportion of those contacts that are likely to yield eventual sales. Evidence of this comes at least weekly through my own letterbox, where duplicate mailings with marginal differences in name and address details reveal a lack of interest in the industry about database cleaning and precision, and an emphasis on how many consumers are reached (with myself being counted twice for each of these).

The appeal of direct mail as a medium for marketers is not difficult to work out. Partly in an age where brand loyalty is declining and consumers are increasingly worried about value, it can be a useful way of

delivering special promotional offers directly into consumers' hands. Mass media advertising, although a vital tool, is also becoming an increasingly expensive way to reach increasingly fragmented audiences. The choice of TV channels, radio channels and magazines vying for our attention has grown astonishingly in the last few years, and the Internet has provided an alternative world from which to access information and entertainment. Our eyes and ears cannot be everywhere, and the few prime media slots, which are the focus of many peoples' attention, are becoming increasingly expensive. Every morning though, we all look to see what has come through our letter box, hoping for something personal and interesting along with the less welcome bills and junk mail.

The Holy Grail in relation to junk mail for the direct marketing industry is to make the very term redundant, because there is no "junk" component to it. In other words, direct mail will become so well targeted that it only reaches people who are interested in the content, and at a time when it is of interest to them and they are likely to take some kind of action. We have a long way to go before then however, because at the moment what I witness in the mornings is often our Postman doggedly dropping identical leaflets through every door on his round. Of course the longstanding problems of direct mail, of a lack of precision and the vast quantities of physical resources consumed by junk mail, were going to be solved by Internet marketing. Internet marketing would allow perfectly targeted promotional offers to be delivered to customers by studying their Internet browsing habits and past purchasing behaviour. What did we get instead? Irritating pop-ups when we're browsing, and an email system where you get spam with everything. This isn't to say that all direct mail and all online marketing is poor, or at least poorly targeted. Much of it is excellent, but not enough, and much of it isn't really marketing, if what we mean by marketing is activities which contribute to the creation of customer satisfaction.