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Augmented reality features can help consumers better visualize their potential purchases.

Serving Omnichannel Marketing with Direct Mail

Printed mail pieces deliver an impact that still eludes email marketers.

For years, hard copy mail was the primary form of communication with other human beings, its importance and relevance to civilization still evident to anyone who browses through the archives in museums or historical societies. For much of human history, letters and messages delivered by some sort of system were the only available form of communication for people who lived more than a town apart, and their use was indiscriminate. Whether a message to the leader of troops in battle or a love letter to a faraway sweetheart, this medium was crucial to human society.

With the advent of the digital age, however, many people assumed that hard copy mail would fall by the wayside. Why would anyone bother sending a letter through the United States Postal Service (USPS) that would — at best — be delivered the next day, when an email (or, eventually, a text message) would accomplish the same purpose in seconds?

And, indeed, mail volumes have

dropped — as was apparent in a 2019 USPS fact sheet of mail volumes from 2010 to 2018. In 2010, the USPS delivered 77.8 billion pieces of first-class mail; in 2018, the number had dropped 27% to 56.7 billion. During that same time frame, marketing mail (formerly standard mail) also declined, although not as starkly; 81.8 billion pieces were delivered in 2010, while 77.3 billion were delivered in 2018.¹

Mail Still Matters

Despite the decline in volume sent, mail is still a strong component of marketers' omnichannel campaigns. In fact, it might even be argued that mail has reemerged as a preferred method of communication thanks to its reputation as a trustworthy and legitimate medium. After all, how many people receive spam messages in their email inboxes weekly or even daily? While digital communication has its perks (namely the speed with which messages can be delivered), there is ▶

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By Amanda Armendariz, Editor, Mailing Systems Technology



QR codes throughout SGIA's "The Guide 2020" direct readers to specific URLs for more information on areas of interest.

Millennials spend, on average, 4.4 minutes sorting their mail and 7.2 minutes opening and reading; baby boomers average 2.9 and 6.5 minutes, respectively.

still that understanding that many digital messages aren't legitimate and are indeed simply attempts to phish information from the recipient. Hard copy mail isn't plagued with that issue.

Mark Fallon, president & CEO of The Berkshire Company, a print and mail consultancy, attests to mail's continued relevance and sense of legitimacy. "Many companies, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies rely on physical mail to connect with their customers," he says. "[These are] statements, bills, and payments that companies need to thrive. Marketing mail drives online sales and charitable donations. [Furthermore,] many legal documents, like insurance cancellations or utility shutoff notices, must be delivered through the USPS. Some laws stipulate the class of mail or special services (e.g., Certificate of Mailing) that must be used when sending the notice. Changing those laws won't happen overnight."

Secondly, even if the digital message is valid, consumers today are suffering from what some researchers call "digital

fatigue." This is especially true for most millennials and Generation Z, who have never known life without cell phones, email addresses, and text messaging. They are bombarded with hundreds of digital messages every day, causing them to tune out the vast majority.

In fact, this group, despite being so digitally savvy, actually spends more time with mail than older generations. In an article for Mailing Systems Technology, Chris Lien, president, BCC Software, referenced a 2016 study by Quad/Graphics, which showed that "90% of millennials see direct mail messaging as reliable, and 57% have made purchases based on direct mail. Millennials also spend more time with their mail than older generations. ... Millennials spend, on average, 4.4 minutes sorting their mail and 7.2 minutes opening and reading, whereas baby boomers average 2.9 and 6.5 minutes, respectively. Additionally, millennials have a fondness for coupons, and they are more likely to read through coupon booklets than older generations, with 77% reading through them more than half of the time they receive them."²

Finally, research conducted in recent years proves that readers remember more of what they read in hard-copy format as opposed to digital, and they are more likely to engage with it, as well. "Neurological studies have shown that the human emotion and recall of hard copy outperforms our response and memory of digital messages," says Kathleen Siviter, assistant executive director of the National Association of Presort Mailers and president of Postal Consulting Services. "Hard copy mail has tremendous ability to evoke human response, not just through its visual components, but with today's technological advances, marketers are able to cost-effectively use paper texture, scent, fold/design, and more techniques to build on that human response to hard copy mail. Some marketers are even combining digital and physical in the mail piece itself with embedded video, RFID, augmented reality, and many more cutting-edge techniques!"

Physical + Digital = A Winning Combination

Marketers have begun to reawaken to the possibilities afforded by hard copy mail, and the benefits of combining it

with digital avenues are even greater. Personalization has always been a key factor in determining the level of engagement recipients feel with a mail piece, and digital offerings allow marketers to take that level of personalization to the next level. Physical mail pieces can be sent with a QR code that leads to a personalized URL; the customer can review the information in the brochure or catalog and then scan the code to be taken to a page with offers customized specifically for them. Mail pieces can also be combined with digital avenues to help recipients finalize their purchasing decisions. For example, some furniture retailers have used augmented reality on catalogs to allow readers to scan an image of a furniture item and digitally place the item in a photo of their home to see what it would look like if purchased.

The USPS has provided some programs to help mailers further combine their hard copy and digital efforts. Its program Informed Visibility allows mailers to see exactly where their mail piece is in the postal stream, from acceptance to delivery. This allows marketers to send a well-timed email or post on social media just as their customers are receiving the piece in their mailboxes. This digital reminder may spur them to further engage with the mail piece that is waiting for them when they arrive home.

Along those same lines, the USPS is seeing strong engagement with its Informed Delivery program. This subscription-based offering allows mail recipients to receive an email showing images of the actual mail pieces that will be arriving in their

mailboxes that day. (The images are pulled from the postal processing equipment.) While almost every mail piece shows up in the daily email (there are occasionally notifications that there is a mail piece for which the USPS does not have an image for on the way), marketers can set their mail pieces apart by creating a campaign linked to this daily feed. All that is required is to provide USPS with a replacement image (usually in color, to stand out from the standard black and white images), a call to action, and a destination URL. So, for example, a retailer could mail a brochure detailing their latest sales, and both the physical mail piece and the Informed Delivery image could advertise a certain percentage off if the products are purchased through the URL in the email campaign.

There are many benefits from utilizing offerings like this, one of which is that “you will be connecting to a mail-centric audience,” said Kurt Ruppel, director postal policy and marketing communications at IWCO Direct, in an article he wrote for Mailing Systems Technology. “The people who subscribe to Informed Delivery have a strong interest in what is arriving in their mailbox and can be expected to view physical mail as credible and respond accordingly — especially with Informed Delivery making the connection to your offer easy and efficient.”³

While mail will likely never see the volumes of years past, it is clear that it is still an incredibly valuable medium for marketers to engage with their customers. When combined with digital avenues, mail opens up a variety of opportunities for everyone ▶

Mailing Terms

First-class mail is composed of letters, flats, and lightweight packages; bills and statements are required to be sent via this category. Marketing mail is a mail piece under 16 ounces that is “not required to be mailed as first-class mail or periodicals.” Mailers can send out “printed matter, flyers, circulars, advertising, newsletters, bulletins, catalogs, and small parcels” via this class. Marketing mail used to be known as standard mail; the USPS made the name change in 2016 to better reflect the usage of this class of mail and encourage more direct mail marketing.

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Variable data printing adds personalization to printed pieces, which can be a key factor determining the level of recipients' engagement.

involved in this industry, and these opportunities will continue to evolve. "Print and mail professionals will begin operating more like consultants," says Mike Porter, president, Print/Mail Consultants. "They will work with clients to uncover their business objectives and then develop ways to produce the desired results using mail and other channels at their disposal." ■

References

¹ USPS Fact Sheet: A Decade of Facts & Figures. facts.usps.com/table-facts

² Lien, Chris. "The Importance of Millennials for Direct Mail." Mailing Systems Technology, November/December 2019. mailingsystemstechnology.com/article-4575-The-Importance-of-Millennials-for-Direct-Mail.html

³ Ruppel, Kurt. "How Informed Delivery Can Improve Omnichannel Campaigns." Mailing Systems Technology, May/June 2019. mailingsystemstechnology.com/article-4517-How-Informed-Delivery-Can-Improve-Omnichannel-Campaigns.html

³ Ruppel, Kurt. "How Informed Delivery Can Improve Omnichannel Campaigns." Mailing Systems Technology, May/June 2019. mailingsystemstechnology.com/article-4517-How-Informed-Delivery-Can-Improve-Omnichannel-Campaigns.html

For the past 10 years, Amanda Armendariz has served as editor, Mailing Systems Technology media, where she provides thought leadership on all segments of the mail industry. Follow her on Twitter @MailSystemsTech or email amanda.c@rbpub.com. Visit MailingSystemsTechnology.com for more information.

Resources for Mailers

There are a variety of resources available online to help mailers with their questions. Some of the most popular are as follows:

PostalPro (PostalPro.usps.com)

USPS Business Customer Gateway (gateway.usps.com)

Postal Explorer (pe.usps.com)

Additionally, the USPS offers a dedicated helpline for mailers in the form of the Mailing & Shipping Solutions Center. Call 877-672-0007 during regular business hours for help on a variety of issues.