

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

Direct response still drives business to the door

Several months ago, I described a marketing plan I was working on to support a business unit's objective to double its revenue in about a year. We decided to use print advertising in conjunction with a multi-part direct-response program. The program has been in effect for about 3 months now and the direct-response component is the best-performing part. Maybe.

I qualify that because the direct-response component doesn't function in a vacuum. Those who receive mail also may see our ads in national trade magazines (this is a business-to-business program.)

My good friend, the late Ray Jutkins, had a checklist of 8 situations in which direct-response mail is most likely to work:

- You can clearly **identify** the target audience.
- You can **reach** your target audience.
- You have **a lot to say** about your service.
- You want to **build a model** that can be repeated.
- Your service has **continuity**, repeat sales, or follow-up.
- You need to **control** the entire selling message or process.
- Your service **doesn't fit other distribution channels**.
- You want **less visibility** in the marketplace (testing).

If you can say yes to any one of these, you have a good candidate for a direct-response campaign. We had a direct hit on 6 of them. There was no question that direct response was a strong candidate for this job.

The only considerations that didn't entirely fit were the need to control the entire process or to have less visibility.

Identify and reach

The first two guidelines could be combined because each is useless by itself. Direct response requires that we be able to clearly identify the prospects (there are about 20 thousand of them in the US) and that we can reach them (we have addresses for most and names for well over half.)

Lots to say

The service in question has a lot of highly satisfied and vocal clients, but others in the target industry tend to view the service with suspicion until they try it. Once they try it, most are immediately enthusiastic about the results.

Because of this suspicion, the campaign had to carefully and completely explain how the service works, had to put the explanation in terms familiar to the reader, and had to provide a lot of substantiation for the claims.

This is far more than can be accomplished by any print ad, so we designed a campaign that uses three post cards to get

the prospect's attention, follow those with a package (nobody can throw away a package without opening it), and end with a telephone call.

Build a repeatable model

The service has potential applications in several additional business sectors, so building a repeatable model is important to our long-range plans.

Ongoing sales

The service is somewhat unusual in the industry it serves because there is no long-term contract. A client who decides the service isn't working, takes too much time, or doesn't perform as expected is free to drop it at any time. The company and the service must earn each client's business every month and, having done that, the company can offer additional services to the clients.

Distribution channels

The service isn't a general business application that could be marketed in *Forbes* or *The Wall Street Journal* and it certainly wouldn't be a good fit for any general publication – a daily newspaper or news magazine, for example.

Direct response was the clear choice, so I pulled out my copy of Ray's book for a quick review.

Checklists

Ray was big on checklists. Checklists are important. They keep us focused and eliminate the all-too-common problem of forgetting a crucial step. That's why airline pilots use checklists. In creating a marketing plan, Ray recommended assessing the facts, understanding the situation, devising a strategy and tactics, and developing a method.

Before going forward, look back

- How has the company marketed itself?
- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to go?
- How big is the marketplace?
- How does our pricing work?
- How profitable is it?
- What market share do we have today?
- What market share do our competitors have?

Identify your advantages and disadvantages

- What are our strengths and weaknesses?
- Do we have the needed resources and commitments?
- What's working now and what's not working?
- What would make us more efficient?

- What is getting in the way of our success?
- What business are we in? What business should we be in? These questions are all about **perceptions**. We have to be in the business our prospective clients want us to be in, which is not necessarily the one we think we're in.
- What should our short-term objectives be?

Set the objectives

- What results are expected from our present methods?
- How do we get to where we want to go from here?

Strategy and tactics

Once you have collected the facts and analyzed them, it's time to devise your strategy and tactics. Strategy is about planning actions designed to reach objectives. Tactics are the details of how you will achieve the plan.

Quoting Ray, "To use a military analogy, *strategy* or *planning* is concerned with the broad outlook – the total picture of what is to come. Tactics, or the *doing* part, are the *specific maneuvers* within the overall view that make the plan happen. That brings it to life."

No matter how good the graphic artist, the copywriter, and the printer, the program will fail if it is strategically weak. Planning is essential and planning requires thinking. Thinking is difficult, but results come from hard work, not wishes.

Obtain buy in from management

Marketing, sales, and management all must agree on the program. If anyone doesn't fully buy in, the program's effectiveness will suffer. Putting the plan together may be directed or managed by a single person, but the development must be a company effort.

Aristotle thought an unplanned life was unproductive because those who fail to plan don't know where they are, where they're going or how they will get there.

The same philosophy is applicable to developing and executing a direct marketing program.

Measure the results

Before creating even the first post card, determine how you will measure the effectiveness of the program. The program I've described has a specific phone number and a specific website address for each of the 3 national trade publications we use and for the direct-response campaign.

That's how I can say with certainty that the best performer so far has been direct response. Maybe.

Your own copy

The first edition of *Power Direct Marketing* book is out of print now, but a second edition (published 1995) is listed as available on Amazon.com. I know that Ray was less than happy with the way the second edition turned out, but I believe his primary complaint was that the second edition didn't *sound* like Ray Jutkins. Apparently a somewhat heavy-handed editor eliminated some of Ray's creative spelling, formatting, punctuation, and capitalization.

If you want a copy of the book and can't find one, let me know and I'll put you in touch with Ray's widow, who probably still has a few copies tucked away. It's a useful reference book and a fun read. **B**

Cleaning up your HTML

HyperText mark-up language (HTML) is what runs the Web. Most browsers are forgiving when the HTML is wrong. Capitalization hasn't been important in the code. Forgetting to close a tag hasn't been a big deal. Nesting tags incorrectly hasn't caused problems. That will be changing as the Web moves toward more standards-based presentations. If you look at the Technology Corner website's HTML, you'll see "XHTML 1.0 Transitional" at the top. "Transitional" means that I'm working toward making the pages compliant, but that I don't want browsers that enforce XHTML standards to throw a hissy fit if I get something wrong.

I haven't exactly reached perfection yet. A page that I had created with Dreamweaver generated a lot of errors, many of which were in the Dreamweaver template. Fixing the errors on the template automatically fixed dozens of pages automatically.

XHTML breaks old workarounds

Several years ago, it was important to put scripts and cascading style sheet styles inside HTML comment tags so that version 1 and 2 browsers wouldn't display them. Browsers are now at version 6 or higher and don't need the comment markers. **XHTML requires that the comment tags be eliminated**, so I've removed them.

To find errors, I used the CSE HTML Validator, one of several tools that's designed to ensure compliance with standards developed by the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium.)

As 2006 begins, I've redesigned the Technology Corner website and have made a commitment to abide by the standards.

The HTML is close to being fully compliant and getting closer. The cascading stylesheet code in CSS files has been fully compliant since about mid 2005.

Why is this important?

It's important because it's the right thing to do. Not good enough? Doing the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing isn't enough for everybody.

How about doing the right thing because eventually (at some nebulous time in the future) pages that don't abide by the appropriate standards will be terminated with extreme prejudice by standards-reliant browsers?

Regardless of which reason you choose, programs such as the CSE HTML Validator will help you do the right thing. **B**

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"The first rule of decision making is that decisions require disagreement."