Is Now the Time to Consider Direct Mail?

Everyone seems to think the Web is king and there's certainly a lot to be said for the Web. It may even be king but kings need dukes, earls, and bishops to keep things running smoothly. If you're looking for a way to improve your website's traffic, maybe direct mail is worth a look.

Until the 1980s and 1990s, when its popularity began to wane, direct mail was king. It was the only choice when I needed to create a market for a service that nobody had ever heard of before. In 2006, it was the go-to medium when I was given the assignment of doubling a business's client base in a year. But somewhere along the way, the Web knocked direct mail off the pedestal.

Now it's payback time for the Post Office.

A client is selling a product that most people don't know they need. Or maybe they know that they need it but they're unwilling to consider the need. And although we've done everything right in terms of creating a website with rich content and making the site friendly for search engines, the result has been zero. Zip. Nada. Nothing. The sound of crickets chirping, if that.

In other words, we were batting about 0.001. And that was when we were headed downhill with the benefit of a strong tail wind.

A Misunderstood Product

Without revealing the product, I can tell you that it's one that most people don't understand the need for.

So the problem was not with design or search engines. If nobody is searching for terms related to the product my client is selling, then nobody will find his website—no matter how well written the content, how well coordinated the colors, how carefully the graphics have been selected, or how professionally the articles have been edited.

Could direct mail be the answer? My client is located in the west and is licensed to sell his product in 17 states. He feels that the Dakotas, Wyoming, and New Mexico are states where his product and his style of selling have some resonance. What if we created a series of oversize postcards that are designed not to sell his *product* but to sell his *website*?

As powerful as search engines and the Web are, they're not the answer to every question.

The goal is simple: Entice people who should be interested in the product to visit the website. Simple? Yes, but Leonardo da Vinci said "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

The key here was simply that too few people know, or are willing to consider, that this is a product they need. As a result, people aren't conducting many searches for the product and, of course, that means website traffic is miserably low.

The test we developed to determine whether direct-mail will work carefully selected 1000 people who live in the 4 states that seem to have promise. Those selected for the list must fit certain demographic criteria based on income, home valuation, and a few other selectors. Over the course of 16 weeks, each of these test subjects will receive a total of 4 oversize post cards.

We selected post cards for several reasons: First, there's no envelope as a barrier between the recipient and the message. There's also no cost involved to produce envelopes and insert letters. Because the cards are oversize, they'll require

letter-rate postage and we'll use first-class instead of standard (what used to be called "third-class") because delivery will be faster and we can easily obtain address change information.

The postcards are 11 inches wide by 6 inches tall. This is the largest size that can be mailed at standard rates and it's large enough to stand out from other items in the recipient's mail box.

We have two design areas—the front (the side with the address, which has significant restrictions that are specified by the post office) and the back. The overall design space is 132 square inches, less the address side restrictions. That's not a lot of space so it's important to coordinate the message, typography, and images to tell the most powerful story in the least amount of space and with the smallest number of words.

Judging Response

Unlike general advertising, direct-response advertising is measurable. In the old days, measurements depended on business-reply-mail response cards or phone calls. Today we can combine direct mail advertising with the Web.

Measuring the response will rely on two technologies: The first is a special landing page that will tell us exactly how many people who received the card responded to it by visiting the website. The cards will include a phone number, too, but we won't be measuring phone response.

Using a URL shortening service such as bit.ly will make the URL easy to type but an even better

option is available for anyone who has a smart phone or a tablet computer—actually anyone who has a computer that includes a built-in camera. Adding a QR code, a square block that contains a special kind of bar code, will make it possible to anyone to aim their camera at the code, click a button, and go to the client's website.

More about that in just a bit.

Direct Mail for Lead Generation

THIS CAMPAIGN IS DESIGNED PRIMARILY TO GENERATE LEADS BY CONVINCING RECIPIENTS TO VISIT THE CLIENT'S WEBSITE. DIRECT MAIL GURU RAY JUTKINS HAD A FEW THINGS TO SAY ABOUT THAT.

"When you create your direct mail program remember short vs. long is usually better for lead generation," Ray wrote. When you're working with post cards, even big ones, short is definitely the rule.

Ray also recommended involvement devices, "things" that get your prospect to play with your mail. These "will get that person to remember and to respond." Unfortunately, that's not a viable option for low-volume post cards.

The two primary variables in direct mail campaigns are the list and the message. Which of these is more important?

- **Message:** If you vote for the message, you won't be alone. Many people think that it's all about the message. Get that right and success is guaranteed.
- **List:** Fewer people will make this choice but it's the right answer and the reason is clear once you understand it: If you're not interested in the product, no offer is good enough to convince you to buy it.

Take cigars for example. I could recieve an offer from a cigar manufacturer to send free cigars for the next 20 years and I wouldn't respond. I don't smoke and I particularly don't smoke cigars.

So it doesn't matter how well the offer is written or how good the offer is, if you send the offer to the wrong list, the results aren't going to please you.

But even a poorly written mediocre offer that's sent to the right list will probably produce some results.

What happens if I recieve an ad for some electronic gizmo? Even if it's been designed by an art school dropout and written by someone whose primary language isn't English, I'll take a look.

The Message is Important

ALTHOUGH THE LIST IS THE MORE IMPORTANT OF THE TWO, THE MESSAGE CANNOT BE IGNORED. THE BETTER THE MESSAGE, THE BETTER THE RESPONSE, ASSUMING YOU HAVE SELECTED THE RIGHT LIST.

Your message must position the product or service with a USP (unique selling proposition). That's an old term that goes back many decades. Modern marketers may call it the POD (point of difference or point of distinction). Either way, it comes down to the same thing: What does your product or service offer that the other guy does not? What is available to the customer from you that is not available from others?

Our initial goal for the post cards is not to sell the product. The product is far too complex to be sold this way. Instead, all we want prospects to do is visit the website.

The sales message must address the needs of the target audience. People buy when they can be shown you can fulfill their need. As Ray Jutkins expressed it, "Sure, wants and desires are important, no doubt about it. Most often emotion and feeling and warm and fuzzy come first. Bottom line decisions are made on the basis of reason, thinking, a true need."

The post cards are designed to explain the need and to direct readers to the website.

Making it Easy

HAVE YOU SEEN IMAGES SUCH AS THIS IN MAGAZINES AND IN ADVERTISEMENTS YOU'VE RECEIVED IN THE MAIL?

The square thing is a QR code. Aim a smart phone camera at it and click. You'll immediately be taken to a website. In this case, to blinn.com.

QR stands for "quick response" and it's a 2-dimensional bar code designed for the automotive industry in Japan. Although patented, the patent holder has chosen not to exercise its rights and the QR code system has become popular outside the automotive industry due to its fast readability and greater storage capacity compared to standard UPC barcodes.

Adding a QR code to a website or e-mail has questionable value but using a QR code in direct mail is a quick, easy way to direct smart phone users to a specific URL that can be used to tabulate the results of the campaign.

Not all recipients will have a smart phone and some who have smart phones won't understand what the QR code can do for them. So instead of providing a long URL that leads to the campaign-specific page, we provide a shortened (and easy to type URL).

For example, **bit.ly/pHkcb4**. Ahtough this link leads to the index page at blinn.com, it could just as easily lead to a URL such as http://www.blinn.com/foo/bar/somelowerdirectory/1/2/3/4/5/6/7/reallylongfilename.html. Which would you prefer to type?

If you want people to visit your website and the medium you're using to contact them doesn't offer a "click here" option, do everything you can to make it easy for them to visit your site!

Organizing the Message

RAY JUTKINS FELT THAT A 3-STEP PROCESS EXISTED IN ANY DIRECT-MAIL CAMPAIGN: READERSHIP, INVOLVEMENT, AND COMMITMENT.

"You must get all 3 from your prospect if you expect to reach your lead generation objectives."

- The prospect must *read* your material.
- Your message must be sufficiently *compelling* to gain involvement. To understand your product, your service, your offer. "You want them to DO something. To take some action ... even a small step in your direction."
- The third step is *commitment*. Saying "yes" to your invitation to become a customer. If the prospect's response is anything less than a commitment, you have more work to do.

And that leads to an antique concept: AIDA. **Attract** the prospect's attention, develop an **interest** in your product or service, create a **desire**, and call on the prospect for **action**.

And when you obtain a lead, consider it to be a perishable commodity. "It is just as likely to go away as a bouquet of flowers or a carton of ice cream," was how Ray Jutkins explained it.

Handle all leads immediately. Ω