

Mail 2.0

Despite new-media options, DM reigns as the preferred medium of many patient segments

Once earmarked for extinction, direct mail is as strong as ever – and savvy DTC marketers are using the channel to reach some of the most desired patient segments. New research sheds light on important consumers who still prefer the traditional mailbox when looking for health-related information.

By Peter Meyers



A decade ago, industry soothsayers broadcast grim predictions for the future of direct mail. The Web was booming and e-mail accounts were fast becoming the cultural norm, no longer a fad for the tech savvy. Marketers immediately noticed the potential of the new mediums, seemingly less expensive and with high potential.

Hello, Newman

The scenario should've played out like this: Lines originating at local post offices stretch for blocks, filled with frown-faced mail carriers waiting to turn in the trademark blue uniforms and cans of mace. Junkyards, stockpiled with mailboxes, looted by local contractors looking for spare metal and parts. Seinfeld's portly nemesis Newman, perhaps one of pop culture's most recognizable mailmen, now merely a mythological character to future generations of re-run watchers.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the marketing medium graveyard. A check of the pulse revealed that direct mail wasn't dying or declining. In fact, a 2005 Forrester study reported lofty numbers of direct mail planned for that year – 10.6 billion pieces to be exact, a 15 percent growth from 2004. The figures are encouraging. Consumers seem willing to tune into direct mail to receive information, and marketers continue to devote efforts to communicate via the channel.

Despite the future of direct mail looking brighter than once anticipated, it's still hard to ignore hard-charging new mediums that are destined to capture some market share in the coming years. In the same Forrester study, more than one-half of the companies surveyed indicated that they planned to increase their e-mail marketing budget by at least 5 percent annually, with one in five planning at least a 15 percent hike. Marketers now must smartly divvy up budgets, placing emphasis on channels that have the best chance of reaching target audiences.

A calculated migration to new mediums is not necessarily a bad omen for direct marketers. As new mediums proliferate, smart marketers will spread budgets across appropriate channels to meet the needs and desires of target audiences. The increased foresight in targeting should result in a boost in response across all channels.

Reallocation of funds to other channels will remove some of the clutter from the mailbox. This trend will reward marketers with calculated direct mail campaigns, especially those who approach consumers with "welcome" signs on their mailboxes. Natural selection will leave less traffic in the mailbox, thus allowing the targeted direct mail offerings to willing recipients an opportunity to make a big impact. In the case of DTC marketing, ICOM's latest study shows that there is huge opportunity in reaching some valuable patient segments with direct mail.

By the numbers

A recent study by ICOM Information & Communications surveyed more than 1,500 households seeking insight to how consumers prefer to obtain their information about health-related issues and prescription medication, and specific reasons for their proclivity to one medium or another.

With a majority (if not all) of their adult lives spent intertwined in the age of technology and computers, Generations X, Y and Millennials are the poster-children for electronic information marketing. Rustling through the briefcase or knapsack of the 18- to 34-year old consumer will most likely turn up a plethora of electronic devices, most or all with Internet connectivity. While this group is often pegged with being the most connected to the online world, with experience also comes savvy.

Marketers must be careful about underestimating the discriminating nature of this group. Spam and undesired e-mails are viewed as a nuisance, an invasion of privacy. Unwanted marketing messages shot directly to mobile devices in the form of text message or phone call are considered taboo by this demographic. And to top it off, this group has a voice and a forum in the Internet that could turn even the most well-intentioned campaign into a public relations nightmare.

So the logical question is: How do you reach this group effectively without completely turning them off? The research shows surprisingly that this tech-hungry demographic is willing and ready to listen to DTC marketers in a familiar place – the long established mailbox. Of the 18- to 34-year-old sample, a robust 56.7 percent of those surveyed by ICOM said they prefer to receive prescription drug information in the mail, almost doubling the 29.2 percent of the same group that said they prefer the same information by e-mail or online.

Also notable was the strong preference for direct mail of oft-targeted DTC consumers in older demographics. The numbers reinforce the belief that these groups are still very in tune with direct mail and continue to embrace the medium. Of the 60- to 64-year-old sample, 55.2 percent cited a preference for prescription information through the mail over just 28 percent preferring e-mail or online communication; 59.4 percent of those ages 70 and above chose mail as compared to 20.3 percent of the same group that preferred electronic channels.

The 18-34 year old group instanced many reasons for mail as the preferred channel for health-related and prescription drug information. A majority cited the ability to read the information when it is convenient as a major plus. Other reasons such as the ease of referring back to the information when needed and already receiving too much e-mail rounded out the list. While the 18- to 34-year-old demographic may not be the primary targets of some DTC

marketing campaigns today, this information suggests that direct mail initiatives should enjoy a prosperous future.

Sensitive seekers

The booming popularity of online medical sites, often laden with DTC advertising, cannot be ignored as a viable channel for delivery of important health and drug information to the masses. The on-demand aspect lures surfers, drawn by the idea of a “doctor” on-call just for you, 24 hours a day. A visit to the homepage of WebMD reveals no less than two DTC advertisements, and this doesn’t include any navigation within the site. A three-minute visit can subject a consumer to an excess of 20 DTC ads.

Marketers shouldn’t be completely hypnotized by the captive audiences frolicking in these virtual waiting rooms. While the Web is a powerful channel for wellness advice, those seeking information about sensitive health issues and prescription drugs are not ready to abandon direct mail as the primary channel for delivery.

Of the survey respondents identified as “frequent sensitive health information” seekers, a hearty 53 percent reported they prefer mail as the channel for sensitive health information as opposed to 30 percent that prefer e-mail or online. Similarly, 50 percent of the same group preferred prescription drug information by mail to 28 percent seeking the same via e-mail or online. Information about treatment for certain conditions such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis led the way in being preferred by consumers via mail over e-mail or online channels.

Changing channels

While Internet ubiquity cannot be denied, direct mail is a still preferred channel for consumer information, even in some of the most surprising, tech-savvy groups.

The growth of emerging media will require marketers to carefully plan and allocate future budgets. Forming intimate understandings of customer segments and their communications preferences will optimize marketing efforts and enable improved returns on investment.

Careful pre-campaign market analysis across multiple points of data, attention to segmentation and knowing which audience you are addressing are all keys to driving a successful campaign. The best DTC marketers will leverage this information to (1) deliver a tailored message, (2) to a targeted patient segment, (3) at an opportune time, (4) using the preferred channel. ■

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