



Making Mail Better

Listening to all the analysts, vendors, and consultants you'd think every piece of mail produced these days is personalized, relevant, and demographically targeted.

A quick scan of your own personal or business mail will tell you the goal of widespread personalized communications is still in the distance. "Spray and Pray" lives on as an often-employed marketing strategy. "Dear Customer" still substitutes for even the simplest recognition of individual customer relationships. Mail recipients still get duplicate pieces. Targeting is often done only at a macro level, resulting in the production of mail pieces that are wasted on recipients with little interest in the promoted products.

The software to create more meaningful mail is accessible at a reasonable cost. Many document operations have the digital print engines to support the production of highly-variable materials. In most cases, the ability to create better mail already exists. It just isn't used as often as it should.

What is the Holdup?

It's quite amazing that an industry facing challenging times and an increasingly lower volume of work is so reluctant to abandon the archaic methods of bygone decades. Some companies seem to be desperately clinging onto legacy business models that depend on volume.

Over the past several years, physical document producers have had to compete with less expensive digital delivery channels. A lot of traditionally paper documents have moved to electronic versions. While functionality has improved for physical communications, mail is still sometimes seen as being behind the times.

The ability to track customer actions as they click on links in emails, landing pages, or web sites is common practice. Mail can provide similar feedback by using technologies such as PURLs or QR codes. Unfortunately some implementations of these capabilities have been poorly executed or under-utilized by mailers as they started including these technologies in their documents. Linking physical mail with digital communications remains an area of opportunity.

Easily-Implemented Improvements

Mail has some advantages that can be exploited with just a little bit of effort. Studies have shown a minimal amount of personalization and targeting – well within the abilities of almost any mailer with a digital printer and some decent software – can improve response rates. Simply understanding customer relationships or using elementary demographic data to craft more relevant messages can make a huge difference.

How many responses do marketers really get when they send customer acquisition pieces to their current customers? What's the success rate for pitching landscaping services to apartment renters? How many Medicare supplement insurance plans are sold to college students? What percentage of dead people refinance their homes? The response rates on direct mail campaigns with insufficient filtering criteria and a single version of the message is generally in that 1 percent or less range we've been told to expect. And yet, the practices continue.

Mail can be done better. It's not that hard.

Education is Key

Educate yourself first. Seek out advice on best practices and talk to experts or your vendor partners. They can show you how to make your mail more effective. You may be able to save money on materials and postage and invest some of those funds in personalization or better targeting.

To counter the negative effects of cheaper distribution channels and uncertainty about future postal delivery services, producers of mailed communications need to step up efforts to make the mail more effective. It's going to be up to these folks to inform the people who make decisions about customer communications about what mail can do. They should spread the word about how mail can enhance the results when combined with all the other channels that are available today.

In the long run, improving the quality of the mail will be the best move for mail producers, their customers, and the mail recipients.



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