

Stop Sending Me Junk Mail!

In 1737, Benjamin Franklin was appointed Postmaster of Philadelphia, and it probably didn't take him very long to see the opportunity that the "mail thing" provided for his printing firm. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that he was actually the first American to use direct mail to market a product.

I can imagine the headline and "call to action" on Franklin's mailer: "Ye May Purchase *Poor Richard's Almanack* Directly From The Publisher At 320 Market Street in Philadelphia. Ye Must Act Quickly, For Quantities Are Limited!"

I can also imagine at least one of its recipients saying: "I did not ask for this solicitation. Why is this Franklin person sending me useless *junke* through the mail?"

A Matter of Perception

According to Wikipedia, the term "junk mail" can be traced back to 1954, although no one seems to know who to trace it to. The Direct Mail Advertising Association, predecessor of the present-day Direct Marketing Association, was established in 1917, and part of its purpose has always been to fight negative perceptions of direct mail/marketing strategy—in other words, to convince the public that it's not junk, that it does have value.

Whether any given mail piece is valuable to its recipient or not, I think all of us would agree that direct mail puts a very small burden on those recipients. After all, if you don't want to read it, you can just throw it away! It's the marketer who really bears the burden (read that: *cost*) of direct mail, and smart marketers realize that direct mail is an investment. The success of any marketing program is determined by the return on that investment.

That takes us to the main point of this month's column. I don't classify direct mail as junk just because I didn't ask for it. But I do call it junk if it's unlikely to provide a return on the marketer's investment. And sadly, I think most direct mail falls into that category. It just plain doesn't work very well, and some of that is the fault/responsibility of the printer, which could represent either errors of *commission* or errors of *omission*.

What does that mean? You'd be guilty of an error of commission if you designed a mailer that didn't work well. And you'd be guilty of an error of omission if you allowed your customer to implement a poorly designed mailer or marketing program. Remember what I've written about the transition from *printer* to *marketing services provider*. The real key to that transition will be imagination and creativity—developing marketing plans that (1) incorporate all the things that a printer who has evolved into a MSP can sell, and (2), actually work to grow the customer's business.

Piece of Junk

I have a piece of junk mail right here in front of me, and I'd like to tell you about it. It's a postcard, finished size 8½" x 5 ½", printed 4/4. The sender/marketer is a local real estate agent, and the headline reads "What are homes selling for in your area?" In addition to that headline, the front face of the postcard features the company's logo, the agent's photo and contact information, an image of a home in my neighborhood, 3 lines of variable text including my wife's first name, and a rectangular white block which includes a QR Code and two more lines of text which read "Go to learnmorenow.com and enter code 3E942XXXXX" and "Or text MLS 3E942XXXXX to XXXXXX." Finally, the front face also includes the image of a stake sign which says "just listed" and points in the direction of the house image. The way it's positioned, the sign image blocks out about a quarter of the house.

Graphically speaking, I would give this postcard a C+. I could be improved a full grade, I think, by simply removing the "just listed" sign and increasing the size of the house image. In other words, this is a situation where one small element of design reflects a large effect on performance.

In terms of marketing strategy, I would also give this postcard a C+. I'm pretty sure that the desired result of this mailing is to stimulate listings. I think the agent wants us to call her and ask her to help us sell our house. But the postcard doesn't say that, it just invites us to compare our home to the details and price of a neighbor's newly listed home. In theory, we will call her if we decide that we want to sell our house, but don't you think she's more likely to achieve the desired result if she states her objective more clearly?

Now, I'll grant you that might be perceived as too pushy for a postcard. But when I followed the "call to action" and visited the web page for this home—using all three of the contact options—I still didn't find a single element of "asking for the order." Nor did I find any means of capturing my contact information. All in all, I think this "cross-media marketing program" will go down as an underachiever at best.

What Is This?

As noted, this postcard also features a QR Code. The printing industry is very excited about QR Codes, but it's my belief that most *civilians*—remember, that's my term for people who don't have professional knowledge of our

industry—don't have a clue about them. To corroborate that, I took the postcard with me when I went out on errands this morning, and asked 10 people (who looked like they might be homeowners, since that was the target market for this program) if they knew what the black/white square on the postcard was and what to do with it. Only 2 of the 10 gave me even a remotely accurate answer—and neither of them had a reader app on their cell phones!

Granted, it's a very small sample, but here's what you should learn from this market research: Marketers need to tell their targets what a QR Code is and what they should do with it! *This is a QR (Quick Response) Code. Your "smart phone" has the capability to scan it to take you immediately to a website where you can learn more about our product/service. Go to the app store for your phone and search on "QP code reader." Any of a number of free (and immediately downloadable) apps will allow you to use this QR Code to its full potential.* Is there any reason why that couldn't have been printed on this postcard?

I have more to say about how of this all might have been done more effectively, but I don't have room for it in this column. Let's see if you can figure out how to find it!

(As you may have guessed, there was a QP Code on the page, and scanning it led to this continuation of the article on the Quick Printing website.)

Well, if you're reading this, the QR Code technology must have worked. That's no real surprise, I suppose, but now that you're here—and before I get to the extension of my *QP* column—let me ask you a question: How would you rate the "reading experience" so far on your smart phone?

In marketing terms, I created some *momentum* by getting you to take a next step, from the printed page to this electronic page, but will I lose that momentum due to the limitations of the small screen? That definitely happened when I took the next step from the real estate agent's postcard to her webpage via the QR Code, and also through the text messaging option. (I sent the text and received an almost-immediate reply, with a *tinyurl* link that took me to the same webpage as the QR Code.)

The problem was in navigating around what was essentially an 8½" x 11" image on a small screen. One solution would have been a webpage optimized for mobile devices. Another might simply have been a smaller landing page containing only text and links to other images. Both of those are things that a progressive printer/Marketing Services Provider could have suggested, created and charged for!

Would the real estate agent have taken on that "additional" cost? OK, maybe not, but every sale doesn't have to be the "top-of-the-line" option. Part of the pathway to success as an MSP is to establish your credibility, and one of the most powerful ways to accomplish that is to be able to say: "There are several ways we can approach this!"

Approach What?

That raises another important issue. What was the goal of this marketing program in the first place? As I wrote in the printed part of this column, I think the real estate agent's objective was to stimulate listings, and that's a completely different objective than "to create awareness" or "to generate referrals" or "to sell this particular house." If you don't understand the objective, you probably can't suggest an appropriate marketing plan!

Here something else to consider, and it's something that I've written before: This was not a QR Code campaign—nor was it a direct mail program, a postcard project or a cross-media campaign. The right terminology is *marketing program*. As it happens, this particular *marketing program* includes printing and QR Codes and other cross-media elements. It's all about *marketing*, though! The objective drives the program, not the technology. In other words, you don't include QP Codes in the program just because you have the technology, you only include them if they'll help you reach the objective!

In many cases, in fact, a "low technology" approach might even be a better choice. Let's think some more about the overall objectives of the customer. And please note that now I want to talk about objectives (plural). Because in addition to generating listings through the direct mail component of the program, the agent also stands to make some money by selling the house!

So what sort of media would be appropriate to place at the house itself? At one end of the technology spectrum, the agent could place a quantity of "data sheets" at the house, possibly in a plastic sleeve attached to the "For Sale" sign. That's been a fairly common practice in residential real estate for many years. At the other end of the spectrum, he/she could place a QR Code on the sign itself. As a Marketing Services Provider, which of those would you suggest?

I would probably suggest both! The "old technology" would place the desired information in the hands of the "shopper" using paper and ink or toner. The "new technology" would provide another option for a more sophisticated potential buyer. But consider this, if you have the printed sell sheet, do you even need the QP Code? Does it really add anything to the likelihood of success, or is it just showing off?

I think it could add quite a lot to the likelihood of success, but not if all it does is take the shopper to a digital version of the same exact sell sheet. Think about the situation where the shopper is outside of the house, but curious about what's inside—and that's exactly the situation that plays out many times every day in America as

real estate salespeople drive shoppers around through neighborhoods, or as shoppers drive themselves around. The sell sheet is very good at one thing, but only pretty good at another thing. It's *very good* at presenting data—number of rooms, number of bathrooms, square footage, school info, tax info, etc. It's only *pretty good* at presenting visual images of the inside of the house—because they have to be small images! A QR Code, though, could lead to a landing page like I described earlier, listing data *and* containing links to other images.

You've probably printed sell sheets for real estate agents before. Take a look at some of your samples, or at the digital files you printed from. Now take a look at your smart phone. On a printed sell sheet, you could probably fit 4-6 very small images of interior rooms. Using your smart phone, you could view any number of significantly larger images. Part of the point of all of this is that, if you're going to use the technology, *really use the technology!*

Expanding The Database

Let's go back to the postcard that started all of this. It contained variable data and possibly variable images. (Wait! As you may remember, I hate those terms, so let me start again.)

Let's go back to the postcard that started all of this. It included several elements of *personalization*. So obviously, the real estate agent knows the names and addresses of the people who will receive the postcard. What else does she know about them, and more importantly, what else would she like to know? Those are questions I would be asking during the development stage of the marketing program, and with the expectation that she'd like to know a lot more—for example, age, number of children, age of children, earnings range, net worth range, and other factors that might indicate a want or need to sell the current house and maybe even buy another one—I would suggest building a data collection device into the program, along with an incentive to take the next step.

"What are homes selling for in your area? Go to learnmore.com and enter code 3E942XXXXX. Get the details on this home (the home in the photo) and register to win a free iPad!"

Will the chance to win an iPad increase the response rate? Probably. Will that make it worth an "additional" \$500-\$600 to a realtor? Possibly. I've had lots of conversations with my clients and their clients about the mathematical parameters of a marketing investment. I have rarely been able to quote concrete numbers—*if you do this, you'll get 4% response, if you only do that, you'll only get 2% response*—but I have always been able to come up with reasonable projections.

And one more thing, they have always been trackable/measurable projections. I recognize that you're probably not a marketing expert right now, but you can learn a lot simply by tracking results. If you like the results, you can probably recommend the same program—or similar program elements—again. If you don't like the results, you can probably learn from your mistakes and improve your performance the next time around.

Final Thoughts

OK, that's about it for today, but I want to close with a question and a few final thoughts. First the question, was this a good application for a QR Code, or were we just showing off?

There's a lot of excitement in the printing industry about QR Codes, and they definitely represent a cool capability/technology. But don't build them into every "postcard project" just because they're cool and because you can. A Marketing Services Provider's core product is a *Marketing Program*, designed to achieve the MSP's customer's goals and objectives.

Many printers have complained over the years about graphic artists and designers who design for their own portfolio, not for the customer's needs. Let's not be guilty of the same sort of crime!