Practice What You Preach

Many quick printers use direct mail to market their businesses. Beyond that, many quick printers have added mailing services over the years to support or attract customers who use direct mail in marketing their own businesses. And whether they offer mailing services or not, I think it's fair to say that most quick printers value customers who buy a lot of printing that eventually goes into the mail.

In recent years, direct mail itself has become a lot more interesting. We've had personalization capabilities for a long time, but now just about everyone has *extreme personalization* capabilities—digital printing equipment that makes both variable data and variable image printing very easy to accomplish. As I've written before, I think many printing salespeople are undermining their own selling efforts by using industry jargon rather than understandable English when discussing these capabilities—talking about "variable" rather than "personalization." In addition to that, I think many printing companies are undermining their own sales efforts by not practicing what they preach.

In other words, if you want to sell your advanced direct mail capabilities, you really ought to be sending out advanced direct mail yourself!

Walk The Walk

I get a lot of direct mail from printers, including a wide range of clients and others who have put me on their mailing lists for one reason or another. Some of it educates me, providing "printips" that would certainly be of value if I were a typical printing buyer. Some of it makes me laugh as intended, although the joke sheets I get from printers are not much different than the ones I get from other business types, and I question whether making me laugh makes me want to buy printing from you.

Some of it makes me laugh really hard, although I'm sure that's *not* what was intended. For example, I received a post card last week that didn't identify the company that sent it in any way whatsoever. Seriously, no name, address, phone number, website address…nothing that would tell me where to place an order if I wanted to!

As I've written before, this sort of direct mail does have some value in keeping your name in front of your customers (as long as you put your name on it, of course), but it probably won't do much to help you to develop significant new customers. And it probably won't do anything to help you to sell advanced direct mail capabilities. If that's your goal, you need to show me that you walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Here's something else to consider. Personalization adds cost to a direct mail program, and *extreme personalization* can add extreme cost. The justification for that cost, of course, is in better response rates, but buyers don't seem to be responding to that intellectual argument. They need to see and hear success stories, and what better success story than when the company that sells it uses it in its own marketing efforts and can prove that it works!

Really Extreme

The "state-of-the-art" in the direct mail I've been seeing seems to be putting my name on both sides of a postcard. Sure, I'm more likely to look at something that says "Hey Dave!" on the front than something purely generic, but this level of personalization is not unique anymore, and it really only scratches the surface of the personalization opportunity. If you really want to get my attention, send me something that couples "Hey Dave" with a picture of a basketball or an airplane.

OK, how do you know what will grab the same kind of attention from your prospects and customers? It's really pretty simple…*you ask them!* More importantly, you ask them using more of the advanced capability *and* marketing expertise you're hoping to sell to them. I'm talking about PURLs now—Personalized URLs—a technology that can bring your customers and prospects to an online "destination" where you can survey them about their specific interests, saving what you learn to a database which will later drive your personalization engine.

Here's an example of a program I put together with one of my clients. The first element was a personalized postcard which asked "Do you want to learn about the state of the art in marketing your business?" Each postcard included a PURL address—for example, www.davesprinting.com/davefellman. At that destination, respondents found a survey form which asked them to answer 3 check-box questions, and made it clear that this was all part of a customized demonstration. The questions included what's your favorite season (spring, summer, fall, winter), what's your favorite color (from a choice of red, white, blue or silver), and what tends to draw your attention to a scene or image (from a choice of beautiful woman, handsome man, sports car or luxury car).

A mailing of 1042 postcards yielded 16 responses within the first 2 weeks—about what you might expect from traditional direct mail. This particular printer, though, has been diligent about collecting e-mail address from

customers and prospects, and that allowed her to send out 708 e-mails one week after the postcard mailing, each including the PURL as a one-click link, and that effort yielded 83 more responses. The resulting database contained 53 variations of season/color/attention preference, and the printer had already built a library of images that covered all 64 possibilities. (Easier than you might think, by the way. She started with 4 base images, one for each season. Then she added a woman or man and a sports car or luxury car with both the car and some of the clothing in each of the four colors, saving each combination as a separate file. Total time involved, about an hour and a half, with most of that spent searching for images of people and cars in the right colors.)

   That database drove a second mailing of 99 highly personalized postcards, and the text on those postcards stressed that "this is the result of what you told us would catch your eye" and then said "call me right away if you want to add *extreme personalization* to your marketing program." That mailing yielded 21 responses within a week of the mailing, and 18 more appointments were scheduled when the printer phoned the other 78 original respondents the week after that. Total response: 39 appointments out of the original list of 1042. That's a little bit less than 4%, which may not seem all that impressive, but I hope you'll agree that these were 39 qualified prospects. I hope you'll also understand that the Return On Investment potential of these 39 qualified prospects more than justifies the cost of this program. That's an important concept, and I'll write more about ROI and other selling issues next month.