Elevating Consumer Engagement Through More Personalized Direct Marketing

By Tim Hendricks

Marketers hoping to break through the information overload facing many consumers in the age of 24/7 digital media are taking a fresh look at traditional channels — such as direct marketing and insert media — to engage customers. According to Vertis Customer Focus 2010, 60% of consumers still use newspaper inserts for their shopping planning and research, and 28% take a direct mail piece with them to the store to assist with a purchase, confirming their impact and continued relevance in the marketing mix. Direct marketing becomes even more powerful — 35% more according to a study released by Infotrends — when combined with other channels including email, mobile and online marketing.

The key to a successful program that begins with direct marketing and results in greater consumer engagement is personalization. Technology is enabling consumers to interact with the world in the manner and method of their choosing, creating an environment in which marketers must become nimble to respond to the rapidly changing expectations of the marketplace. For example, according to the Direct Marketing Association (DMA), 42% of consumers who receive marketing messages through direct mail prefer to respond to those offers online. Making that option available provides consumers the access they expect, while setting the stage for a more tailored and interactive communication experience.

Incorporating a QR code into a dynamic direct mailer allows consumers to interact with the brand through another channel and helps brands provide more detailed information to their audience.

In a catalog for the Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce, a QR code is placed on the back cover of the book. When the consumer scans the code with their smartphone, they are directed to a website where they can find information on the chamber. Additionally, each QR code is personalized with a location-specific pURL to the website. This allows the chamber to track each person's interaction with their place of business and results in a more engaged consumer base.

The emergence of quick response (QR) codes and personalized URLs (pURLs) has made it easier for marketers to create a link between direct and interactive marketing techniques. Direct marketing pieces that feature QR codes and pURLs drive consumers to web portals that transform printed content into interactive online experiences, enabling the consumer to learn more about the brand or the offer while enabling the marketer to gather important data that enhances the relationship and improves future offers for that consumer. Added layers of personalization for both QR codes and pURLs can increase the effectiveness of marketing campaigns by increasing open rates and providing highly relevant content that delivers more actionable information.

With a simple snap of a smartphone camera, QR codes, which are typically square, two-dimensional barcodes consisting of black modules arranged on a white background, direct consumers who typically rely on print coupons to the same offers online, but can then enhance the relationship through exclusive web offers, surveys or links to social networking sites. While QR codes are often made available to a broad audience through advertisements or mailers, they can be personalized by geography, providing relevant content based on regional marketing research, or even by individual household. Enticing consumers with compelling print messaging that drives them to customized online content supplies shoppers with more detailed product information, leading to more informed buying decisions, and provides retailers and brands a more engaged consumer base. Although QR codes have not yet been widely implemented, experts in both marketing and telecommunications industries expect them to garner more widespread adoption as smartphone penetration increases and QR codes become more commonplace.
code readers are incorporated into baseline smartphone packages.

Similar to QR codes, but without the distinctive graphic, pURLs are personalized web addresses implanted into print materials that direct users to a landing page with information uniquely tailored for the individual recipient. Marketers have the ability to deliver highly personalized content based on product preferences or geographic location, building a virtual bridge from print to online, and transforming email, print and direct mail campaigns into a two-way dialogue. pURLs have helped some of North America’s leading brands engage in more relevant “discussions” with consumers, ultimately driving response rates and increasing sales. For example, one of the nation’s largest health benefits companies employed pURLs to improve and track responses to a direct marketing campaign that – on its own – was not generating satisfactory response rates. The customized URLs enabled the company to respond more quickly to customers’ requests for information and increase personalization through the integration of customer insights. pURLs offer a quick and convenient method for collecting consumer feedback, while providing marketers real-time results tracking and measurement of consumer behavior, which helps inform future communication. This form of personalization can deliver a 5-20% direct mail response depending on program design* and can result in an ROI of up to 122% on every dollar invested in a pURL program.

While QR codes and pURLs operate differently, much of the functionality is the same. Delivery mechanism and intended audience play a role in determining which method to implement, but in some cases, firms, including Vertis Communications, recommend the concurrent implementation of both tactics to maximize audience reach and help brands learn more about their customers and their preferred channels of communication. As both QR codes and pURLs are easily tracked, embedding both within a single direct marketing piece can determine which percentage of recipients are using which method, helping brands understand how engaged their customers are with digital and mobile communication and ultimately shaping future communications.

Using tactics such as QR codes and pURLs, marketers can make their traditional print marketing work even harder by transcending print material into customized online content while delivering convenience and the power of choice to the consumer. We can expect that digital tactics will continue to evolve in the coming years, enhancing and improving the marketing landscape by providing new channels to reach specific audiences. While research indicates that print marketing remains an important part of consumer buying decisions, many consumers prefer to respond to offers online – calling for a critical balance between print and digital marketing tactics. Brands delivering the most powerful campaigns today are incorporating traditional and emerging marketing channels into comprehensive multichannel marketing campaigns that leverage personalization – a strategy that enhances customer relationships, maximizing ROI and increasing sales.

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*Vertis Customer Focus* 2011 research