

BUILDING CUSTOMER RELATIONS THROUGH DIRECT MARKETING

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Abstract : Marketing in general and Sales in particular is interested in improving sales and market shares of products and services. This of course, is achieved through building relationships and transactions with customers. The first one is a long term orientation and process whereas the second one is short term increases in sales. Direct Marketing has evolved over a period of time and companies have found cost effective means of serving customers and this process has been accelerated with the development of electronic media and the mobile technologies. Conventional techniques have become redundant or inadequate to cope with the pressures of modern times. However it is sad that some companies have resorted to short term benefits of direct marketing by smart increases in volume sales. The purpose of this research paper is to focus attention on the techniques of Direct Marketing and the imperative need to develop such ideas and methodologies which will have a lasting impression and long term benefits to consumers. Relationship building and enhancing customer experiences and satisfaction through transactions need to be the ultimate objective of marketing and sales. One at the cost of the other is detrimental to the total efforts!

Keywords: Direct marketing, Customer relationships and transactions, Effective means of serving customers, impact of modern technologies, enhancing customer experiences.

1. Introduction

Direct marketing discipline is currently driven by an evolving marketing scenario where the interaction of response, engagement, sales, and measurability is reducing the lines of difference between direct marketing and advertising. Now more than ever before, it cannot be defined in terms of any one medium, or as a channel, or in terms of any single technology. It's not just about "going direct" to a consumer, either. But while the lines are blurring, direct marketing remains a distinctly unique discipline demanding particular skills and techniques. Nearly all communications today are direct. They all target a segment of consumers or businesses, attempting to generate a first-step response or action to engage with the advertiser. To approach any marketing communication today without a direct marketing discipline limits a consumer's motivation and options to respond and a marketer's ability to track *meaningful* response and *actionable* data.

Today, businesses have access to more media and distribution channels than ever. With direct mail, Social Media, email marketing and mobile advertising,

ability to reach a targeted consumer has become easy. As direct marketing has evolved, the use of data has been more important and successful personalized direct marketing lies in unlocking the power of customer data. Leveraging the right insights to deliver the right message, to the right customer, at the right time, on the device they prefer has become easy. Direct Marketing campaigns can be created around specific customer, geographic and budget needs to make them incredibly effective in terms of reach and cost. Because direct marketing is cost-effective and highly targeted, it is possible to try out new messaging, platforms or markets. Testing ad copy allows you to send the right message to the right audience, every time. Self-service applications mean fast turnaround times so marketing doesn't get stale, allowing you to run new campaigns on the fly. Whether it's an email campaign, a mobile advertising program or direct mail, direct marketing connect you directly. The evolution of direct marketing techniques makes an interesting study.



Figure 1: Direct marketing

Direct marketing techniques focus on two aspects: Building customer relations

and contacts and the usual focus on transactions for incremental volumes of sales. After a lot of deliberations and extensive research, the author has come to the conclusion that Direct Marketing is built on Customer Confidence in your product or services. This is not a fly by night operation; needs careful building of meaningful relations with customers to gain their confidence and thereby gain their acceptance for your products and services. Any approach to speed up this process has to consider how the relationship is not disturbed by the process and rather how the process is to be designed to enhance the relationship building and Marketing.

Government Employees Insurance Company has been around long enough to remember what GEICO stands for; even before the recent campaign that actually explains it. But about a decade ago, Berkshire Hathaway bought GEICO and Warren Buffet put the full muscle of his company behind the objective of making the GEICO brand a household name. Berkshire went after this goal in a most unconventional way, not with the standard approach of one campaign followed by another over the years, but with each new campaign idea building on the momentum of the last. When advertising becomes ubiquitous in every medium, the only way to fairly attribute outcome is to accept the fact that *all* media are working together to produce the remarkable results that GEICO has achieved. In the most simplistic sense, GEICO looks at the entire flow of leads and quotes and sales, and divides each metric by the total media spend to measure high-level effectiveness. So, GEICO is a classic example of a direct marketer

2. Objectives & Methodology

Direct Marketing has been there for some time now and newer forms of direct marketing through internet and digital media is developing every day. With the proliferation of direct marketing techniques, one of the decision challenges for a company is to identify the right technique and the process. Of late many techniques have been developed to enhance the penetration and improvement in sales volumes, but the concern is the sustainability of such methods and techniques. With these thoughts in mind the following Objectives have been identified for this research paper.

1. A broad review of history and development of Direct Marketing techniques
2. Current Marketing techniques which are popular and their use.
3. Direction of development of these techniques.
4. Futuristic potential of such techniques and their impact
5. A critical comparison of sales enhancement and customer orientation.
6. Impact of current techniques and suggestions for futuristic development.

Several methodologies were considered for research and data collection. The proliferation of available literature on the print and electronic media has encouraged the author for a desk research and thorough examination of available data through published literature. It was found that adequate literature is available for the purpose of the current research and what was needed was a comprehensive data

analysis and compilation. This has been done and hopes the conclusions will be found suitable for academicians, practitioners and researchers for further study and focus on specific areas.

3. Review of Literature

For many years, there has been a false impression amongst people that direct marketing is associated exclusively with direct mail because it was the earliest and most commonly used direct marketing technique. In fact, along with the development of the industry, there are an increasing number of forms and techniques employed in direct marketing. Nevertheless, most direct marketing techniques were developed by the mid 1970s. By and large, direct marketing has become part of a multi-media era; that is, most direct marketing activities involve more than one medium and produce an aggregate effect on the market. It has a strong impact not only on direct marketing practice, but also on direct marketing research. There are an increasing number of studies, particularly in the US, which focus on newly developed media such as interactive TV and the Internet.

In 1984, the major US industry trade association changed its name from the Direct Mail Marketing Association (DMMA) to the Direct Marketing Association (DMA) to reflect the true nature of its memberships' widening operations in practice. Similarly, in the UK, the DMA was founded in 1992 in response to the rapid growth of direct marketing and its increasing importance in the economy. It was formed from the original trade organizations of the Association of Mail Order Publishers; the British Direct Marketing

Association; the British List Brokers Association and the Direct Mail Producers Association. The functions of direct marketing have also been broadened from selling goods or encouraging customers to purchase, to include customer care and service.

Not surprisingly, direct marketing has drawn a lot of attention from marketing professionals, academics, and researchers in the past two decades. However, they express different views towards this subject from three different perspectives. The first perspective looks upon direct marketing in terms of the promotional medium (e.g. Smith, 1993; Burnett, 1993 Chapter 2 Direct Marketing & Mail-Order). The second perspective looks upon it as a channel of distribution which is one of the elements of the marketing mix (e.g. Rosenbloom, 1987; Lewison & Delozier, 1982). The third view considers direct marketing as a subset of marketing (e.g. Hoke, 1982; Stone, 1984). Apart from the different perspectives employed by researchers and academics, there are also different opinions over the definition of direct marketing. For instance, there are vague attitudes towards direct selling. Some researchers (e.g. Ogilvy, 1982) treat direct selling synonymously with direct mail or telemarketing, as part of direct marketing, however others (e.g. Roman, 1987) exclude it.

The DMA in the US formally defines direct marketing as follows:

"Direct marketing is an interactive system of marketing that uses one or more advertising media to affect a measurable response and/or transaction at any location." (DMA, 1982, pAxiii) Moschis, Korgankar, and Mathur (1990) also argued that, according to DMA's

definition, "direct marketing does not include other forms of non-store retailing, such as door-to-door sales and vending machines." (Moschise, et al., 1990, pp.8) Ogilvy, who is one of the few people to define what direct marketing is, defines direct marketing as "any advertising activity which creates and exploits a direct relationship between you and your prospect or customer as an individual" (Ogilvy, 1989, p.28). Though there is no general agreement on the definition, by contrasting the different definitions, Katzensten and Sachs summarized the general opinions pointing to four basic features:

- a) A combination of advertising and selling into a single function.
- b) A prominent service concept that will affect repetitive buying.
- c) A strong trend toward specificity.
- d) An existence of built-in feedback mechanisms (Katzensten & Sachs, 1986).

A database is an essential component of direct marketing which facilitates the development of a medium to long-term commitment or relationship with both existing and potential customers. A shift from the product or service-focused marketing to customer and market segment-focused marketing has meant that customer databases have started to replace the traditional product-based database (Shaw, 1991). A database is not only a list of names and addresses but should also be distinguished by the quality and quantity of relevant marketing information on customers. There are primarily two types of information retained on a marketing database: historical data and predictive

data. Historical data is simply transactional data that indicates a customer's past orders, that is the frequency of purchases, responses to offers and size of the orders, as well as containing personal data such as name, address, and gender. Predictive data is processed data which is derived through statistical methodology. Historical data and customer attributes are scored to predict their future buying behavior. Predictive data usually identifies those who are more likely to respond to a certain offer. Therefore, database marketing relies heavily on computer technology. It involves the collection, selection, and analysis of customer records.

Currently, investment in databases varies according to company type, often related to the size of the marketing department. For instance, British Telecom and the Automobile Association are examples of companies which made huge investments into databases. At an industry level, the manufacturing sector invests the least in database, whilst the retail sector is the biggest investor in software, data, and hardware for its database, with more than half (55 per cent) reporting expenditure of more than £250,000 and 22 percent more than £1 million (Marketing Business, 1993). Dunn Humby Associates surveyed 113 of the UK's top advertisers in their 1992 annual study and reported that at present the database is usually under-utilized and that companies do not get the full benefit from it. The survey identifies that 13 per cent of companies did not make use of names and addresses held on computer. This represents a significant loss and waste of resources (Marketing Business, 1993).

GEICO advertising campaigns are known for using surreal humor and satire, often featuring distinctive characters such as the company's mascot, the GEICO gecko, which is actually a Lizard. Investor Warren Buffett, chairman and CEO of GEICO parent Berkshire Hathaway, has stated that he would spend \$2 billion on GEICO ads if he could, approximately double the spending in 2012, which was \$1.1 billion, over twice that of second place Progressive Corporation, with 6.8% of premiums going into commercials. In 2016, GEICO was the top spending brand in the United States, with over \$1.4 billion in advertising, ousting second place Verizon and previous leader AT&T. However, this is offset by not paying agents' commissions, since GEICO uses a direct to consumer model. This has resulted in GEICO being the second largest auto insurer in the United States (behind State Farm).

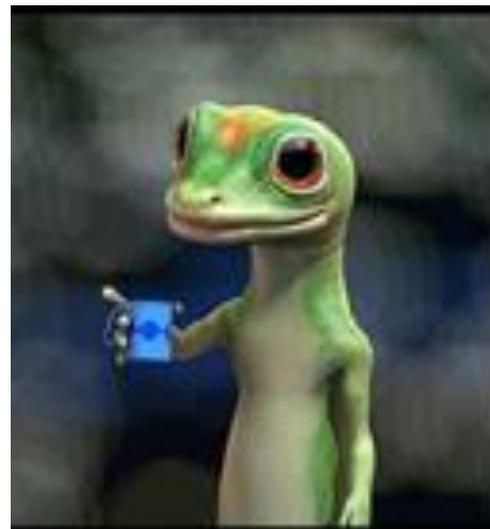


Figure 2: The GEICO Mascot



Figure 3; Prominent characters of GEICO Campaigns

Many of the most prominent TV ad campaigns, such as the GEICO Gecko, the GEICO Cavemen, Maxwell the Pig, and the GEICO Hump Day Camel were developed by The Martin Agency. Professor Tim Calkins of the Kellogg School of Management explains: “GEICO is a perfect example of why positioning matters. Why buy from GEICO? To save money; this is the core of the brand. GEICO is a reputed company with low rates. GEICO doesn’t promise the best service or the most complete coverage. It promises low rates.” The idea for the Gecko grew from a creative session at GEICO’s ad agency, the Martin Agency in Richmond, VA. The name “GEICO” was often mispronounced “Gecko,” and as the brainstorming began, a quick doodle of a gecko appeared. Successful ad campaigns from the past have proven animals create a strong connection between customers and companies

To Tim’s point, when you have a singular brand focus and idea, customers have total clarity on what you are and what you are not. And to GEICO’s credit, it has stayed true to the same brand positioning relentlessly for almost 20 years with arguably one of the

longest-running call-to-action strategies and taglines in recent history. Because GEICO hasn’t moved from its positioning, has stuck with a target segment that values price over paying for a traditional agent network model, and has continued to beat a steady, relevant drum through a series of clever ads and characters—whether its cavemen, pigs, the gecko, banjo players or the newly minted camel of Hump Day fame—customers know exactly what to expect from GEICO. GEICO also realizes that consistent brand positioning and relevance must go hand in hand.

So while the message has stayed the same, GEICO’s advertising campaign tactics and medium usage have evolved. For example, in 2010, GEICO provided mobile users with a first in the insurance industry — the ability to quote and buy a policy from mobile-friendly pages on their I Phone and Android mobile devices. Just recently, GEICO was announced as the premier sponsor for the pilots of Amazon Studios’ new series, streaming on the Amazon Prime Instant Video service. It’s a wide-ranging ad deal that also includes banners and placement on the Amazon Pilot Series home page, as well as ads on Kindles with Special Offers, the cheaper version of the Kindle that shows ads. The expansion continues on new, relevant mediums but continues the “save you money” messaging. The Gecko was voted America’s favorite advertising icon in 2005.

Good direct marketing campaigns focus on promoting a specific product or service, and call on your customers to act - to receive further information, register their interest, visit your website, to make a booking or a purchase. Direct

marketing gives you the opportunity to promote your products and services directly to the customers who most need them. A good direct marketing campaign will help you build relationships with new customers; test the appeal of your product or service; tell you which marketing approaches reach your target market; provide customers with compelling content they can share with potential customers and help increase sales.

However, direct marketing campaigns require careful planning and a clear understanding of responsible direct marketing practice. Being aware of the benefits and challenges of direct marketing will help you use direct marketing effectively. Direct marketing lets you adapt and respond to the needs of your market, and your business. You can achieve fast and flexible sales results using direct marketing. For example, you could use a direct marketing campaign to:

- boost sales of a particular product
- run out discontinued stock
- renew stale sales figures
- increase customer contacts
- Follow up on a promotion.

Word-of-mouth is the most powerful form of marketing. An effective marketing campaign will provide customers with collateral about your business that they can easily share with their friends, colleagues and family. This can generate new leads for your business. To mark World Water Day, a mailer was sent to various companies and the press. The letter contained inside was a little unusual, in

that it was only possible to read it when it was held underwater

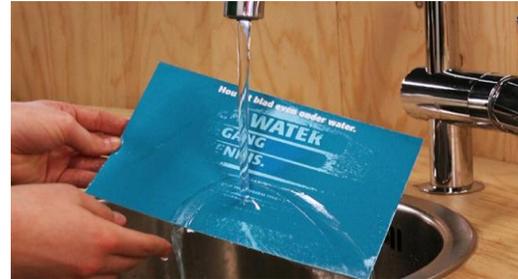


Fig.4: Direct mailer on World Water Day
Image via Athens Business Group

Direct marketing is often used as a tool to promote food products, with chocolate manufacturers Nestle also getting in on the act. They sent out a mailer that was made to look like the card left by postmen when they're unable to deliver a parcel. Instead of saying that a package couldn't be delivered, however, the mailer claimed that the package (Kit Kat chunky) was unable to be posted as it was 'too chunky for your letterbox'. The lucky recipients were able to exchange their card at their local news agency for a free Kit Kat Chunky chocolate bar.



Figure 5: The chunky Kit-Kat mail

The unifying concept that underline Direct Marketing practice is that there are many circumstances in which it makes better business sense to market goods and services directly to consumers rather than rely on intermediaries located in retail outlets, or “bricks and mortar” as they are now popularly described. Selling directly, as distinct from face-to-face, implies the existence of media through which people can communicate with each other using channels other than face-to-face. Until thirty years ago that communication relied almost exclusively on a communications channel developed over four hundred years ago, the printing press.

The practice of including direct response advertisements in newspapers naturally evolved into the promotion of manufacturers’ catalogues. Before World War I it would have been customary even for manufacturers selling through “bricks and mortar” to produce illustrated catalogues to display their range of stock. William Morris first did this in England in 1862. Promoting these catalogues directly to end customers was a natural evolution. In due course it became clear that, rather than each manufacturer developing its own bespoke catalogue, there was an opportunity for an intermediary to source products from a variety of manufacturers and consolidate them into a single, larger catalogue. The most successful of these catalogues was that of Sears, first published in 1888. The company’s headquarters were in Chicago, its prime market mid-Western farmers. Many of America’s foremost data compilers and data analytics companies continue to be based in this city.

This consolidation provided a number of opportunities for saving costs. Like a department store, the mail order catalogue provides the consumer with the option to purchase across a range of different products. It could be kept handy until the time when these products were needed. Purchasing from a single supplier was more convenient and involved less risk than buying from multiple suppliers. Quality of service and timeliness of delivery could be assured. And, in many cases, the catalogue company could use its purchasing power to negotiate better terms from suppliers and so supply merchandise at more attractive prices. The business model on which this marketing proposition was based is little different from that employed by Britain’s most successful catalogue retailer Great Universal Stores, founded in Manchester in 1900, and, albeit using different channels, more recently by Argos and by Amazon..

The centralization of the interaction with individual customers made Direct Marketing a much easier environment in which to examine the impact on the business of micro-decisions. Individual assistants behind the counter of a retail multiple may each have known more about the preferences of individual customers. But this knowledge could not be aggregated to build an understanding of how best to promote which products to which groups of customers using a process of controlled experimentation. It is not clear exactly to what extent the early catalogue companies managed to link individual customer orders together. Prior to World War II punched cards were the means by which customer behavior was analyzed and target customers selected. But it is likely that

even before the advent of the computer most orders were filed at the level of the individual customer and it was not impossible even in the pre-digital age to test the impact on business performance of variations in copy, pricing or terms and to learn how best to make use of previous response history when communicating with repeat customers. Renowned for its unparalleled expertise in these techniques was Reader's Digest, formed in 1922. In its hay day it was the best-selling magazine in the US and, after the launch of its United Kingdom edition in 1938, the company became the most internationally admired exponent of Direct Marketing practice.

4. Analysis & Conclusions

While Marketing has evolved ever since it began, the digitalized world is seeing some phenomenal changes. While changes have taken place in the formats, customer has been centric to all developments. We see that the latest formats have been evolved with a customer centric focus, the only change being the digital proliferation of media and the corresponding fine tuning of the methods to align with such changes in consumer perception and choice.

Direct Marketing techniques originated and developed as a necessity to reduce marketing costs and improve customer contacts at the same time. As seen from the review of literature this started in the direct mail campaigns. While word of mouth publicity forms the basis for customer acceptance of a product, Direct Marketing techniques developed and constantly evolved as seen from the World Water Day direct mailer! While punch card data of customers were originally stored, the development of

computing techniques and enhancement of computer capabilities and the digital revolution have changed the scenario. Present technologies enable companies to have access to customer data instantly and sharpen their campaign focus.

Digital Technologies have enabled Companies to access customer profiles and preferences quickly and sharpen their marketing strategies and product offerings. The Development and growth of DMA has made direct marketing techniques more popular and cost effective. Direct Marketing enabled companies to roll Advertising and Marketing into one seamless effort. Direction of development of this technology will be for better usage of mobile technologies.

The Future is bright as is evident from the campaign success of GAICO. Their combination of Advertising and Marketing efforts is commendable and their Advertising budget is projected at \$ 2 billion! The GEICO promise is simple and direct – cost savings and economy and it has produced success! As pointed out by Prof. Tom Calkins of Kellogg School of Management, brand positioning with strong image has helped GAICO.

The future of such techniques is definitely bright!

Throughout the development and history of Direct Marketing techniques, it is clear that development of customer base and service enhancement has been emphasized and that is the reason for its success. While companies sharpen their focus and techniques to serve the customer well the sales pitch becomes irrelevant as it is automatically taken care of. Such marketing techniques

(Direct Marketing) make the customer central to the efforts. So, obviously the Customer Orientation and Focus is inbuilt into the business model of such companies!

Current techniques have been developed from the experience of companies and it does not come to a stop as development is continuous. The impact of current techniques can be felt around the world and it is changing the way companies look at their products and services. As mobile technologies develop and hand held devices become more popular companies will automatically change their campaign focus to tap such technologies.

5. Recommendation

Direct Marketing is here to stay because this is how it all started in the good old days when a seller tried to contact a buyer by explaining the utility of his product! Techniques of contacting a prospective buyer are changing and it is evolving, but that is the fundamental process which has not been reversed so far. So, the future is bright and the companies who take up a leadership role in such emerging technologies for buyer-seller contact will reap better dividends.

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