

Do print catalogues have a future?

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Many retail experts expected ecommerce, with its low cost of entry and vast potential, to ring the death knell for print catalogues. But catalogues remain a vital element of sellers' marketing arsenal. In fact, even companies that launched as online retailers, like Firebox.com, have been won over by the unique strengths of print.

'Catalogues allow us to reach new and existing customers in ways and at times that we can't necessarily reach them online, and so it has proved to be an invaluable mechanic to drive traffic to our website and sales for our business,' says Firebox.com managing director Christian Robinson.

A direct marketer of gadgets and games, Firebox launched online in 1998; it introduced what Robinson calls its first proper catalogue – as opposed to a photocopied price list – two years later. 'Our website does an amazing job of entertaining and converting customers once they have keyed in firebox.com into a web browser, but a catalogue can engage with our customers where our website can't – on the way into work, or while they are eating their breakfast at the kitchen table.'

Flick-through versus click-through

Much has been written about how the internet is a passive, 'pull' medium: It will attract consumers, but only when they are given an impetus to actively seek out a website. Direct mail, in contrast, is an active, 'push' medium; catalogues are sent to consumers and help to prod them to take some sort of action, be it picking up the phone to place an order or visiting a website to find out more information.

'You can show product through the web, but it does mean the customer has to be on your site,' explains Nick Begy, marketing director at Baker Ross, a direct seller of crafts and toys for children. 'A catalogue lands within the home and gives a far greater opportunity to grab the interest of the consumer. In my experience, the web for many is simply the order channel, but the order is generated from the catalogue.'

The experience of Paul Cunningham, managing director of children's furniture manufacturer/marketer Aspace, is similar. Although more than 40% of its orders come via



the web, match-back analysis indicates that 'a very substantial proportion' of those orders were driven by print catalogues or visits to one of its retail stores.

Not only does the mere arrival of a catalogue on the doorstep remind consumers that they may want to shop from the brand, but the creative of the catalogue is also a powerful driver. When it comes to displaying certain types of products, ink on paper still trumps pixels.

'Lifestyle and room context is extremely important to our offering,' Cunningham says. 'We believe that many decades of lifestyle magazines and their continuing popularity underline the fact that, when it comes to aspirational lifestyle, in the consumer's mind, flick-through still beats click-through, and print confers greater authenticity on a product offering than the web is able to. Our mailorder catalogues are playing to this consumer instinct, plus a sense still prevails among the majority of our customers that one can better see how products will look in real life on the page than on a screen.'

Catalogues are 'much more user-friendly when it comes to product browsing,' says Dara O'Malley, managing director of home decor cataloguer/retailer House of Bath.

Discretionary items make up a significant portion of House of Bath's merchandise range, making the company 'very reliant on spontaneous purchasing, which is better supported by a print environment,' O'Malley says.

Print also offers a certain mobility that digital commerce is still striving for. As O'Malley says, 'It is very difficult to take a computer to the bathroom!'

Eco-friendly, budget-friendly

What about the charge that print catalogues are environmentally unfriendly? 'It is high time someone with all of the facts made a fair comparison between the carbon economics of mailorder shopping versus retail shopping, for example,' Cunningham says. According to the ECCM Mail Greenhouse Gas Emissions report, 2008, the total CO2 emissions per UK adult from direct mail is 2.8kg – that's equivalent to 7.7 miles in a car.



Nonetheless, marketers are striving to lessen the environmental footprint of catalogue mailings. Robinson breaks Firebox.com's efforts into two categories: targeting and environmental efficiency.

With targeting, Robinson says: 'Our goal is to make sure that catalogues are only being sent to recipients who are genuinely looking forward to receiving them and to whom they will offer true benefit.' That entails practising exemplary list hygiene: ensuring that addresses are correct, running lists against suppression files, and the like. 'We are assiduous in capturing goneaways and other similar information as part of Aspace's targeting efforts,' Cunningham says.

As for efficiency, Firebox, Aspace, and Ironmongery Direct are among the mailers that use paper sourced from sustainable forests. Other cataloguers are 'mailing naked', without a polywrap. Some marketers, including Ironmongery Direct, are offering customers the option of an e-catalogue, a digital version of the print catalogue. And Baker Ross is testing sending catalogues that are more targeted and have a lower page count to some of its niche markets.

One hidden advantage of testing or implementing most of these eco-friendly measures is that they're cost-cutting measures as well.

The best of both worlds

In the early days of ecommerce, too many marketers viewed the web as competing against direct mail. Indeed, often the two channels were competing, for in-house resources and for the credit of acquiring custom. If a customer received a print catalogue prior to ordering online, should he be considered a web customer or a catalogue customer? Who should get the credit?

Today, most multichannel sellers realise that it's not a matter of web versus catalogue but rather one of web and catalogue, and that the synergies of the channels really do prove the adage about the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

A survey by Pitney Bowes of UK consumers revealed that 60% said that direct mail or direct response advertising was most likely to get them to shop from the website of a company they'd never bought from before. In contrast, only 24% said a digital marketing message,



such as an email or an online ad, would encourage them to shop from a website they'd never bought from before.

As Begy of Baker Ross says, 'I see the web and the printed catalogue working hand in hand, and I think by simply going down one route you are narrowing your potential.'

A final word...

If anything, the rise of ecommerce has given print catalogues a second life. Marketers are realising their importance as a driver of online sales and are investing more time, energy, and resources into the medium and its role within the marketing mix. It's telling that although all the executives interviewed sell online as well as by catalogue, none expect to stop producing and mailing catalogues.

'In 10 years the web has become a major tool for many customers,' says Ironmongery Direct's managing director, Wayne Lysaght-Mason. 'In 10 years' time maybe the catalogue will be dead because everyone will want to shop online. But that's certainly not the case now.'

