

Six Ways You Can Avoid Irrelevance

IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS DIRECT MARKETING



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I admit to thoroughly enjoying advertising. Every time I flip through a business magazine, the ads get more and more clever. Smart. Modern. And as I chuckle and flip the page, I thank God I'm in direct marketing.

Every day, direct marketers shoulder the responsibility of helping our clients make sales and hit their ROI expectations. We're held accountable for deadlines and bottom lines. We're vulnerable and exposed, which is why we never let our clients down.

Flipping through my mail at the office, I'm dismayed to see the same humor and ploys I see in *Fast Company* and *Wired* magazines. The advertising mindset is starting to find its way into direct marketing; but with results on the table, the stakes are much higher. If we fall prey to the same fey cult of cutie pie that seduced our cousins in advertising some years ago, we face the same irrelevance they face now.

How do we escape the siren's song? How can Business-to-Business direct marketers continue to make direct marketing relevant to the bottom line? I think we can avoid their fate if we always adhere to these simple tenets.

1 DIRECT MARKETING IS A SELLING PROCESS, NOT AN ENTERTAINMENT EVENT

We must never lose our sense of purpose. The purpose of direct marketing is to start or facilitate the selling process. Period. Our job is not to brand, position, entertain or enlighten. We sell. If branding, positioning, entertaining or enlightening contributes to closing a sale, that's all well and good — but we must always remember to focus on the sales process above all else.

2 BUILD YOUR PLAN AROUND HITTING THE ROI GOAL, NOT OBTUSE MESSAGING OR BRANDING OBJECTIVES

Focus on changing behavior, not mindset. Only action — generating a lead or making a sale — can directly contribute to ROI. Since direct marketing can be measured, you must deliver a decent ROI. If you don't hit your ROI target, budget won't be allocated for it. By focusing on ROI, you will also force yourself and your staff to establish proper performance standards for every element of the campaign.

Frankly, most of the questions required to build an ROI plan are not even included in most marcom plans. You must set the following targets and parameters before beginning creative:

- Revenue and unit sales targets
- Lead quantity, allowable cost per lead
- Closing rate targets
- Sales volume, allowable cost per sale
- Drop quantities and/or call targets
- Budget targets
- Response rate targets
- System constraints

3 CREATE TEST HYPOTHESES BASED ON THE KEY METRICS ESTABLISHED ABOVE

You must get to the point where the program is objectively measured, not subjectively judged. Subjective judgement — creative directors creating for creative directors instead of buyers — is one of the major reasons for advertising's downfall.

4 USE THE “NOBODY CARES” RULE IN ALL PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Product development and marcom groups become entranced with their product and mission. After all, it's their baby. And no marketing mama or papa ever had an ugly kid. They often project a level of anticipation and excitement in the market that just isn't there. Truth is, the prospect usually doesn't care. Prospects are all wrapped up in their own products and services, not yours. Most just won't work very hard to understand your product. So you are better off building your copy platforms around the following rules:

- They don't care about your company
- They don't care about your products and services
- They don't care about anything you have to tell or sell them

When you create programs using these assumptions, you still bring in the early adapters and the truly desperate. But more important, you'll also bring in the fence-sitters that are not quite ready. Bringing in the marginal buyer is where the direct marketing battle is won or lost.

5 MAKE YOUR COPY PLATFORMS, APPEALS AND OFFERS PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL

Build your programs around the emotional arguments that drive all of us: greed, fear, guilt, anger, exclusivity and salvation. Can you save them time? Can you save them money? Can you make their jobs easier? Can you help them get recognition or reward? Can you help them avoid the next downsizing? Can you make any significant, positive impact on their lives? Or can you help them avoid pain and suffering? Always remember: They don't care what your product does — they care what your product does for *them*.

6 TEST ALL HYPOTHESES

The biggest sin committed in direct marketing today is the lack of testing. It's bad in consumer direct. It's even worse in the Business-to-Business world since the marketing team is almost never a qualified buyer. And yet we try to guess — or allow others to guess — the right solution. The buyer will tell you how they want to buy; all you have to do is test and let them give you the answer.

When you test, you'll find fascinating solutions. You'll usually find that emotional copy sells more than the rational, fact-filled copy most product managers love. The Business-to-Business bias is for the “product sheets in drag” that we see all the time. Test results are the most effective argument for overriding this bias.

There is another Business-to-Business penchant toward self-mailers, but again, testing will usually prove that full packages work best. Many believe that short copy is the key to success, but once again, testing often proves that theory wrong too.

The cumulative effect of making a series of wrong decisions will render direct marketing impotent and, ultimately, irrelevant. Testing smart and testing often is the best way to stay on top of our game and make a difference in sales.