

# Quality multichannel customer communications win hearts and wallets

 By Jacques van Wyk

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More than 25% of recipients classify direct mail as junk. And, according to research commissioned by Ricoh, 6 out of 10 consumers would no longer support brands if communications from those brands were poor.

In addition, two-thirds feel less loyal and would spend less with brands that send them irrelevant information. Nearly one-fifth of consumers said they have actually taken their custom elsewhere after being spammed by irrelevant material from product and service providers.



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In South Africa, Warren Moss, chairman of the Direct Marketing Association of South Africa in 2015, said during a 702 interview: “Postal direct marketing are on the rise overseas. Digital media has freed up more space for post. Responses from post are very good.” He added: “SMS is annoying unless the content is useful and timeous. Financial services dominate this type of direct marketing.” And: “Leaflets have the lowest response rates, because it’s the least targeted.”

No wonder then that a staggering 70% of consumers want digital communications to serve the majority of purposes. However, print and more traditional methods of communication still have their place. Perhaps not in leaflets but documents perceived as having more importance, such as contracts, are wanted in a digital format by 45% of consumers. More than half want those important documents in hard copy. Brands need to offer communications in a range of formats, both print and digital, suitable to their purpose and the wants of the individual consumer.

Figuring out what, when, and how to communicate with existing and potential customers can be a perilous process. The good news, however, is that eight-in-ten consumers are willing to share personal information to ensure the messages they receive from brands are relevant to them. Starting with the information they already have available, for example in billing, about their customers' individual demographics, businesses should look to connect these pools of data to build a picture detailing each customer's full range of needs. Using the knowledge you already have about the customer to learn how, and when, to communicate is crucial to its effectiveness and in securing repeat business. And it will demonstrate a willingness to be responsible with customer data that will have them divulging more for businesses to use.

But gathering pools of data from across the business implies that there needs to be some high-level coordination of the data. Tying together customer data from across silos sheltered in divisions, departments, business units, and group companies, can be a difficult process at best. When top executives shuffle it to the bottom of their priority list it's doomed before it begins.

But if you don't tie your data sources together then you risk alienating customers. And that can have an immediate impact on a company's revenue and cash flow, while irritating potential customers erodes pipeline. It takes a long time to gain a customer's trust, but generic and impersonal communications can destroy that trust almost instantly. For example, a bank regularly contacted a colleague of mine. It routinely offered him membership to the same rewards programme he had already declined more than 10 times. It got to the point where he no longer entertained the idea of the rewards programme, even if it could prove beneficial, simply because the bank had eroded all trust. That poor use of their customer data systems, right alongside a competitor's much more effective use, saw my colleague ultimately switch banks. They had a loyal customer but poor communication and poor use of data drove the customer into the open arms of their competitor.

Customers are often bombarded with information because printing and mailing material is rarely co-ordinated. So it's important that all data be digitalised because that makes it easier to quickly analyse to effectively tailor communications. And proper upfront analyses can often inform companies which customers will be receptive to their message and medium, eliminating the need to print copies for people who won't use them.

And, finally, businesses shouldn't be afraid to ask their customers for feedback on the communications they receive. Knowing where to make improvements is critical, considering 57% of people claim the quality of printed materials they receive directly impacts their perception of a company. Setting up a simple feedback system online, in-store or in-branch, goes a long way to helping customers feel valued and get repeat business.

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