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It's the Network Age—But Don't Give Up on Print Yet!

By Michael Stoner

It's the network age. Marketing is a conversation—it's all about email, blogs, RSS, podcasts and the web. Right? And you can find plenty of naysayers who are ready to tell you that key segments of your market just don't want all that paper. So why should you even consider printing anything?

Why indeed? Maybe because it works. Research points to some interesting conclusions. There is evidence that considerable segments of your audiences pay attention to print—and even want it. Consider this, from a survey of prospective students by University Research Partners, the research division of Royall & Company:

- Students are more likely to open print mail than email: 51.4 percent of respondents said that they had opened mail from colleges because they were curious, but only 37.6 percent had done so with email. Moral: it's easier to ignore email—especially given the prevalence of spam.
- Mail has more residual value than email. 82.0 percent of respondents said they had saved mail from colleges (and 74 percent had filed mail) while only 66.4 percent had saved email from colleges (and 53.8 percent had filed email).

And you know what? When asked how they preferred to learn about colleges, 71.7 percent of students identified mail (personal letters) as a preference while only 48.0 percent identified email (note: participants could select multiple contact modes). But there's more—here's what they said about websites, print, and school visits:

School websites (xxx.edu): 65.8 percent

Campus visits: 52.9 percent

School publications (e.g., brochures and magazines): 50.6 percent

In our own focus groups, we've heard high school students and first-year students talk about the value of viewbooks: here, the pass-along effect comes into play. It's easier to share a printed viewbook with their parents, grandparents, and friends than it is an email or even a website.

What about alumni? Five years ago, some vendors were predicting the death of the printed alumni directory: who would buy a book when "everything" is available online?

Turns out the answer is: a lot of people. According to the folks at Harris Connect, who publish (print) alumni directories for colleges and universities and also provide a variety of online community solutions, sales of print directories are still strong. And Paul Gangi [president and COO of Harris Connect's Internet Services Division], points out that people who buy a print directory are also more likely to participate in an online community, attend reunions, and give money to their alma maters. All these behaviors, Gangi says, are a measure of affiliation—and affiliation is expressed in many ways.

In a fascinating study aimed at helping Pitney Bowes predict the future of commercial (print) mail, researcher Chrystal Szeto notes that despite wild predictions to the contrary, new technologies often do not simply replace older technologies—but are adopted selectively by the public, who recognize the value of a new technology and adopt it accordingly. Thus, personal letters tailed off when the rates to make a telephone call became cheap enough. Now, for many teens, IM and text messages have replaced the telephone.

She points out that as teens age, they will continue to receive and even welcome (print) mail, as have generations before them raised with disruptive technologies such as the telephone, radio, and TV (which—though it seems hard to believe from the vantage point of 2006—were revolutionary in their day): “Children and adults adapt to an increasingly multi-channel world, and have not dramatically changed their habits so far; and (2) sociological research indicates that the current young generations will be quite traditional and act quite like past generations.”

We can't know what the future will bring. But we want our clients to base their communications strategies on evidence, not hype. So for now, our best advice is that it's all about integration—and there's a lot of evidence that validates the importance of print as a key part of a communications stream