



Your Mailing Is Your Salesman...
...so how badly dressed is yours.?

This month, I'm Mr Angry.

Truth is - I'm getting VERY concerned. The whole thing is going to hell in a handcart...

And, much quicker than expected, too...

Let me explain.

Response rates to direct mail are reducing. Nothing new there then. The same thing is happening all over...

...off the page, emails (*yes, read that again email lovers*), inserts, TV, radio - you name it, it isn't delivering anything like it used to...

Not just here in the UK, by the way... all over.

In Europe, the Pacific Basin, Australasia, the Middle East - everywhere. In the U.S. the drop-off is close to the worst of all - and probably more pronounced...

It's ironic really. Because, that's where this crazy business began - in around 1886 with Richard Sears and Montgomery Ward. And now, 120 years on, the natives on that particular block are getting *really* restless...

The reason is obvious.

Look around you. It's not rocket science...

On the one hand, our targets are now increasingly savvy consumers and business people, who know how it all works. They don't fall for the stuff they used to. They know our tricks and techniques and they see our approaches before they even appear over the hill.

PLUS, they have now realised the power that they have...

On the other hand, you have marketers and agencies, most of them possessing a seemingly TOTAL lack of understanding of how to correctly sell anything these days...

Put the two together and you have a cocktail for disaster. And it's one that we're all facing - right now...

...we are no longer in control of this ship...

But, bad as that all is - and it's the biggest crisis to ever hit the communications sector in living memory - it doesn't stop there...

...now, there is something *new* to add...

Something that makes the whole picture even more worrying...

Crap quality is in vogue.

Yes, '*Cheapo Cheapo*' Productions rule...

I suppose it had to happen, given the scenario above. What's made it worse though, is - for reasons completely beyond me - brainless berks with little or no experience, have been given the responsibility to make a lot of important decisions in this area.

Surely, anyone with a heartbeat, when faced, for example, with the challenge that their mailings aren't delivering the required response levels, would first review all aspects of their programme?

In direct mail, there are only five, as most of you readers to this column will know.

They are:

1. *Targeting*
2. *The Letter*
3. *The Offer*
4. *The Creative*
5. *The Timing*

The reason for disappointment in mailing campaigns is almost certainly going to be one, or a combination of those....

The targeting is crucial, obviously. It is vital that you get your communication into the hands of those individuals that will have a propensity to be interested in it.

The letter. Well, I think you know my feelings on this by now. Everyone thinks they can write direct response copy. In reality, only a handful can. It's a specialist art.

The offer. Well, that's simple. Basic stuff. In these tough times, if there is no offer, there will be no sale. Read it again and consign to memory. Fight it and you'll die a slow death...

The creative has to be impactful and has to rise above the general noise level. It plays the support role to the copy in direct mail. *Fact. Proven.* But, no matter how many times we old liggers tell people this, a lot of people still choose to ignore it.

In this medium, pretty pictures don't sell. Period.

Words sell. *Tell the world...*

The timing can be hugely influential. And, in most cases of course, specific timing is unique to a particular industry. So it's best to try and recognise it, unless you like losing money...

For example, if you have a big industry event that you know your targets will be attending or focused on, don't mail them at that time. Their attentions will be elsewhere.

Kid's stuff...

OK, basics over. Back to where I started.

The real concerns...

There is now a highly worrying trend developing in marketing circles. Faced with dwindling ROI on marketing campaigns, certain marketers are responding to this problem with a response that I find impossible to comprehend ...

"Let's make everything cheaper..."

Staggering? Yes, it is. But it's happening, trust me...

I have analysed it from all the angles and can only explain it this way. Clients don't really care. They have given up. I *swear* they have...

It can be the only answer.

Faced with a situation where recipients of communications are not responding the way they used to, these idiots decide that the only way forward is to reduce the quality of the mailing.

Instead of looking at why response levels are low and trying to improve the overall quality of the promotional message, they decide to go cheaper...

Go figure. It's too much for me....

The current trend has manifested itself in many ways in direct mail, but is mainly:

- Cheaper stock - crap paper instead of half decent paper
- Two sided letters instead of two page letters – (*which, incidentally, always pull worse in any head to head tests I've ever seen.*)
- Cheapo ink-jetting instead of good quality lasering
- Litho printing letters and then lasering a salutation and sometimes an address on top, instead of lasering the whole letter. How crap does that ALWAYS look...?
- Envelopes so thin you can see the text inside before you open it
- Reluctant use of colour.

I could go on and on...

What the hell is going on here? And all this is before we even talk about the crucial and absolutely vital areas of creative and copy.

One of the leading financial mailers in the UK – one of the main players who have 'raped' our letterboxes in the last five years - has now resorted to black and white mailing packs, produced, it looks like, on a budget of tuppence-halfpenny a thousand...

So this is the answer, huh? Talk down to your targets. Show them even *less* respect. That's a strategy that will get the interest back and the response levels up..?

I can't believe it...

The lunatics are running the asylum. No doubt in my mind at all. I've suspected it for years. Now it's fact.

How can anyone think this way? It's not only very stupid. It's hugely dangerous.

You can almost hear them saying... "*Maybe, but at least we have kept our costs in check – and maybe our jobs for a little while longer...*"

Brainless bastards...

Their world is a spreadsheet world, underpinned with a '*tick in the box*' mentality.

"Has the mailing gone out, Bill?" "Yes, Harry, last Monday".

"O.K Well done..."

I believe that explains a lot.

Most marketing decision makers these days, it would seem to me - whatever their title - don't really care about anything, as long as they cover their ass. They are only going to be in the job for 13 months anyway on average in the UK, (*according to the latest published figures...*)

So, as long as the cost per new customer acquired is within that acceptable computerised level on the bottom right hand corner of the spreadsheet (*reducing every week, by the way*) then they're in the clear...

"Not me guvnor, just the rules I have to work to. Talk to the pin-stripes..."

Oh, I'd love to. Believe me, I'd LOVE to...someone send me some contact details...

They've killed so many decent industries - my beloved music industry for one. And there are scores more...but that's for another day...

Now they are doing it to the direct marketing industry.

But is it them? Or is it a poisonous cocktail of these faceless parasites mixed with marketing people that seem to think it's smart to want everything cheaper...?

I don't know. But what I do know is we are in BIG trouble if it continues...

On two fronts. Firstly, let's consider the companies who service clients. Agencies, data providers, printers, envelope suppliers, mailing houses et al...

Being in the business as long as I have, I'm pleased to have old friends who run companies in the operational arena of our industry - mailing houses, envelope suppliers, data and laser bureaus and such like.

I can tell you they're very worried...

...the bar talk at the IDMF at Earls Court this year, was of little else than this situation...

People are getting less for their product now than they did 20 years ago...

Twenty bloody years ago. It's unbelievable.

I have to tell you that this astonishing commercial and strategic response by marketers who should know better, is something that I cannot understand.

Faced with an increasingly apathetic reaction to the messages they are sending they react this way... explain it to me someone, please...

The consumer and business audiences we are talking to, are *totally* hacked off by a decade and more of crap. They have switched off. They have had it with us...

And who can blame them ..?

Overall, mailings are very poor. Door drop material is lacklustre. Inserts do not 'grab' as they should. Radio ads are banal. TV ads are mind-blowingly obscure and emails are imploding by the day...

More and more people in the UK are joining the MPS and TPS. There's a massive backlash against Indian call centres - and I'm pleased to say that whilst writing this - one major company has now decided to stop this lunacy...

Hopefully others will follow suit...

The 'do not call' list in the U.S. is now standing at an unbelievable 25 million homes and growing!

Even SMS messaging in the Gulf is taking a bashing...and that particular audience LIVE on their mobiles...

The message to us marketers from the people we are aiming our messages at, is very, very clear.

"We're pulling up the drawbridge. Good night. Go away."

So, my fellow marketing playmates, I ask you this.

How on earth do we think we can get them to open up again by talking *down* to them and reducing the quality of message delivery?

Do we think this is going to work?

Not in my world. Not in my lifetime...

It will just piss them off. Even more...

Which is an extremely frightening highway to *nowhere*...

But, if we carry on the way we are going, we'll be so far on that highway, we won't know how to get off.

We have to recognise that we are no longer in charge. The brand isn't in charge. The directors aren't in charge. The company philosophy isn't in charge. The corporate guidelines aren't in charge. The agency isn't in charge.

The individual receiving our message is now in charge.

In today's tough marketplace, to connect to that individual and influence him or her to respond and act on a particular promotional message - above all others - requires a lot of things.

But two stand out.

Talent and professionalism.

1. The talent. Putting the message together in the first place.

That requires knowledge, skill and expertise in how to write copy and originate creative for direct marketing campaigns and programmes.

Integrated agencies offer little in this area that really matters. They 'play' at direct marketing, without a lot of meaningful knowledge.

Traditional agencies have absolutely no idea.

PR Agencies. Design Agencies. Sales Promotion Agencies?

Well, if they *are* involved – in any way with a DM campaign, then you are almost certainly looking at a client that has *lost* it. *Big time...*

Out with the fairies...

How many times does it have to be said? Direct marketing is a specialist discipline. So, employ specialists. People who know what they are doing...

Very few come under that banner, I can tell you. Reason is, as I've said many times before in this column – no one *studies* the art of communication anymore...

Listen to what Drayton said on this very subject only recently....

"Few copywriters study enough. And many who commission copy, study even less. So the partially-sighted serve the blind. No wonder most copy isn't very good"

2. The professionalism. Now ROI is GOD in our business, you need a professional approach to your campaigns - not an amateurish one.

You can divide marketing people into two groups – the Pros and the Amateurs. The amateurs are in the majority. They guess...

But because they study and learn, the pros know. That's why the pros consistently deliver better marketing ROI...

This also includes how it's delivered. In direct mail, that's the package – the contents – the overall customer experience - how it connects, influences...

...and the impression it gives.

Remember, if it's cheap, that's the impression the recipients will have of you and your organisation ...

So, overall, if your mailing is your salesman, how does yours look?

Impressive or shabby? Showing respect for the individual you are talking to, or sidestepping this issue and completely ignoring it?

Does your particular salesman look as if he or she has been pulled through a hedge backwards...?

Whatever your answer, like it or not, you'll probably be getting what you deserve.

Because, you are now talking to individuals who recognise their immense power.

If you choose to talk down to them, talk badly to them or show them scant respect, you will be dismissed in the blink of an eye.

And quite rightly too...

It would appear that it's happening already.

Be afraid. Be VERY afraid...

See you next month

Keep the faith



About the Author

Andy Owen is Managing Director of Andy Owen & Associates, a leading International Strategic Marketing Consultancy specialising in contemporary direct marketing.

The company provides advice, guidance and high quality expertise in all aspects of direct marketing to companies all around the world.

Head Office is in Birmingham UK. Other offices are in London and Dubai, with associate offices in Cairo, Paris, New York & Los Angeles.

The company's corporate website is www.andyowen.co.uk. The specialist copy division has its own site at www.copywritingthatsells.com

If anyone would like complete copies of any examples shown in these articles, please contact Andy direct at andyowen@aol.com. or copydeskUK@aol.com

Andy can be contacted on 0044 121 778 6640, or by email personally at andyowen@aol.com