

Dabbling in direct

Is direct marketing the answer to marketers who are under pressure to deliver return on investment? **Gillian Jones** speaks to leading specialist, Andy Owen.

AS THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC downturn continues to bite, it's surprising that all marketers are not using direct marketing to interact with consumers. This is the message leading international direct marketer, Andy Owen, would like to impart.

On a recent visit to South Africa to conduct a master class hosted by the Direct Marketing Association of SA (DMASA), he was steadfast in his belief that mass marketing, or above-the-line advertising, often does not make sense.

"In above-the-line you advertise to everyone to target someone. It doesn't make sense because so much of the budget is wasted. Direct Marketing is all about targeting – getting the right message to the right person while cutting wastage," says Owen, who has worked in direct marketing for over 28 years and has his own international direct marketing consultancy, Andy Owen & Associates. Based in Birmingham in the UK, it also has country offices in Dubai, Bucharest (Romania) and Moscow.

"The main difference in direct marketing is that it's not mass marketing. The mindset is one-on-one marketing – we're interested in individuals," he adds. "The world has changed dramatically and mass marketing is dead. We are all individuals and direct marketing is the only medium to harness that individuality."



Andy Owen - direct marketing is a strategic medium

Tenuous strapline

Quoting the example of a car advertisement, Owen explains that an above-the-line agency would create a very expensively-produced television advert showing a car on a beach, accompanied by some "tenuous strapline".

"In direct marketing, we would take a particular car and ask 'what are its main benefits to the target audience'? We would break down the message to get close to the specific target audience [because] direct marketing involves human psychology."

So, if direct marketing is such an effective and accountable medium, why do more marketers not make use of

it? Owen contends: "The problem is it is a 'mysterious medium'. People tend to think: 'What is it really'? There's not enough knowledge."

He believes that, in many cases, when an agency gets a brief from a client for a direct marketing campaign, it does not have the necessary know-how to proceed. However, it will never admit this to the client, nor turn down the work. Once the campaign is produced, says Owen, the client signs it off as they also do not know any better.

"You have the classic situation of the partially sighted leading the blind," he quips.

"An above-the-line agency thinks direct marketing is just an ad in an envelope. If you want a direct marketing campaign and go to an above-the-line agency, it's the equivalent of going to the doctor when your tooth aches. It's the client being lazy. And then, if someone doesn't know what they're doing, they blame the medium and not the agency."

Quick results

Owen believes that one of the reasons marketers do not use direct marketing more often, or more effectively, is that they are under enormous pressure to deliver quick results.

"We live in a quick-fix society, but direct marketing is a strategic medium, rather than tactical. However, people want tactical and are under pressure to

deliver a return on budget. This often results in an above-the-line agency creating a quick-fix print campaign, or the equivalent.

"The agency is frequently more interested in making it look good, creatively. This kind of solution is, however, not effective because consumers are only interested in things that benefit them, solve a need, or satisfy an emotion."

And this is where direct marketing – which is also often known as 'direct response marketing' – answers that consumer need, Owen says.

"Everything I create for my client should promote a response, and an excellent way to gauge whether your campaign will elicit a response is to test it. Sadly, this is another neglected area."

Campaign testing

He believes that, in the golden age of direct marketing in the US in the 60s and 70s – and in the UK in the 70s and 80s – people spent a lot of time and effort studying direct marketing and testing campaigns.

"Testing was the rock on which we built our direct marketing church. It is absolutely vital. Now, today's marketers ignore it," he writes on his blog at www.andyowen.co.uk.

Owen says many marketers choose not to test their campaigns, citing budget constraints. But he counters: "To go to market without a test is a sure-fire way to waste an awful lot of money.

"With testing, you can ignore your instincts and find out what your customers and prospects really think about your campaigns... after all, their opinions are



Above-the-line... advertising to everyone to target someone?

much more important than yours."

He adds: "Yet, countless campaigns are launched every day, with no thought at all given to 'learning'. Learning what really works... what really gains the largest number of responses, the most qualified leads, the most sales.

"And you test, because the individuals that make up your target audience don't necessarily feel the same way about you, your products and your offers as you think they should,"

Mailing packs

Owen gives the example of two mailing packs that he and his team created over two years ago and which are still being used today.

"Bar a couple of images used in the packs, they are the same packs we created then. Nothing has changed. Both these packs broke response records when they were first mailed, and they have continued to perform well over the last two years.

"But these two companies have never

come back to us (...or anyone else by the way), to create new packs to test against them. In short, they have run the same packs for over two years – nothing else. No tests at all. It's lazy and incredibly stupid," he writes.

Despite his despondency about the current state of direct marketing, Owen – who was one of three top international judges of the DMASA Assegai Awards 2008 – was fairly positive about the South African direct marketing industry.

He says the local work he judged was: "very good. It gave you a lot of confidence in the future... people were trying hard." But he does add a proviso. "The problem was that often they were falling into the trap of trying to entertain, instead of sell." 🗑️



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