

Why and how print works in the digital age

Nine simple facts for successful marketing publications

Not long ago at the dawn of the new millennium, the World Wide Web appeared to businesses to be a paradise. Marketing professionals clearly saw the merits of shifting to the internet and joined in droves the chorus proclaiming the end of printed advertising. The digital promise was simple and credible: You do not pay for expensive paper. With no paper you save the money for the printer. Distribution works by a mouse click enabling you to reach much more customers at a much higher frequency at marginal costs next to zero.

In the meantime we need to recognise that the promise was kept only half: Digital is thriving. But print is fine, too. During the last ten years the number of companies producing their own printed marketing publications was rising tremendously. Exact data vary depending on whom you ask, but there is no doubt that the market has blossomed into a multi-billion euro global industry with still no limit in sight.

Ironically, it appears to be the internet that brought a lot about this growth of print. We now see that the combination of print and digital triggers a significantly higher client response than any of the two alone could ever achieve. Adding print to TV and internet increases customer loyalty by 44 percent and sales intention by 15 percent, according to Dynamic Logic/Millward Brown, a digital market company. And Print Power, an organisation promoting print media in integrated marketing, says that the combination of print and online increases brand effectiveness by 26 percent compared to using just print or online.

The lesson is that there is no either-or situation as many used to think. It is more about the question of how we integrate the old and the new to a changing mix of media. If the mantra at the birth of the internet was digital, digital, digital, then the new mantra is integrate, integrate, integrate.

Despite its growing importance still little is known if and when print works. Here are nine simple facts for successful print publications.

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Apply a subtle content strategy

Unlike in the online arena, where customers quickly rush through and consume bite-sized pieces of information in a few seconds, the average customer reads a customer magazine 25 minutes. Seize this time for grasping your customers' openness towards your company. Do not write monosyllabic and provide just neutral, objective information. If your company was a person, what sort of character would it be? Would it be sophisticated? Talkative? Prudent? Whatever your answer is: Write with an attitude. Achieve standout. Create a layout which guides the reader smoothly through the magazine and supports the desired reputation.

Use a journalistic approach

Writing in an overtly advertorial manner is a save way that customers throw your magazine straight into the bin. Your products and services will have their space, but they will clearly be second to editorial content. Publish engaging stories across a wide mix of topics that are of interest to your target group (rather than to you). Investing in seasoned writers and photographers who go the extra mile for their stories will pay off later when customers are about to make their buying decisions.

Let others be your heroes

Detailing the advantages of your company sounds nice, but stories featuring a customer how he found the girl of his dreams after countless failed attempts because he used your dating service are the ones we all love to read. Let entrepreneurs tell how their businesses flourish because they installed your software and students about their vibrant careers after they earned a diploma from your institution. Framed in well-written anecdotes, testimonials will proof out to be the most persuasive ambassadors for your products and services you can get.

Provide thought-provoking content

Neurological research findings suggest that reading from paper is much faster than reading from screen (by about a third), and reading from paper provides a lasting memory of the content. This capacity of "deep reading" is a big advantage of print magazines as it supports critical reflection. Write stories that question your readers' presuppositions and meaning perspectives. Provide a different view. It will provoke them to pick up the copy of your magazine several times over, and they are more likely to become distributors recommending your magazine to acquaintances.

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Separate sales promotional measures from editorial content

Vouchers, QR codes and a reference to your web order page may work, but do not integrate these in the body of your cover story. Readers value if they can distinguish between the information and the pure advertorial part of your content. On the other hand, people are getting quickly upset if information seeks to appeal too heavily to their emotions to act or close a sale.

Take your time to choose the right paper

Weight and style of the paper give people a special feeling when they touch your magazine. Perhaps needlessly to say to use no cheap paper as this will have a negative impact on your credibility. The paper weight may vary, but as a principle you should have a higher weight the less pages your magazine has (thin paper and few pages may occur your magazine to look cheap). Make sure you have physically touched different types of paper before you make your decision (ask suppliers for paper samples), especially if you have little experience in the publishing arena.

Plan your mailings sensibly

Determining the frequency of your magazine is an especially difficult task. Research is weak in that respect. Some findings suggest you should publish at least quarterly to trigger a measurable response which is more or less in line with most experts' opinion. I personally believe that this is based more on gut feeling than valid data. There appear to be too many exemptions. In some markets even an annual edition can work if integrated wisely into the marketing mix. What can be told for sure is that a magazine sent to the personal address of a recipient triggers more likely a response than anonymous bulk mailings or copies freely available at local hotspots.

Define and openly communicate your goals

You are unlikely to close a sale just because someone reads the magazine. Do you expect customers to call or e-mail? Do you like them to visit your event? Knowing what you want and making sure that everyone in the team knows what you want helps you to stay focused.

Keep the bigger picture in mind

Print is a crucial factor, but be aware that it is also a piece in a puzzle. Reputational gains and strong customer relationships are not always achieved by the magazine - and supposedly never by the magazine alone. Banner ads in digital media, TV advertising, fairs, sales and

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other staff talking directly to the client - there are many communication channels that work together and none of them should be considered separately from each other. So review your overall response system and make sure you can follow through when customers act.



The author Marian Mazdra has a successful 20 year track record in marketing, project management and business planning. Amongst others, he has sound experience in both corporate and conventional media and managed large publishing projects across all channels and in multiple languages.

Working as a freelance consultant and interim manager since 2002, Marian (jointly) develops and implements marketing strategies for businesses with internal and external teams and helps them to grow their bottom lines. Currently he lives in Austria.

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