

Direct Mail vs. Email: How the Marketing Channels Differ and Work Together

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Email marketing and direct mail have two things in common:

- Much has been said about the efficacy of each channel
- Everyone has predicted that each channel is either dead or dying.

That argument is tired because the people who are most likely to predict the deaths of either channel are the ones who think they can dethrone them.

Companies like Facebook and Slack have claimed to be able to dethrone digital media and replace it with their own channels.

But the truth is that the only risk to email marketing and direct mail is misuse of the medium by people who don't take advantage of everything each channel presents. We'll explore that concept further in this post.

In this blog, both Paul Bobnak (direct mail guy) and Ryan Phelan (email guy) discuss the differences and the advantages of both mediums.

What is omnichannel marketing?

That's a question we all struggle with. What does true omnichannel marketing mean? Both channels can work together, but the difference between coordinated marketing, where every marketer blasts the same message, and true multichannel, or omnichannel, marketing is based on the data behind the themes and respecting each channel for what it is.

We need to raise the level of sophistication to protect the channel, to ensure their longevity and to ensure what we do in our marketing is to think about the channel in front of us and to reach out to adjust the channels to work together cohesively.

Segmentation in email marketing

I was in a conversation with some peers, and one remarked that a client told him, "Email is easy!" Everybody groaned and rolled our eyes.

That's because email marketing is super hard. Okay, correction: Email with low sophistication is easy. It doesn't take much thought or planning to put an email together and send it out to all audiences.

What makes email marketing hard is the sophistication behind the scenes. Targeting populations and audiences, using predictive modeling, sending the right message to the right recipient at the right by using dynamic content – that's the hard work that goes into an effective program.

Segmentation in direct mail marketing

I've heard the same thing, Ryan! "Direct mail is easy because it's just spray-and-pray".

Nope and nope.

The fact is that direct mail is the original king of marketing data.

Response codes, lists, data cards, selects, A/B and multivariate testing – they've all been around for decades. It's just that the tools have gotten more sophisticated. Which is great! Because postage and printing costs going up means that if you're mailing without always scrutinizing your data, you're throwing away money. That's just nuts. At a minimum, you need to [know \(and focus on\) the segments](#) that work best for you, while always be testing.

Email's instant-on advantage

The advantage of email marketing is its ability, even in a fast-paced environment, to get the message out the door quickly. Direct mail is slower because of its delivery method – the postal service.

Email marketing can be instantaneous. Even with planning, you can deploy a campaign in a relatively short time. This gives you an advantage you can use to react quickly to market conditions, customer sentiment and action, breaking news and other situations that require you to send a message quickly.

That's email's strength. When you use it right, it can be highly effective.

Another of email's advantages – or a disadvantage, depending on your perspective – is that you can do email badly and still make money, like my friend's client, who bragged that he could easily cobble together a message and send it out.

My argument is that email done right, done strategically and with data guiding your decisions, makes more money and serves your organization's highest purposes within your marketing plans to achieve your business goals.

Email is the only channel that gets into the inbox, the same place where your customers receive their most personal and valued messages. That's the strength and power of email. But you also must employ all the tools available to you to make those messages demonstrate their value in the inbox. Too many marketers don't, and that abuses and diminishes the channel's power.

Direct mail's physical advantage

With smartphones, everything digital – or pretty close to it – is channeled through it to the consumer. Whether it's an email, text, web page, app, video, or podcast – they're all somewhat different experiences that have to fit on the exact same screen.

And don't get me wrong – a lot of the time, I love that convenience.

Direct mail, though, gives you lots of choices for how to connect your brand with customers in a tangible way.

Envelopes, folded self-mailers, brochures, [postcards](#) – even within USPS guidelines – can make your marketing stand out with an amazing variety of inks, paper grades, finishes and effects, sizes, and technological enhancements like NFC and video-in-print.

Being tactile in a digital-first world gives you an extra set of tools to cut through the clutter. As shown in studies by Temple University and others, it helps to activate areas of the brain associated with memory and recall. That helps to create the “mail moment” – the experience customers have when they look through their mail with their eyes and hold it in their hands.

Email is not the only tool in the box

To achieve true omnichannel marketing, however, you have to know which channel is appropriate to use for your purpose. This means you have to understand channel propensity, which shows you which channels your audience is most likely to use to act on and convert from your messages.

Prime example: my wife, a digital marketer herself and savvy in the ways of digital communication. She hates Facebook but loves Instagram. If I try to reach her with a Facebook, I'll find my ad dollars are wasted there. The connection is stronger on Instagram, so that's where I should advertise to her.

This concept of channel propensity – of knowing, for example, that some of your customers will buy from social media and others from email or another channel – is key to developing a true omnichannel program and shaping your messages to reflect that complexity. That's what drives higher results and optimizes your ad spend.

How email and direct mail can work together

With all that being said, here's the thing: with the right data, each channel can make the other better. Here are some ways to align and combine the strengths of email and direct mail.

- Send direct mail to email non-responders. If you have postal address data on your customers and your email is flagging, mail may bring them back.
- Follow up a mail campaign with email. Again, it's about reaching customers where they may be more comfortable engaging your brand.
- Sneak preview a high-value print piece using email. When you're about to mail a special offer, or maybe a high-quality personalized mailer, let your customer know it's coming to build anticipation.
- Prospect with direct mail for email. At the risk of sounding obvious, everyone has a physical address. But email is a bit more private. To ask a prospect to opt in to your list on your landing page, send a mail piece offering something of value (e.g., a discount) for responding.

- Use direct mail as a step in a drip campaign. It provides a different experience than your other efforts, hopefully one that showcases content or other helpful information that moves them closer to conversion.
- Respond to cart abandonment with both channels. When a customer exits your ecommerce website and leaves items behind in their cart, launch a follow-up reminder to bring them back and recover the sale.
- Sync up your direct mail and email campaigns through [Informed Delivery](#). More than 32 million subscribers have opted in to preview their mail delivery each day. Your brand can reach any segment of them with an email component – tied to a direct mail piece – that allows them to respond instantly rather than wait. And it's free for marketers!

Takeaways: Look beyond your channel

Direct mail and email marketing working together make an incredible merger of two effective media. But don't forget about other media, such as social media, SMS, and offline sources like TV and radio. None of these channels are dead or even dying. Instead, they are evolving.

A channel that doesn't drive results for you is not dead. Rather, it simply doesn't offer you a way to advertise to your audience. Midnight TV infomercials or 20-second spot on local radio are effective for some brands, maybe just not yours.

Always think about the adjacent channels and how you can use them to reinforce your own messaging or increase your customer or subscriber base. A classic example is using social media to persuade your followers to sign up for your emails. Or to send an email or text message when a valuable coupon that arrived in your mailbox is about to expire.

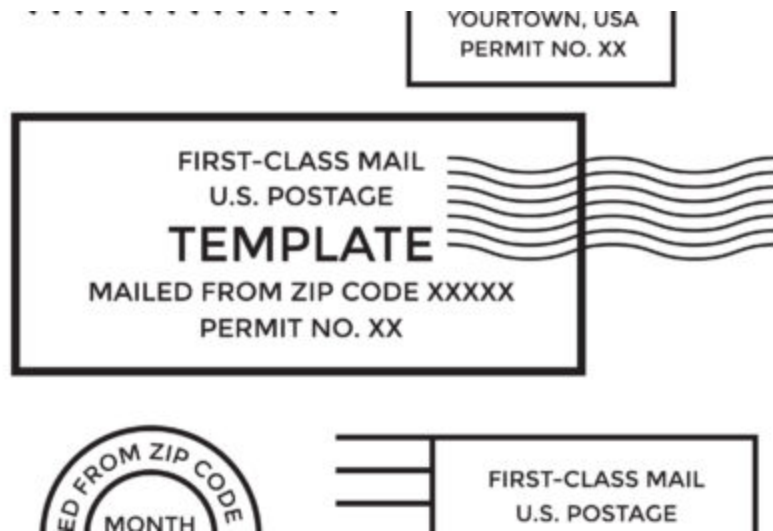
The best marketers have professional knowledge of other channels. They not only think about the channels that serve their needs best but also learn about other channels and how they can use them to broaden their approach.

A multichannel marketing program doesn't blast the same message across multiple channels. Instead, it develops a unique strategy for each channel, understanding how the message must change to take advantage of the channel's strengths and the reasons your customers use it.

If you focus only on your channel goals, you'll gain wins, but they'll be limited. Raise your sights and look for the connections among other channels, especially direct mail, that will help you achieve your marketing goals.

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