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For many multichannel campaigns, print provides the initial touchpoint that leads the consumer towards purchase. But what makes it such an ideal catalyst and why is the world's oldest media now seen as disruptive?

By David Benady

Printed marketing, whether it's direct mail or door drop, newspaper or magazine ad, customer magazine or catalogue, has a resonance and physical presence that's unmatched by the plethora of adverts on TV screens, PCs, tablets and smartphones.

Screen-based ads are ephemeral. While they may leave an impression on the memory, a print ad stays in the hand. It can be carried around and notes can be scribbled on it. It can be cut out of a publication and stuck on a notice board. It's impactful and brilliant for conveying a story.

For certain products, print plays a pivotal role in launching a customer on a journey that leads to purchase. In the fields of luxury, fashion, financial services and media, the print medium can be used to make consumers sit up and listen to a brand's message. They may see an ad in the press then go off and explore the brand in more depth on the web. A direct mailing for a car brand may lead them to request a test-drive or they may see a style they like in a clothing catalogue and buy it directly.

Liam Mullins, Head of Trading at international media buying agency the7Stars, argues that print is a strong medium for catalysing the customer journey. "Print is a place where you can inspire and captivate an audience in an engaged environment, and it has a role higher up in the purchase funnel," he says. "An ad in the Sunday papers might inspire you to go onto your tablet or mobile to make a purchase on a Monday morning."

Mullins points to high-end fashion and luxury as sectors that still make great use of magazine advertising. "It's print that gives consumers inspiration," he says, "and for many fashion brands, TV is secondary to glossy print media."

Attention-grabbing ads

Apart from the creativity that newspaper and magazine advertising allows, there's also the vital element of context. One of the strong points of newspaper advertising is that newspapers are thought to be a trustworthy source of information, reflecting many people's trust in newspaper editorial. That trust means they are willing to act on this information.

A study by INMA, the International News Media Association, and RAM, Research and Analysis of Media, found that 44% of quality newspaper readers thought the advertising in their papers was attention grabbing. Meanwhile, 43% of quality newspaper readers and 32% of mid-market newspaper readers said they received important information from the advertising. And almost a third of quality newspaper readers said that the advertising influenced them to purchase products.

A 2014 study by IPC Media, found that print still leads the way in sparking ideas in its readers, with 89% of consumers getting ideas from print. This inspirational factor is followed through to purchase, with 45% of consumers indicating that print had inspired a purchase – more than digital editions, the web or apps.

Laying on the emotion

But while newspaper advertising is an effective medium, some turn to alternative forms of print marketing. Rob Rees, Interim Marketing Director at Denby Pottery, accepts that digital works out cheaper but says there are certain powerful uses of print. For instance, where colour is an important consideration – such as promotion for an item of clothing or a piece of furniture – print is essential as colours can often be seen differently in digital.

But while advertising in colour supplements makes little economic sense for Denby Pottery, Rees says that catalogues, which can be picked up in any one of the 30 Denby stores around the country, are very important in showing off the range of products and getting the message out.

“Flicking through a catalogue is easier than flicking through a website,” he says. “You don’t get that textual or emotional layer on a website. It can be really flat.”

The nature of the creative process is to visualise a simple striking image for an ad, so agency creatives often begin thinking about a multichannel campaign using an image that’s suited to the print medium.

As Ross Keenleyside, Creative Partner at international ad agency OgilvyOne, says: “Print is the start of the creative idea. I’d say nine times out of ten you’ll be thinking of a creative concept in the form of a simple press ad or a simple poster, which is the simplest form of describing an idea. And it blossoms from there.”

The new disruptive media

Competition from digital is putting pressure on print and threatens to undermine some of the core skills that give the medium its saliency. Nicky Bullard, Executive Creative Director at UK direct marketing agency Lida, laments a general lack of great direct mail creativity and suggests that some may have lost confidence in the ability of print to surprise and tell a powerful story.

But print is far from down and out, she believes. In fact, it seems on the cusp of a comeback. “Some clients are starting to get an appetite back for it, particularly with younger audiences,” she says. “Their lives have been so digital that direct mail is hugely disruptive for them.”

Bullard is concerned that agencies should ensure they maintain long-copy writing skills, which are vital in many sectors to spark the first-time interest of potential consumers. She says that Lida has a team of three long-copy writers to ensure those skills are kept within the agency. “This is useful for anything where there’s a story,” she says. “Every copywriter should be able to write long copy and hold people’s attention.”

Ultimately, Bullard believes that digital will never replace the power of print. “Digital is a little bit cheaper and ties in with eCRM as it’s easy to click through,” she says. “But I think we miss the physicality of direct mail, that brand in your hand, something that lives beyond its impact. The digital world is instant so I like the fact that direct mail can live on the page. Print allows you to unpack the story, as with automotive ads that contain a lot of technical points to get across. Print is good for anything useful, with numbers or information you want to keep.”



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Direct marketers are getting increasingly skilled at using print to drive people to websites. This may be done by simply including a web address on a mailout, perhaps with a money-off incentive or offer. There are also ingenious new techniques for bridging the gap between the physical world and the digital world, such as QR Codes and augmented reality applications. Lida used Aurasma technology in a mail-out for the O2 wallet card to drive people to a website containing more information.

Introducing brand to customer

Print marketing media such as direct mail and catalogues are 'intrusive' – it's said that direct mail goes looking for customers, while consumers go looking for goods and services online.

"Printed material can introduce customers to brands in a very evocative way," says Ian Simpson, Managing Director of Catalogues 4 Business. "A catalogue has a high 'pass-through' rate in that it can be shared among people in a similar demographic. If you have a catalogue on your coffee table and it's seen by your friends, they are likely to have similar interests and aspirations to yourself."

Print is also a good way of demonstrating the customer experience – a catalogue for a store or brand can reflect the brand visually and also through its weight and feel. Something light and flimsy communicates 'bargain' while a catalogue which is weighty and textured communicates quality.

Printed marketing is a direct and forceful medium, which makes it ideal for inspiring people to consider a product or brand and seek out more information about it. Print can be a powerful catalyst for creating brand consideration and starting a journey that ultimately leads to a sale.

A striking piece of printed marketing may well be the spark that sends consumers to check out a website, call a phone number, look at customer reviews online or ask their friends on social media about the product. In a world of multiple touchpoints with brands, it's nice to know that marketers can still rely on print to create the initial desire to interact with a brand.

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