

GETTING PERMISSION: EXPLORING FACTORS AFFECTING PERMISSION MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

Permission marketing suggests an evolution of direct marketing, particularly used with e-mail. It combines databases of customers who agree to receive marketing messages with low-cost, customized e-mails that attempt to slice through advertising clutter, attract increased customer support, and change behavior.

This applied research examined implementing permission marketing, relevant literature, and permission marketing's effectiveness influencing consumer interest and behavior. A case study tested the propositions resulting from the literature review and evaluated responses to a permission marketing campaign that used traditional and new media. This study found that relevance—personalization, brand equity, and previous relationships—influenced

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response rates. This article adds to the growing body of research on permission marketing's role in marketing theory, as well as its applied effectiveness in the marketplace.

I. INTRODUCTION

As businesses and organizations tackle effective use of Internet technologies, e-mail seems to be the most pervasive application. Given that e-mail is the most widely used Internet technology (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002), how do businesses and organizations gather and use e-mail addresses with their customers? What are the barriers to implementation and what are the recipes for success?

One-to-one communication plays a central role in customer relationship management (CRM) and positions e-mail as an important strategic tool (Newell, 2000). Marketers increasingly use e-mail to acquire customers, inform them of new products, and enhance customer relationships (Krishnamurthy, 2000). But as e-mail marketing grows, the volume of commercial e-mail sent explodes and inboxes overflow. For example, Jupiter Communications (2001) estimates that U.S. customers will receive over 1,600 commercial messages per year by 2005, up from 40 messages in 1999.

Godin (1999) popularized the use of opt-in e-mail, suggesting that obtaining consumer permission to receive customized advertising material via e-mail—permission marketing—improved segmentation, and targeting precision, thereby cutting through advertising clutter. Yet, practical problems arise when deploying permission marketing (PM), especially in the first step—obtaining permission.

This article focuses on this first step, answering a call for more research on customer acquisition. Current CRM research and practice, hampered by limited databases of customers, tend to focus disproportionately on managing customer retention. Customer acquisition, however, does influence the customer retention process and is as important (Thomas, 2001).

The objectives of this article are twofold: to

discuss practical problems marketers face when implementing permission marketing and to investigate factors affecting consumer reactions to marketers' initiatives to overcome these problems. The article begins by highlighting permission marketing's potential as a CRM tool and then illustrates problems associated with building and retaining e-mail lists. Based on a review of possible factors affecting the success of PM campaigns, an experiment uses a traditional direct marketing medium—snail mail—to test reactions to getting permission for online communication.

The study reveals typical marketing problems encountered by organizations deploying PM initiatives and examines response rates in light of PM and consumer behavior literature. The article concludes with managerial implications and suggested avenues for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 E-mail, the Marketing Communications Tool of Choice

E-mail has become an important part of the marketing mix and is considered the most successful communication technology since television (Jackson, 2001). At year-end 2000, there were 891.1 million active electronic mailboxes in the world, up 67% from 533.1 million in 1999 (United Messaging, 2001). A Jupiter research study (2001) found that, for 92% of Internet users, e-mail is the primary reason for going online. Furthermore, a Carnegie Mellon University survey revealed that e-mail was used on 70% of all Internet sessions (Jackson, 2001). This growing number of e-mail users, together with their high usage makes e-mail the dominant Internet application.

E-mail marketing has the potential to generate increased marketing success and improve brand images and customer relationships inexpensively. E-mail helps drive traffic to websites and is interactive, fast, highly measurable, and relatively easy to deploy, particularly when compared to alternatives such as banner ads, mass advertising, and direct mail (IMT Strategies, 1999).

2.2 Deploying Permission Marketing

Permission marketing (PM) is commonly defined as promotional e-mail to recipients who consented to receive commercial messages from the sender, typically by signing up at the company's Website (IMT Strategies, 1999). Permission relationships start with the consumer's explicit and active consent to receive commercial messages and always give consumers the possibility to stop receiving messages at any time.

PM appeals to advertisers because it enables global diffusion of communication messages, while enabling customization without sacrificing the economies of scale of a one-source message originator. Like few other media, opt-in e-mail potentially results in synergies even though multiple audiences are targeted and multiple themes are used (Grein & Gould, 1996).

Although acclaimed as the embodiment of global one-to-one communication uniquely suited to personalization and keen targeting (IMT Strategies, 1999), PM presents problems and challenges such as segmentation, building quality e-mail lists, spam, and privacy.

2.3 Segmentation

A rationale behind PM is the targeting precision of mining databases for consumers who say yes, the specific categories that interest them, demographics, and past response data (Wathieu, 2000). This *segmentation* is based on a simple formula: Who you are indicates how to market to you (Rozanski, Bollman, & Lipman, 2001). Marketers craft online questionnaires to harvest relevant information to segment, target, position, and aim effective messages at individual consumers.

These online segmentation methods based on age, income, sex, education, and psychographics—outward and visible signs of inward attitudes, or even expressed ones—assume that each individual engages in a single, dominant type of behavior. Thus, they predict behavior and purchase patterns from demographic and psychographic data.

Predictive demographic typology of online behavior, however, seems elusive. A study of 2,466 Internet users found no dominant forms of online behavior by user profile, that is,

groups of people who routinely engaged in one sort of activity over others (Rozanski et al., 2001). Regardless of stated preferences, demographics, and lifestyle characteristics, users showed distinct behavior in distinct occasions, each time choosing what fit their needs and mood. This suggests that the basis for effective segmentation and targeting are needs, not demographics, lifestyles, attitudes, or even stated interests.

2.4 Building E-mail Lists

A related problem is maintaining a quality e-mailing list. For privacy reasons, many consumers provide false mailing addresses and other personal data when signing up for permission lists. Even when consumers volunteer accurate information, transaction costs and long questionnaires may discourage them from completing the process or updating their information. A Jupiter Communications survey (2001) revealed that, when consumers change e-mail addresses, less than a third inform e-mail lists of this change. And over two out of five respondents had changed their e-mail address at least once in the last two years because of switching ISPs, career moves, school graduation, or privacy concerns. As a result, databases tend to be highly corrupted and targeting suffers.

From a marketing standpoint, opt-in methods are often unworkable. They impose a catch-22: Marketers can only communicate to consumers already hitting their site or partner sites (Yager, 2001). This is problematic for start-ups and traditional retailers ramping up new e-commerce operations (Railsback & Yager, 2001). It is hard for online start-ups to persuade consumers to enter e-mail relationships, as consumers are already overwhelmed with e-mail relationships, have established online brand consideration, and generally go online with defined purposes and brands in mind (Hansell, 2001).

Permission marketing implies that successful marketers either have a powerful online brand and the ability to build and manage an opt-in list from scratch or use information to provide enough e-mail addresses. Yet, using infomediaries—independent permission list managers that play an intermediary role between customers and marketers (IMT Strategies, 1999)—pre-

sents several risks. Apart from the fact that the infomediary may mean nothing to the consumer, it carries alongside and in the same manner messages from less known brands. Recipients may also perceive the message as spam.

2.5 *When Opt-in Is Perceived as Spam: Inbox Clutter*

Several surveys (IMT Strategies, 1999) argue that most e-mail users feel positive about PM and negative toward spam. Traditionally, spam is any e-mail relationship that is not opt-in. For instance, IMT Strategies refers to spam and “unsolicited commercial e-mail” (UCE) interchangeably, defining both as promotional bulk e-mail whose recipients never consented to a marketing relationship with the sending company. In the same line, Deckmyn (1999) argues that opt-in e-mail differs from spam in that the customer has agreed to receive it. Finally, Krishnamurthy (2000) defines spam as an e-mail message of a commercial nature that has been sent without the receiver’s explicit permission.

Doubts arise, however, that in mature markets consumers always perceive UCE as spam and opt-in e-mail as okay. While PM literature clearly defines UCE as spam, it is unclear whether consumers also use permission as the construct to define spam. In some instances, consumers may perceive opt-in e-mail as spam or opt-out e-mail as good and beneficial.

Consumers may sign up to receive e-mail in many categories and with multiple companies, leading to excessive e-mail (Krishnamurthy, 2000). Even if consumers sign up with few companies in few categories, the low marginal cost of an additional contact makes it likely that marketers send out more e-mails than is physically possible for consumers to digest. If PM e-mail comes en masse, it will not cut through the clutter, it will be the clutter (Neuborne, 2001).

As the number of messages overwhelms consumers, they may fail to distinguish between opt-in e-mail and spam. Ultimately this lack of differentiation may drive attitudes toward opt-in e-mail down to the same level as attitudes toward spam. At that point, permission may not be the main criteria for classification of mes-

sages as spam and consumers may skip personally irrelevant e-mail independently of being opt-in or spam. Increasing the level of permission to stand out in the crowd as suggested by PM is appealing, but is a great managerial challenge (Krishnamurthy, 2000).

As marketers try to keep share of inbox, relevance, as opposed to permission, may become the main determinant of consumers’ e-mail behavior. Krishnamurthy (2001) considers that message relevance positively influences participation in PM activities, in addition to monetary benefits. Costs may be another consideration, as Krishnamurthy suggests that PM is negatively affected by information entry/modification costs, message processing costs, and privacy costs.

2.6 *Privacy Concerns*

Privacy issues already exist in direct marketing. For companies online, privacy becomes infinitely more worrisome, as shown by highly publicized online privacy lawsuits such as the United States against Toysmart (Reilly, 2000). While the four-pronged “fair information practices” standard—notice, choice, access, and security—has been widely accepted as a guiding principle, combatants in the technology, marketing, and privacy communities find little common ground over applying these principles (McGuire, 2001). Some defend a complete *laissez faire* attitude and others argue for legally enforceable practices.

Permission marketing is considered the easiest way to tackle privacy (Godin, 1999), but it is not free of controversy. By using the right combination of question framing and default answers, firms can reap the consent of nearly every website visitor. These firms take advantage of inattention, cognitive and physical laziness, and visitors’ tendency to view the default option as the standard, popularly endorsed, or correct answer (Bellman, Johnson, & Lohse, 2001). For example, a recent study found that over two out of three U.S. Internet users did not know they had consented to be on e-mail distribution lists (Bellman et al.). This raises consumer privacy concerns and may affect their trust in PM activities, affecting the success of the medium.

3. GETTING PERMISSION: AN EXPERIMENT

As the preceding has shown, PM optimism is partly appropriate, but a challenge to deploy as commercial e-mail may backfire if messages are not relevant and people cannot easily opt-out, even when explicitly asked for ahead of time.

The following case study explores factors influencing relevance in the early states of permission e-mail relationships. Specifically it investigates how affiliation and personalization affect initial permission—the main requisite for permission marketing. In this experiment, a business school department of an Australian university launched a PM initiative targeted at its recent graduates. Like many other offline organizations, the first challenge of the initiative was to attract target consumers to its website, where they would provide personal information and consent to receive future e-mail communications.

This experiment tested constructs in a traditional direct marketing medium—snail mail—but designed to attract permission in a different medium, the Internet. This mix of media stems from a reality in today's Internet marketing environment: Many organizations' databases contain a huge amount of consumer information, but no e-mail addresses or explicit consent for e-mail communications. For example, American Airlines' permission e-mail program is over five times as cost-effective as direct mail, but as of 2000 only 6% of the 32 million frequent flyers who get postal mail from American had opted-in to their permission e-mail program (Dioro, 2002, p. 92).

3.1 *Affiliation*

The use of affiliation as an antecedent of relevance derives partially from scoring models in the direct marketing literature. These models, as described by Malthouse (2001), use predictive modeling techniques and historical consumer data—namely, recency, frequency, and expenditures—to predict who will respond to surface mail campaigns.

In this experiment, two variables operationalize the affiliation construct: brand equity and

previous relationships. This follows the observation that affiliation, also referred to as customer commitment, is positively affected by and emerging from brand equity and previous relationships. For example, Mittal (2001) suggests that brand equity influences customer acquisition, as it builds awareness, attracts customers, builds emotional ties, and reminds customers to repurchase. Chaudhuri and Holbrook propose that brand trust and brand affect are antecedents of brand loyalty/commitment and are each positively related to both behavioral (purchase) and attitudinal loyalty.

Purchase loyalty consists of repeated purchases of the brand (in this article referred to as past relationships), whereas attitudinal brand loyalty (described herein as brand equity) includes a degree of dispositional commitment in terms of some unique value associated with the brand. Consistent with one-to-one marketing relationships, brands high in consumer trust and affect are linked through both attitudinal and purchase loyalty among consumers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

3.2 *Customization and Personalization*

Customization and personalization as antecedents of relevance in marketing relationships have received extensive coverage in the direct marketing literature, albeit with conflicting results. For example, Clark and Kaminski (1988) found that personal mailings (real stamp out and back, and a handwritten cover letter) had three times the response rates, the same success rate obtained by customized direct mailing in a Dortmund International School of Management study (Anonymous, 2001). Byrom and Bennison (2000), however, found no significant impact of personalizing envelopes on response rates. Despite these mixed results, the use of customization and personalization as important antecedents of relevance is well established in the direct marketing literature (Peppers & Rogers, 1993; Pine, Victor, & Boynton, 1993).

3.3 *Method*

The study began with the collection of physical addresses from the alumni database. A total of

TABLE 1
Response Rates

	<i>High Affiliation</i>	<i>Low Affiliation</i>	<i>Total</i>
Hand addressed	8/100 or 8%	5/100 or 5%	13/200 or 6.5%
Printed labels	4/102 or 3.92%	1/101 or 0.99%	5/203 or 2.46%
Total	12/202 or 5.94%	6/201 or 2.99%	18/403 or 4.67%

411 alumni records were found, eight of which were dropped from the sample as these graduates were enrolled in the department as post-graduate students, worked with the department, or had invalid addresses. Letters sent to the alumni asked them to enroll as alumni members (as such, consenting to receive future messages) by filling in their details on the department's website. A date limit for enrollment was established and a special coffee cup was offered as a reward for those enrolling.

To measure responses to the two relevance constructs (affiliation and personalization), four different letters were sent using a two by two matrix: L1, containing high affiliation and high personalization; L2, containing high affiliation and low personalization; L3, containing low affiliation and high personalization; and L4, with low affiliation and low personalization.

High affiliation contained nine references to the brand (the specific department) and two references to previous relationship (beautiful campus and old classmates), while low affiliation contained only one reference to the brand (letterhead). High personalization consisted of hand-addressed envelopes, while low personalization consisted of preprinted labels on the envelopes.

Letters were randomly allocated among the participants using a stratified sampling technique, with each graduating year having an equal number of letter types. For example, the year 2000 graduating class of 104 students was allocated equally, 26 copies of each letter, across the four experimental conditions. Responses were used to compile descriptive statistics and to evaluate relationships among study variables and with other variables not studied (interaction, gender, and graduating years).

4. RESULTS

Hand-addressed envelopes gleaned almost three times as many responses compared to printed labels (see Table 1). And high-affiliation letters had twice the response rate of low-affiliation letters. The total response was 4.46%, with individual-letter-type response rates varying from 1% to 8%.

A test of the difference in proportions for each group showed a strong positive effect for both relevance measures (see Table 2). Personalization was the most effective variable and was significant at the 5% level ($z = 1.97, p = .024$). Although the use of high-affiliation statements was not significant at the 5% level ($z = 1.44, p = .074$), the difference was in the hypothesized direction. In this case, personalization fared better than previous relationship and brand equity between the two relevance measures.

The cell with the most responses used both relevance measures. A test of significance against the absence of these measures proves significant at the 5% level ($z = 2.43, p = 0.008$). This suggests a no-interaction effect between high-affiliation statements and handwritten addresses. Each relevance measure gleaned more responses independent of whether the other was present or not. In this study, the direct

TABLE 2
Difference Tested

	$p1-p2$	z	p Value
Hand written–printed label	.040	1.97	.024
High affiliation–low affiliation	.030	1.44	.074
Both-neither attentive features present	.070	2.43	.008

TABLE 3
Binary Regression for Response Variable

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>b/St.Er (t-value)</i>	<i>p-Value</i>
Constant	-2.416	0.917	-2.63	.008
LABEL	0.757	0.630	1.20	.229
AFFILIATION	0.521	0.594	0.88	.381
AFFL_LABEL	-.868	1.27	-0.68	.4964
SEX	-.218	.494	-.441	.659
GRAD_YEAR	-.099	.116	-.853	.3937
Goodness of fit	$\chi^2_{5df} = 7.56$.182

marketer can expect the effect of the relevance measures to be additive.

The direct marketer is interested in predicting response rates. A binary logistic regression modeled the response rates. Table 3 presents a complete model that includes the two experimental factors, their interaction, gender, and graduating year variables. The results suggest that demographic variables are weak indicators of response. While the two experimental factors are not significant, the model's inclusion of the nonsignificant interaction term will affect the standard errors of each factor's main effect. Furthermore, the absence of an interaction effect between the relevance factors is of practical significance to the direct marketer, because the effect of each relevance measure is additive.

A restricted regression (Table 4) estimated confidence levels for the inclusion of one or both of the relevance attributes. The inclusion of either relevance measure had a moderate effect on the response rate (Figure 1). By in-

cluding both measures the direct marketer can expect a much higher response rate. Supporting this interpretation, response rates for L1 were eight times that of L4.

5. LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

5.1 Limitations

This exploratory study examined responses to the first step in PM deployment: obtaining consumer consent to receive future communications from the firm, and in the process building mailing lists. Its results are limited because the participants comprised a small sample of recent graduates. Another limitation of this research is the newness of literature on PM, confirmed by the fact that it is mainly trade news based.

Additional follow-up in terms of subsequent responses to PM messages was not done and important post-study attitudinal data were not

TABLE 4
Binary Regression for Response Variable

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>b/St.Er (t-Value)</i>	<i>p-Value</i>
Constant	-4.106	0.568	-7.22	.000
LABEL	1.019	0.537	1.90	.058
AFFIL	0.728	0.512	1.42	.155
Goodness of fit	$\chi^2_{2df} = 6.34$.042

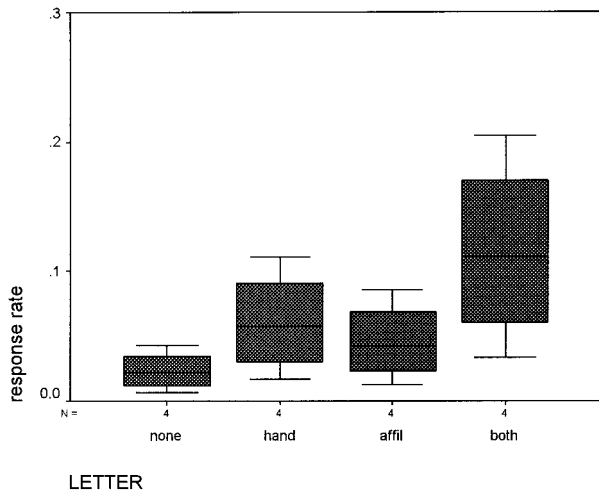


FIGURE 1
95% Confidence Intervals for Predicted Response Rates

gathered to ascertain validity and conformity of conclusions obtained. Nevertheless, graduates are important consumers and genuine calls-to-action were used in the study. These results offer tentative suggestions for marketers and for future research.

Although this exploratory experiment's small sample size and low response rate precluded an extensive investigation of all the potential relationships, the results will certainly influence the department's future "snail mail" to alumni.

5.2 Managerial Implications

This study suggests that firms choosing to deploy e-mail marketing should be optimistic about its potential, but exercise caution in respect of its practical deployment. They should understand that because the e-mail marketing environment may be near its maturity, target consumers are probably already engaged in a series of e-mail relationships. As such, marketers should not regard permission as an objective in itself, but as the first hurdle to overcome, instead focusing attention on relevance, the main measure against which consumers engage in and evaluate their e-mail relationships.

Firms with powerful offline brands and large e-mail databases may lose e-mail marketing opportunities by focusing exclusively on online methods to build lists and maintain customer interest. For example, they may lose the opportunity to market

to loyal offline customers that rarely go online for things other than e-mail and news.

To improve the chances of success, marketers should obtain e-mail addresses and maintain customer interest at every point of contact. This includes brick-and-mortar stores, during customer service calls, in printed materials, in mass media advertising, and on company websites. Brick-and-mortar and other offline contact points could be better opportunities to strengthen e-mail relationships, as customers are shopping in retail stores and see commercial messages offline more than online. When marketers use all brand contact points to entice potential e-mail marketing customers, relevance attributes (among others, personalization, brand equity, and previous relationships) are more easily capitalized and should subsequently yield better results for PM efforts.

5.3 Future Research

This study reinforces relevance as an important variable for obtaining and maintaining effective permission for e-mail marketing relationships. Study findings suggest that previous relationships, brand equity, and personalization are important antecedents of relevance.

However, these findings suggest additional empirical testing and investigation of the perceptions and attitudes of participating subjects. This additional research could add insights on the hypothesis that in mature markets consumers use relevance, not permission, as the construct against which spam is defined and relationships are evaluated. Furthermore, the effects of these relevance variables—personalization, brand equity, and previous relationships—in long-term success of e-mail relationships require further testing.

The integration of opt-out methods into a comprehensive e-mail marketing framework deserves further research. If relevance, not permission, is the main variable for predicting success of e-mail marketing, then opt-out methods may be justifiable and successful for marketers who have relevant offers to target audiences but do not have access to extensive snail mail or e-mail databases.

Other issues for future investigation include the content of the letters—such as consumer's perception of the brand—response times, atti-

tude toward e-mail marketing, and timing since end of previous relationship. Furthermore, this experiment tested a traditional direct marketing medium—snail mail—to explore reactions to permission e-mail and may not apply to e-mail relationships. Subsequent study of the development of the e-mail relationship could provide more insights of the measures covered and their consequences for retention levels.

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