

# Revisiting the Conceptual Definition of Direct Marketing: Perspectives from Scholars and Practitioners

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## ABSTRACT

Sales attributed to direct marketing activities continue to grow worldwide. However, despite its growth, there is no agreement of what direct marketing is. Terms like *directed marketing*, *relationship marketing*, *interactive marketing*, etc. are now used to describe direct marketing activities. This *term de jour* approach promotes ambiguity and misinterpretation among practitioners and inhibits researchers from selecting an acceptable definition to interpret empirical results. The need for greater shared agreement about the definition is critical.

This study examines the many definitions of direct marketing in an effort to determine a common framework on which practitioners and scholars can agree. First, conceptual and operational definitions are reviewed via a content analysis of Principles of Marketing and Advertising textbooks. A review of 19 such texts reveals an equal number of unique definitions. Authors of textbooks on these subjects limit the concept of direct marketing based on type of media used, market segment served, the lack of retail presence, and face-to-face interaction.

Direct marketing textbook authors, most of them practitioners, present a more unified opinion about the definition. Half of the texts reviewed use the DMA version, *“direct marketing is an interactive system of marketing which uses one or more advertising media to effect a measurable response and/or transaction at any location.”* Others include the integration of a database, an itemization of response mechanisms and the types of offers that may be made. Overall, the elements within the definitions presented in Direct Marketing textbooks are more consistent than those that focus on other marketing subjects.

To determine how practitioners define direct marketing, attendees at three direct marketing conferences were surveyed. Terminology used in the survey was derived from a content analysis of topics of academic papers presented at DMEF conferences from 2001 through 2004 as well as seminars presented at the 2003 Annual DMA Convention. A total of 118 usable surveys were obtained from attendee of three direct marketing conferences.

When practitioner input is compared with the definitions found within textbooks, six key dimensions of direct marketing emerge – historical foundations, customer relationship building, database analysis, electronic media and print media. The six dimensions account for 64.3 percent of the variance with coefficient alphas for each dimension ranging from .60 to .85. These findings indicate a medium to high degree of reliability. (See Table 1 for the results of the factor analysis.)

Based on the synthesis of academic and practitioner perspectives, the following conceptual definition of direct marketing is proposed:

***Direct marketing is a database-driven process of directly communicating with targeted customers or prospects using any medium to obtain a measurable response or transaction via one or multiple channels.***

This definition incorporates the key elements found throughout the research: database, interactivity, direct communication, target customers, any medium, response generation, and multiple channels. This definition encompasses not only what direct marketing is but what makes it unique. The conceptual model (found in Figure 1) illustrates the relationships among the six dimensions.

**Table 1: Factor Analysis Results**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Historical Foundations</b>	<b>Customer Relationship Building</b>	<b>High-Tech Media</b>	<b>Database Analysis</b>	<b>Electronic Media</b>	<b>Print Media</b>
Direct Marketing	.844					
Direct Mail	.785					
DR Advertising	.778					
Response Rate	.650					
Lists	.605					
Relationship Marketing		.772				
1-to-1 Marketing		.729				
Information Privacy		.668				
Permission Marketing		.647				
CRM		.606				
LCV		.480				
Internet Marketing			.836			
Email Marketing			.747			
E-Commerce			.697			
CyberMarketing/WWW			.658			
Interactive Marketing			.616			
Database Enhancement				.681		
Merge/Purge				.629		
Database Marketing				.619		
RFM				.580		
TV Direct Response					.801	
Telemarketing					.720	
Catalog Marketing						.733
Continuity Programs						.619
Mail Order						.585
Variance Explained (64.3%)	27.0	12.7	7.9	6.0	5.8	4.7
Coefficient Alpha	.85	.80	.82	.66	.81	.60



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Direct Marketing**

