

Understanding the Effective Use of Color in Direct Marketing Communications

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Effective direct marketing requires well-crafted communication for targeted consumers. Whether by telephone, mail, email, or the internet, direct marketers must ensure their communication efforts resonate and effectively reach the consumer. Our research addresses this goal and centers on improving understanding of what facilitates effective direct-mail marketing efforts. Direct-mail still accounts for 24% of direct marketing media expenditures (and 32% of direct marketing sales; Kotler, Armstrong, and Cunningham 2008), and involves millions of mail pieces (e.g., letters, ads, brochures, etc.) a year. Using an experimental approach, we focus specifically on the role of color in facilitating effective communication in a direct-mail brochure.

Surprisingly, research investigating the role of color in direct marketing and more broadly in marketing communications in general is relatively limited. Initial work in this area has centered on the use of color (versus black and white) in the context of newspaper ads, yellow-pages advertising, and magazine advertising (e.g., Click 1982; Lohse and Rosen 2001). Findings generally show a positive effect for the use of color in these contexts. Color is shown to facilitate attention, recall, positive attitudes, perceived quality, and resulting sales when compared to black and white executions. However, is this always the case? Are there instances where a color execution isn't more effective? Indeed, a few studies have shown exceptions to the primacy of color execution, showing that black and white can outperform (or equate to) color in some instances (e.g., Lester 1966; Rossiter 1988). Given this, we seek to identify contextual factors that ensure color execution effectiveness in direct-mail communication efforts.

We draw on previous research in psychology and marketing (e.g., Gorn, Chattopadhyay, Yi, and Dahl 1997; Valdez and Mehrabian 1994) that links color to emotional responses experienced by the consumer. We predict that the use of color is most effective when linked to emotional aspects of a product. Further, we expect this effect will endure under low levels of information processing (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1995). We expect however, this consistency is not realized for black and white executions.

Our predictions were tested in a 2x2 between-subjects experiment where the first manipulated factor was color execution (black and white vs. color) and the second manipulated factor was cognitive busyness (high vs. low). Seventy-six undergraduate students at a large west-coast university participated for course credit. Participants first received the cognitive busyness manipulation. Following Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999) participants were either asked to memorize an eleven digit number (high busyness) or a two digit number (low busyness) and retain it during the study.

Participants were then asked to spend a few minutes evaluating a direct-mail brochure for a fictional hotel resort. The color execution manipulation was delivered through the brochure. We also note that the resort brochure used text with a number of emotional descriptors (e.g., warm, relaxing) in its copy. After evaluating the brochure, participants completed a questionnaire containing the dependent measures of interest.

Supporting our predictions, ANOVA with the color execution and cognitive busyness factors as independent variables showed a significant interaction effect on a brand attitude measure ($F(1,72)=4.23, p<.05$). When participants were cognitively busy the color execution ($m=1.86$) outperformed the black and white brochure ($m=0.98$). When participants were not cognitively busy both color and black and white executions were shown to be effective ($m=1.79$ and 1.85 , respectively). This mean pattern was replicated for an affect index measuring relaxation ($F(1,72)=3.81, p=.05$). Further, feelings of relaxation were shown to mediate our brand attitude findings. Our results show that a direct mail brochure that seeks to evoke an emotional response from a consumer (specifically one of relaxation) can effectively use color to facilitate a positive response in situations where consumers are processing under low involvement conditions.