

“Best Practices and New Perspectives: How to Teach the Creative Aspects of Direct/Interactive Marketing”

**Direct Marketing Educational Foundation
Direct/Interactive Research Summit**

10:15-11:15 a.m.

October 11, 2008

Las Vegas, Nevada

Susan K. Jones, Ferris State University

W. Glenn Griffin, Southern Methodist University

Peter Johnson, Pace University

**PRACTICAL EXERCISES FOR DIRECT AND
INTERACTIVE MARKETING CLASSES (from
Susan K. Jones)**

PROS AND CONS OF DIRECT MARKETING

Many college students enter their first direct marketing course unsure about what “direct marketing” is and perhaps apprehensive about its positive benefits. “Pros and Cons of Direct Marketing” is a **consumer behavior** exercise in which students look at direct marketing from the **buyer’s** perspective and then, switching to the point of view of the marketer, devise ways to *maximize the positives of direct marketing and overcome its liabilities*.

Here is how it is presented to the students. Before I ask them to complete this assignment I have them explore various web sites covering top DM sellers online as well as DM trade publications so they are quickly immersed in the field.

Part of being a good direct marketer is the ability to see things from the point of view of the customer. Before we set forth on our direct marketing adventures, I would like for you to consider the pros and cons of this method of buying from the customer's vantage point. The web site exploration you did previously should yield you some good insights. You can also give these questions some thought based on your own experience with music clubs, buying via the Internet, etc. -- or maybe you have a parent, grandparent or friend who buys extensively through direct response means, and you could talk to them about the pros and cons. You might also put "Buying by Mail" or similar words into a search engine like www.google.com to read some articles on this topic.

Consider everything you have thought, discussed and read, and then do the following:

PROS AND CONS OF DIRECT MARKETING

- List the "pros" of direct marketing from the consumer's point of view (convenience, etc.) -- at least 10 pros
- List the "cons" of direct marketing from the consumer's point of view (invasion of privacy, etc.) -- at least 10 cons
- As a marketer, how can you best emphasize and maximize the "pros" of DM you have listed?
- As a marketer, how can you best overcome the "cons?"

When the students come to class with their lists, I separate them into small groups with some groups taking the pros and some taking the cons. The “pro” groups are instructed to come on strong with all the reasons that buying through direct response methods are great for them as consumers; the “con” groups are instructed to play it up big that they think direct response marketing is bad for them as consumers. The two sides debate back and forth, with me listing their main points on the board. Then we get back together as a large group and discuss ways to emphasize and maximize the “pros” we have listed, and overcome the “cons.”

Example: If a “pro” of direct marketing is that it’s convenient, marketers can

emphasize/maximize this by offering overnight shipping options, and easy methods of returning products.

Example: If a “con” of direct marketing is that consumers are worried about having their privacy invaded, marketers can overcome this by establishing, sharing and abiding by strict privacy policies, and by asking consumers to opt in only for the information and methods of communication they prefer.

BRAINSTORMING

The ability to brainstorm effectively – both individually and most especially in groups – provide marketing students with a great asset for all of their work projects – not just those in direct and interactive marketing. This exercise introduces them to the process in an enjoyable and non-threatening way.

To introduce brainstorming to direct and interactive marketing students, I first ask them what they know about brainstorming, when they may have experienced it, and what makes for a good or bad brainstorming experience. We write key words from their comments on the board.

Typical comments for what makes for good brainstorming would include:

- Everyone is treated as an equal
- People come with an open-minded attitude

On the other hand, what makes for ineffective brainstorming would include:

- The boss is there and he/she puts a damper on open sharing
- People censor each other with comments like “we tried that and it didn’t work” or “the client won’t pay for that”

Then I familiarize them with Alex Osborn’s original rules for brainstorming. These are:

1. Criticism is ruled out.
Negative judgments of ideas must be withheld until later.
2. Free-wheeling is welcomed.
The wilder the idea, the better. It is easier to “tame down” wild ideas than to “liven up” pedestrian ones.
3. Quantity not quality. The greater number of ideas, the more likelihood of winners.
4. Combination and building on ideas are sought.

We compare their ideas to Mr. Osborn’s and make sure everything is covered.

I then explain that brainstorming as a group has been proven to develop more and better ideas than “brainstorming with yourself.” To that end, we will be practicing brainstorming on a topic they can all relate to. They get to choose the topic – typically something like starting a new bar, mall or restaurant near the campus. On the prep day for brainstorming, we select the topic and I send them off with a reading on Alex Osborn’s methods. If you put Mr. Osborn’s name into Google a number of resources (albeit non-academic ones) will pop up for your use and that of the students.

I suggest that the students put the selected topic in the back of their minds. I don’t want them to make lists, only to ponder the topic.

When everyone arrives for the next class session, we make sure we have done everything that the class agreed would make for a good brainstorming atmosphere. That sometimes includes rearranging the room to put people in a circle, or perhaps all sitting on the carpeted floor. Sometimes the lighting is changed.

Next we re-introduce the topic the class chose, and come up with an “In what ways” statement to start the brainstorming process. For example “In what ways could we ensure that our new restaurant will be a profitable success with Ferris State University students.” To start things off, I usually suggest that we brainstorm in turn ideas for product, price, place and promotion.

The students start making suggestions and I jot down key words for their ideas on the board. Usually they have a great time coming up with scores of ideas – some down-to-earth and some pretty crazy. After some time, when the natural flow of ideas seems to have slowed down, I suggest that the students spend a minute or two in silence, looking over the ideas we have on the board. This is intended to help them build on the ideas of others, and/or spark some new ideas. After a few minutes, then, more ideas usually start popping.

Once the flow of ideas starts waning (sort of like popcorn popping –the number of seconds between ideas starts to grow) I ask the students to help me circle the “wildest ideas” on the board. Then we try to think of ways to bring these crazy ideas back to earth with methods that are more cost-effective, appropriate, on a lesser scale, or whatever is necessary.

Finally, I ask the students to look at all the ideas they came up with in just a half-hour or so – it’s usually quite extraordinary. Then I explain that in practice, this large group of ideas would be compiled and evaluated by a smaller group that would sort through the ideas and find like ideas, ideas that can be combined, etc. Finally, the ideas would be evaluated according to a set of criteria such as budget, appropriateness to the client and product, time constraints, human capital, and so on. We also discuss the option of a “Brain Wall,” one of Mr. Osborn’s other ideas – keeping all the ideas up on the wall for awhile so that they can “percolate” with the involved people and perhaps spark additional ideas, combinations or concepts.

CATALOG COPYWRITING

This exercise immerses students in the concept of catalog “niche marketing” and then allows them to play the role of a catalog copywriter with all its limitations and challenges.

As a former catalog copywriter myself, I can explain to the students in detail what the process is for writing a catalog with hundreds of products. If you want to do this assignment but are not an experienced catalog writer, you might invite one to visit your class as a guest speaker.

Having worked for the old Sears catalog, I have seen cases of “catalog copywriter burnout,” where writers get to the point where they just go through the motions, doing their write-ups off of buyer sheets and never even looking at the products. Obviously, that is not optimal, so I tell the students stories about some of the best catalog copywriters I know.

Example: a copywriter who wrote about bath accessories had bath mats a foot deep on her office floor so she could feel them for herself and compare the colors and textures. Another example: A friend who wrote a catalog about nearly 100 different kinds of chocolate tested every kind (tough duty!) to ensure she could articulate the differences between Swiss and Belgian milk chocolate, semi-sweet and sweet chocolate, and the like.

The key to catalog marketing in today’s world is the niche – a product mix and “world view” that is different than any other, and that provides customers with the incentive to buy from this catalog because they can’t get the products and/or the “atmosphere” of the catalog at the retail mall.

That said, writing catalog copy – once the initial concept and direction are set – can indeed be pretty regimented. It is important for the writer to ensure that the tone, format, typeface and length of copy is absolutely in keeping with the set-up of the catalog. At that point, every student is given a catalog from the “stash” I collect for them. This is their assignment:

I have given you a catalog. If you have one you prefer to use, just get it approved by me. You may also switch catalogs with a classmate. You do not have to do a creative strategy for this assignment. The purpose of this assignment is to practice the catalog copywriter’s craft of writing compelling, benefit-laden copy that also fits the tone, format and space constraints of an existing catalog.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT: Study your catalog and get familiar with both its tone/persona and format. Also study the merchandising mix. Determine a product that could be in this catalog but is not. Pretend you will put it in place of an item already in the catalog. Write copy to fit the space and format of your catalog, including headline, listing lines, pricing, etc.

GOOGLE AD WORDS

Last spring my E-Commerce Marketing students and I participated in the Google Online Marketing Challenge. To find out more, put “**The Google Online Marketing Challenge**” into the search box at google.com. I highly recommend this opportunity.

We had three groups of students (4 or 5 per group) working with three small business owners who had little to no experience with sponsored search. Google provided \$200 in free Google Ad Words to each business owner, and the students developed three-week campaigns to endeavor to spend the money cost-effectively and provide learning and leads for their clients.

All three clients were delighted with the results – they learned a lot about how Ad Words could potentially benefit them and what they will have to do to improve their web sites to optimize their use of Ad Words. I intend to make this a regular part of my spring E-Commerce classes, and I have talked with professors who used the Challenge in a wide range of classes including Public Relations, Marketing, Advertising, E-Commerce and Non-Profit Marketing.

If you are interested in having your students take part in the Challenge for Spring 2009, you can indicate your interest at http://services.google.com/events/marketing_challenge_2009