

VERSIONING

“Are You Talking to Me?”

Version 1.0. 1.2. 2.1. 5.0. And on and on. It’s a familiar vernacular to anyone who’s ever bought or used computer software.

But Version 10,000? How about Version 50,000? It’s not too far-fetched a notion, if you’re talking about customized marketing campaigns. If you want to reach customers, or potential customers, with an appeal that seems to speak to them on a highly personalized level, think “versioning.” If not, you’re just not thinking.

It’s not enough to think about and acknowledge the advantages of using a versioned marketing strategy. After all, directing a personalized appeal to individual prospects or groups of prospects is pretty much a no-brainer, can’t-miss idea. But, like any good idea, the devil is in the details.

Start your versioned marketing effort with this mantra: “It’s a database thing...” Repeat it as necessary throughout the process. Information is power, you see. It’s long been a truism, and never more so than in this high-tech age. Direct mail is data-driven, pure and simple, and the better the database, the more successful the campaign. (If it helps you to get past old, fallacious notions about direct mail, stop using the term “direct marketing” and start calling it “database marketing.”)

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Versioned marketing can be as simple as a personalized letter with an inkjet-printed salutation addressed to the specific recipient, or, coupled with sophisticated variable-data printing, it can be so nuanced that the reader feels that he or she alone got that marketing piece. One recent campaign from a New Jersey car dealership addressed the oversized postcard to the recipient in a few subtle personalized ways, then went a big step further: the reverse side of the card showed a facsimile of a license plate with the recipient’s last name as the vanity tag. It’s pretty hard to resist a tug that’s that personal.

But

before the dealership or its marketing partner could get to that point, it had to start with data – cleaned, massaged, well organized data. If a versioned marketing campaign is the vehicle that’s going to take you or your client to the promised land of higher response rates, then data is the fuel powering your engine.

It’s not enough for the creative team to design a clever, even irresistible versioned marketing campaign, and hope that the anonymous folks in IT have done their job with the database. One important avenue to assuring the success of a versioned campaign is to have the creative people involved much earlier in the process – the “prediscussion” phase. The goal is to have the design people think of themselves as (and work toward becoming) certified “creative experts,” with a working knowledge that allows them to input into database management, print buying and other “intangible” areas of the marketing process.

“Control the database – when you do, you control everything!”

It’s no longer enough for the creative team to be satisfied with an intriguing design – “return on investment” has to be a constant thread.

Even small databases can pose mammoth challenges in terms of vetting, organizing and applying the data, which makes it all the more essential – and, ultimately, effective – that the design team gets involved in the process as soon as possible. Meet with clients and demonstrate how you can help them get their list into better shape (after all, the list is everything!). Show the client how your help in managing the database, coupled with an intriguing, personalized design, will help them make more money. (And if they make more money, so will you.) Control the database – when you do, you control everything!



“If you think this all sounds too expensive, or too complicated, you’re thinking too small.”

Databases are built from lists, and these lists can come from a variety of sources. Some are acquired externally: purchased or rented from list brokers; based on magazine and journal subscription records; culled from the Yellow or White Pages, or compiled from public information sources. Then there are those that are developed internally, and these provide perhaps the greatest degree of control: internal lists of existing customers or prospects, based on data from responses to other direct marketing efforts, product registrations, visitors to your Web site, point-of-purchase calls to an 800 number, and more.

This is not to say that lists acquired from external sources such as a broker can’t be massaged just as effectively. Many brokers, if asked, will review your direct-marketing package and provide valuable input to help shape the database and, ultimately, the campaign.

“**List-hygiene**” is one name for the process of getting your data into shape to serve as the underpinning of a direct-marketing effort. The broker can provide this service with an externally-acquired list, or you’ll have to see to it that your agency’s database people take the task in hand. This process can include:

- **Name parsing** (separating first and last names);
- **Address splitting** (breaking down a combined city-state-ZIP field into three separate fields);
- **Database enhancements** (running the list against other databases to pick up such information as gender, income, credit card, home and/or car ownership, etc.);
- **File conversions** (ensuring that your database is produced on the correct media and will be compatible with the digital equipment used to print the variable-data job); and
- **Postal processing** (for accuracy and compatibility).

The well-crafted direct-marketing piece should be designed to take prospects and customers where you want them to go, via response cards, 800 numbers, versioned Web sites, and the like. Sophisticated online examples of this approach are those used by XMPIE® and Xerox, among others. In this new high-tech age, there’s nothing that says personalization quite like a Web site with your name on it (literally), and contents on that site that are tailored to your needs and interests.

Think your work is finished once the manicured list has been hammered into a useful database and tied into a versioned marketing campaign? Think again! Along with direct marketing comes direct response, which produces new data to make the database even more powerful and up to date. Every response from a prospect or customer produces information that can be added to an internal database and make future versioned marketing efforts even more personal – and more effective.

Tied in, perhaps, to an order-fulfillment system, response management can become a data-mining operation that generates a steady stream of useful new information. Take each response and cull such details as: name and contact information for the person who made the inquiry or response; name of the salesperson responsible for follow-up; date of inquiry and geographic location of the respondent; a list of items sent out in response to the inquiry; whether or not an inquiry was converted into a sale.

All data should be entered in the database in separate fields to allow maximum personalization.

If you think this all sounds too expensive, or too complicated, you’re thinking too small. The goal, after all, is to keep learning more and more about your customers and prospects, in order to more effectively address their needs in the future. The more effectively you address those needs, the greater the response rate, and the return on investment.

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TALKING THE TALK

With the modern creative process involving so many players – creatives, database managers, press people, etc. – the terminology can seem about as easy to understand as a U.N. meeting.

No need to reach for your trusty Funk & Wagnall's: **CreatEducate** is here to help you decipher some of the lingo, from the common to the obscure.

ASCII:

The industry-standard representation for text, short for American Standard Code for Information Interchange (pronounced "ask-ee"). An ASCII file contains only plain text with no special formatting.

Creep:

No, it's not the printshop foreman who won't reset the press for your short-run job.

Creep is the displacement of each page location in the layout of a book signature as a result of folding the press sheet.

Digital Workflow:

An integrated series of steps in the printing and publishing process, commonly including preflighting, trapping, imposition and OPI serving. (What are these? See below.)

Distributed Printing:

Sending digital files to diverse locations in order to print the quantity required as close as possible to the point of distribution.

Field:

In a database, one particular element in a record, such as a street address in one record of a mailing list, that is distinctive for searching and thus indexed separately.

Image Carrier:

The device on a printing press that carries an inked image either to an intermediate rubber blanket or directly to the paper or other substrate.

Imposition:

No, it's not the fact of working overtime to finish a job just because the client made last-minute changes. It's the positioning of pages on a press sheet so that when the sheet is folded into a signature and cut, the pages will be in the correct sequence.

On-Demand Printing:

The method of producing a select number of documents at a given time by storing a publication electronically.

OPI:

(Open Prepress Interface): A method for replacing high-resolution images with a placeholder image (called a viewfile, proxy image or FPO image) to minimize handling large-data files. This maximizes workstation productivity and minimizes file-transfer time on a network. OPI software generates the viewfiles and automates the process of merging the image data back into the page.

Preflighting:

Named for the preflight checklist procedure used on airplanes, preflighting is an orderly, usually automated procedure for verifying that all components of an electronic file are present and correct prior to submitting the document for high-resolution output.

RIP:

(Raster Image Processor): A device or program used to translate the instructions for a page in a page-description or graphics-output language (such as PostScript) to the actual pattern

of dots (bitmap) supplied to the printing or display system. In one example, a RIP is what allows a photocopier to scan a document, burn the image onto the carrier, and then print a paper copy.

Static Printing/Dynamic Printing:

Static printing refers to traditional ink-on-paper approaches, where each and every sheet is reproduced from the same image carrier, which is fixed with the same image. All copies look exactly the same. With dynamic printing, the printer regenerates the image for every page, allowing every page to be different – as in variable data printing.

Trapping:

How well one color overlaps another without leaving a white space between the two or generating a third color.

Variable Data Printing:

A process in which specific, changeable information such as names, addresses, other personalized messages or graphics can be inserted or merged into a standardized printed document, such as a direct-mail piece. (See also static and dynamic printing, above.)

– more terminology in our next issue.