



NORTH-HOLLAND

The Opening and Reading Behavior of Business-to-Business Direct Mail

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Companies who are able to optimize their target audience's opening and reading behavior of commercial business-to-business mailings realize two objectives at the same time: increase response rates of these mailings and lift the level of exposure of their company, its products, and/or services. However, little is known about the way in which managers open and read direct mail pieces that are received at their offices. This study investigates the antecedents of and relationships between direct mail opening, reading, and response behavior in a business-to-business context and reports the results of a field ex-

periment in which 60 Belgian managers participated. The study shows that manipulating envelope characteristics is the most effective way to influence business-to-business direct mail opening behavior. Segmenting and targeting appear to be key success factors for stimulating reading and response behavior. Mailing content characteristics were not related significantly to reading behavior, nor did mail pressure affect opening behavior. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, business-to-business markets have evolved significantly: they became increasingly

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Key success factors for influencing managers' behavior towards direct mail.

turbulent, highly competitive, and more fragmented, and in many businesses sales stagnated. Today, industrial sellers are confronted with increasing costs, changing customer demands, and a trend of supplier base reduction [1, 2]. Considering these developments, companies are looking for more cost-efficient sales methods. In this article, we focus on direct mail as an alternative cost-efficient sales (support) method that can be used in a business-to-business environment.

Since the direct mail communication process shares several characteristics with the personal selling process [3], direct mail can make significant contributions to each phase in the business-to-business sales process. Direct mail can supplement or even take over outside sales representatives' tasks of awareness building, image enhancement, lead generation, selling, closing, after-sales, and customer management [4–9]. This allows sales representatives to concentrate their efforts at the most important customers and to spend less time on nonselling activities [1, 10–12].

The direct mail communication process generally is evaluated on basis of direct mail response rates. However, response rates provide us only with a partial picture on the total communication effects of direct mail. Vögele

[3] stated that the direct mail receiver needs to pass through several stages before response actually occurs: receiving the mailing, opening the mailing, looking at the mailing (referred to as the “first dialogue”), reading (parts of) the mailing (“second dialogue”), and ultimately responding to the mailing. While during the first dialogue, mail receivers limit themselves to briefly looking at the various elements in the mailing, the second dialogue is characterized by the fact that mail receivers actually read text (parts) in the mailing.

Figure 1 relates the phases of the direct mail communication process to their potential contribution to the sales process. While response behavior only contributes to the sales cycle phases of lead generation (gathering market information, identifying and qualifying prospects, making sales appointments), and selling/closing (strengthening planned sales visits and selling directly), improvements in opening and reading behavior can increase awareness, enhance company image, stimulate after-sales (cross-selling, upgrading, and repeat buying), and optimize customer management (keeping in contact with customers and increasing customer satisfaction). Unfortunately, the mail receiver's opening and reading behavior is a “black box” to the mail sender. Little is known about the “invisible” opening and reading process of business-to-business direct mail and its determinants. In the next section, we discuss the existing literature on business-to-business direct mail effectiveness.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Four main observations can be done with respect to previous research on the effectiveness of direct mail in a business-to-business context.

In Most Previous Studies, the Only Variable Measuring Direct Mail Effectiveness Was Response Behavior

Since measuring response rates is easier than measuring opening and reading behavior, most studies focused

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