When it comes to lead generation, don't fail. Mail.

By Russell Kern, CEO, Kern Organization
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Working as I do with some 25 different b-to-b marketers, I spend a good bit of time each day discussing lead generation with campaign managers. And not a day goes by where one of them doesn't wonder aloud, "Why should mail still be part of our lead-generation mix?"

Their rationale goes something like this: "I get lots of mail at home. I throw out most of it. So if our company is still using mail as part of our marketing mix, we must be throwing away a lot of money. Isn't everyone we want to reach online? Does anyone read printed marketing materials anymore?"

The answers to those two questions may surprise you.

* **They can't read your e-mail if they're not online.** It would be nice if every purchase influencer you wanted to reach were actually online at work, but they're not. Plant managers, health professionals, field service technicians, contractors and many other businesspeople are on their feet, out of the office or away from computers all day.

In addition to being the only way to reach them, mail allows these targets to read your message on their clock and then respond when and how they want—picking up the phone or posting your reply card.

It would also be nice if you could get your hands on the names and addresses of all those targets who are online. Unfortunately, the current state of third-party opt-in e-mail offers you the potential of reaching only a paltry 30% to 40% of the total b-to-b audience. With mail, you can reach "em all. What's more, you can slice and dice your targets any way that suits your marketing whim.

There are mailing lists available for every conceivable industry, product type, job function, company size and purchase influence you could want. There are compiled files of every business in the U.S. selected by date founded, employee size, job title, SIC code, geography. There are even response files containing prospects with a history of reading and responding to mail solicitations. That's catnip to a b-to-b direct marketer.

* **The target, and nothing but the target.** There are almost two-and-a-half times as many b-to-b prospect mail lists as there are e-mail lists available for rental. (Which explains why you can reach almost three times as many prospects with mail.) Due to the way they're compiled, mail lists allow you to avoid waste by aiming your message at precisely the individuals you want to reach.

* **People like to get mail. Always have; always will.** A lot of the same marketers who claim that mail is "old school" can't resist opening everything that lands in their inboxes each day and eagerly check their mailboxes when they get home from the office each night.

They're not alone. Interestingly, both Gen X and Gen Y rate 75% of their mail as being of immediate value to them; 63% report that they enjoy getting catalogs, and 64% said they'd ordered something online the previous month after receiving a direct mail offer. DMA research shows that mail is well-received by prospects of all demographic groups—from Gen Xers to baby boomers. And as marketers shift campaign dollars to online strategies, every mailbox becomes less cluttered, thereby granting each piece a clearer shot at getting noticed.

True, mail is typically opened while standing over a wastebasket. But nobody wants to throw out a bill, an important renewal or something that can move their lives, their careers or the performance of their business forward. So each piece of mail gets reviewed before it gets tossed.

By contrast, how often have you identified a large group of unsolicited e-mails, highlighted them and hit "delete" without thinking twice.

* Failure isn't an option, so mail should be. Reaching the entire target market, targeting with precision, getting the attention of cold prospects, mail continues to be a most effective channel for acquisition activities.

How effective? Glad you asked. Our campaign data tell us that mail responders are 10% to 20% more likely to convert to a marketing-qualified lead than their online counterparts. Cost-per-qualified mail lead is 5% to 15% less than online. And field sales reps report a 7% to 15% higher likelihood of working a mail-based lead.

Russell Kern is founder and CEO of the Kern Organization, a direct marketing agency, and the author of "S.U.R.E.-Fire Direct Response Marketing: Generating Business- to-Business Sales Leads for Bottom-line Success" (McGraw-Hill, 2001).