Is COVID-19 a Direct Mail Opportunity?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major shift in lifestyle on a global basis. For the first time in modern history, a high percentage of the population is self-isolating or at least practicing social distancing. This incredible lifestyle alteration has been tracked by companies like Unacast, which use smartphone GPS data to pinpoint how much the mobility of the standard citizen has decreased in recent weeks.
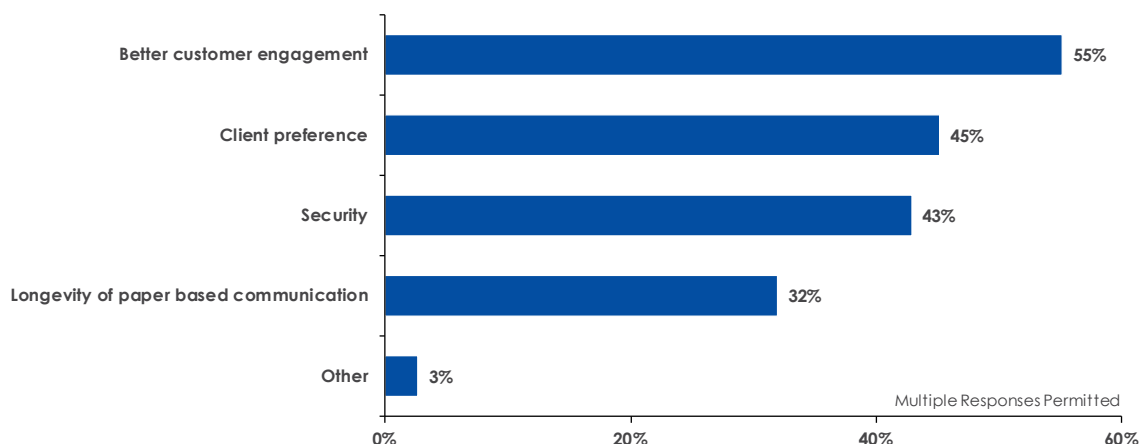
Although COVID-19 will not be a permanent state of life going forward, there is real debate as to how long its effects will last, with some experts predicting that life may not fully return to normal until well into 2021. Given that a state of social distancing/social isolation might be the new short-term norm, print service providers may need to rethink their strategies to better communicate with and support consumers during this time of limited contact.

Paper Continues to Engage

Research has consistently shown that paper is a powerful tool for customer communications. Data from Keypoint Intelligence's 2019 Annual State of Transactional Communications Business Survey found that 55% of businesses used paper and mail communication to foster better customer engagement. This research has also indicated that consumers spend more time reading printed mail than they do digital messages. Some of this has to do with format: opening an e-mail takes less time than opening an envelope. Nevertheless, research confirms that print remains a strong tool for capturing consumers' attention.

Figure 1: Motivations for Using Paper/Mail-Based Communications

Q: What drivers motivate your efforts to use paper / mail communication?

Better customer engagement — 55%
Client preference — 45%
Security — 43%
Longevity of paper based communication — 32%
Other — 3%

Multiple Responses Permitted

N = 259 Enterprise respondents in the US and Canada
Source: Annual State of Transactional Communications Business Survey, Keypoint Intelligence – InfoTrends 2019

Client Preferences May Shift

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the modern world of customer communications required a complex, flexible, omni-channel approach. Consumers enjoyed interacting with different brands in a multitude of ways. They were constantly traveling, using apps like Yelp and Grubhub to find the best restaurants while using Google or Mapquest for directions. Nearly everyone was on the go during at least one part of the day. This is no longer the case for a great many consumers. Although essential businesses remain open and compel some employees to continue traveling, much of the enterprise space has transitioned to (or is in the process of transitioning to) a full-time remote workflow. Workers who used to travel nearly every day are now confined to their homes, and excursions to places like restaurants and bars have halted as these institutions have been forced to temporarily close their doors.

While it is true that most consumers still have smartphones and Internet connectivity, reports have been coming in from multiple parts of the world regarding throttled speeds and reduced streaming quality – largely because internet providers are struggling to keep up with today's changing lifestyle conditions.

The point is that customers are traveling a lot less than they used to, and are therefore depending on their communication channels more than ever before to remain productive and socially active. This presents an opportunity for every form of customer engagement, but direct mail might benefit more than most. At least for the short term, many consumers are almost guaranteed to be at home, and they likely look forward to checking their mailboxes to remain connected to the outside world.

Conditions are right for well-implemented mailing campaigns to make inroads with customers, attracting more attention and compelling higher response levels.

Brand Storytelling is Essential

Whether during or after the COVID-19 pandemic, marketers and print providers must understand that today's customers are bombarded with a sea of messaging. Communications are nearly non-stop thanks to the internet and IoT technology. As such, any surface-level, generic messaging is likely to be dismissed by anyone that is not already familiar with the brand in question. While some may think the path to success involves going bigger (e.g., more colors and greater vibrancy), the reality may be that increased emotional closeness is key.

For those new to the term, brand storytelling focuses on the use of a narrative to connect the product to the consumer. It relies on stories to convey its message, and this approach has been [proven to stimulate brain activity](#) and engage consumers on the cognitive level. Instead of quoting facts or showing off statistics about products that are helpful to the majority of people, businesses should instead focus on brand storytelling to help their consumers relate to their products on a more emotional level. Research conducted by Quantified Communications suggests that effective brand storytelling can help make marketing [22 times more memorable](#).

Spam is prevalent in both physical and digital communications, making consumers quick to tune out any communications that come off as ingenuine or sales-y. A printed customer testimonial may do more to engage a consumer than the highlighted expertise of a dozen doctors. In addition, printers that can make text seem like actual handwriting may be able to create more relatable marketing campaigns.

Right now, consumers are feeling isolated, and this feeling will only intensify as the pandemic drags on. This common thread creates a clear path to effective brand storytelling and captivating new possibilities

for direct mail, which already feels more personal than electronic messaging. Print service providers should stress the emotional closeness of print during this pandemic. Mail has been keeping people connected for centuries, through several similar periods of social distancing and upheaval.

With some effective brand storytelling and speedy deployment, direct mail can rebrand itself as the warmer channel of communication during these isolating times.