

How advertising's ugly duckling has turned into a swan

 By [Bronwyn Williams](#)

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Direct marketing has a bad name. The medium is, and always has been, synonymous with junk mail catalogues; charity donation requests and spam emails selling bad literature, questionable weightless products and “opportunities” to help stranded princes move their millions offshore. However, whatever you may think of the medium, direct marketing has always had three key things going for it.



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Firstly, like it or not, it works. Ad man, John Wanamaker once said, “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half.” That excuse no longer flies. It may have been true of above and below the line marketing but, with direct response, particularly digital direct response, marketers know exactly which rands and cents are wasted, and exactly which ones returned the sale or generated the click.

Every cent spent on direct advertising is optimised to generate equal or greater return. If it didn't work, there would be no direct response marketers selling you magazine subscriptions or self-help DVD box sets through your post or email box.

It's only the advent of the internet and pay-per-click advertising that has forced conventional advertisers and marketers to start really accounting for their marketing spend, in a way they had never had to do before.

Marketer, consumer relationship

The second key is in the name: direct marketing. With direct marketing, the marketer builds a one-on-one relationship with the consumer. More to the point, the relationship between the marketer and the consumer belongs to the marketer – not to an advertising agency, a television network, a radio host or a social network platform. Direct marketers own their own channel – their email, cellphone number or postal database – and they control the conversation. Direct response means that the same marketers are able to gauge their consumers interest in real time, and make adjustments to the offer and the marketing copy quickly in return.

Not only that, but through owning their own communication channels, direct marketers are not at the mercy of third-party channel owners. For example, recall when Facebook started charging Facebook Page owners to communicate with their own fans, through promoted posts and paid adverts? Brands and businesses that had relied on Facebook's free Pages offer to build and communicate with their audience suddenly had to find budget and adjust their business models. Direct

marketers who invested in building their own communities outside of third party platforms had no such issues.

New marketing channels and techniques

Thirdly, throughout its history, direct marketing has been an early adopter of new marketing channels and techniques. Marketers and advertising agencies can learn a lot about what channels, messages and methods work and why from watching spammers and junk mail publishers.

Direct response advertisers were some of the first marketers to embrace email as a marketing channel. Our email boxes filled up with get rich quick business ideas from American “self-publishers” who ran their businesses from a post box, decades before the likes of Yuppiechef and FNB’s ebucks started sending us monthly sales offers.

Once again, direct response marketers, were some of the first to take a chance on Google’s novel pay-per-click advertising method when it first launched. Today, those same direct response companies are embracing native content marketing platforms such as Rev Content and Outbrain ahead of big brands and businesses. Content marketing is nothing more than the mainstream adoption of direct marketing principles.

Today, there is hardly a business on the planet that has not adopted some form of direct marketing; be it in the form of an email newsletter with a call to action, a social media campaign, a native content lead strategy or good old Google PPC.

In a world where advertisers have only (<http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/6-tips-for-better-facebook-video-ads/> three seconds) to grab a consumer’s attention and stop them scrolling past their marketing message, this is no surprise.

Direct strategies are cheap and easy to implement

Direct marketing, through a private brand-owned channel (which can be as simple as an internal email list or as complex as a smart brand app or custom-built chatbot) gives businesses a rare chance to build a relationship with their consumers in a space where they do not have to compete for attention with newsfeed and other advertisers.

The good news is, direct strategies are cheap and easy to implement, as long as your brand or business has something interesting to say, and is willing to take the time and effort to build a personal relationship with your consumers.

Even better, thanks to big data – which provides businesses with an incredible depth of insight into individual consumers buying habits; and smart algorithms such as chatbots which allow businesses to give consumers personalised feedback, solutions and offers in real time – it has never been easier to personalise marketing messages and brand offers right down to an individual level. Today there is no excuse not to be a direct marketer.

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