

Printing pressure

Is the production of paper-based catalogs still worth the effort? by Carolyn Heinze

It remains a topic of debate: Do printed product catalogs still have a positive effect on sales—or have websites, social media, and smartphone-friendly resources paved the way for cutting this increasingly colossal expense? The answer is that while paper continues to play a role in customer communications, this role is diminishing as distributors explore other channels through which to engage clients.

Tanya Hansel, founder of HGM Catalog Consulting (catalogagency.com), believes that print catalogs can still be effective for B2B organizations. She noted, however, that companies that still publish and mail catalogs should pay close attention to database hygiene.

“Contact files, for example, should be cross-checked regularly with the National Change of Address [NCOA] Link System provided by the U.S. Postal Service,” she said. “Variables in the software can also be set to determine how many catalogs to mail to a particular business—for example, you may not want to send 100 catalogs to the same company.”

One of the best ways to remain cost effective, Hansel advised, is to segment mailing lists and keep them updated.

“If someone hasn’t made a purchase in the past six years, is mailing another catalog worth it?” Hansel asked. “Are the new prospects that receive the catalog really a good bet?”

“When it comes to lead generation, B2B companies should prequalify their prospective customers and needs before mailing a catalog based on their profile and level of interest,” she added, noting that sometimes a phone call or face-to-face sales call reaps better results.

Neil O’Keefe, vice president of multi-channel segments at the Direct Marketing Association (DMA; the-dma.org), noted that while printed materials remain a widely used form of communication, companies are growing increasingly selective on how often—and to whom—these items circulate.

“In terms of catalogs and printed communication, you will see more businesses

utilizing mail, but the overall volume of mail will likely continue to decline as these communications are reserved for better customers and prospects and the frequency of communication will be less often,” he said. He added that catalogs themselves have decreased in size and are often used as a way to drive clients online, where they’ll find a larger product selection.

ONE DISTRIBUTOR’S STORY

The last time Springfield Electric Supply, based in Springfield, Ill., published a print catalog was in 1990. Alan Baum, vice president of marketing, recounted that the distributor had stopped listing prices in its catalog at least 10 years prior to that.

“Either the products themselves changed too quickly or there were so many new things being introduced into the industry that it was difficult to keep things accurate for any length of time,” he explained, noting that it also became extremely expensive: As the company’s client base grew, so too did the cost of printing and mailing catalogs.

Springfield Electric hasn’t abolished its print communications entirely, however. Presently, the company utilizes a few different brochures that outline the vertical markets it serves, its customer base, its locations, and the product lines it represents.

Pamela Nation, marketing communications coordinator, explained that even these are also available online. “The printed materials are meant for when salespeople call on prospective clients so that they have something to hand to them and leave behind,” she said, add-

ing that the distributor stocks only a minimum of these printed pieces. “They’re almost printed on demand; the online versions are easily updated when the company adds and subtracts product lines.”

In an effort to streamline its online catalog, Springfield Electric has recently joined the ElectricSmarts Syndicated Content Network (electric-smarts.com), which connects manufacturers, distributors, and contractors with updates on product and industry news, as well as training resources.

“We have been integral in working with them because I feel that this is going to be a huge resource,” Nation said. “Systems like ElectricSmarts or direct links to vendor catalogs are probably best because then we don’t have to worry about maintaining product updates.”

Springfield also publishes a monthly e-newsletter through the email marketing firm Constant Contact (constantcontact.com). “Through Constant Contact, we can track who is opening the newsletter and what they are looking at. We use it as a guideline for future communications.”

As video becomes an increasingly popular communication vehicle, Nation has begun to experiment with YouTube. She noted that she is presently using this channel for internal promotions, which she then sends out via Constant Contact e-blasts. The response she has so far received internally has encouraged her to take it to the next step.

“We are considering doing this for some upcoming customer promotions,” she said. “Right now, we are experimenting with its functionality and how much bandwidth it takes, and I believe that it’s something that we will be addressing more often in the future.” ■

Heinze is a freelance writer and editor. She can be reached at carolynheinze@free.fr.