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FEATURE STORY

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Bly looks back on two decades in direct marketing

Story posted: February 19, 2008 - 4:39 pm EDT

Bob Bly is a freelance direct marketing copywriter who specializes in b-to-b marketing. As a copywriter since 1979, Bly has seen many changes. *BtoB* spoke with him about what has changed and what remains in b-to-b direct marketing, as well as what marketers are doing right and getting wrong when marketing directly to their customers and prospects.

BtoB: *What are the trends we should watch for this year in terms of b-to-b direct marketing?*

Bly: When I started in this industry in the late '70s, direct marketing meant direct mail. We still use direct mail and it still works, but today we want to switch prospects to e-mail. The sooner you get them to opt in to your e-list, the better your advantage because you can communicate with them at a fraction of the cost of direct mail.

Our dream has come true. We can e-mail them monthly or even weekly. I have my own list for my business, and I e-mail them twice a week and they are very happy to hear from me. When you are in e-mail, it's also much easier to do time based direct marketing. Timing can be so much more precise and accurate with our promotions.

In b-to-b, another hot trend today is clearly webinars. People are learning to make webinars the next step in the selling process. They are using e-mail marketing and print direct marketing and, in some cases, even space ads to drive people to sign up for webinars. E-mail in my experience works better for webinars, although I've used both. When you are doing the e-mail, the first people you are hitting is your house list and the response rates are always better there. The last minute e-mail reminder works very well; that will easily boost sign-ups 10% to 20% in most cases.

BtoB: *What is the most effective direct marketing tactic for b-to-b marketers?*

Bly: One of the most effective tactics is, in your direct marketing sales letter or e-mail, if you are selling a product or service, it's important to have a secondary offer. Let's say you are selling an ERP [enterprise resource planning] solution. You send out a letter with information and some kind of offer. If you then add a p.s. to that letter, such as, "Respond now for our guide, 'Ten Tips to Improve Your Enterprise Resource Planning,'" you can increase direct response 50% to 100%. That's a bait piece. I use CDs a lot. Audio CDs work well because they are different.

To get the CD, even if you are offering it online, they have to give you their physical address in addition to their name and e-mail, which gives you a more qualified leads.

There's also the "thud" factor: It's great for me to send you my link to my offer, but I should also mail you a CD. That's because you listen online and then forget about it. Five days later, my package arrives on your desk with a thud, and that contains the CD of that same presentation. Even if you don't listen to it again, it catches your attention. Calling white papers "briefings" or "guides" can also be more effective. Semantics matter. And what works best is a combination of online and offline marketing that complement each other.

People still have print material, despite online. Salespeople still carry sell sheets and product catalogs to leave on someone's desk. You still need hard copy and electronic copy.

BtoB: *What are b-to-b marketers getting wrong when it comes to direct marketing?*

Bly: One of them is, despite what we've been talking about, the majority still do not have an offer and do not think an offer is important. I never want to send out a mailing piece [on behalf of a client] without some kind of free premium or content offer, but it's hard to talk people into doing that. A lot of them say, "There's already so much information out there that they're not going to read it. Why would they send for our stuff?" The other thing they say is, "We don't know how to do that or we don't have someone to write that."

Another thing they are getting wrong is, in the print direct mail world, a lot of b-to-b marketers don't use list brokers. They often go straight to a list owner, rather than approach a list broker who has that list owner's list plus ten more lists.

The research and list recommendations the broker makes are free. You only pay if you rent names; the fee is on the owners' side. They don't understand that it's free. There are lots of list brokers that specialize in b-to-b. B-to-b marketers haven't figured that out. The list makes the biggest difference.

B-to-b marketers also spend a lot of money to drive traffic to Web sites. Search is very important to us. But some b-to-b marketers make no attempt to capture information from those people visiting their site who don't take a primary offer: they don't buy a product or ask for a quote or download a catalog. You don't want them to leave without trying to get their address.

Most aren't doing that. You spend a dollar or ten dollars on a click to drive people to your Web site, and you don't have anything to show for it. If you can't convert traffic into orders or leads, you want to at least convert them into opt-in names.



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BtoB: *What are they getting right when it comes to b-to-b direct marketing?*

Bly: We're much more attuned to immediate ROI and accountability. We've been saying it for years, but every year it gets much more pronounced. We're offering incentives like podcasts and white papers that we didn't used to do.

B-to-b marketers are beginning to understand the value of content-based offers. If we are the ones who educate the prospects on our product catalog or the problem it solves, we'll be positioned as the reliable resource and the experts in our field.

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