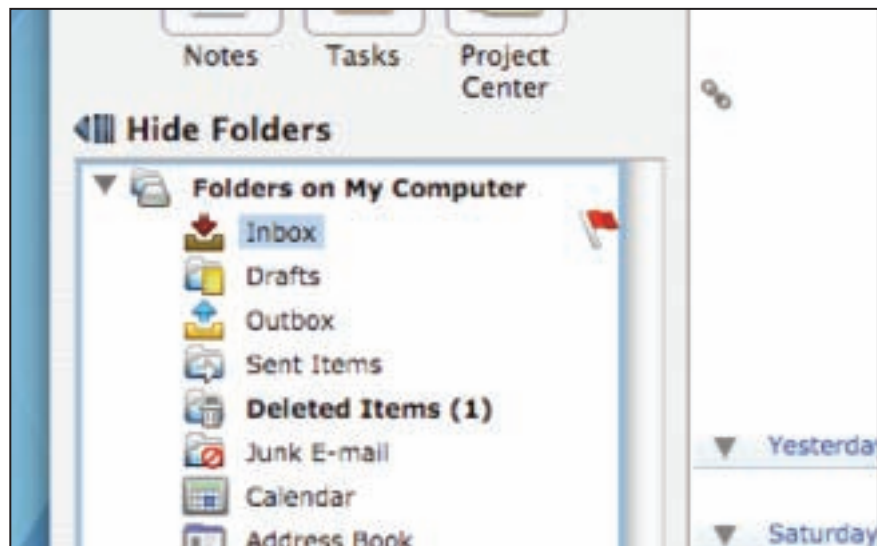


Can Direct Mail Survive Digital?

Chris Barraclough argues that in the digital age traditional direct mail needs to adapt or die.

Having done with books, the immediacy, depth and cost-effectiveness of digital communications will kill off direct mail. Communications will be on a permission-only basis with customers only receiving the information they want. And no-one will really mourn.

That could be a worrying prospect, particularly if you work for Royal Mail. But like Henman winning Wimbledon, it won't ever happen. Like every other channel before it, personal digital communications will eventually become cluttered and devalued. It's already happening to email. It's happened to the phone - TPS now blocks access to millions of customers and is growing. Junk mail's place in everyone's Room 101 is well known.



Thanks to spam filters many emails never even get seen

Even if we believe online permission marketing is a panacea, we have to attract customers and get that permission first. Then we might have to get it again if we want to talk to them about something else, and relying on one communication channel is unlikely to do the job. And given the option, many great prospects will not give their permission immediately. We cannot afford to lose them, so we have to work on them by other means.

Traditional media will always have a role in acquiring and informing customers, particularly cold ones. But to believe the role, and therefore execution, of direct mail does not need to change to take account of the PC's universality is to sign its suicide note.

Above all the web can tell you almost everything you need to know about practically anything. Not only can it act as an “online brochure” but it allows for immediate interaction, tailoring, sales etc. It can lead the customer precisely where you want them led. It can excite in a way print can only dream of. But offline has the power to get them there.

If you can get customers to a web or microsite and captivate them, you can lead them direct to a sale, meeting, test drive or whatever. Which is why most mailings today feature a web address with an invitation to visit for more information or to transact in some way.

But, apart from more contemporary graphics, mailings themselves have not really changed from what we were producing ten years ago. A few believe that by making mail less assertive and more elegant, they are making the medium more acceptable and successful. All they are probably doing is making it work less well.

If mail’s role is increasingly going to be to drive customers online, I believe mail has to become not prettier but more noticeable, more impactful and more memorable.



**Mailings don't come much more memorable than this.
We sent a brick through the post**

It should still give enough information to convince the reader that the product or service on offer is one that the customer needs (teasing people to go online will rarely work – customers haven’t read the full brief and don’t care enough to be teased). But there needs to be something in the pack that grabs the customer’s attention and sticks with them for more than the few seconds it takes to flick through the contents.

The pack has to succeed in bridging the gap between its being read and the customer getting in front of the PC – which might be when they get to work, or it might be later in the evening or even over the following days.

As the Royal Mail size pricing policy will inevitably lead to greater uniformity of outward appearance we, as creatives, need to do more to differentiate via the contents. A letter with a leaflet is too easily forgotten and rejected. A letter with a newspaper clipping, a photograph, a fridge magnet, a sticker, a postcard etc is less easily forgotten.



To dramatise this Morgan Stanley cashback proposition a 10p coin was attached to the letter

This is simply exploiting the deliverability benefits of the medium to the full. Whatever we include should still reinforce the proposition but provide the link between mail and PC.

This way of thinking is significantly different from expecting the mailing to achieve everything itself – as most do now. But if mail is to survive, and it can play this link role more effectively than almost any other medium, the way we think of it and design it needs to adapt.

