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FULFILLMENT

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Literature Fulfillment in a **Flash**

Best practices for delivering your fulfillment kits on time and on a dime

The key to efficient literature fulfillment is that it needs to be treated as a combination of two processes, says Barry Blumenfield, CEO of BMI Fulfillment Services in Norwalk, Conn. The first component is order fulfillment, which requires you to provide fast delivery of the right materials. The second is direct mail conversion, where in your goal is to get a sale.

David Lowndes, director of new product development at fulfillment firm Comac in Milpitas, Calif., provides the perfect example of how companies miss Blumenfield's points. How often have you attended a trade show, he asks, in which you visited a booth, gave the sales representative your contact information, and then returned to your office to wait about three weeks until a package arrived with the company's full product brochure? The problem is, you had inquired about one product and could care less about the other 50.

To make sure your fulfillment kits hit the target for timing and relevancy,

Lowndes suggests you review several program areas before you set up your literature fulfillment program, including:

- ✓ message to be communicated;
- ✓ the value of this message;
- ✓ quantity needed;
- ✓ lifecycle of message/campaign;
- ✓ production options; and
- ✓ delivery methods.

Once you've pinned down these details, you will be ready to select your kit components, contract with delivery partners and develop an inventory management process to keep the pro-

gram running smooth as silk.

Kit Creation Pointers

Direct marketers are moving toward more personalized—and sometimes customized—kit materials, notes Blumenfield. By tailoring the contents more closely to prospects' specific interests, direct marketers hope to convert these inquirers to buyers.

A cost-efficient way to personalize the message on the carrier without creating custom envelopes is to print variable messages on the reply form, which also serves as the addressing piece that shows through the envelope window. Extra envelope windows allow you to present even more personalization. For example, Blumenfield offers, by printing the name of the teleservice representative who took the kit request on the return address section, you can help jog the prospect's memory of making the information request. And if possible, he advises, avoid using parent company names that were not part of the promotional effort that generated the fulfillment request.



Print-on-demand technology makes sense for companies that want to customize the fulfillment kit beyond simple personalization, says Blumenfield.

The cost of color digital printing is coming closer to that of offset printing, Lowndes states, making it a more accessible production method. It's important to test highly personalized kits versus those with static information, he explains, pointing out that increased response rates and the lack of inventory costs can make print-on-demand more cost effective than offset printing.

Regardless of which production method you select, you want your kit to arrive in good condition. Blumenfield advises marketers to test their fulfillment materials' durability in the mail stream by shipping a kit to a seed address. You might find that a padded bag, for example, is not the best carrier for a videocassette, letter and brochure.

Side note: Storage charges for one pallet of materials is only about \$9 to \$10 per month, Blumenfield estimates. While you can store many more DVDs and CDs per pallet, storage costs are low enough that it's smart to offer prospects the option to request videocassettes as well. You never know which medium people might prefer, he says, so consider protecting your response rate by providing a full selection.

On Top of Your Inventory

Inventory management requires vigilance to ensure that adequate, up-to-date materials are on hand to fulfill kit requests at all times.

Fulfillment companies are helping marketers control their fulfillment program via automated tools provided through a password-controlled extranet and/or e-mail.

The marketer can set program parameters that trigger e-mail alerts, say,

when the inventory on a particular kit component falls below a specific level, Blumenfield explains. In addition, the marketer can access its inventory counts at any time via an online portal, and reset its notification parameters.

Automated inventory management tools also can provide alerts for when material shipments are in transit and when they reach the fulfillment firm, says Lowndes, providing marketers with a complete picture of their fulfillment program status.

Reporting tools are key to helping marketers manage their program's inventory needs. Some automated systems, says Lowndes, offer a defined set of reports on product cycles, inventory levels, spoilage ratios, etc. Others also allow marketers to request custom reports as well as develop their own ad hoc queries.

Such automation systems are wonderful operational tools, says Lowndes, but they should never take the place of human support. He notes that marketers should have a dedicated account team that knows its goals and fulfillment kit materials so it can provide guidance on how the marketer can head off program problems as well as make tweaks and bigger changes to impact the program's response rate.

Fast Delivery is Priority No. 1

All fulfillment materials being equal, the factor that most impacts sales conversion is delivery time, states Blumenfield. You simply need to put the fulfillment kit in prospect's hands within two to three days, he says.

The two components of delivery are kit production time and the mailing process. On the production end, your goal is to get the kit ready within 24 hours, to give as much time to the mailing window as possible—and to reduce the need for overnight shipping,

which increases program costs, says Lowndes.

Blumenfield points out that you might be able to pre-pack some kit components ahead of time to speed the production side.

Whether you can pre-pack or not depends on the lifecycle of the pieces in your kit, Lowndes adds. Short revision cycles mean having to strip pre-packed kits, which also affects your production time. He advises marketers to pre-pack kits that have a six-month or longer lifecycle.

Lowndes finds that more and more kits are using personalization to the degree that pre-packing isn't an option for most fulfillment programs, especially when print-on-demand is being leveraged to customize messaging and offers. In these cases, he notes, marketers can use pre-printed shells to shave some time off the production process.

When it comes to delivery, Blumenfield has been using DHL Smart & GlobalMail as an alternative to First Class mail. This service commingles marketers' mail drops and injects them as deep into the USPS mail stream as possible to get discounted rates. Blumenfield says that SmartMail users get delivery times that are comparable to that of First Class service at pricing that is closer to that of Standard Class mail for flats.

Parcel consolidators also are good resources for sending packages at lower cost rates, he adds.

Again, Blumenfield notes, you want to use a mail monitoring service, or order regularly from your program, to test how well your fulfillment vendor meets your goals for delivery times. If the percentage of fast deliveries starts to slip, he says, you need to investigate to see where the holdup occurs, and take steps to surmount any obstacles to a successful fulfillment program. ♦



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