



The do's and don'ts of mailing discs

There's a big difference in designing a mail-delivered disc package meant to market, promote and sell a product or service, versus a disc package to be sold at retail, as Tom O'Reilly learns

America Online (AOL) used to be the company using discs to help sell its service. But many other companies in a variety of markets have spun off similar efforts. From private investigators, to home protection companies, to colleges and universities trying to attract students, marketers are finding that discs are a great, cost effective way to tell their story to prospective customers.

But unlike a movie DVD or music CD that a customer has bought with the specific intention of using, how do these companies not only get the discs into the hands of prospective customers, but also get them to open the package, and put the disc in the drive to see and hear the message?

It starts with the packaging.

"I believe there is great opportunity for utilising disc media for very creative marketing, advertising and promotional opportunities," said David Coho, director of sales at disc packaging supplier Univenture. "The disc manufacturing and disc packaging industries have an opportunity to illustrate new and creative methods of presenting products and materials for customer applications.

"With entertainment packaging, the product is a vehicle that delivers the product safely and illustrates the content," continued Coho. "Often times, consumers know what they want and seek a product that is recognisable, one they know will comply with their computer hardware. Marketing, advertising and promotional packaging has a more complex task. Not only does the product

need to be delivered safely and be recognisable as a disc package, but the packaging must also illustrate the application and create desire for the recipient to open the package and activate the disc. Essentially, the packaging needs to provide some recognition and quickly sell the recipient on taking the next step, empower the content of the disc/see what is inside.

"[You] need to consider unique packaging that stands out in the consumer's mail box," chimed in Lisa Riofrio, of long-distance telephone service provider Vonage. She used to work for AOL in the days when the online service provider was flooding mailboxes with its promotional CDs. "Test various formats keeping costs in mind."

Kirsten Walter, another former AOL executive who now works for direct mail firm

Production Services Associates, agrees with Riofrio regarding testing. Walter goes a step further in noting that certain types of packages will likely work better for specific products or services being marketed. Testing is the best way to understand what is most suitable for a specific product or service. "Smart testing is the key to understanding what package will work for your program," she said. "It may be the flash of holographic foil or the organic look of natural kraft papers that catches your customer's attention, but unless you set up a readable test against the current package, you may not know which direction to point your efforts. I've seen widely different packages work for different products. Without the test results behind it, you can't gain knowledge to further refine testing and identify realistic packaging options."

Generally speaking, "interactive, dimensional packaging typically drives higher response rates, as well as formats with perceived value to the consumer," said Riofrio. "Show the CD-ROM in the creative through a window or die-cut in the packaging." But a disc alone will not necessarily entice a recipient to open the package. There must be substance and creativity to it. "Strong offer, strong format, strong creative, strong call to action [are] all very important," summed up Riofrio.

"There are many ways to encourage the end user to respond to the product: typically, marketing promotions," said Michelle Cole, Univenture president. "However, the package itself can be attractive enough to want to open and respond to the product. Specialised product design can be creative enough to entice the end user to take the next step and open a package."

Cole recently developed a holiday card designed to hold both a disc and business card or gift card that Univenture sent to customers. "Resulting from a creative packaging discussion with a valued customer, Michele was able to develop a consumer package ideal for adding value to retail gift card applications," said Coho. "The concept behind the product is to provide a packaging solution that can be used to support gift card sales with disc media. The fully printed disc/gift card, presents an opportunity for a retailer to 'up sell' the gift card with a music or movie disc. The result is increasing the overall customer experience, increasing the product branding impact and most importantly creating value to the consumer by packaging a card, disc and gift card together."

Learn from others

There is much to be learned – both good and bad – from the variety of marketing, promotional and sales discs already being sent to prospective customers. AOL has led the way with a myriad of packaging solutions all geared toward getting prospective customers to insert its CD into their computer, and subscribe to its service.

"We have received very creative applications for the disc media through the mail," said Coho. "Applications providing

product information, templates, videos of the product, company and useful applications have supported the objectives of the direct mail product. Equally important is how the product is packaged and how the packaging compliments that application and truly represent their brand.

"The packaging has an opportunity to illustrate the value of the application," Coho continued. "We have received 9x12 envelopes that have contained a cover letter, post card brochure and a loose CD-ROM. In this instance, the application of the disc may be overlooked because it is not supported by the packaging.

Getting discs there half the battle

Most marketing and promotional discs sent to prospective customers go through the mail because it is typically the least expensive way to get the disc in the hands of a prospective customer. While it is the last part of the project, there are significant issues with making sure mailed discs make it to their destination in good condition.

worlds, and has patented a product it calls the eKEY mailer. The 6-inch x 9-inch cardboard mailer offers a design that Butler says helps decrease the chance of breakage while offering plenty of space for marketing images and text. Butler designed the mailer to keep the CD away from the pressure of the letter-sorting machine's drum, protecting it from excessive stress.

Riofrio's suggestion is more practical than scientific. "Mail 500 pieces in the packaging through the mail and evaluate the packaging and CD-ROM content when the mail arrives," she said. "Have the CD packaging approved by the United States Postal Service. Include seeds in the mailing list so you can track the mail pieces and evaluate them upon receipt."

Keep it green

There is one final issue to consider, and that is that the packaging be as environmentally friendly as possible.

"With the focus on environmental conservation, it is more important than ever to work with materials that are recyclable for disposable packaging," said Cole. "While the

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"We're the last one they talk to," said Todd Butler, president of Butler Mailing Services, which specialises in disc mailings. Butler said that the United States Postal Service is automating as much of the mail handling process as possible. That can be bad news for those mailing discs, especially if they are not careful in selecting their package.

Butler looks at mailing a disc differently than most. "First, it has to be machinable, then [I consider] breakage, and then marketability," he said. "Pretty doesn't do you any good if you can't get it through the system."

Just how many discs break when sent through the mail? There is no official percentage that Butler is aware of, but based on various reports he has seen on typical breakage, he said it typically ranges from a low single digit percentage, up to 45%, depending in large part on how the disc is sent and what it is packaged in.

There is a fine line between disc safety and mailing costs. The safest way to send a disc in the mail is to put it in a hard plastic case, but expect to pay a hefty premium to mail this, especially as the USPS is putting more emphasis on a package's dimensions in determining postage (see related story, page 4). On the other hand, using a small, lightweight mailer will decrease your mailing cost, but increase the chance that the disc is damaged. Butler has focused on finding the best of both



AOL blanketed America with free discs, and quickly became the largest Internet service provider.

entertainment media needs a storage package to keep the content safe for the long term the options for materials is wide range."

Charting success

At the end of the day, marketing, promotional and sales media packages are either successful or not. Ultimately, success is defined by sales for the product or service being marketed.

"Budgets may be less for marketing and promotional CDs, but there is also the budget-to-success factor," said Walter. "Unlike retail media products, media used for marketing purposes are most likely tracked for their success in reaching the targeted goal. This ROI (return on investment) measures how much you can spend on the packaging. If today's package cost 10% more than previous packages, but provides a 50% increase in consumer response, the more expensive package has paid for itself. ●