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Target Marketing

Smile—and Flash Your pURLy Sites

W. Eric Martin

Using personalized Web sites gives customers a reason to respond

Add a note...

Direct marketers have worked for decades to personalize their contacts with customers. Back in the 1940s, for example, after a human typed “Dear Eric” on the first line of a sheet of paper, the remainder of the sales pitch would be typed automatically by a player piano roll that was hooked up to a typewriter. By the 1970s, people saw their names on contest letters from *Reader’s Digest* and thought they might be winners.

With new technology comes new ways to personalize pitches, and the personalized URL—or pURL—is a new tool that will bring great benefits to marketers who know how to use it correctly. pURLs, which might appear as some variation of www.company.com/yourname, typically are incorporated into a print piece sent to a contact. When that contact visits the Web page bearing his or her name, ideally the page will be personalized with information contained in your company’s database.

Putting the ‘Personal’ in pURL

Frank Romano, co-author of “Personalized & Database Printing: The Complete Guide,” notes that pURLs largely have been underused since their appearance in 2000. “The person’s name is slotted into whatever boilerplate material was already on the page,” he says.

Those times are starting to change, though. “In a sample for a health care company, we tested driving people to a generic Web site versus a personalized landing page that’s dynamically creating an offer for that person,” says Tom Côté, president of The Ballantine Corp., a printing company in Wayne, N.J. “The lift off that pURL was 30 percent compared with the generic landing page.”

In another mailing for a magazine client that wanted readers to sign up for a VIP area, Côté found that while only 8.75 percent of the 21,000 postcard recipients visited the Web site, once there 88 percent of visitors signed up for a free account. “It’s powerful once you get them there,” he says. Frank Hudetz, president of Chicago printing firm Solar Communications, says he’s also seeing a 33 percent lift in pURL campaigns, such as ones used to build enrollment at universities or educational institutions, or to drive traffic to PR events.

When pURLs are implemented well, you can create a continuous personalized marketing message that extends from mail piece to Web site. “I can already send a mailer that has different images for females and males, different offers for people in different verticals,” says Scott Bronstad, creative director at PrintMailers, a printing company in Houston. “Now I can continue that look and feel into a personalized Web page using that same data.”

And if you don’t have the data? That’s actually another reason to use pURLs. “Marketers are

attracted to pURLs as a way to grab e-mail addresses,” says Coté. “If you can make a sale with them, fantastic, but in lieu of a sale, they’re a great data-gathering mechanism.” A magazine publisher, for example, can use a pURL-driven campaign to contact lapsed subscribers to find out why they didn’t renew.

Adds Spyro Kourtis, president of Bellevue, Wash., direct marketing agency The Hacker Group, “You can start with a survey, then deliver relevant content and offers based on that information.” For one project under development, customers will see different wireless plans and phones based on their survey responses and receive an offer tailored for them.

What’s even better, says Kourtis, “I can ask your permission to contact you in the future, and when you come back, you’ll see something new.” If customers didn’t sign up for a wireless plan last time, their survey responses will automatically determine whether the marketer should sweeten the offer or present a different product.

Adding pURLs to Your Marketing Wardrobe

pURLs enable the personalization of direct mail, while providing the benefits of Web design. “If you see a survey question being consistently ignored or not getting the response you want, you can change it immediately,” says Pamela Evans, director of account services for BAM! Direct, a direct marketing agency in Suwanee, Ga. “You can also modify a campaign in progress, so it’s a beautiful integration of print and Web.”

Customer tracking is another pURL plus. “I can know to the day how many people have opened this page and were interested enough to give us more information,” says Bronstad. “I even know which people looked at the page but haven’t given us information, which gives me data for follow-up calls or e-mails.”

While you can use pURLs in e-mail campaigns, doing so defeats the purpose of a pURL because e-mail already contains clickable links. “Clicking an e-mail isn’t the same as typing the URL that includes your name,” says Bronstad. “In marketing, any time you can activate someone to do something, that increases the response.”

For all their positive attributes, pURLs work only within the context of a coordinated campaign. “pURLs are a great enhancement for getting response in direct market[ing],” says Evans, “but they’re not the end-all, be-all tool. You can’t neglect proper targeting with a product that has relevance.”

Coté discovered this first-hand with a client who insisted on using a pURL for a product that appealed to older men. While the Web site featured dazzling design and streaming video, the users never saw it because they vanished as soon as the site requested an e-mail address. “You want to use mail and drive people to pURLs when you’ve already determined that they’re Web savvy and order online,” he says.

A Few How-tos

Ideally, says Frank Hudetz, you’ll develop a direct mail piece that will point out the pURL, using images to highlight it and stressing the personalized information that awaits at the Web site. Place the recipient’s name as close to the front of the URL as possible so he has a greater chance of noticing the personalization, and keep the URL short to encourage action.

For recipients with identical names—which **Ballantine Director of Marketing Ryan Coté**

estimates is 2 percent of his clients' lists—you can add characters to the pURL to eliminate the duplication, e.g., www.company.com/michaelsmith23, although you might want to disguise these efforts to keep the URL looking personal. Ballantine takes another approach, printing a unique security code on each item mailed. "If you have a mail file of 50,000 names, the code will be five digits long," says Coté. When someone with a duplicated name visits the Web site, that person will be prompted for the security code, which will connect him or her with the right data; everyone else will go immediately to their personalized landing page.

Surveying lists for duplicate names and otherwise assembling the data for pURLs will up the prep time on any campaign. To avoid adding even more time, Hudetz suggests keeping your IT department out of the process. "That's a big flaw that we almost stepped into, as it will take IT six to 12 months to reinvent the wheel," he says. By going with an established provider, you'll get started more quickly and have access to immediate reports and tracking.

Once you start exploring the possibilities with pURLs, which can be personalized to any degree that your budget can bear, you'll come to see them as an invaluable tool. Says Bronstad, "From a marketing standpoint, I love them to death."

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