



The cost of giving direct mail readers too many choices

By Hugh Chewing

One thing we can do to improve the profitability of our direct mail is to learn the lessons of a famous jam study.

That's right. Jam. The stuff we spread over our toast.

In a gourmet market, Professor Sheena Iyengar of Columbia University and her research assistants set up a booth offering samples of Wilkin & Sons jams.



Every few hours, the researchers switched from offering customers a selection of 24 jams to offering a group of only six jams.

Each participating customer – regardless of the number of selections offered – received a \$1 savings coupon and tasted an average of two jams.

Here's the interesting part.

Of those shoppers seeing the larger display, 60 percent stopped to sample the jams. Yet when researchers switched to the smaller display, only 40 percent of shoppers stopped for a taste.

But of those sampling from the smaller display, 30 percent decided to buy

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jam while only 3 percent of those confronted with larger display purchased a jar.

The display with more choices drew the largest crowd but customers presented with fewer choices bought more.

Researchers then repeated the study using a wide variety of products – everything from chocolate to speed dating. And each time, regardless of the product tested, offering fewer choices to the prospective customer resulted in more sales.

Professor Iyengar concluded, “In reality, people might find more and more choices to actually be debilitating.” And while it may be too simple to conclude that offering lots of choices is bad, we shouldn’t assume that providing more choice is always better.

What does this have to do with our direct mail?

Look through your mailing samples – particularly at the response device. We’ve all seen response devices from nonprofits that suggest five, six and even seven asking amounts. And the offers we get to bundle cable, phone and Internet service can be paralyzing.

Offering too many choices can immobilize the reader’s decision-making process and cost us a sale.

Taking the lessons from Professor Iyengar’s study, let’s make it simple for our reader to respond. For nonprofits, three suggested contribution amounts plus an “Other” option is more than enough. But whether asking for a contribution or a lead or a sale, keeping it simple makes it easier for the prospect to respond and feel good about it.

Littering surveys with too many questions is no different. Surveys are a great way to involve the reader with our mailing but we need to keep it simple.

You’ve probably have received a telephone call asking for your participation in a survey. You’re interested in the subject so you say “yes” and 20 minutes later, you can’t wait for the call to end.

Let’s not make the same mistake with our mail.

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Remember, when we include a survey in a mailing, its purpose isn't to gather information, it's to encourage a response!

Limit yourself to five or seven questions and allow the reader to move quickly to the order form.

And finally, don't accept the argument that the reader needs more choices to understand the offer's full value. Instead, accept this as a challenge to do better list selection. Better segmentation of your mailing list will reduce the need to overwhelm the reader with too many choices.

We can all learn from the jam research. Keep it simple, make it easy for the reader to respond and the result will be better than your morning toast.

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