

# **When “Good” Direct Marketing Backfires ...and Why You Can’t Always Trust the Dogma**

**by Perry Marshall**



# Why “Good” Direct Marketing Backfires

Many rules of thumb in direct marketing that have calcified into rigid dogmas. Here’s a short list:

1. The more you tell, the more you sell
2. The best way to sell anything is with a long sales letter
3. People buy for emotional reasons, not logical ones
4. You should take all the navigation off your website and just use a “NameSqueeze™” page
5. Direct marketing is the best way to sell everything
6. The answer to every question is to test, test, test

I can cite blatant exceptions to every one of these dogmas. As a matter of fact why don’t I do that right now:

1. Every salesman in the world has a “I talked ‘em in and then talked ‘em right back out” story. When the buyer is ready to buy, shut up, take your money and give him his stuff.
2. I bet not one single thing you bought at the grocery store last week was sold to you with a sales letter.
3. Bob Bly has a great paper called “Secrets of Successful Software and Technology Marketing” where he says, “The engineer’s purchase decision is more logical than emotional. Most books and articles on advertising stress that successful copy appeal to emotions first, reason second. But with the engineering audience, it is often the opposite. The buying decision is what we call a “considered purchase” rather than an impulse buy. That is, the buyer carefully weighs the facts, makes comparisons and buys based on what product best fulfills his requirement.” You can certainly say that there’s still some kind of emotional desire that motivates him to do the project in the first place, but you still can’t ignore what he really wants: something that meets his project requirements.



4. A few months ago I showed an example from a clients' website where his leads went up, not down, when he added links where visitors could explore his site before filling in the form. Sometimes people want to know who you are before they give you their email address.
5. Direct marketing is *not* the best way to sell everything. Before mass media, it didn't even exist. It's never been the primary means by which evolution, talk radio, Christianity, iPods, Toyotas or Tylenol are sold. The best way to sell something is to present it in whatever way that the buyer prefers to buy it. Actually DM is the domain of *specialized* and *premium priced* products and services. I do think direct marketing principles are the best way to evaluate advertising.
6. Sometimes it's impossible to test. Sometimes it takes too long. Sometimes you've only got one shot. Sometimes the best answer to a question is to ask a grizzled veteran. Sometimes the best answer is to borrow a solution from a totally different industry.

I've got a friend John with a catalog business, whose customers tend to be more educated and somewhat upscale. His catalog sells educational materials and experiences. On the advice of his direct marketing friends, issued his new catalog last year with a re-styled cover, based on the Cosmopolitan Magazine school of headline and bullet writing. A number of his customers (good loyal ones, not cranks) went out of their way to tell him they did *not* like the tabloid feel. They felt it cheapened his catalog, which they refer to throughout the year.

As he was telling me about this I was reminded of a charity I gave money to about 15 years ago. They were in the business of solving some fairly grave problems and after my donation I immediately started getting mailings from them, which I did not like.

After getting three or four of their fundraising mailers I wrote them a letter and asked to be taken off their mailing list, because those mailings felt more like a record and tape club membership than a charity. (Keep in mind, this was long before direct marketing as a career was even a twinkle in my eye.)

In retrospect, I'm quite certain that they had hired a direct mail copywriter to do this job, somebody with perfectly fine credentials and everything else. I'm sure most direct marketers would think he did everything "right" if they were to look at that stuff. But here's the deal: **The stronger your language and delivery, the more important it is**



that your language be *exactly right* for your audience. Their language was not right for me.

Compare two different magazines intended for two entirely different audiences:



Both of these publications are very successful. Target Marketing magazine had a great article a few years ago about The Economist's circulation manager, who has resolutely resisted the temptation of selling the magazine to discounters to pump up circulation numbers for the sake of selling ad space. (A 1-year subscription to The Economist costs \$127. Compare that to Cosmo at \$18. Oh, and you can also get Sports Illustrated delivered to your home for less than 72 cents an issue!)

As you can see the Economist ain't goin' down that road, and they don't have a supermodel on the cover. Not everyone feels like speaking that language. The principles of what sells both magazines are the same but the styles may be completely different.

What separates the men from the boys in marketing is the ability to pick out nuances of language and style and speak to an audience in their own language. What I think is going to work for John is more *Economist* and less *Cosmo*.

As I was writing this up it occurred to me that Cosmo's cover and his cover serve entirely different purposes. The purpose of a Cosmo cover is to get people so curious about "I bet you're wild in bed" they can't stand it anymore and buy the magazine.



Cosmo's editors are surely OK with the fact that the articles themselves are almost universally disappointing. The purpose of John's cover is for people to feel encouraged and reassured about their educational choices, and hopefully flip to a section they hadn't noticed before.

Another lesson that applies to John's situation is "New Coke." Pepsi was beating Coke in taste tests, so Coke made a new, sweeter formula. It won in taste tests but bombed when they rolled it out.

Why? Same reason original Coke already had more market share than Pepsi. Initially Pepsi tastes better. But when you're drinking a whole can, the extra sugar is fatiguing. Same difference applies when you compare a magazine that's bought on a fluttering impulse to a catalog that sits on your table for six months. Nobody keeps Cosmo for reference.

## Taking the Pressure, Manipulation and Sleaze Out of the Sale

My first real sales job was manufacturer's rep here in Chicago. I had just come from being an engineer and the biggest adjustment for me was this feeling like I was just a peddler hawking wares to some purchasing agent.

Talking to a customer about a genuinely frustrating problem that I could realistically solve – that was a head rush. I really loved afternoons where the sales calls were going *that* way. But what I hated was when I was interrupting the guy's day, basically 'cuz it was my job to pound the phone and book appointments and 'get out of the office' as often as humanly possible.

Well there's an Internet version of that. The Internet version is buying traffic from as many keywords as you can think of and driving people to your sales page, and only getting maybe 1% of them to buy something. **Hey, what about the other 99% who didn't buy anything? What about them?**

Most people think the solution to that problem is to write ballsier copy. Use more power words, use yellow highlighter, smash 'em in the head with a sledge hammer, tell them how they need to crawl buck naked over broken glass to get your righteous new stuff. Well we all know what that kind of sales pitch sounds like. It's obnoxious and strident and annoying, kind of like me when I was trying to undercut the price of some guy's connectors.

Ari Galper's discovery was: *The fastest path to the sale is to not start out by selling something. If you set your agenda aside and focus on the customer's situation, you'll*



*come to agreement much faster, more securely, with no heartburn for you or your customer.* Take the pressure out of sales and you'll sell more.

So in Ari's world, a conversation starts with some version of "Tell me about your situation" and ends with "Where do we go from here?" This is not the salesman telling the customer what the agenda is. It's letting the customer take ownership of what it is he's buying. When you take the pressure out, you're able to not only listen but to hear. Your customer not only talks, but speaks.

When I advise people who are building new websites and entering new markets, I tell them they should interact with those customers as much as humanly possible so they know exactly what prospects are thinking and feeling.

If you do this, over time you'll become intimately familiar with the aches and pains. Your prospects will become extremely predictable, such that every single one that comes along will have a situation you're already familiar with. Now you know how to write every word of copy – it almost writes itself.





## About Perry Marshall

Entrepreneur Magazine says, “Perry Marshall is the #1 author and world’s most- quoted consultant on Google Advertising. He has helped over 100,000 advertisers save literally billions of dollars in AdWords stupidity tax.”

His Chicago Company, Perry S. Marshall & Associates, consults both online and brick-and-mortar companies on generating sales leads, web traffic, and maximizing advertising results.

Prior to his consulting career, he helped grow a tech company from \$200,000 to \$4 million in sales in four years. The firm was then sold to a public company for \$18 million.

Like direct marketing pioneer Claude Hopkins, Perry has both an engineering degree and a love for persuasive copywriting. He’s published hundreds of articles on sales, marketing and technology, and his works include *The Ultimate Guide to Google AdWords* (Entrepreneur Press, 2nd Edition 2010), which is the world’s most popular book on Google advertising. He is also author of *Industrial Ethernet (ISA, 2nd Edition)*.

He’s been featured at conferences in the U.S., Canada, Ireland, Great Britain, Israel, Australia and the Middle East. He’s shared the stage with Zig Ziglar, Brian Tracy, Jay Abraham, Gary Halbert, Harvey Mackay and Les Brown. He’s consulted in over 200 industries, from computer hardware and software to high-end consulting, from health & fitness to corporate finance.

Direct Marketing pioneer Dan Kennedy says, “Perry’s methods coupled with Google AdWords offer a fast and cheap testing ground for a lot of marketing messages. He’s a consummate player of this game, the smartest person I or any of my clients have ever found when it comes to Google AdWords – optimizing response for his clients, and teaching others how to do it for themselves.”

