



Marketing Tools and Buyers' Attitudes: What are your buyers thinking?

In June and early July 2006, I surveyed art buyers and other photography buyers (designers, art directors, etc.) [see disclosure note at end of article]. The purpose of the survey was to get an idea of their likes and dislikes regarding some of the forms of marketing used by photographers. The survey was done online with invitations to participate sent via email, and participation was anonymous (the participants could choose to be identified, but it wasn't required). However, to call it truly "scientific" would not be entirely accurate. As is not unusual for surveys done this way, the response rate was under 2% of those invited and that could mean that the results could be significantly skewed (that is, perhaps those who participated were more predisposed to liking email, for example). So, although I'm not a statistician and the statistical accuracy of the data may be technically inexact, the information provided should still serve to give us a good general idea of some of the thinking out there.

It is important to keep a few things in mind as we look at the results. For example, it's important to remember that your mileage may vary, as they say. That is, if you are marketing to a very select and highly targeted list, their behavior may be quite different than the generalities listed here. It is crucial to get to know your market as best you can to be as effective as possible in your marketing; the data here is from a very un-targeted group as the participants work in a range of companies from top agencies to small design firms. Secondly, remember that things are changing very quickly these days; what may be true as of this writing could very well be outdated within a year, just because of some sort of technology shift. It would be great to be able to say that "doing X always results in Y" but reality just doesn't work that way, unfortunately.

Regardless, when considering different marketing tools a photographer always has to look at his/her own particular situation and needs. The information in this article will help get you started in understanding some of the general trends in some of the tools out there. Don't make final decisions based solely on this information. Do research on your own, targeted for your specific market, before making important financial decisions.

Email Marketing

One of the newer marketing tools out there is the email promo, the e-promo. The advantage of this tool is, of course, cost. If you manage the email blasts yourself, there is often very little cost associated with email promos. However, it is rare that a self-managed blast results in accurate data about its results. For example, if the email gets sucked into the spam filter, you will never know. Also, doing it yourself can result in poorly programmed HTML which can get spam-blocked or may end up looking terrible when it does get through.

If you use a service like ADBASE's Emailer, there is some cost, but the trade-off is better and highly trackable results. The cost to use these services is still much lower than many of the generally effective marketing tools out there. In exchange you (often, depending on the service) get detailed analyses of click-throughs and open rates, etc.

The important question, regardless of method chosen, is, however, will the targets even get the emails? That is, will the e-promo get blocked as spam before even reaching its intended recipient?

According to the results in the survey, the answer is "probably, but it depends." While a considerable number of respondents (13%) didn't know if they had any restrictions on emails from non-approved senders, 71% stated that they could indeed receive both plain-text emails with attachments and HTML emails from non-approved senders. An additional 9% said that HTML was okay but attachments were not, and only 3% said that attachments would get through while HTML emails got blocked (in all cases, from non-approved senders).

Thus it is likely that your e-promo will get to your target, but not a sure thing. In practice, the open rate (% of emails sent that are actually viewed) for a typical HTML email is only 20-30% because the use of sophisticated SPAM blocking software is so widespread. It is very important to make sure that your efforts are making it through or, at the very least, to know who isn't getting the e-promo so that you can use some other tool to reach them.

If you use an email service, part of what you should be getting for your money are good numbers and data about who does and does not get your emails. This data can help you to improve your marketing considerably. If an email does not get through, you can send a plain-text email to the target asking how to best contact him/her, or even call with the same question. Or, of course, you could use print promos exclusively for that target. Getting the information to be able to make sure you are reaching your targets is definitely worth the cost of the service.

By the way, the stated preference for one format over another is pretty well spread out over the three main types of email promos. In other words, whether you choose to use HTML or an attachment or a text-only email with a link, it's not going to make a huge difference on the attitude of the receiver. 36% prefer HTML, 28% prefer attachments, and 17% prefer text-only with links.

A surprising 19% of the respondents in the question referred to above answered that they preferred to receive no emails at all. When the data is cross-tabulated, it appears that those 19% seem to receive more emails a day from photographers than others (it's the largest sub-group receiving 21 or more e-promos a day). And, a significant number of those respondents also preferred to be contacted by a rep or suggested that photographers should contact their art buyer instead of "bothering" them. While purely supposition on my part, I tend to think that most people who say they'd prefer not to receive emails are not art buyers but rather art directors (or designers) at firms with art buyers. Every art buyer I have asked personally has told me that while sometimes the volume of promos (e- and traditional) can get large, they need to know who is out there--it's part of their job--and so they do not have problems with getting promos in any form.

I'll have a little coffee with that crow, please

In the recent past I have often counseled photographers to consider sending text-only emails before starting a full e-promo campaign. That is, sending an email that would state something like:

Annie Photographer is starting to send bi-monthly emails to her list. These emails will include images and links to more information. If you do not wish to receive these updates, please click here to be removed from the list.

Well, it seems that such an email may not be as great of an idea as previously reported. When asked if it would be "better" for a photographer to send such an email ahead of time, only 35% of the respondents said "yes." In the comments by the respondents, however, no one said that it would be a bad thing to do, just an unnecessary one, and several of the 35% (the "yes" responders) said that it would actually be "great."

But do they like them?

I mentioned earlier that there is a significant correlation between those respondents who complained about getting email promos and the number of e-promos they get. Overall, however, the volume of email promos received by the respondents was lower than I had expected. 50% receive between 11 and 20 a day and another 38% receive 10 or less. These numbers are by no means overwhelming. However, this is one of those areas where things could shift on a dime and, if people start getting "overloaded" with e-promos, their attitudes could turn.

But for now, they're actually fairly popular with their receivers. When asked "What is the BEST way for a photographer (one you do not have a previous relationship with) to reach you?" 29% said via e-promo. Asked in a different question whether they generally preferred to receive email-based promos or postcards from photographers, 16% chose email, but another 41% said that either was fine.

In other words, yes, inasmuch as they like any promotional materials, e-promos are an acceptable tool to use. I would expect that generally it will become more and more acceptable to send e-promos as the younger generations move into the creative posts--that is, as long as the promos don't, well, suck. But more about that later.

Other electronic options

Online sourcebooks are becoming more and more popular. While some photographers (usually lower-end or consumer-direct) may try to make a claim that having your site Search Engine Optimized (SEO) is the way to go, they are wrong when it comes to marketing to advertising and design clients. When asked what sources (more than one answer ok) they most often use to find "new" photographers (that is, someone they haven't used before) not a single person even mentioned Google or any other general search engine. Not one. However 40% mentioned workbook.com, 22% mentioned blackbook.com, and 15% mentioned altpick.com. All the other sites (photoserve.com, portfolios.com, ASMP or APA's find-a-photographer sites) received single-digit responses. Of the 55% who mentioned an "other" response, a large number said, again, "my art buyer's recommendations." So, while spending the money to SEO your site won't hurt you, it's not really going to help unless you're targeting consumers directly.

Of course the photographer's own website is a vital part of his/her marketing mix. When I asked Cindy Hicks, Senior Art Producer at the Martin Agency (they have clients like Miller, TLC, Geico, etc.) about how the process usually goes when selecting a photographer, here's what she replied, "Websites first always, maybe then portfolios [called in], sometimes not, then estimating, as of late triple bids." That response is pretty typical. Websites are the first significant research tool a potential client uses, once s/he knows you're out there. Your marketing needs to drive your client there (and once there, it had better not be bad).

Print-based marketing tools

The good-old print sourcebook is, as previously mentioned, not being used as often or in the same way as in the past. Tiffany Correa, Art Buyer, of PUSH in Orlando, FL (their client list includes The Orlando Museum of Art and Scotiabank) explained her search process, saying "I talk with the art director to see what they're thinking and then also do my own research, unless I think of someone right off the bat after seeing the creative. I review websites or the usual suspect art books and call in portfolios if needed, although I like to see a good portion of work online." When I asked her to clarify, she explained that she uses her personal files/memory first, if she still needs to search then she uses the online sourcebooks, and if she's still looking after that, then the print books. This seems to be a pretty typical route.

So what print "book" sources are most often used? When asked (and again the option of selecting more than one was given so the total exceeds 100%) here's how they ranked:

Communication Arts	63%
Workbook	58%
Black Book	46%
AltPick	25%
AtEdge	18%
PDN	15%

Additionally, under the “other” category in that question it is important to note that a considerable number of people listed “word-of-mouth” (yes, even though that is not a print source). Your reputation and attitude are big factors in whether or not you get work. People do talk and share information about photographers they have worked with in the past, both the good and the bad. When asked “What is the worst thing a photographer can do” the response was almost universal: be a jerk on a shoot.

Postcard mailers are a waste...right?

No, actually, they generally are not. 35% of respondents said that the best way to contact them is through a postcard mailer (the highest percentage for any of the options listed, by the way). While the postcard is often not considered “great” in and of itself, its purpose is still solid--it gets your name and image in front of your buyers. Lots of people noted that they keep cards they like and use their files first when looking for new photographers. Several people mentioned that they like cards because they fit in files and take up little space in their over-crowded cubicles. Many said that they will eventually at least look at postcards (but not single cards in envelopes!), even if only briefly, noting “it’s harder to ‘delete’ a postcard.”

Of course, more elaborate mailers were mentioned in responses to an open-ended question I asked about great promotions respondents had received (in any format). Books, mini-books, 3-dimensional pieces, monthly thematic postcards (calendars or other themes), promotional items like beautifully designed calendars or fun toys--these were all items listed as favorites. But the buyers also understand that these promos are costly.

Calling all Art Buyers!

It can easily be inferred from this data that, when you’re making your target lists, for ad agencies always start with art buyers if the agency you are targeting has them. They really are your best point of contact with a new target agency as they greatly influence the buying choices of the art directors and other creatives. They are not generally just some sort of administrator, but rather a vital part of the creative team and the person(s) with the greatest ability to get you work. Sometimes the art buyer will even go to the shoot!

If there is no art buyer, ask if the print producer has photo-buying duties. If you have the budget to market to a wider list, then add art directors next, followed by designers and creative directors. For editorial, send to photo editors first, last, and always.

About the work

No matter what medium used, one thing was repeated again and again by respondents: it doesn’t matter if the promo is expensive or cheap, elaborate or simple; if the image isn’t great it won’t work and if it is, it will. The quality of the image(s) was consistently cited as the most important factor in all the marketing pieces. Several people stated that a simple postcard with an image that just blew them away was their favorite (recent) promo. On the other hand, many people said that most of what they get are promos that do not show great images and they get deleted or trashed without a second thought. Several also mentioned that design can only do so much--while it is important to use great design in all your marketing tools, if the images aren’t fantastic, good design won’t hide their lack of quality. Lipstick on a pig, if you will. So in the end, it really is all about your work--the image. If you aren’t sure what is your best work, in your target audience’s eyes, ask around or hire a pro to help you make these decisions. Whichever way you go, remember that it’s your shot at getting the kind of work you want--don’t waste it by sending anything that isn’t your best.

A note for full disclosure: I need to thank the fine folks at ADBASE for their help in distributing the emails for the survey. They did so using their new Emailer service but did not, in any way, ask for preferential treatment or good “spin” in this article. They also provided general information and data on CTRs, Bounce Rates, and other email-related statistics like the fact that only 20-30% of promotional emails are ever opened and to expect higher results will result in disappointment.

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