

Finally! A Great Creative Solution for VDP — Get Ready to Smile!

By Frank McPherson

Looking for a way to jump into personalization in 2005? Consider Direct Smile, a unique personalization program that has won four major marketing awards. Direct Smile is a completely new way to personalize your documents. Playing on the power of the recipient's name, it allows your customers to see their names created out of anything, from snowflakes to Easter eggs.

Direct Smile is part of a new trend of marketing called "dialogue marketing," which is ability to use communications to create a dialogue with your customer. In this, dialogue marketing is one component of the larger Customer Relationship Marketing (CRM) concept, which has proven benefits for customer retention, customer loyalty, and corporate branding. Direct Smile brings that power to print.

What is unique about these programs — and what differentiates them from traditional variable data programs — is their tremendous creativity and, consequently, their ability to get recipients to smile. Imagine receiving a marketing communication that has your name scratched into the bark of a tree, scattered in colorful autumn leaves, or puffed into clouds in a clear blue sky.

Perhaps it is not surprising that many of these programs have response rates of 28-30%.

Best Applications

As with all variable data, Direct Smile programs are most effective when used as part of a larger CRM campaign. As a few idea starters, you might consider the following applications:

Personal greetings — When you send a card to a family member or other significant person in your life, you address them by name. This works in business relationships, too. Why not send a personal birthday, Easter, Christmas, or New Year's greeting with the person's name spelled out in birthday candles, Easter eggs, or snowflakes? Direct Smile allows you to speak directly to every individual with emotion, cheaply and with minimum effort.

Customer rewards — The same goes for customer reward programs. If you really want to reward someone for higher spending, being a loyal customer, or some other behavior, it's much more powerful when you speak to them by name. When your customer spends over a certain amount, why not send them a "thank you" card in which you show your appreciation personally?

Customer activation — Everybody likes to be remembered. Say you want to encourage customers who have not made a purchase from you in a long time to visit you again. Referring to the customer by name is a proven tool for motivating them to call again. You might also include an individual voucher for a special offer — again, addressing the customer by name — integrated directly in the card.

Customer loyalty — It's always easier to keep a good customer than to find new ones. So customer loyalty programs are a key application for variable data. Make your customers feel special. Let them know about benefits they receive from doing business with you. Sending personal communications and mentioning customers by name, with images tailored directly to their needs, preferences, and demographics, creates a strong customer bond.

Public relations — Do you need to present a new product to the media? Invite journalists to cover a company event? Editors get lots of generic direct mail pieces. Personalizing the invitation to the editor — addressing them by name in a unique font (say, spelled out in ballpoint pens) — is guaranteed to get your announcement to stand out among the rest.

These are just a few examples. There are many more.

How Does It Work?

How does Direct Smile work? You, the marketer, determine the content, mailing dates, and dispatch frequency. When it comes to crazy, smile-producing fonts, you can choose from standard fonts in the Direct Smile catalog or the printer licensee can create custom fonts for you. The resulting documents can be output to digital print, email, or PDF.

In addition to creating unique fonts, Direct Smile software can also handle complex manipulations of variable data, allowing marketers to customize the entire document.

Direct Smile is Winner of the 2004 Drupa Innovation Award, the first time this award has been given to VDP software. In addition, programs created with Direct Smile have won numerous awards. The marketing world is noticing that, finally, we have the ultimate in design and creative variable data print.

Real-World Example

M-Real, a paper manufacturer in Europe provides an excellent example of when personalized, intimate communications can have a powerful marketing impact. In this case, the ability to rebuild customer relationships following a brand and corporate image problem.

When a new product failed to deliver to expectation, M-Real faced the challenge of launching a replacement product. It realized that the key to a successful recovery of the situation would be its ability to rebuild its image across Europe and generate a positive perception among potential purchasers for the new replacement product.

The program utilized a five-step image personalised campaign with variable elements reaching from local testimonials, local merchants' logos, and different languages, as well as personal Web response codes and a personalised give-away. The program was spread over 12 countries and printed in four languages.

Recipients' names were personalized in a variety of unique fonts, ranging from sunflowers to petals on the back of a naked woman, to reflect the theme of each piece. In the text, M-Real apologized for any inconvenience the change in paper might have caused, delivered basic information about the new paper, and invited customers to order a personal information and sample kit at no charge.

M-Real punctuated the campaign with a highly emotional, image-personalised postcard that included an individual Web response code that took the recipient to a personalised Web site where they could order the free kit with a single click. The form with the client data was already filled out. Customers responding to the promotion were sent a high-value package, including comprehensive information, paper swatches, a personalised mousepad, and a fully personalised voucher for a free ream of paper.

The program achieved a 28% response rate and was awarded Best Digital Printed Campaign at Mailingtag 2003.

How Far We've Come

Direct Smile show just how far variable data printing has come. And while we've given some idea-starters here, the applications really are endless. No longer are marketers limited by traditional fonts and image swaps. Now that you can communicate with customers using fonts created out of literally any image, we see this as a breakthrough that will energize the variable data printing market in entirely new ways.

Custom Data Imaging Corporation is the first licensee in Canada to offer Direct Smile.