

## **Combining Print and Internet: Personalized URLs**

By Frank McPherson

With the growth of the Internet, many Internet applications have started to replace traditional print due to their immediacy, cost-effectiveness, and tracking abilities. Consequently, many marketers think of the Internet and print as antagonists. Not true, especially when it comes to variable data print.

VDP and the Internet can work together like close dance partners, complementing and reinforcing one another's strengths and creating a marketing combination far more powerful than either medium used alone.

One effective way to take advantage of the print-Internet combination is by adding personalized URLs to your direct mail pieces. When recipients of the direct mail piece log into their PURL, the information from your customer's database is used to tailor the Web page experience to that specific recipient. They are referenced by name, and the graphics, text, offers, and other information on the page can also be tailored to them, personally, based on the information in your customer's database.

Moreover, once the individual logs in, the Web site can track the respondent's activity and continue to tailor the information based on their behavior. This information can also be used to further tailor future print and Internet communications.

### **Personalizing the Experience**

Many of us have experienced this type of personalization online when we visit sites like Amazon.com, which welcomes returning customers by name, with advertising, product suggestions, and other content tailored to that individual based on past viewing and purchasing activity.

While these sites personalize this information using Internet cookies, personalized URLs work somewhat differently. PURLs are assigned to individual recipients based on the customer's database and are included either as the only variable or as one of several variable fields in the larger VDP communication.

By combining both media, marketers can take advantage of the comfort, tangible appeal, and quality of commercial print, plus the immediacy, tracking, and instant response of the Internet.

### **Making It Easy to Respond**

The Internet component also allows recipients to immediately respond to offers by ordering products, signing up for programs, or others immediately, without having to take an additional step,

such as mailing forms or making phone calls, that can derail the effectiveness of the campaign.

It is a well-known fact that the more steps a respondent has to take, the less likely they are to respond to an offer. This is why pre-filled response cards (another popular VDP application) dramatically increase responses, since recipients can simply tear them off and drop them in the mail. The easier you make it to respond, the more likely it is that recipients will do it.

This is also the power of personalized URLs. Once recipients log in to a personalized Web site, if they like what they see, responding is as easy as clicking a button.

### **PURLs in Practice**

Many of these applications are so successful that few customers are willing to release their results. But one financial company did release the results of one of its campaigns that I will share.

The bank was facing a significant business challenge. It had been trying for some time to switch its customers from hard copy statements to Web-based administration so that it could reduce postal and printing costs and traffic to its call center. Previous campaigns using generic letters and hard copy sign-up sheets had been unsuccessful.

As a new approach, it decided to switch to a variable data direct mail campaign, with each mailer containing a personalized URL that customers could log into for more information and demonstrations, as well as to sign up.

The program started with a branded Web site that demonstrated the bank's online service package and allowed customers to enroll online. The program created personalized sites for each customer, addressing that customer by name and demonstrating the features and benefits of secure online account management, including account summaries, activity reports, and account history. Not only did this provide a practical demonstration of the system to customers, but it also allowed the bank to monitor and track its customers' responses, providing it with an excellent monitor of how well the program was working.

The next step was to create the print marketing piece, which included more than a dozen fields of variable data, as well as the customer's personalized URL. Once the customer logged in to the personalized Web page, the system tracked who responded, where they went on the site, and what they did once they got there.

The results? The bank increased enrollment from .4% to 2.5%, an increase of 625% over its previous marketing methods. Of those who went to the site, eight out of 10 enrolled.

### **The Power of Two**

This is just one example of an application that is quickly gaining popularity among marketers. The reason is obvious - it combines the best attributes of both print and the Internet to create a responsive and personalized solution for interacting with customers. Moreover, you don't need to have an extensive customer database to justify creating PURLs, so they make both terrific 1 to1 customer interfacing tools and prospecting tools for creating and building databases.

You can also take advantage of these applications without extensive knowledge of VDP. The direct mail pieces on which the PURLs are printed can be as sophisticated as dozens of fields of variable data or as simple as name, address, and PURL. This puts these applications within the realm of practical achievability of any marketer, with any size database, at any level of sophistication.

So before you dismiss print in favor of the Internet, consider the power of using them together.