

March Is For Mailing

Purchasing On The Internet Is Growing

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School secretaries are responsible for the distribution of all catalogs and other third class mail, for the most part placing the mail in teacher's mail boxes. They often make decisions regarding how to distribute the mail, sometimes following the label instructions, other times using their own judgment. They handle many purchase requisitions and are integral to the purchasing process in schools. That's why every other year School Market Research Institute, Inc. surveys several hundred school secretaries in order to identify new and changing trends in the ways schools purchase.

Our most recent survey of school secretaries conducted this past summer revealed more than half (55%) of all respondents predicted that sales of instructional materials would remain the same for the 2006-2007 school year as they were for 2005-06. Sixteen percent anticipated sales somewhat higher than last year.

Over half (52%) of the responding school secretaries identified first year teachers as most likely to purchase supplemental materials. First year teachers include both teachers new to the profession and teachers who have been in the profession, but find themselves in a new job. In either case, they are the least likely to have materials on hand to supplement their basal program.

Understandably, to school secretaries less mail is better. When asked how often catalogs should be sent to schools the responses were divided

between once and twice. There was no significant difference between catalogs promoting instructional materials or those promoting school supplies.

Best Timing For Fall Catalogs

The majority of school secretaries (65%) said the best time to receive catalogs and direct mail was before or just as school opened. If one assumes the average delivery time of direct mail is 10 working days, this argues for mail dates of mid-August or earlier.

It makes sense that educators would prefer to receive promotion materials prior to the start of school rather than after as teachers would want to receive their instructional materials sooner rather than later. Many times, teachers cannot precisely anticipate the timing of their teaching plan so it stands to reason that the sooner they order their materials the sooner they can expect to receive them. With the materials on hand, there is the least possibility of disruption to the teaching process.

Best Timing For Spring Catalogs

School secretaries overwhelmingly advocated three months (26%) and 2 months (18%) before school closes as the time to receive catalogs in the spring. Assuming that most schools close in mid to late June, this suggests early March to early April as the preferred mailing dates.

Budgets for the overwhelming majority of schools (98%) roll over on June 30 or July 1. March and April are ideally suited to the budgeting process as these months are early enough to accommodate an orderly process of

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approving and managing expenditures. Interestingly, when school marketers were surveyed and asked in which month they made their largest promotion effort, only 9% indicated March and 2% indicated April. The largest responses from school marketers were January (21%) and August (20%).

A possible reason for this disconnect lies with the difficulty in tracking responses back to a specific catalog or direct mail promotion in order to determine the productivity of that particular mailing. Many companies have had success overcoming this issue using the technique of prefixing or suffixing their item codes or sku's. For simplicity, these prefixes and suffixes are for marketing reports only and should not effect inventory or accounting records.

Most companies report virtually 100% tracking using this technique and it has lead many to alter how they allocate their promotion efforts over the course of a year. One common (though not universal) finding is the productivity of mailing in the months of March, April, and May. In a number of cases, March has proven to be more productive than either January or August.

Experience indicates that there are considerably more opportunities to mail profitably into the school market, many more than school secretaries would like to see. But one can only make these determinations if one can track the sales back to each promotional effort. Herein lays the secret to growth and increased market share.

Promotion events (catalog mailings) have a limited life. In order to maximize sales, more catalogs must be mailed at proper intervals. The determination of the mailing dates and quantities comes about through tracking sales results (as previously described), making adjustments, and tracking again. The largest companies and the most profitable companies are

those that know how many mailings they can make at what quantities and on which dates in order to accomplish their business plans with the least amount of risk.

Internet Usage Almost Doubles

According to SMRI's 2006 school secretary survey, the Internet almost doubled as the most important channel for learning about and purchasing educational products. While all other channels declined from the 2004 survey results, catalogs suffered the greatest decline as a preferred channel due to the growing popularity of the Internet.

This is a particularly significant finding due to the fact that school marketers continue to lag behind consumer and business-to-business marketers in the application of new marketing techniques and strategies. The "typical" marketing plan outside of the school market includes reasonably intensive search marketing which encompasses ad word marketing and website embedded organic search marketing.

Many school marketers still have first generation web sites that often are not kept up to date or do not make it easy to order. Clearly, school

secretaries are telling us that times are changing. Today's teachers are comfortable with technology. In fact, they consider it necessary and vital. According to Market Data Retrieval's K-12 Technology Review 2005, 84% of schools had computers with high-speed access to the Internet and 87% of teachers had access to e-mail in their classrooms. Fifty-four percent of teachers reported purchasing educational products online and 62% reported purchasing personal products online.

Our secretary survey results show this trend is continuing and enjoying rapid growth. It's time for all school marketers to embrace the Internet in their marketing plans.

Bob Stimolo, NSSEA's Official School Market Consultant, is President of School Market Research Institute (SMRI) a direct marketing agency dedicated to helping school marketers succeed. Bob will be conducting his next full day seminar on school marketing on May 10, 2007. Visit www.smriinc.com, e-mail rstimolo@smriinc.com, or call 1-800-838-3444 for more information.

The most important channels when purchasing educational products according to school secretaries.

