STEP 2 — EASE

Make it easy and show your customer

As I mentioned earlier, at Blue-Chip we regularly sent out promotional mailings to our customer database. It was our long-term advertising campaign. Typically, there was a reply element (and a potential reward), designed to get the recipient to think about our message. Figure 15 shows an example. With mailings like this, we usually got a response ranging between 25 and 50 percent.

For our mailing way back in June 1994, following a heated debate, we decided to split the database into two equal test cells. I'll call these mailback and faxback. In the mailback cell, the recipient could enter by the normal method: a prepaid envelope. In the faxback cell, the recipient could *only* respond by faxing the form back to one of our offices.

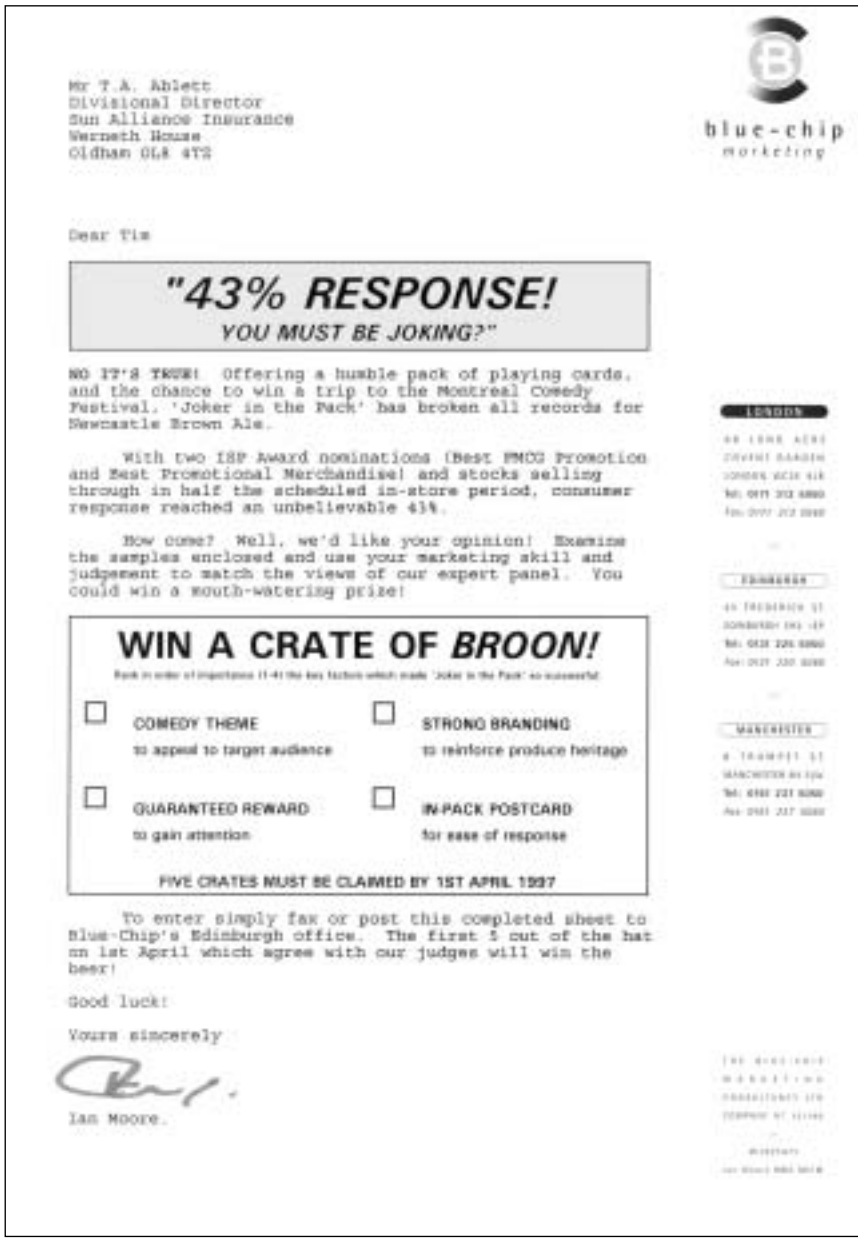
The mailing was aimed at somebody probably quite like you: working in a modern environment, at a desk, in marketing, or sales, or business. The argument went that it would be easier to reply by fax than to fiddle about with an envelope. I wasn't convinced.

You know what I'm going to tell you. Mailback response 30 percent. Faxback response 6 percent. The mailback cell outperformed the otherwise identical faxback cell by a factor of five — 500 percent better.

How come?

As I had suspected, actually we had made it *harder* for our customer to reply. When you think about it, this is common sense. Few people have a fax machine right next to their desk. Indeed, for staff in larger companies, the departmental fax could be some distance away. Sometimes (and more so in those days) there were even rules about who was allowed to use it.

But every firm has a system that conveys mail to and from in- and out-trays. So asking our customer to reply by mail was simply going with the established flow — and almost zero calories required. Expecting them to



Mr T.A. Ablett
Divisional Director
Sun Alliance Insurance
Warneth House
Oldham OL8 4TZ

blue-chip
marketing

Dear Tim

"43% RESPONSE!
YOU MUST BE JOKING?"

NO IT'S TRUE! Offering a humble pack of playing cards, and the chance to win a trip to the Montreal Comedy Festival, 'Joker in the Pack' has broken all records for Newcastle Brown Ale.

With two ISP Award nominations (Best FMCG Promotion and Best Promotional Merchandise) and stocks selling through in half the scheduled in-store period, consumer response reached an unbelievable 43%.

How come? Well, we'd like your opinion! Examine the samples enclosed and use your marketing skill and judgement to match the views of our expert panel. You could win a mouth-watering prize!

WIN A CRATE OF *BROON!*

Rank in order of importance (1-4) the key factors which made 'Joker in the Pack' so successful

☐ COMEDY THEME
to appeal to target audience

☐ STRONG BRANDING
to reinforce produce heritage

☐ GUARANTEED REWARD
to gain attention

☐ IN-PACK POSTCARD
for ease of response

FIVE CRATES MUST BE CLAIMED BY 1ST APRIL 1997

To enter simply fax or post this completed sheet to Blue-Chip's Edinburgh office. The first 5 out of the hat on 1st April which agree with our judges will win the beer!

Good luck!

Yours sincerely

Ian Moore.

Figure 15 *Example of an "advertising" mailing sent out by Blue-Chip Marketing to its customers and contacts. Where practical, this would also include a sample of the actual campaign materials. A response level of 50 percent was not unusual. This program was an important testbed for developing effective techniques.*

toddle off to the fax machine proved to be a greater barrier than might have been imagined.

Thereafter, we never depended on a solely faxback reply mechanism. Sometimes we kept it in as an option, but the faxed-back component rarely accounted for more than a tenth of the total number of replies we received.

Navigation, ease, and action

There are times when navigation and ease become hard to tell apart. If you think back to the tear-off reply card in the last chapter, you could argue that it deals with navigation and ease simultaneously. At a glance, it tells the customer what to do and makes it easy to do it.

When you create a piece of marketing communication, you may not even separate navigation and ease in your thinking. However, when it comes to *evaluating* an ad or a mailing or a brochure, you can certainly treat the two steps independently. And there is a clear distinction.

While navigation focuses on the customer's thought process, ease emphasizes the physical aspects of the communication piece (or the sales environment) and the customer's practical interaction with it. Navigation concerns the *what*, ease the *how*.

If the race to the sale were a steeplechase, navigation would be the plan of the course and the orders to the jockeys; ease would be the hurdles, ditches, and protesters en route.

I'm pretty certain that our customers in the faxback cell gained just as good an understanding as those in the mailback cell. The core messages and enclosed materials were the same. I think we made quite a good job of navigation. Recipients knew what to think about and what to do. The directions were clear. But when it came to action, the hurdles proved to be a significant deterrent.

Looking at that last sentence, you might wonder if ease is interchangeable with the traditional *action* of old AIDA. Aren't they just the same thing in a different order?

In fact, there is no paradox (but you'd be right to raise the question). To continue with the steeplechase metaphor, ease is all about smoothing the

course that lies ahead of your customer. In particular, it focuses on those first few moments when they set off and interact with your marketing.

However, ease doesn't necessarily get them across the finishing line. And that's where the distinction lies in my mind. As you can read in Step 7, action concerns the psychological matter of closing the sale. Meanwhile, in this chapter I'd like to highlight the wide-ranging practical obstacles that cause many customers to fall by the wayside.

The tipping point

As the faxback "calamity" demonstrated, there can be a fine line between an ordinary (6 percent) and an extraordinary (30 percent) response. The difference was a modest prepaid envelope. There are great gains to be made by finding such tipping points. Deal with ease upfront, and you may save a fortune later when the time comes for action.

In effect, we were able to increase the response of faxbackers simply by giving them an envelope and the option to reply by post. But say we'd persevered with faxback only: I wonder what value of reward it would have taken to achieve the same fivefold uplift?

Free trial offers

Here's another startling contrast provided by some equally unobtrusive hurdles. Take a close look at the shelves in your local supermarket (or, to save time, Figure 16 overleaf) and it shouldn't be long before you find products advertising the following offers, or "mechanics" as they are called in sales promotion parlance:

1 "Try me free," or
2 "Money-back guarantee"

To all intents and purposes, these two offers are identical. With the try-me-free mechanic, customers mail in a proof of purchase and get their purchase price refunded. With the money-back-guarantee mechanic... spot

Figure 16 *For every 300 customers who apply for a try-me-free offer, only 1 responds to a money-back-guarantee offer. Indeed, the ratio can be greater than 1,300 to 1. Reproduced by kind permission of Lever Fabergé Ltd and Bendicks (Mayfair) Ltd.*

the difference! Customers mail in a proof of purchase and get their purchase price refunded.

Despite this similarity, for every 300 customers who apply for a try-me-free offer, only 1 applies for a money-back guarantee.

It's strange, but true. "Try me free" will typically get a 30 percent response, while a money-back guarantee struggles to a barely measurable 0.1 percent. (I know of a try-me-free offer from the Netherlands that reached 40 percent[1] and a money-back guarantee in the UK that came in at a microscopic 0.03 percent[2] — that's a ratio of over 1,300 to 1.)

The explanation lies in a series of hurdles that are not immediately apparent. When customers pick up the money-back-guarantee offer they see the proposition: "100 percent satisfaction or your money back." That makes it a no-risk purchase, just like a try-me-free offer.

But what they don't see is the small print: "To claim your refund return your till receipt with your purchase of Bloggo circled, along with the barcode cut from the bottom of the pack, plus a letter stating in not less than 30 words the reason for your dissatisfaction."

It's the high hurdles.

I don't know about you, but my till receipt rarely seems to make it back to the house. Then there's the barcode conundrum — how do you cut it out until you've finished using the product? (And how do you remember until then?) Finally there's the minor essay, when you have to eke out your very flimsy (though legitimate) excuse for not quite experiencing 100 percent satisfaction. No wonder hardly anyone bothers.

OK, that's not entirely true. When we ran the money-back-guarantee mechanic for the 1996 launch of a new tissue brand, 8,812 customers did bother. However, although this was one of the highest such responses I've seen, at 0.3 percent, it was still 100 times less than we'd have expected for a try-me-free offer.

In my experience, in most cases — and I'm talking leading brands of bread and beer, soap and soup, and tissues and loo rolls — money-back guarantees consistently come in below 0.1 percent response.

Despite its low response, the money-back-guarantee mechanic has its place in the marketer's toolkit. It's a low-cost way of making a bold claim to the customer. It proclaims product confidence and customer care in one fell swoop.

It's really on-pack *advertising* masquerading as a sales promotion offer. In 2003 Lever Fabergé built an impressive through-the-line campaign around the Surf Promise (see Figure 16). By naming 99 top stains, its customers were invited to think beyond the bland standard "gets your clothes cleaner."

But left to their own devices, money-back guarantees aren't a behavior-shifting promotional technique. If it's in-store brand switching or trial you're after, you need to remove the hurdles. That means try-me-free offers. Don't ask for a till receipt — just refund the maximum retail price. Let your customer reply on an easily removable (and writable-on) piece of the packaging. Make the claim address freepost, and short and simple. And refund the postage as well as the purchase price.

Tear-strips

In 1985 I joined Cadbury's, as a product group manager in charge of assortments. The company let me loose on huge and famous brands, including Milk Tray and Roses. I got rid of those horrible cracknel things from Milk Tray and fought a rearguard action to keep the marzipan in Roses. (It was the most expensive choc, so the accountants wanted to ditch it, but in research 17 percent of customers said they bought Roses because of the marzipan. I noticed that it quietly disappeared a few years later.)

At the time I was recruited, the company was about to launch an exciting new product, designed to replace the aging Bournville Selection and rejuvenate Cadbury's sales in the dark chocolate assortment sector. The new brand was named Biarritz and — as you may recall — it had a striking metallic blue triangular box.

The launch became one of my projects. Biarritz gained a 21 percent market share within four months and grew the sector by 16 percent in its first year. In the *Super Marketing* Awards it was voted the best new confectionery product of 1986 (see Figure 17).[3]

Biarritz, however, was not a long-term survivor and was withdrawn a few years later. While I believe that its ultimate failure was largely due to positioning,[4] there was one practical issue that emerged at the outset.

Just a few days after joining the company, I remember a production sample appearing on my desk, hot off the new wrapping machine. It looked great. Since I had a marketing pass, I was allowed to take products off company premises. That evening (for research purposes) I gave the pack to a girlfriend.

Opening a box of chocolates is supposed to be a romantic moment. But despite my friend's impressive talons, we eventually had to resort to a kitchen knife to get through the polythene shrinkwrap.

The next morning I went to see my boss. As the new boy I was a bit nervous and didn't want to appear critical. I explained about my ruined date and asked if we'd thought about including a tear-strip.

To my surprise he said of course, but I should know that the factory already wanted to kill us (for making it manufacture and wrap a stupid

Figure 17 *Cadbury's Biarritz — great once you could get into the box. Reproduced by kind permission of Cadbury Schweppes plc.*

impractical triangular box) and I could imagine what would happen if I dared raise it at the next production meeting. I got the message.

At the said meeting I opened by apologizing for taking a career in marketing, and explained that I had always wanted to be an engineer. Seriously though, the production team were a great bunch and had sweated night and day to get the complex high-speed wrapping machine installed and commissioned to schedule. The oversight was a classic marketing Catch 22 — none of our other lines had tear-strips, so no one guessed that Biarritz would need one.

Eventually a tear-strip was introduced, but in vain. The majority of boxed chocolates are sold between Christmas and Easter, and all of the stock produced during the launch year was of the non-tear-strip variety. Most customers only buy one or two packs of assortments in a 12-month period, and a large proportion of these are given as gifts *by* elderly women *to* elderly women.

Even if these customers *didn't* suffer from arthritis, getting into the box was no picnic, as my girlfriend had demonstrated. With scores of

alternative brands and products to choose from, when next time to buy came around, the first impression left by the previous year's Biarritz was probably already starting to tell.

The trouble with packaging

Plainly, my chocolate-box tale is about packaging — manufacturing, even — on the face of it, perhaps a bit of a diversion from the main theme of marketing communications. However, this book is really about *sales*. After all, that's why we use marketing communications in the first place.

What is more, packaging often carries marketing communications and certainly can play a role in encouraging (or discouraging) customers to buy a product again.

We all have our pet hates when it comes to packaging. For me it's Imperial Leather — a product I like, but just try getting the soap out of the wrapper when you've got wet hands. (Or even when you haven't.) Perhaps it's because it's another tear-strip issue that it bugs me so much. Extracting toothbrushes from their blister-packs can require tools. For years, my older relations have fumed about milk packaging — a positive triumph of the producer over the consumer. And I remember Paul Merton consigning videotapes into Room 101 to tumultuous applause. (Tear-strip again, you see.)

Of course, there are many more examples of brilliant packaging that we don't even notice because they're so convenient. How about Twining's tea bags with their immaculately perforated caddies? P&G's detergent tabs are pretty nifty, too. And I like egg boxes. (But why don't they tell kitchen duffers like me how to make scrambled eggs, or even how long to boil for that perfect soft center? I'm sure I'd buy far more if I knew what to do with them.)

For Warburtons, to coincide with a campaign entitled "Respect the Bread," we invented expanding cartons rather like wine carriers, so that customers could get extra loaves from shelf to home without crushing them under a bootful of groceries.

A plea to design engineers

Last year I made a presentation at the request of the managing director of a market-leading British food producer. His question was how sales promotion could become a more potent weapon in the company's armory (think of free gizmos in breakfast cereals and cash prizes in crisp packets).

I'd got lots of ideas, but unfortunately there were stumbling blocks:

1 Insertion of free gifts or gamecards: not possible.
2 Random printing of winning numbers or prizes inside the packaging: not possible.
3 Online labeling or banding of free gifts: not possible.

Sadly — although understandably — few companies approach production with a "marketing-engineering" hat on. Yet they spend millions downstream on sales promotions. If I were launching a product and buying new equipment on which to make it, I would insist that maximum scope for marketing communication was designed in to the manufacturing operation.

As it is, people in the sales promotion business have to invent ever more ingenious ways of turning existing products and packaging into Heath Robinson-type communication devices. Codes hidden beneath ringpulls on beer and soft drinks. Winning cans that sing when you open them. Labels that reveal your prize when you chill the bottle. Foam bath that changes colour on contact with water.

During the time we worked on Kleenex tissues, we had the idea of using the tear-out oval as a reply postcard. This is the bit you remove from the top of the pack to get at the tissues and throw away. On the mansize packs the oval was large and thick enough to satisfy the Post Office's mailing requirements. All it needed was for the packaging supplier to be able to print one color on the inside of the box.

After a few years this went ahead. We tested a free-prize-draw mechanic for the annual hay fever promotion. The result? A record response, with applications for our promotion peaking at a staggering 112,000 per week. (And see Figure 18 overleaf for a similar example.)

Figure 18 *Reply made easy. A "postcard" printed on the inside of Newcastle Brown Ale packaging. This device undoubtedly contributed toward the extraordinary (43.2 percent) response that this campaign generated. Reproduced by kind permission of Scottish & Newcastle plc.*

We shouldn't have been surprised. All of a sudden it was so easy for the customer. Hurdles were minimized.

And even if your customer ignores the promotional message in the store, there's a second chance to gain their involvement as they open the pack. Indeed, many on-pack offers are created with this in mind. We used to design Kellogg promotions for reading at the breakfast table rather than beside the supermarket shelf.

If you can make participation in your sales promotions easy, they will be much more effective. If you can't, and the limitations of your product and packaging mean hurdles and hassle for your customer, perhaps you should think again. You might only serve to irritate them. A few days ago I opened a new tub of margarine to find that the slip of greaseproof paper beneath the lid was in fact a 50p coupon. Nice offer… except that the underside was covered in low-fat spread.

The lottery

The UK National Lottery has come in for a deal of unjustified criticism, mainly from people with little understanding of brands and marketing. As a product launch — in most other categories — it would be viewed in many respects as a considerable success. However, in terms of ease, it's an illuminating case study.

A few pages earlier I used the expression "triumph of the producer over the consumer" to describe milk packaging. The lottery is another cracking example of this. I'm looking now at an entry form (a "play slip," they euphemistically call it) and it rather reminds me of a multiple-choice exam paper.

I'm a non-player of the lottery, so it's people like me they want. A while back, for the launch of the rebranded Lotto, I received a door-drop communication, apparently one of 14 million sent out.

The navigation step I got (at least I thought I did): "They've sent me a free entry, already made out with random numbers, to take down to my local retailer."

From a marketing point of view it seemed like a sensible exercise in free sampling. Studies have shown that free samples can create 40 percent more trial. And free-sample users tend to exhibit greater levels of repeat purchase (+12 percent), leading to almost 60 percent higher long-term penetration.[5]

However, when I read the body copy on the leaflet, I realized that it wasn't a free entry — I still had to pay the £1. I'd just assumed that they'd made it that bit easier and had offered me a carrot to get me over the remaining hurdles.

Of course, if you send out 14 million free entries (that's more than every other home receiving one) for an established product, you'll get a massive take-up by existing customers. Not very good use of lottery funds. So I can appreciate why they didn't do it.

But that doesn't help me as a non-user. I need to understand and experience just how easy it is and I need a bit of a shove to do so. Perhaps the budget would have been better spent paying a polite salesperson to single me out in the foyer of my local supermarket?

Why do I need help? Have a look at a play slip through the eyes of a first-time customer. It's been designed not for the human that plays it, but for the robot that processes it.

For a start, I wonder why it looks like an official form. It's not exactly the most inviting first impression. Then why do you have to mark six numbers when they are arranged in four rows and twelve columns? (It doesn't tell you how many to select.) Next you have to draw an unfamiliar horizontal line (when you usually choose things by ticking them). A tick is much easier. And why all the small print on the back?

Oh! It's the instructions. What to do is set in the 5-point type that marketers normally reserve for the stuff they don't want their customer to read (eventually I found the bit about six numbers), plus a plethora of options I could never have guessed at. It seems I don't have to mark any horizontal lines at all if I don't want to (I just mark the Lucky Dip box). I can enter draws on different days and in different weeks. Further down are even more instructions about another game entirely, called Lotto Extra — but by now my eyesight's starting to give up.

There are almost 1,000 words printed on the back of the play slip. That's about three pages of the average novel crammed into a quarter of the space. Over the years I've devised scores of gamecards and I worry if the wordcount gets past 50. (See Figure 19 for an example.)

If the lottery play slip were designed with ease in mind (with the *customer* in mind, instead of that darned robot), it would look decidedly different. Maybe there wouldn't even be a game piece. Since the entry has to go into a computer, why can't you play directly at a terminal?

It could be really fun, with great graphics. Your confirmation slip could include your horoscope or tell your fortune. We all use technology these days. Young people are experts. If our banks trust us to take money out, surely the lottery could trust us to pay money in? Perhaps you could even enter via ATMs — places you already go to, with cash on tap! Then you could play 24 hours a day, when it suited you.[6]

This sort of thing would help to overcome another of the lottery's hurdles — the queue. The times I've had my car sitting on a yellow line while I'm buying milk from a convenience store and had to wait in the same

Figure 19 *An in-bar gamecard designed by Blue-Chip Marketing for Morgan's Spiced. Note how it sticks to the bare necessities. Reproduced by kind permission of Diageo.*

queue as customers getting their lottery slips processed. That puts me right off. Especially when I'd be worried about having made a mistake and people grumbling behind me. In my local Sainsbury's there's one lottery terminal at the cigarettes counter — and nearly always a queue — and in the foyer a bank of six loyalty-card terminals usually standing idle.

Ease in the service sector

Think about this: A study of customer-service programs by General Motors led to the conclusion that while a satisfied customer will positively influence eight others (and spur at least one more sale), a soured customer will negatively affect 25 people.[7]

In the retail environment, one of the challenges you face if you wish to improve your marketing communications is actually defining what they are. Sometimes it's hard to draw any clear distinction between communications, customer service, and selling. My local bar is a good example of this and always reminds me of the power of ease in the buying process.

I've known the head barman for a number of years — but only in the pub. (Just once I met him in the street, the worse for wear, on his way back from a wake. He was muttering "Wrath of God" and I don't think he remembers the incident.)

The pub itself is a large, traditional city watering-hole, and often there are 50 or 60 drinkers there, even on a quiet weeknight. Nevertheless, once we've got our first round and found some seats, that's it — job done. By this I mean we don't have to — how can I put it? — bother our butts for the rest of the evening.

The barman keeps a regular watch on our beer and when it's nearing its last inch, conveys an inquiring look across the room. My friend Ken and I are in competition to see who can summon a round with the tiniest possible movement in response. At the time of writing Ken is leading with a minor twitch of an eyebrow (an order he claims not to know he'd placed). Within a minute or two, fresh beer arrives.

A couple of months ago I got talking with a guy on a plane. He said that he was in the licensed trade, on his way to spy out some new retail concepts on the continent. That took us on to the subject of table service and I mentioned my local. I said I was amazed that more British pubs didn't do the same thing. I asked him if perhaps it was against some regulations. He said no. I asked if he did it in his pubs. He said no. So I asked if there was a particular reason why not. After quite a few moments deep in thought, he said no.

From a sales point of view, my local clearly scores. With no time wasted queuing at the bar with empty glasses, we reckon we spend 20–25 percent more per visit than on an equivalent night in another pub. What is more, we keep coming back.

The barman scores because we always buy him a couple of drinks — which he takes as tips and supplements his wages. He gets to chat with the customers. We get to chat with him. It's just like in *Cheers*.

I'm not saying that if a bunch of strangers walked in the same level of service would be available. In fact, in this respect the place really fails in its marketing communication. Passing on foot recently, I watched a group of three American couples loitering on the sidewalk, peering through the frosted glass windows and the crack in the big swing doors, trying to work the place out. ("Waddawa do here?") After a minute or so they gave up and wandered away. Yet I'm sure all it needed was a simple door sign: "Visitors welcome. Please order at the bar. Try a free taste of our traditional local beer. Hot pies available too."

The communication of basic navigation and ease represents a huge opportunity in the service sector. Yet the impatient Anglo-Saxon psyche is so often ignored from the selling side of the counter. There are few things more frustrating than waiting anxiously to get *acknowledged* (never mind served) when you're hungry or thirsty or the kids are playing up. No wonder so many people use the fast-food drive-through: you get priority service, in the order that you arrived (paradoxically quite the opposite of the in-store experience).

Direct-response ads

I'm endlessly amazed by television ads where a phone number or web address flashes up briefly at the end. What are the advertisers thinking of? Never mind that you don't have a phone, online laptop, or even a pencil and pad sitting beside you — how do they expect you to remember the details long enough to record them in some way?

Spend a few minutes watching daytime television and see how the DRTV (direct-response television) experts operate. These are companies that actually measure their advertising effectiveness by the sales they make. You'll notice how long their (memorable) phone numbers are displayed, often for the full 40 seconds of the ad, and verbally repeated at least two or three times.

Also notice that in 9 out of 10 ads they won't try to confuse you with a web address as well (or even pretend you'll take the trouble to visit one).

Conversely, the presenter in a current elephant.co.uk television ad announces the website address *five times* in 20 seconds (and no

competing phone number). It's equally single-minded, and no doubt equally effective.

I'm also bemused by much of the "off-the-page" advertising that I see. (An apt name, because that's where a lot of it ought to be.) The main off-the-page pitfall seems to be the reply section — the coupon.

Obviously, the best form of coupon is one that you can easily remove, preferably without damaging the ad. In some magazines, you can pay extra and use either a tip-on or a bound-in. A tip-on is simply held in place with a blob of tacky glue. A bound-in is like a perforated mini-page that precedes your ad. Either of these can be extracted with great ease and leave your customer with a postcard in their hand, ready to go. Not surprisingly, they can increase your response levels by up to 10 times.[8]

They can also deliver free samples of your product and are widely used by fragrance companies.

However, there are two practical drawbacks to the use of these techniques. The first is budget — they can treble your production and media costs. The second is flexibility — for instance you can't use them in newspapers.

That means that you often have no choice but to create the coupon *within* the space of the ad itself. Unfortunately, this is where things begin to go awry.

If you think back to what I said about navigation leading design, it's quite clear that the same principle applies to ease. If you're putting a reply device *in* your ad, presumably that's the main purpose *of* your ad. (If it isn't, you're probably trying to achieve too much at once — and you should drop it.)

You want your customer to be able to glance at your ad and see that it's easy to respond. (Remember that this automatically helps with the navigation process.) This objective should be at the top of your design brief. Otherwise your art director may create an ad that looks pretty but doesn't work.

Compare and contrast. Figure 20 is based on three real ads for investment funds, found in the same edition of a consumer money magazine. In each case, to progress toward purchase, the next step for the customer is

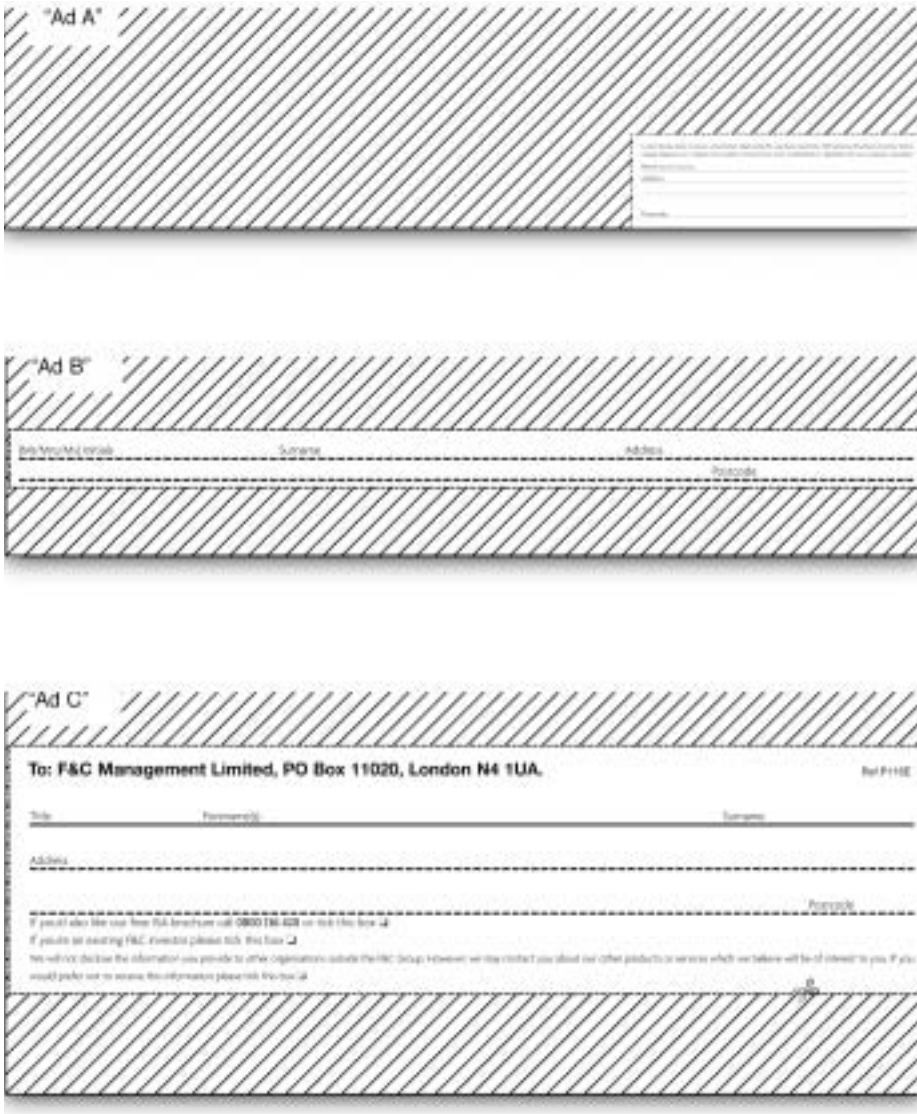


Figure 20 *The reply coupons from three ads for investment funds, placed in the same publication. While they share the objective of generating a customer inquiry, their respective designers clearly did not attach equal importance to ease.*

to send for more information. This, then, would appear to be the main objective of each ad.

Back in the mists of time, marketers found out by trial and error where the best place was to get maximum response from a press coupon: bottom right-hand corner. (Making sure, of course, that your ad is on the right-hand page.)

Common sense, of course. (As usual.) Two snips of the scissors and you've got it. You can even *tear out* a coupon from this position quite easily.

What is more, from a tracking point of view (and by tracking I mean the journey that your eyes and thoughts take as you peruse the ad again in more detail), it's a logical spot to end up.

However, the disguised "ad A" in Figure 20 was actually positioned on a left-hand page. If you've ever tried to cut out a coupon that's placed near the gutter (the center, where the pages are bound together), you'll know that it's tricky. In fact, the coupons in all three ads shown run close to the gutter.

I have examined thousands of applications sent in by customers. I would estimate that more than 90 percent of people are incredibly diligent in the way they cut out coupons and tokens. If you design your coupon in the shape of an octopus, that's how it will come back. You just won't get many replies. Your customers like to do things properly, so the harder you make it, the fewer of them will bother.

Graphic designers, left to their own devices, will often relegate the coupon to a small strip of space that they grudgingly give up. See the disguised "ad B," also in Figure 20. To all intents and purposes, this is unusable.

But when it came to developing "ad C" (the F&C ad, shown in full in Figure 21), I reckon someone stepped back and thought first about ease. The large space allocated to the coupon tells you — at a glance — that the advertiser is serious about wanting a reply. The bold dashed line is printed in red to make it stand out even more, and there's a pair of scissors urging you on. And — unlike ads A and B — there's actually room to complete your name and address in normal-sized handwriting.

Finally, what about the *back* of coupons? I'm surprised that you never see an advertiser buy the space on the reverse of their coupon. Not only is

Figure 21 *"Ad C" from Figure 20. Clearly, the design process was led by ease of response. Reproduced by kind permission of F&C Management Ltd.*

it a second chance to get your message across, but also it makes sure there isn't something more important overleaf that your customer doesn't want to lose by cutting out your coupon.

Conventional advertising

In conventional advertising, no immediate action is required or asked for. So it would be tempting to think that ease doesn't matter. This could be a critical mistake. I believe that your customer thinks about ease even when their purchase may be several months ahead.

In Figures 22 and 23 are two ads featuring binoculars and telescopes, respectively from Opticron, a manufacturer of high-quality optical equipment, and In Focus, a successful optical retail chain. I think it is interesting to analyse how they have dealt with the "upstream" and "downstream" ease challenges in their particular market.

The ads shown were placed in the RSPB's *Birds* magazine, circulated to its more than one million members. These are interested customers who almost certainly take time over each quarterly issue, reading it thoroughly. Navigation should not be too much of a challenge.

However, when it comes to ease, if you've ever bought a pair of binoculars or a telescope (or any technical gizmo, come to that), you'll know that it can be a fraught experience. For what may be a once-in-a-lifetime purchase, and a costly one too, you don't want to make a mistake.

The problem begins with the fact that the average customers — I'll use binoculars as an example — don't know what they need. From personal experience, I'd say that this even applies to relatively experienced users of optical equipment. This raises all sorts of hurdles in your mind.

Take a look at the Opticron ad. Immediately you are reminded that this is a technical product category. Therefore, in a sense by necessity, it's populated with jargon and shorthand (and each company has its own peculiar dialect).

I've been using binoculars almost daily since I was a kid, but there's no way I could confidently order a pair of Opticrons based solely on the coded information available in the ad (although the consolation would be that I'd get an excellent product, whichever I bought).

Figure 22 *How do you strike a balance between information and overload? Opticron recognizes this dilemma and integrates its advertising with that of its trade customers (see Figure 23). Reproduced by kind permission of Opticron.*

Obviously, Opticron knows this. And while I think that the imperfections in its market make it impossible for it ever to produce perfect advertising, it does a pretty good job.

Working in its favor are the dynamics of the buying process. With an average inter-purchase interval of 10 years or more, typical Opticron buyers have probably read many ads before they get around to making a purchase. So any single ad doesn't have to do the job of communicating Opticron's entire 150-strong range and their attributes.

And when the customer's mind (or bank balance) moves into a more active binocular-seeking mode, Opticron is ready with a catalog and a website packed with facts. In this way, Opticron takes responsibility for tackling the 'upstream' ease challenge.

But now, two of the market imperfections I mentioned suddenly raise their ugly heads. The first is that you're still unlikely to spend £649 on a pair of 10 × 42s unless you've looked through them. The second is the task of looking through them. What I mean is the pressure-selling situation that this might entail: at a camera shop that you may never have visited before, with a salesperson of questionable knowledge literally breathing down your neck, in the High Street, in the rain, with suspicious passers-by looking at you askance. Aargh!

In Focus to the rescue. Not only does In Focus have branches at or near popular bird reserves, but it also runs a continuous program of informal field events at similar venues nationwide. You can simply turn up and basically help yourself to an eyeful of a whole range of kit in a real but relaxed setting, and get as much or as little no-obligation advice as you need, both from expert staff and from other customers just like you with whom you can exchange information. Indeed, you don't even have to go out of your way. Expensive binoculars are neither an impulse purchase nor an entry-level product. They are mainly bought by active birders who frequent the very places that In Focus has chosen to present its wares.

As you can see from Figure 23, In Focus devotes a good half of its advertising space to this aspect of the buying process. As a retailer, it has addressed the "downstream" ease challenge head on, and made it central to its marketing and communication strategies.

Figure 23 *Successful independent retailer In Focus concentrates on convenience — a vital point of leverage in the optical equipment market. Indeed, more than half of the space in this ad is devoted to the process of getting trial products into the customer's hands. Reproduced by kind permission of In Focus.*

Read the two ads in tandem — which you often can in the same publication — and they dovetail neatly. The critical hurdles have been identified and presented as solutions to customers long before they buy.

So the lesson? My view is that it's really important to do this sort of "perceived hurdle analysis" on your particular market. (Just ask your customer how they feel, having read your ads.) It could have a radical impact on the way you design your communication. If your customer reads your message and turns the page with more hurdles in their mind than when they began, your marketing is actually "unselling" your products.

Unease on the internet

Your customer won't visit your website just because you've got one. As Seth Godin points out, there are over 2 million corporate websites and — on a good day — about 50 million people surfing the web. That's 25 people per site.[9]

Obviously this average is meaningless in practice, but it does put things into perspective. The vast majority of websites are, to all intents and purposes, completely ignored by their intended audiences. All those marketing budgets lost in cyberspace.

I know of a well-established website, belonging to one of the 25 biggest grocery brands, which by late 2003 was attracting fewer than 5,000 actual visitors per month. (Compare this to the site for *The Sun* newspaper, with 3 million unique visitors per month.[10])

A friend of mine is in charge of the reception services of a borough council catering for over 100,000 citizens. I have visited the operation and it is absolutely inundated — besieged even — by members of the public, jamming the switchboard and arriving in person, all hungry for information. They want to know about stuff ranging from the abolition of water rates to the preservation of water rats. And the team does a sterling job in furnishing answers and directing enquiries to the corresponding rate and rat experts within the council.

There is obviously a huge demand for information and resources provided by government, yet a recent survey by ICM showed that *less than 3 percent* of

the population use the internet for this purpose (while more than two-thirds of adults currently have internet access).[11] Part of the blame has been attributed to the poor design of websites, but I think it's much more basic than that.

For many customers, for many things, the internet is not the easiest route. Why would it be more comfortable to seek out and then wade through a strange website, when you can speak in person to someone you or your brother or sister or aunt or neighbor went to school with?

Books and banks

Searching for books (though not random browsing or deeper consideration) is much easier on the Amazon website than in a conventional bookstore. Amazon is open 24 hours a day and has a seemingly endless list of publications. So if you know what you want and don't need it right now, Amazon's the answer.

Compare this to my branchless bank account. It started with telephone-only access, and I've generally been impressed. I've timed it and it takes under two minutes to make a cash transfer by calling and speaking to a customer service adviser.

More recently I was also given access via the web and encouraged by mailings to use this route. But the site doesn't like my usual browser (a detail I always forget), so I have to exit and go back in using different software, then I have to change my settings so the site fits the screen, and finally go through all the various steps to locate my account. It takes about 10 minutes from going online. (So I generally don't bother.)

If your website can make something your customer already does easier, they'll use it. Otherwise, you're inviting a lower response. If you can go with your customer's flow and speed it up, all well and good, but think twice before you try to divert it just to suit your own purposes.

Ease and the mobile phone

One of the most successful product launches in recent years must have been BBC Radio Five Live, which began in March 1994. I believe a key

factor was that it coincided with the explosion in ownership of mobile phones. (It's difficult to imagine now that in 1990 hardly anybody had one.) What makes good radio is good content: quality information and opinion, from authoritative contributors. In the past, many of these people were at work, maybe on the road — sure, listening to the radio, but with no easy, instantaneous means of making contact.

Before the advent of the mobile (and, to a lesser extent, email), the callers to radio phone-ins were, how can I put it, not very listenable to. Bring on the mobile, and suddenly the *people who know* can tell us how it is. The much-berated referee from a Premiership soccer match, driving home, can call the 606 fans' phone-in to explain his decision. A politician, in her limo between functions, can blow the gaff on the opposition spin. You or I can help other motorists by reporting in real time the latest jam at Spaghetti Junction.

It no longer has to be a phone-in, as such. Recently I heard Peter Allen, the co-presenter of the *Drive* news show, mocking someone for saying "the west coast of Norfolk." Within minutes he'd been flamed by scores of listeners pointing out that of course the county of Norfolk has a west coast — it borders the Wash. Now when the presenters want to know something, they just ask — and Encyclopedia Britain answers in a flash.

The mobile has created ease. If you can tap into it, it's a powerful marketing tool. Here's a simple example concerning beer.

Text 'n' win

Over the last few decades the drinks industry has poured millions of pounds down the on-trade promotions drain. (The on-trade means bars, clubs, restaurants, and hotels with a license to serve alcohol on the premises.) A couple of years back I remember a discussion with the managing director of Carlsberg-Tetley, Vincent Kelly. He said to me: "You don't want to know how much we spend on in-bar marketing." Then he added, with a large measure of cynicism: "But have you ever actually seen a promotion in a pub?"

Of course I had, but I knew what he meant: The majority of kits lie gathering dust in the cellar. The problem goes like this: The publican won't fea-

ture your brand unless your salesperson goes in with a promotion kit. But in practice, the bar staff often won't run the promotion if it involves any work or admin on their part (such as handing out scratchcards, or stamping a collector card for each drink purchased, or judging winners and giving out prizes). And resistance grows during peak sales periods — just when you most want to promote.

More recently I was chatting with Stephen Crawley, managing director of Edinburgh's Caledonian Brewery. The company had just won the CAMRA Champion Beer Award for its delicious Deuchars IPA brand. It wanted to promote this great triumph during the time of the Rugby Six Nations Championship, when the city's pubs become inundated by thousands of visiting drinkers.

I said I was concerned about the ease issues and my suggestion was that we should create an in-bar *advertising* campaign, rather than a promotion that nobody would run and nobody would enter. (At best it would get stomped underfoot.) Of course, this needed to *look* like a promotion, else the trade wouldn't take it in the first place (what a conundrum!). So we included a simple text 'n' win offer in the body copy of a series of large poster ads (see Figure 24 overleaf). This meant that the sales guys were able to say "I've got an in-bar promotion for you" (because you can't walk into a pub and ask the landlord to display your advertising), with the extra selling benefit that there was no hassle involved for barstaff.

Very few customers entered the promotion. But that wasn't the point. Some 90 percent of targeted pubs displayed the campaign (and were literally plastered with posters for Deuchars IPA) and thousands of drinkers participated in the beer and its advertising at the busiest time of the year. A record 50,000 pints were despatched in Edinburgh on the weekend of the Scotland v Wales game.

The mobile phone made this possible: it elegantly removed the hurdles as part of a considered strategy. The publican knew that most of his customers owned a mobile, therefore the entry mechanic was plausible. But that does not mean that the mobile is a promotional panacea. There has been a rash of text 'n' win promotions as brand managers have raced to tick the box. New, different, and fashionable, however, do not automatically

Figure 24 *Caledonian Brewery managed to get 90 percent of pubs to support its Deuchars IPA at some of the busiest times of the year. The trick? The introduction of the mobile phone as a promotional entry device. Reproduced by kind permission of Caledonian Brewery Ltd.*

equal *effective*. Indeed, in many cases, the introduction of the mobile as an entry mechanic simply serves to divorce the customer from the product and reduce the chances of an actual purchase taking place. Be vigilant — showmanship lurks around every corner.

Ease equals *convenience*

Ease is a key factor in effective marketing communications, and what is more — as I hope this chapter demonstrates — it permeates right into the heart of marketing itself. So if the process of analyzing your communications for their "easiness" takes you deeper than expected, then surely that's a good thing.

The more hurdles you can anticipate — and remove — the more participation and repeat sales you'll get. This principle applies across the spectrum, from advertising for binoculars to promoting beer in a pub.

As the faxback and try-me-free case studies illustrate, the tipping point can be remarkably unobtrusive when it comes to customer response. We naively tried to make our faxback mailing easier, and almost killed off response. A small detail that you might easily overlook could make the difference between profit and loss. (Your small detail could be your customer's insurmountable hurdle.)

Your customer gets — by one of the more conservative estimates I have seen — 254 commercial messages every day,[12] over 90,000 uninvited intrusions into their already busy life every year. How much effort can you realistically expect them to make on your behalf?

The answer, of course, is not a lot. But get navigation right and the interested customer will take a first step in your direction. Remove the practical hurdles — and do this at the start of your thinking — and you can maintain your customer's momentum.

To paraphrase Paco Underhill, chief exponent of the "science of shopping": make life difficult for your customer at your peril, for "amenability and profitability are totally and inextricably related."[13]

Steps you can take

So far in this chapter I've made little mention of direct marketing — or, at least, of direct *mail*. Yet of course, there is probably no other area of marketing communication more obsessed with ease than direct mail. I say obsessed, because if you read between the lines of any direct marketing handbook (and there are some very good ones[14]) you'll find that a significant proportion of the advice concerns ease: simple things you can do to make it easier for your customer to respond.

Indeed, John Watson, a leading direct marketing practitioner for over a quarter of a century, goes so far as to say (and I paraphrase):

> **"If there is a secret of successful direct mail, it is to devote your mailing to the action you want your reader to take."**

People in the business of making mailings tend to call the physical elements of a mailing the *format*. This is the size, the shape, the material, the various pieces, the layout, the color, and so on. When it comes to ease, it's the format that can make a real difference for your customer.

Clear your customer's path

A good place to start is with the envelope. Can your customer open it? If your customer is a little old lady with arthritis and it is a tough polythene envelope, the answer is probably not.

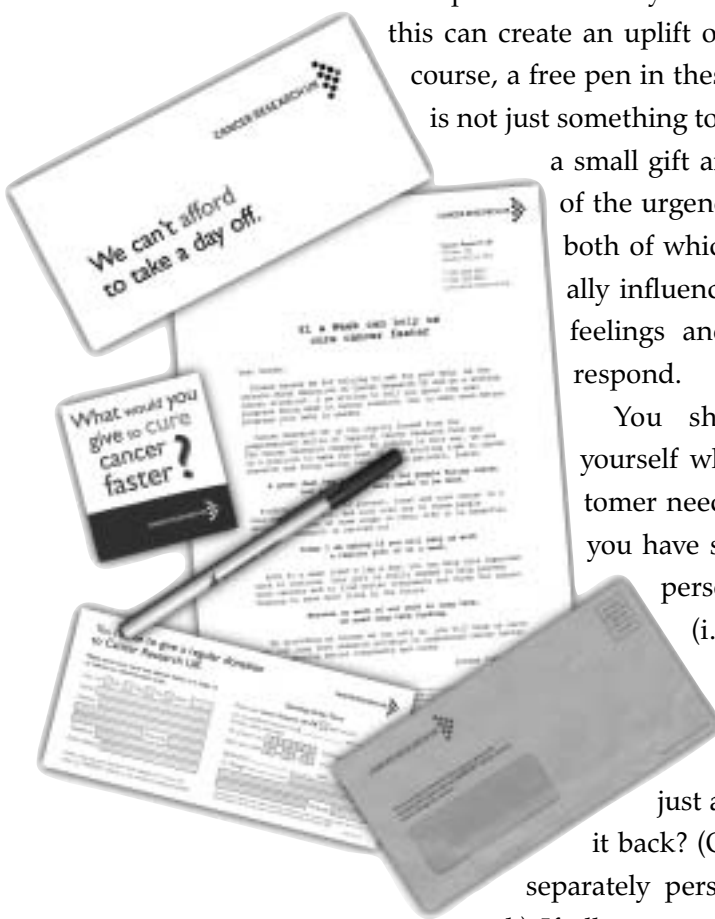
In fact, not only are they awkward to open, but polythene envelopes or shrinkwraps always seem to transfer a film of grime to your hands and clothes. In a recent mini-survey I conducted, the average account executive's wastebin contained 2.7 unopened items of polythene-wrapped mail.

Next, can your customer read your writing? If they're over 40 and you've set some of the text in 5-point type, then I doubt it. If they don't have their reading glasses handy, you're in trouble.

But surely nobody would send out a mailing with essential instructions set in 5-point type? As you'll recall, the UK National Lottery did.

OK, your customer has found their specs. What about a pen? Even in the office pens go walkabout, and at home I can only put it down to the Borrowers. I'm especially amazed that more pen makers don't include free personalized samples in their mailings to businesses.

While a pen should not generally be too much of a hurdle, it can make a difference. The Cancer Research UK mailing shown in Figure 25 contains a free pen. The charity's experience is that this can create an uplift of 50 percent. Of course, a free pen in these circumstances is not just something to write with — it's a small gift and an indication of the urgency of the appeal, both of which may additionally influence the recipient's feelings and inclination to respond.



You should also ask yourself whether your customer needs a pen at all. If you have sent customers a personalized mailing (i.e. with their name and address lasered on it), then why not just ask them to send it back? (Or part of it, or a separately personalized slip or card.) If all you need is a "yes," you

Figure 25 *A mailing from Cancer Research UK. It contains everything the customer needs to reply. The charity's experience is that the inclusion of a free pen can create an uplift in response of 50 percent. Reproduced by kind permission of Cancer Research UK.*

can make life as simple for your customer as placing a postage-paid card into their out-tray.

Then there's the issue of allotting your customer enough space in which to write. Given that this is usually the object of the exercise — as I highlighted in the earlier discussion of reply coupons — it's remarkable how often marketers make it a trial.

Confidentiality is an invisible factor, but nonetheless one that could prove to be a tipping point. Some people just don't like the idea of their details going naked through the post, even for the most innocuous of requests. We discovered that we could get a better response from very senior managers (to our win-a-prize mailings) if the subject matter wasn't obvious from the completed reply device. So we provided reply-paid envelopes. More lowly staff had no such inhibitions when it came to getting their names in the hat — and a reply postcard worked fine.

Design the reply device first

There is a range of explanations for why you might design the reply device first. One argument goes that your customer — intending to respond — will remove the reply device and discard the rest of the mailing. Later, if they can't find all they need to know on the reply device, the buying process will break down.

American adman Fred E Hahn says that busy readers, especially in business, often go straight to the reply device. Before spending time learning all the details, they want to discover what the offer will cost in dollars, time, effort, or other commitment. In response to this behavior, copywriters now load the reply device with the key benefits, and summarize the offer, the guarantee, and the conditions. Often, they design the reply device first.[15]

If you recall my counsel to "think tabloid," you'll recognize a great similarity in the way Hahn's logic acknowledges the busy customer's demands for information. It's as much of a navigation as an ease issue, but nevertheless valuable.

For me there's an even more basic reason why you should tackle the reply device first. Simply, it puts ease high on your agenda. It gives ease a

chance to stake a claim before all the space is gobbled up by images, graphics, headlines, and copy.

It forces you to consider how your customer will respond, and how you can help them. So even if you don't actually have a physical reply device (response may be by phone or internet), it ensures that ease is not an afterthought. I find it useful to make a range of blank, actual-size mock-ups of an ad, mailing, or leaflet before I begin to write a single word.

Say "This is the reply device"

It can be as simple as putting the words "order form" in bold at the top of the order form. Or, "bring this card with you." Or, "ring here for beer." Or, as I illustrated earlier (and see Figure 26), "tear-off reply card" — which, productively, is not only a description but also an instruction, give or take a hyphen.

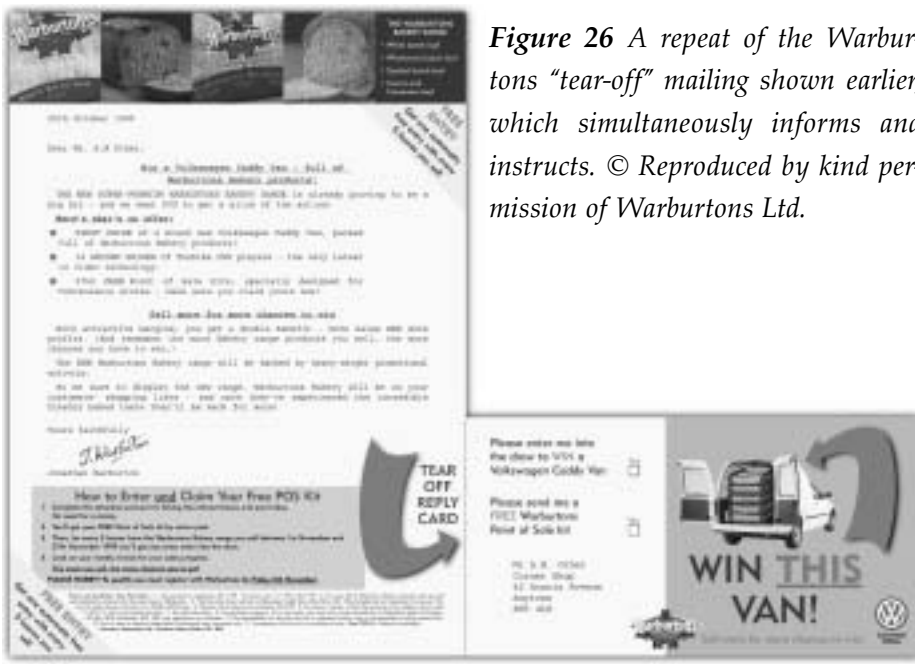


Figure 26 *A repeat of the Warburtons "tear-off" mailing shown earlier, which simultaneously informs and instructs. © Reproduced by kind permission of Warburtons Ltd.*

The tipster's mailing that I mentioned in the introduction started to work once we emphasized the reply device. The latter was originally an

integral part of the main letter and had to be cut out, so I recommended a more involved arrangement, in which it became a separate slip ("return this to register and claim your three free tips") held by two paperclips over the front of the letter, roughly in the middle. To read the letter the customer had no choice but to interact with the reply device. As I stated earlier, response increased by more than 750 percent.

Straight-talking British direct marketer George Smith gave this equally direct advice:

> **"You are not selling computers, copying machines or whatever. You are selling reply forms!"**

I like it.

Go with the flow

Our faxback mailing patently did not go with the flow. It required our customer to make a significant detour. Our mailback cell worked because it stuck to the tried-and-trusted route: in-tray to desk to out-tray.

The more closely you can engineer the means of response to match your customer's usual behavior, the more chance that they will reply. Take, for example, the buzzphrase "traffic builder." This is an offer that is sent or communicated to your customer when they are outside an establishment, to encourage them to go inside. The customer constitutes the traffic. (And outside may mean literally outside on the sidewalk or anywhere else — most likely at home.) The supermarkets do quite a lot of this sort of thing, and here's an analysis you might like to try for yourself.

I live six minutes from Sainsbury's, eight minutes from Tesco, and ten minutes from Safeway.[16] My shopping pattern is about 80 percent Sainsbury's, 15 percent Tesco, and 5 percent Safeway. (A recent study indicated that 40 percent of shoppers travel less than 10 minutes to their main store.[17])

Sainsbury's feels the easiest to get to (there's only one unpredictable junction). A trip to Tesco involves a drive through a busy commercial bottleneck (or alternatively winding rat-runs mined with "sleeping police-

men", those annoying road humps that slow down traffic). To reach Safeway, I actually have to drive past Sainsbury's.

I buy pretty much the same brands and products in each chain. Indeed, I can't really distinguish between their offerings, so my shopping pattern must be determined by the inherent physical obstacles, relatively insignificant though they may seem: Tesco plus two minutes, Safeway plus four minutes.

The great Claude Hopkins went so far as to state: "No one can profitably change habits in paid print."[18] I think these are salutary words for the modern-day marketer. Going against the flow is one of the toughest challenges you can tackle. (What would it take to turn your shopping habits on their head?)

Think carrots

Occasionally Tesco sends me traffic-building mailings with coupons — some of which are based on my meager spend (and therefore not of very high value). For Sainsbury's I get a low-key ongoing discount via my loyalty card at the store.

Every week while I was writing this, Safeway took the trouble to deliver a promotional leaflet through my door. When its much-publicized 20p-off-a-liter petrol promotion was introduced, I began to take notice of the leaflet. There were some good offers. Plus a £5 off coupon if I spent over £30. I decided to set out on a serious discount-shopping experiment, and planned a big list and an empty tank. I made a one-quarter saving on my grocery bill and saved £21 on petrol — in total over £76 in one trip.

The less you are able to engineer the means of response to match your customer's usual behavior, the bigger incentive you'll need to offer. Rather than build a dual carriageway direct from my house to its car park, Safeway went for the carrots big style: "Save 20p a litre on petrol and get BOGOFs[19] on lots of long-life household goods." It worked. Not surprisingly, my shopping pattern changed.

There are two lessons here. First: All is not lost if you can't remove the hurdles. Second: Can you afford the carrots? (Remember that Safeway was bought out by Morrisons.)

A last word about ease

I'll leave this to Drayton Bird (of whom David Ogilvy said: "He knows more about direct marketing than anyone else in the world"). In describing the attributes of *Reader's Digest* mailings he writes:

> **"Note how careful they are to tell — very often at the beginning of a letter — how easy it is to respond and exactly how to do so."**[20]

EASE — SEVEN TOP TIPS

1 Think ease before attention.

2 Define and mirror the natural flow.

3 Design the reply device first.

4 Dismantle all possible hurdles.

5 For advertising, identify future hurdles.

6 Test and research for tipping points.

7 Be prepared to dangle carrots.

KEY QUESTION

"Can my customer see that it's easy?"