

The Enduring Power of the Email

The channels through which we can communicate have never been more plentiful or hi-tech. But one channel, when it comes to how consumers prefer to be contacted, that can't seem to be shifted from top spot - is the trusty email. Regardless of age, consumers prefer their inbox to be tapped up over any other means of exchange, and by some considerable margin. But what is it about the humble email compared with the plethora of other channels that makes it so popular? Is there evidence to suggest other channels could threaten its crown? And is there scope for the email to evolve to consolidate its position as the undisputed king of preferred consumer correspondence?

The whole conversation surrounding preferred methods of communication surfaced last year after the DMA (*Direct Marketing Association*) released results from a study it carried out in 2015. They were striking to say the least. Age groups were categorised into nine year blocks (e.g. 25-34) apart from the youngest (18-24) and the oldest (65+). What was discovered was that every age group, by a majority of between 71% and 79% picked email as their favoured channel of correspondence with vendors. Second in line, picking up between only 21% and 32% of votes was old-school, analogue, hand-delivered post, with a face-to-face coming in a close third, and again with little disparity between age groups. Differences became apparent with the remaining options, namely: Text/SMS, phone (mobile), social media, phone (landline), and apps. As an example almost a third of 18-24 year olds preferred correspondence to be made across social media platforms compared with just 1% of the 65 and overs. Likewise, a quarter of those occupying the youngest age bracket like contact to be made over apps, while only 2% of those aged 55-64 share the same preference.

But what do these results tell us? Unsurprisingly perhaps, they show that the younger crowd prefers newer modes of communication, but also that these newer channels still have some way to go before they begin to mount a serious challenge to the email. They also tell us that the postal services still have a part to play in this hi-tech world, and that sometimes you can't beat seeing the whites of the eyes of a fellow human being. Such is the enormity of the margin between email and the others though, that it's worth exploring why it has remained so popular.

The thing about the email is that even though it's been around for years it still ticks so many boxes. It's user-friendly, it can be made to look attractive, it can have links and multi-media bolted on to it, you can access it from your phone or tablet, and it's quick to the point of being instant. Email service providers aren't resting on their laurels either, and the next few years will see some important albeit overdue changes.

Firstly, your email is going to get an IQ upgrade. AI-assisted email will become common place and your service provider will meticulously analyse the content of emails, who the sender is, and at what time the email is sent. It will then put together appropriate responses if you are on holiday, or for whatever reason are unable to reply in person. Email will also become more collaborative. The enormous popularity of social media 'groups' on platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger has not gone unnoticed. CC and BCC functions on email are past their sell by date and quoted texts clutter emails and slow them down. They will be replaced by a 'share' function and emails will have the option to enable a comments section to replace forwarding. We will also see the emergence of the 'kinetic email' which will support a level of interactivity not seen before. Emails will contain games and powerful animations

meaning customers will actually look forward to correspondence from the companies they purchase from.

The data collated by the DMA clearly show that there are communication channels popular with younger users that threaten the dominance of the email. The threat has been registered, and though the future looks like it will become more of an even playing field, the trusty email isn't giving up the fight. Not by a long shot.