

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



5.21.2002

Are You Targeting Me? Are You Targeting ME?

As long as they don't know too much about me, I'm all for 1-to-1 marketing

Someone in the ad business recently told me, "In a few years, all marketing will be direct marketing." I think that's a likely proposition, and a very scary one.

Selling a client on things like CRM and one-on-one marketing is easy. Clients salivate when you mention services that "add value," and those services tend not to involve breakthrough creative ideas. Clients are attracted to any rational way to justify their companies' marketing expenses to their boss. They hunt for quantifiable results wherever they can find them, and they're quick to value data over mass marketing.

Most of us are familiar with direct marketing in the classic sense. Publishers' Clearing House. Ron Popeil's Spray-on Hair. Telemarketing calls at dinner.

However, the notion of creating a one-to-one relationship with every customer is slowly creeping into every segment of marketing, and taking shape in new ugly ways.

So far, I've been resisting grocery stores' so-called "loyalty cards." It's really not loyalty--more of a Pavlovian method of jacking up prices and lowering them again the next week.

The hope is consumers will be attracted to weekly sale prices they can only attain by using their handy loyalty card. This perceived "savings" supposedly increases store loyalty. But true brand loyalty lies in the trust a consumer places in a brand. I don't trust these cards, so these stores sure as hell don't have loyalty from me.

If I applied for a "loyalty card," I'd need to supply my name, address, phone number and other personal info. The card would have a unique ID strip to identify me when I buy something.

I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but I thought of a scenario that doesn't seem too far-fetched to me. If I go in and buy Twinkies, cigarettes, and beer every week, they know.

What if my HMO found out about my slovenly purchases? Would I get a "lazy bastard" surcharge on my monthly premiums? Could an insurance company deny me health care coverage altogether until I start buying rice cakes and bottled water? Yuck!

Even drugstore chains are introducing loyalty cards. Can personal hygiene habits be tracked? That's even scarier.

Maybe technology lacks the sophistication to link people directly to the merchandise they bought. How do I know that? I don't. There's no telling what information is being collected and how it's being used.

What would happen if a grocery store chain went out of business and sold its customer database to someone else? Sounds to me like that's a more valuable asset than the shelving and freezers.

Every week a news story appears about our increasingly tracked lives. A certain mega gigantic software company can track documents written on its software. TV recording devices make note of what you watch. Websites record where you've surfed. Even courts can subpoena bookstore purchases to find out what you read.

Every day, databases around the world collect more and more information about us without our direct consent. Although much of our industry embraces these marketing techniques, I'm confident it will come back to haunt us.

The public may not revolt against marketers in protest, but as consumers ourselves, each one of us will face a day when we realize someone out there knows too much about our habits.

The ad industry always struggles with the battle of art vs. commerce. We know that the ad business will always be an inexact science, and there's no precise method of predicting consumer behavior. The pursuit of data enhances our capabilities, and yes, it often adds value to our services. But at what price?

Have we entered an era where the only way the ad industry can increase its value to our clients is to resort to Big Brother tactics? As an industry, we have responsibilities to the public as well as our clients. Just because technology allows us to track this stuff, does that mean we should?

We'll never again see an area where a simple TV or print campaign is all a brand needs. Would our industry ever decide that certain one-to-one marketing techniques and research methods should be off-limits? I wonder if it's too late to have that discussion. If it isn't too late, well, I'm here, and I like Cheez Doodles. Or did you already know that?