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April 2011

Cleaning Out the Competition



An old client of ours used to hold two annual, internal events: a spring clean-up day and a fall clean-up day. On those days, employees combed through files, binders, drawers, and shelves and recycled or destroyed the documents and records the company no longer needed to keep. The practice freed up needed storage space, reduced clutter, and forced employees to evaluate the piles of "stuff" they had accumulated at their desks.

You probably have piles: journals to read, requests to respond to, reports to file, and files to review. In fact, you most likely have one file that we think you can not only empty today, but you can also remove from your desk for good: your competitor file.

Don't get us wrong: we believe in the value of a competitor file, a file of marketing pieces created and distributed by your competitors. Keeping tabs on others' direct mail enables you to monitor your competition's marketing activities and identify your strengths, their weaknesses, and your market's spending habits. It gives you an opportunity to learn more about your market and improve your promotions and offers.

But collecting campaigns and learning from them are two different things. This spring, dust off those files and put them to work for you. Our suggestions below will help you quickly identify the good, the bad, and the useful in the direct mail you receive at work.

If you have any questions under the marketing umbrella, let us know. [Send your questions to us today.](#) We are here to help!

Snapshot of a Direct Mail Plan



What does it take to create a successful mail plan?

According to Association Headquarters, an association management company, it's a six-step process:

1. Determine your objective.
2. List and describe target markets.
3. Describe your benefits.
4. Select marketing and promotional strategies.
5. Identify your competition.
6. Monitor your results.

Two Steps to File Freedom

How to Avoid the Competitor File Backlog

Keeping a competitor file is great, but only if you give it regular attention. If you're prone to procrastinating competition analysis, we have two words for you: chuck it.



Chuck the folder. If you never seem to have time to review a folder full of marketing material, don't collect it. Instead, make reviewing your competition's marketing a priority. Review the pieces as they come in: don't let them accumulate, and don't make a big production of it. Looking at each piece won't take long, and it can fill those time gaps you experience throughout the day: when you're waiting for your computer to warm up, an email to send, a large document to print.

Then, put it to work. Scan each piece and determine right then if it contains any information you can use or learn from and incorporate that information immediately into the appropriate location. For example, if your competition used a format your organization hasn't tried before but you think would be effective, consult your marketing calendar, determine which promotion would be the best one to test in the new format, and make a note on that campaign's marketing plan. Then, file the example with that campaign for reference at design time.

Still not ready to give up your file folder? Try giving the next competitor piece you receive the following two-minute test. It may change the way you think about competition analysis.

The Two-Minute Test

What to Look for When Time Runs Short



Evaluating your competition's mail doesn't have to be a labor intensive ordeal. If you have the time and the inclination, go ahead and study each mail piece in detail: the more you know about your competition's strategies, the better prepared you'll be to counteract them and retain your client list. But if you'd rather assess a campaign quickly, we suggest focusing on these five elements:

1. Overall appeal. If you received this campaign at home, would you have read it or recycled it? If you liked it, what caught your eye? The graphics? Format? Layout? Text? Color scheme? If you didn't like it, why?
2. Copy. Before you read anything, note the overall use of text. Is the campaign text-heavy or white-space friendly?

Does it favor long or short paragraphs? Long sentences or short ones? Now scan the bullet lists and headlines. Does your competitor highlight anything your products, services, or campaigns include or lack? Is the text benefits-focused or features-focused? Emotional or practical? Formal or informal?

3. Offer. Does your competition offer incentives to encourage response: discounts, freebies, deadlines? How do your offers compare?

4. Price. How does your competitor's price compare to yours? Are organization X's prices consistently in the ballpark as yours, or are they trending toward a different price bracket? If they're changing, find out why. Either your competition is changing focus, or they know something you don't.

5. Timing. How far in advance of a product release/event/fundraiser do your competitors mail? How soon and how often do they follow up? How do their schedules compare to yours? If you notice a difference, could you increase your response rate if you adjusted your timing?

Could you be a Marketing Snob? [See this month's blog](#) for interesting insights on how you receive and perceive the marketing efforts of others!

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