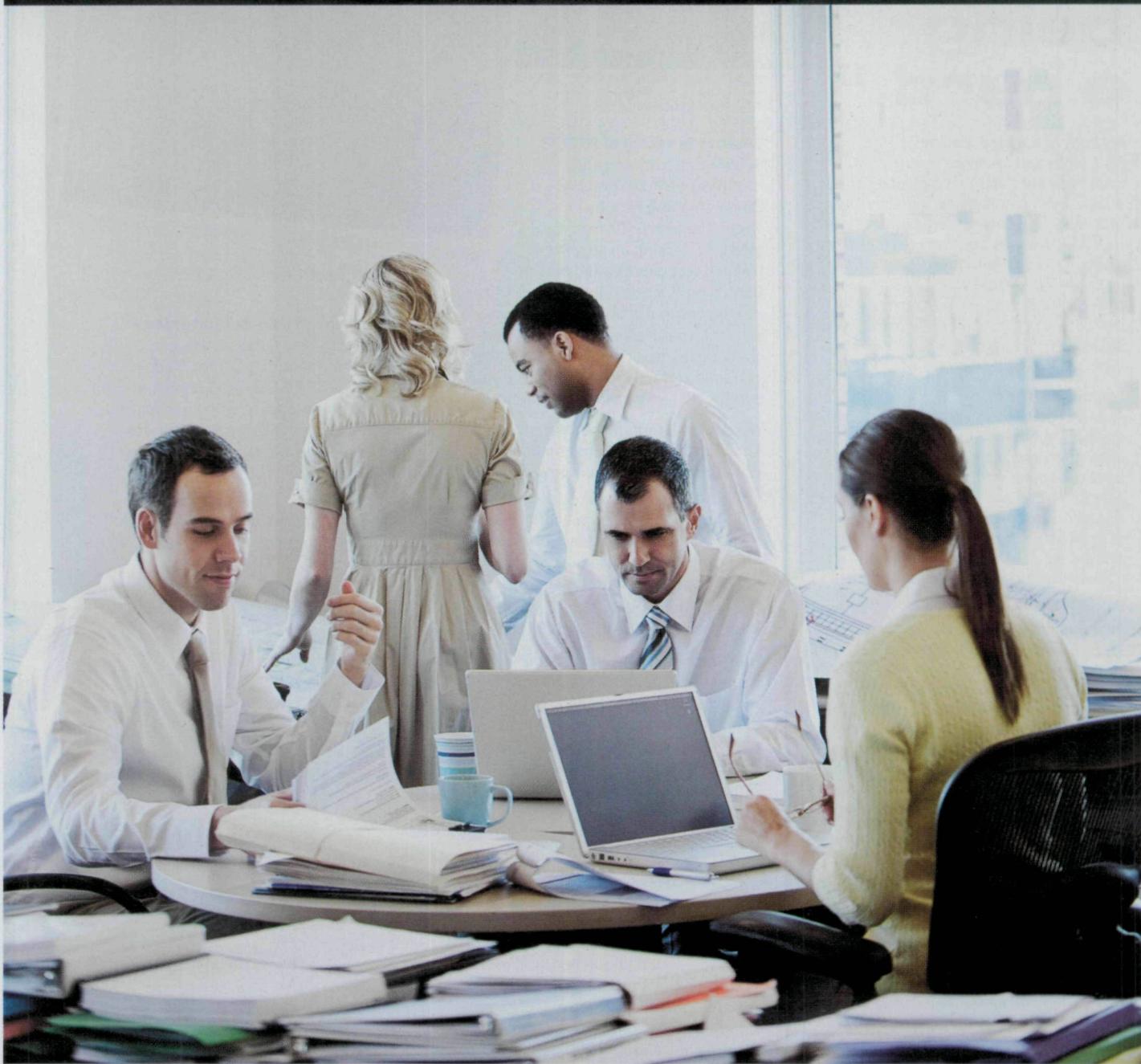


Lead gen



Multiple marketing personalities

Lead gen isn't just about message volume, it's about reaching the right audience at the right time. And that means strategically using every available channel.

An interesting thing is happening with what used to be distinct categories of businesses: Retailers who sell in multiple channels, direct-response devotees and companies interested in brand-building are all turning to similar marketing tactics.

At one time, multichannel retailers sold mostly in stores and through catalogs and call centers. These days, with catalogs under siege from mailing costs and eco-conscious shoppers, those same sellers want to learn about e-commerce and selling via mobile.

Direct-response marketing and branding have seen an even more notable blurring of once-clear distinctions. Direct marketing has always stressed hard-edged metrics: How much did it cost to acquire this consumer, from lead through final sales conversion, and what return did that yield on our investment? By contrast, brand promotions dealt in softer metrics such as awareness, lift and the cost of putting a message in front of thousands or millions of prospective consumers—with a rather unfocused expectation that some of those would eventually become customers.

That's no longer the case. Branding promotions today look much more like direct-marketing campaigns in their drive to measure, to segment the online audience and to target the highest-converting consumers with the most relevant ads, content and campaigns.

On the other hand, classic direct marketers now recognize that the prospects they once thought they were converting with a single targeted deal or offer may actually have gone through a much longer sales consideration. In other words, that apparently brilliant e-mail campaign or dynamite web offer—the one that got such a large number of prospects to sign up for their newsletter or download their white paper or take up that trial offer—may actually have been just the lucky last step in a much longer sales conversion process.

This was brought home in a recent

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study of online lead generation by research firm Econsultancy that was sponsored by Clash-Media, a lead-gen network. The survey of approximately 500 global marketers, agencies and publishers found that 65 percent of companies increased their budgets for online lead generation in 2010. Eighty-one percent of respondents said they generated leads online with the expectation of converting them offline, through retail outlets or call centers; that compared with 70 percent who said the same in 2009.

In terms of the lead-gen tactics they used most, optimizing web content to be found in a natural or organic search—the standard blue links that come up in a basic Google or Bing search—ranked as the most favored tool. Ninety percent of respondents took the search engine optimization route to finding prospects, compared with 77 percent the previous year. E-mail came in second (83 percent, up

from 74 percent). And pay-per-click ads—the text ads on the right margin of Google pages that are linked to the keywords visitors type into the search box—were used by 73 percent of marketers.

The heavy reliance on search as a lead-gen tool makes sense. As journalist John Battelle wrote years ago, Google is our “database of intentions.” If people are searching for information on your category or product, they're ripe for a pitch from you.

But the Econsultancy stat I find most interesting is that two-thirds of respondents (66 percent) said they were using social networks as a channel for generating online leads. That's up from only 40 percent who said the same thing the previous year.

Some of these marketers might be relying on Facebook ads to put offers in front of interested parties in classic “Hey, you!” direct marketing fashion. But it's more likely they've realized that lead-gen efforts have added oomph when they're directed at consumers whose attention may already be engaged by valuable advice or other content they've found via Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn.

At a minimum, it's pretty certain these marketers are using social networks to test the appeal of content and other offers before mounting a more conventional lead-gen campaign via e-mail, snail mail or other channel. And they're using what they learn through social networks to segment their prospects and tailor offers to specific groups, based on everything from intention to buy to lifetime value.

In other words, marketers are coming to see that effective lead gen isn't just about firing out the most messages. It's about getting the right message to the right prospect at the right time—which may only come after that prospect is already engaged in a relationship with your company. —BRIAN QUINTON

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