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# Want to score with me? First, listen up and cut the crap

In an age of advertising overload, the way to consumers' pockets is via their hearts. Marketers must talk with us, not at us, reports Nick Kettles

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[The Observer](#)



If you think consumer fatigue is what happens after a day at the sales, you may be quite happy with the bombardment of advertising that interrupts our daily lives. According to the Chartered Institute of Marketing we are subjected to at least 1,500 messages every day - from TV ads to billboards, email spam to direct mail - the majority of it unsolicited.



Marketing is increasingly regarded as intrusive, says the institute, which represents 60,000 marketers globally and faces the possibility of increased government regulation to protect the privacy of consumers.



This has already begun, with the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations Act, which requires that companies marketing through electronic messages must get prospective customers' per mission before firing off unsolicited missives.

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Research by the CIM found, however, that nearly 80 per cent of respondents had done nothing to implement changes to their marketing practices since the new regulations came into force last December. Nearly half - 45 per cent - were not even aware new regulations existed.

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Our increasing tendency to switch off - we make tea during the ad break, use email less because of spam, and discard 60 per cent of all

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direct mail without reading it - suggests we are aware of an imbalance between consumer and business interests. We want simple honesty, not bells and whistles.

Indeed, the problem is actually less what marketers say and more how and when they say it. According to Peter Fisk, CEO of the CIM, businesses still believe in campaigns in which they influence when the customer buys something, which gives the sense they are talking at us, not to us.

He says: 'Companies need to engage customers in an adult-adult relationship by envisioning what the customer's need is, and where and when they want to buy something. The demand for this is accelerating as issues of privacy and permission become more and more important.'

This is the essence of a recent CIM report *You talkin' to me? Marketing Communications in the Age of Consent*, which acknowledges the reduced effectiveness of traditional intrusive techniques in engaging the customer, and calls for the more collaborative approach of entering into a dialogue that creates a fair deal for both parties.

It may sound like we've heard this one before. After all, listening to customers has formed the basis of many marketing messages, including those from one high street bank.


But the CIM says its report calls for real transparency by building on the work of marketing guru Seth Godin, author of *Permission Marketing*.

He says the idea that marketers are in charge and can demand attention whenever they want it is over. 'It's not about you [the marketer],' he says. 'It's about me [the customer]. You don't invade my privacy if I ask you to talk to me. And the only way I'm going to ask is if you offer me something of great value, or create a product that's remarkable.'

For most consumers the basic recognition of their ability to reason will be enough. John Lewis, for example, knows we aren't fooled by products with prices ending in 99p. Carphone Warehouse has always set out its stall to offer the consumer the very best deal. Direct Line does in general make insurance products more accessible.

Of course all this might sound like a gross generalisation. It is perhaps unfair to compare a credit card with a piece of cheese. The nature of competition from one industry to another is different because the products and their lifecycles are different. Where competition has largely failed in financial services, it keeps

supermarkets on their toes.



But like it or not this is the way marketing practices will have to go, argues Robin Houghton, co-author of Marketing Karma. 'The break-up of the media means you can no longer reach 50 per cent of the nation through TV advertising. We are moving towards niche markets - what you want when you want it. It's about getting back to the corner shop mentality, which is more personal, and the only way large corporations are going to achieve that is through technology.'

Some steps are being made towards these ends. Boden allow you to set up its website to only show clothes in your size. The personalised marketing of Amazon and Viking, the office stationers, is well-documented.

But tokenistic attempts to more actively engage can only be taken further if we demand it. Ultimately the responsibility lies with consumers. Mick McAteer, a policy director with the Consumers' Association, says: 'It's assumed that consumers can't shop around. But it's just about willingness.' The Office of Fair Trading encourages consumers to use their power more, and make businesses compete harder for their money.

Demanding good, honest marketing communication is about more than just getting what we want when we want it.

It encourages businesses to recognise the circle of virtue that is created when they champion the customer.

Fisk says: 'Investors tend to look at a company's performance over a 10-year period - not just the money they are making this year. They look at what they are doing to build customer relationships. Therefore the value to the customer must be both real and perceived in the long term. A quick buck to the business or customer [driven by over-zealous marketing] doesn't necessarily mean long-term sustainability.'

Makes you think. Especially if these companies are currently propping up your pension fund.



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