Request Marketing

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Summary:

The Web must reverse the traditional direction of marketing. Instead of a company generating messages when it wants to reach its customers, with request marketing, the company sends only messages that users ask for. Request marketing is especially suited to the mobile Internet, where intrusive messages are ultra aggravating.

Although once a viable paradigm permission marketing is no longer sufficient. Users cringe when they are shown checkboxes to "get valuable offers" - and even if they do opt in, they tend to quickly tire of the many emails and start ignoring them.

Even worse: **the mobile Internet's impending growth will kill anything that interrupts users** or stands between them and their specific online goals. When you have a small screen and are paying by the kilobyte for downloads, you don't want "valuable offers." And you certainly don't want your mobile device to beep you whenever someone sends you a promotion.

Seth Godin deserves much praise for *Permission Marketing* , a landmark book that established opt-in as the marketing strategy of choice for ethical Websites.

However, permission marketing does not go far enough. It is based on the notion that marketing is the **transmission of messages** *from* the business *to* the consumer. This unidirectional metaphor is also implied by the infamous B2C acronym. Ethical companies will only send people stuff if they have indicated a willingness to receive it. This is fine, but we're still talking one-way.

The Web and permission marketing work in opposite directions. Whereas permission marketing is business to user, the nature of the Web is *from* the user *to* the Website. It is the ultimate customer-driven medium: He or she who clicks the mouse controls everything. It is time we recognize this fact and embed it in Internet marketing strategy.

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Request marketing basically means that customers ask the company for what they want. You can't get more targeted than that. You can't generate hotter leads. And, from a usability perspective, request marketing entails a design that works *with* the Web's fundamental principles, not *against* them. This is why search engine ads work so much better than banners: they advertise what people asked for rather than trying to push something that people don't want.

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As in so many other areas of the Web, **Amazon.com has been a pioneer in request marketing** . The best feature of the entire site is one that lets customers request email notification when their favorite authors publish a new book. I signed up for the feature in 1997 and still get occasional messages about authors I told them about then. When my favorite authors publish books, I am quite likely to buy them. More importantly, notifications about impending publications feel like customer service. Not spam. Not advertising. Not even a permission-marketing-style newsletter. Pure, helpful service. Something I requested.

Amazon is good: they have extended the same feature to sell loads of DVDs. Amazon now keeps a list of films in theatrical release, and lets users sign up to **receive email when the films they select are released on DVD two or three years later** .

I have my own modest version of this feature: My colleagues and I are currently running a field study in London of WAP usability and mobile content. The study has generated substantial interest based on my discussion of our preliminary findings at a few conferences. However, we're still collecting final data, and thus have yet to release the final report. Now, I am not so proud as to ignore Amazon's very good idea. Our WAP project page now features a sign-up section for users who want to receive an email when we publish our final report.

Whether it's Amazon telling you about a DVD or me telling you about our WAP report, email addresses collected for a specific notification **should be used only once** . Although this sounds like a great loss of marketing opportunities, violating the request paradigm **defeats your purpose and your credibility** . Regardless of how well intended any follow-up messages might be, if users didn't request them, they shouldn't be sent.

It's fine to also offer users a newsletter (or a column like the very one you are now reading), but such offers should be kept separate from request marketing. With a by-

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It's fine to also offer users a newsletter (or a column like the very one you are now reading), but such offers should be kept separate from request marketing. With a by-request service, you send users only what they explicitly ask for.

Unfortunately, current **mailing list services offer poor support** for email-based request marketing. Such services are designed to treat mailing lists as a Big Deal and not as a disposable, ephemeral service. The overhead of establishing and administering a mailing list is acceptable for something like my Alertbox notifications ; the column has a large and constantly expanding subscriber list of people who will hopefully maintain their subscriptions for many years. It is absurd to absorb the same overhead for a one-time mailing to a few hundred people.

The best solution for ephemeral mailings lists that I have found so far is Listbot *(no longer available as of 2004)* . It costs only $99 per year and lets you establish unlimited mailing lists. Listbot makes it reasonably easy to set up a new list, and very easy to delete one after its single use. Unfortunately, for users, the sign-up is unpleasantly difficult. Listbot has an entire bureaucracy of passwords and other features that make sense for big discussion groups, but not for users who simply want to add their name to a one-time mailing.

Types of Request Marketing

Request marketing need not be conducted by email. Although it is currently the best technology for contacting a user, email is ultimately doomed to failure as people drown in overflowing inboxes.

We must develop new mechanisms for letting people request information without having it all land in their inbox. Here are a few approaches, most of which work with existing technology.

- **Include a special entry on the website home page** . If the user is a frequent visitor, you can simply turn on a notification on the home page when the event occurs. For example, if the user requests a back-ordered product, you could devote a small section on the home page to track the order's status and indicate when the order is ready to ship to the user.
- **Show the information on another site** . Third-party websites could track user requests and list the relevant information on a page that is customized for each user.
- **Develop an information control panel** . The information control panel is an application that will monitor activity in different areas of the Internet. For example, users could request that they be notified when a target newsgroup initiates a hot discussion of a particular topic. The user could also receive request-marketing updates via the control panel by granting access to particular Internet services. If

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- **Use email** . Although very intrusive, email is still good for some purposes. Also, while we await the arrival of the control panel, we need a "push" mechanism that doesn't require the user to go somewhere.
- **Use mobile notification (sparingly)** . When users are desperate to find out information immediately, you can notify them using paging or other types of alerts on mobile Internet devices. This is the most intrusive mechanism of all, and must be used solely at user discretion.

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