

CONSUMER RESPONSE TO ADVERTISING MAIL:
SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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ABSTRACT

Direct mail, or advertising mail, is the third largest advertising medium in the U.S., but little attention has been given to it in marketing and advertising textbooks. Part of the explanation for the academic inattention may be the paucity of empirical research in this area. This paper reports some preliminary findings of a secondary data analysis of a three year study conducted by the U. S. Postal Service on mail sent and received by U. S. households. This paper reports the findings of the first year, 1987.

The primary objective of the Household Diary Study is to project mail volume for corporate planning in the U.S. Postal Service. Using a stratified multi-stage area probability sampling procedure, 5315 households from the continental U. S. were selected and interviewed. In addition, each household agreed to maintain a one week diary of every mail piece sent and received by the household. Over 123,700 pieces of mail were sampled.

The focus of this paper is on consumer response to the receipt of advertising mail, particularly third-class mail. The analysis reveals that as household income increases, so does the volume of mail received, particularly advertising mail. Although higher income households read proportionately less advertising mail than the less affluent households, they read more pieces of advertising mail than the less affluent households. Moreover, they tend to order more frequently than the less affluent households. Overall, about 60 percent of the U. S. households ordered through the mail in the past year.

The data lend support to the cognitive theories of consumer behavior. Consumers do select those mail pieces of interest to them before ordering from them or discarding them. Intentions to order from the mail piece are strongly related to whether the household members want more advertising mail, read the mail piece and perceive the mail piece as useful.