

Mailing and emailing schools: a comparison

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In the past year the number of options for anyone who wishes to mail schools has moved from the classic two (solo or shared) to a much more bewildering five.

To bring some clarity to this field I've prepared analysis which compares the costs and response rates from the five options, as well as outlining the benefits and weaknesses of each.

But first, a word of warning about the email side of the equation. Collecting data from companies that run email services is very hard – not least because some of the companies involved in supplying email lists and services either don't publish any response rates for people using their services or they absolutely refuse to co-operate when information is requested.

There can be many reasons for this, but it is important to recognise that there are some dubious practices involved. A recent survey from McAfee showed that up to 8% of sites advertised on the major search engines are of a highly dubious nature (in that they are either fake businesses or sources of viruses or other unwelcome practices.) Certainly one website associated with a supplier of educational email addresses gets a warning from McAfee to the effect that the site should not be visited.

Two different companies have suggested to HHM that they might look at legal action if we did not back off from our reports on their email lists and services, but interestingly both have also failed to produce any evidence or information as to where we have been mistaken in our reports. Both refuse to sell us any of their product and one refuses to allow us to join their free email news service (their version of the free Education Marketing News service). In another case we found that information suggesting that the data supplied was copyright free was untrue – the list was simply lifted from elsewhere, leaving the user potentially open to prosecution (although I'd admit at once that no one using that list seems to have suffered that fate).

So what are we to make of this? It could be of course that it is HHM, the firm behind this report, that is simply trying to see off the opposition through dubious means, or it could be that there is something amiss in the world of email into schools. In the end you must decide, but I would certainly urge caution – especially if you get the slightest inclination that the mailing list you are sold contains any sort of spyware. In one case we saw a list which came with the warning that when one loaded it onto a computer certain anti-virus programs would give you false warnings about the computer being under attack. One wonders who to believe – the anti-virus company or the person supplying the data who claims that the anti-virus warning is false.

To help through this minefield we've prepared two simple reports. The first shows the various methods of mailing schools and areas where they normally work. The second summarises response rates and costs.

1. The definitions and issues

Solo Mailing: Your item or items on their own mailed to the schools you choose. If you want schools with 9 year olds and over 250 pupils in the Birmingham area, that's what you can have. Expensive, but with the highest response rate and a massive potential for increase in response rate if you can get the leaflet right. No price rise between 1g and 100g – but putting more and more items in a mailing is not always a benefit.

Do remember that the solo mailing must include the mailing list, and this should come with guarantees. Also remember, if you are given a free or low cost mailing list of schools and it has 5% more errors than one of the standard mailing lists you can buy, the free or very low cost mailing list is actually a worse deal than the paid-for lists – simply because of the money you will waste on sending literature to the wrong schools, closed schools and so on.

Shared mailing: Price per school varies considerably depending on the number of times a year you mail, and the weight of your item. There's been quite a move towards putting four and eight page brochures into shared mailings in the past year following the change in pricing structure from Royal Mail. Shared mailings normally have a cover page which asks the administrator to pass the leaflets on – but not all firms approach this in the same way.

Up to 2006 most shared mailing companies priced their services in the same way, but the advent of the new postal regime that year resulted in all sorts of changes. To give but one example, if you mail several items together in a shared mailing some firms will add together the weight of all the two or three items you are sending to each school, and then surcharge you for the full weight. Others will only charge you for the weight of the heaviest item and ignore the lighter items – which means your weight charge will be a lot less. It really is worth exploring all the options – the firm that is cheapest for one mailing may be much more expensive for another, simply because the way the prices are worked out are so different.

Generic email: The cheapest email option – the addresses just begin info@ or admin@ and thus don't go to an individual teacher. Part of the problem is that many teachers don't have their own personal emails at school, and so in this format the administrator is being asked to print out the item you send and then pass it on. If you broadcast the mailing yourself you need to ensure you have suitable software and know exactly what sort of settings to use to avoid your address being blocked by the schools. Schools will also block all sorts of words and phrases, and many will block anything with illustrations or logos, so don't expect anything like all of the addresses to get through. We've even had reprints of government news items to schools blocked because of "inappropriate content", so do remember this is not a perfect medium.

Email Teachers Direct: School managers and teachers subscribe to the opt-in email news services in order to get the news items that they can't find elsewhere. The adverts which come along occasionally within this service are written as press releases to help them blend in with the service, and the number of adverts is strictly limited. The number of subscribers will always be lower than the number of schools you will get on a generic mailing but the response rate can be so much higher than you end up with more sales through this smaller number of teachers. So far this service has been launched to primary school managers, secondary school managers, and sixth form/careers tutors. The details are updated on www.EmailTeachers.co.uk

Opt-in email (shared). This service is one over which there is some debate as figures tend to be measured through the number of people going to a particular page of a website, rather than actual sales. What's odd about this service is that it is sold at around the same rate as direct mail shared mailing services, and yet one would expect that because its medium of transmission is so much cheaper (email as opposed to direct mail) its cost should be lower. We have not yet been able to find anyone who has used shared email services who reports significant profits in terms of sales, so we'd be very pleased to update this if we can find such a firm.

2. Table of comparison

Format	Average unit cost	Highest response rate (1) Free items	Highest response rate (2) Sold items	B/e assuming £20 gross profit mailing 1000 schools (3)
Solo Mailing	40p	40.0%	11.5%	20 (2%)
Shared mailing	5p – 10p	2.5%	2%	3 to 5 (0.3 – 0.5%)
Generic email	4p	7.0%	0.5%	2 (0.2%)
Email Teachers Direct	10p	35.0%	3%	5 (0.5%)
Opt-in email (shared)	9p	3%	?	5 (0.5%)

Notes:

- (1) Highest response rate. This relates to mailings undertaken by HHM offering a product or service for free.
- (2) This column records the selling of a product costing around £25 to a cold-mailing list (i.e. not to past customers).
- (3) Break even assuming £20 gross profit per school that responds. Here we make the assumption that after paying for manufacturing cost and despatch of goods, and other items directly related to the sale (but excluding marketing, R&D, wages, rent etc) the profit is £20 per sale. The figure shown is how many sales are required per thousand schools mailed in order to cover typical marketing costs. Obviously if the gross profit is £10 per sale then the number of sales required is doubled. It should also be remembered that for many companies these first sales are merely an entry point into further sales to the same customers, and thus for some firms a sale rate below the break-even is acceptable because of such subsequent sales.