

How to get higher response rates:

The questions to ask when buying mailing lists

It is a fact of commercial life that a lot of people sell mailing lists – and not all the mailing lists are as quite as good as they might seem.

Most people who want to ensure that the list they are thinking of buying is a good one try and do so by asking questions of list suppliers. This is fine except that sometimes the questions that are asked are not really the right questions.

Below is a list of questions you could ask – and some thoughts on what you might look for in each case.

When is the list updated?

The problem with this question is that someone who is selling an old list is unlikely to tell you that. But sometimes the only list available is one that is very out of date. And if you get someone on the phone who admits this you might feel it is worth looking elsewhere. You get another person who claims they have an updated list, and you go with that – and find you have dealt with someone who is not being completely honest.

Here's a specific example – imagine you want to a list of amateur football clubs. The only list of these across the country is that made up of lists extracted from the various county football clubs. These lists are issued once a year usually in August, – so by May each year the lists are getting a bit dated. That's bad news, but there is nothing to be done about it. The person you should believe in this case is the person who admits the lists are (by May) 9 months old.

What is the source of the list?

Be careful with anyone who won't tell you because it is “confidential” or who gives you a vague answer. Some sources are obvious – “our readership” is often a good source of a list because you know exactly what you are getting. For more general lists there ought to be two or more sources – but this is not always possible.

How complete is the list (and the question of definitions)?

Don't just go on numbers. To take an educational example – we state that there are around 5,000 secondary schools in the UK. There is another company out there that claims there are 6500 such schools. Does that mean that we don't know what we are doing? Does that mean we don't bother to do our research properly?

The answer is “no” to both (but you would expect me to say that). We define secondary schools as being places with 16 year olds in. We think that is a fair definition. But the other firm has decided to include schools where the pupils leave aged 13.

So the point of this question should be not, “how complete is the list?” but rather “how do you define....?”

What guarantee do you give with the list?

This is the best question. If you get someone who says “we don’t need to give a guarantee because the list is excellent” or “oh we would give you your money back – but don’t worry it won’t happen” you might care to ask some deeper questions.

Different lists have different types of guarantees. For example many educational and business lists are available with a guarantee that under 2% of the mail you send out will come back as undeliverable. If you do get more than 2% gone-aways you get a refund – not just of the money you spent on the list, but extra money to cover your other costs. Consumer lists are more difficult to guarantee in this way – 5% is a more common guarantee level.

Phone numbers and names are guaranteed differently. With these you are unlikely to get more back than you pay for the details if they are wrong.

Is the guarantee included in the contract?

If it is not in writing, and isn’t imbedded in the contract, then it is not worth the paper it isn’t written on.

How long have you been in business?

I’ve been asked this a number of times. The answer for my company is over 20 years. But supposing I was a crook. Would I really say “since last week”?

Do you know the book “The Lazy Man’s Way to Riches”

One of the oddest questions I have ever had. The answer by chance was yes, I knew the book. I asked the questioner why he asked, and he said it was to verify whether I really knew anything about direct mail. I’m not at all sure about this one. It’s not even a very good book. You could try asking “what post discount will I get if I post 4000 second class items weighing between 30g and 40g over a period of 2 weeks?” (The answer is none – the items have to be the same weight and posted together – then you would get 15% if the addresses are spread across the UK – more if they are all in one area.)

Can I have a sample mailing list?

Quite a good one – we have a sample list of schools we send out – they mustn’t be used for mailing but you can have a look at them.

Your list is no good – the address of a business around here is wrong

Although it is not ideal, business addresses can be wrong, and the mail can still arrive. For example, a lot of people write our business address wrongly – they use the wrong postcode (4AX rather than 4HH – we have our own personalised postcode because of the level of mail we get). Sometimes they miss off the street name. But the point is that mail still gets here.

Normally speaking this is the key criteria – does the mail arrive. But if perfection is important to you, do yourself and your supplier a favour and spell that out.

I need the list now

If you are buying on-line lists, as you can through this site, you will get your list as soon as you hand in your credit card details. But where a list selection is made manually it can take time. Time for someone to key in your selection. Time to process the paperwork. Time to pack the goods up. Time

for the courier to collect it, lose it, find it, deliver it. Quite often we manage to process orders received on a Monday during the course of Tuesday and our customers get them Wednesday. But the reality of life is that it is not always like that.

Your list was rubbish. It took me 2 weeks to sort it out. Here is my bill.

You might be surprised at how many people try this one. And they never get anything. All contracts for the supply of mailing lists that I have ever seen say the same thing. If you find a problem, contact the supplier and the list will be sorted. Do not try and sort it yourself.

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