

## **There are several hundred mailing houses in the UK. However, deciding which one is the best for you can be difficult**

Traditionally companies are selected on price and indeed it is not uncommon to find huge variations on the prices charged for undertaking mailings, supplying lists and so on.

The fact is that anyone can sit down with a computer and type up a list from Yellow Pages or a directory. The list will itself probably be a breach of copyright and may also be highly inaccurate – but such lists exist. Likewise, anyone can undertake a mailing from a garage using labourers who are not working legally and who are being paid below the legal minimum. It is even possible to have such work done in prisons and, while most of us applaud all attempts to give prisoners work, the reality is that the checking and accuracy level that results from this approach can be seriously lacking. (If you would really like to hear an outrageous, hilarious and sadly true story of one firm's attempt to save money on this type of work give me a call. I am not going to put it in writing, but I will tell it on the phone!)

So, assuming that you agree that maybe price is not everything, here is how you can check what you are getting from your list supplier or direct mail house.

### **The contract**

The more comprehensive the contract, the more likely the company is to have been in business for some time. No written contract willingly and readily available normally means trouble. Look out particularly for the guarantees.

### **ISO9000**

ISO is the international standard of quality control. Unfortunately there are some bodies around that get their ISO certification from certifying bodies that are little more than print shops endlessly printing ISO certifications. Only deal with companies that have DTI recognised ISO certification. Bit of a mouthful, but DTI recognised certification is hard to get and tough to keep, and you will know that these companies do take quality control seriously.

### **Royal Mail Quality of Mail Production**

QMP was the Royal Mail quality assurance programme in which the customers of the major mailing houses had their say on the performance of registered companies.

Although this system was not perfect, it was good, because companies that did not put themselves forward for QMP accreditation were clearly saying that they had no faith in the views of their own customers, and that was quite an informative vision.

However in the spring of 2007 QMP was shut after Royal Mail changed the way the system worked, leaving the people who ran QMP without enough subscribers to the service to make it viable.

At the time of writing (April 2007) the future of accreditation remains unclear. The people who ran QMP are looking at trying to re-institute it via the DMA, although they have indicated that membership of DMA will not be needed to be part of the new QMP. But as of this moment there is no independent verification of the work of mailing houses, other than ISO9000 which the DMA rejects as being relevant to the industry!

### **Trade Association membership**

In the good old days there were lots of trade associations for companies working in direct marketing – one for list owners, one for mailing houses, one for telephone marketing companies, one for door to door....

Then they all got together and formed the Direct Marketing Association which sounds rather good – except that the resultant group spent its time trying to look after everyone. The problem with the DMA and other trade bodies is that the way you get to be a member is..... by paying to be a member.

I am going to come clean and admit to a vested interest. Hamilton House was a founder member of the DMA but eventually pulled out when we felt the DMA failed to give us much help and support in an argument with Customs and Excise over whether we should charge VAT on certain types of postage. Membership was costing us £2000 a year and we didn't feel we were getting anything out of it at all. No one came to inspect us. No one validated that we were honest.

### **Hidden costs**

When comparing mailing house prices and mailing list prices, make sure you compare like with like. For example, if you see someone offering a free CD of names and addresses you might think this is God's gift to the direct mail world. Why would anyone pay £50 per thousand for a mailing list when you can get it free?

The answer is because the free list is normally horribly out-of-date and comes with no guarantees. Although you may save £50 per thousand you must realise that you are putting these addresses on a mailing package that probably costs you £400 per thousand including print, envelopes,

labour, post etc. If the mailing list has 5% more inaccuracies than the paid for one, then you are losing money by taking the cheap one.

### **Response rates**

Does the mailing house or list seller do anything to help raise your response rates? Some will just sell you the list or take your items and post them. Hamilton House (and I use ourselves simply as an example here) also offer to help raise your response rates by working with you on the copy and design of your leaflet at no extra cost. Just call 01536 399 000 and ask for the creative team.

Some mailing houses have inside knowledge of specific industries – if so, that knowledge might well be freely shared with you and can be worth its weight in gold. For example, you might ask, “When is the best time to mail electrical wholesalers?” Someone who really knows that business could give you some helpful information.

There is more information on many areas of mailing available through the Mailing Information Exchange at <http://hamilton-house.com//gateways/MIE.html>