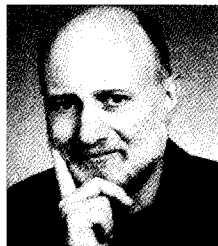


Junk Mail, 2001: Physical and Virtual

By James R. Rosenfield



If, contrary to historical precedent, e-mail does end up replacing physical direct mail, what a world of goofiness we will lose. You just can't beat the physical world when it comes to pratfalls.

Direct marketers have adapted to the Internet like ducks to a big new pond. What wading, splashing, and feathers flying! The quacking at DMA conferences these days must be positively deafening. As someone said not long ago, the Web is like direct mail on steroids.

Let us at it! As a direct marketer of over 30 years experience, I can tell you happily that what works in direct marketing—especially in direct mail—works wonderfully well on the Web.

Unfortunately, since so much of what we do is junk, junk now proliferates on the Web.

Please don't get upset if you're a direct marketer. We live in a junk culture, after all. I would say that close to 100 percent of TV ads are junk, the most toxic kind of junk, glamorizing false values, e.g., "Drink this beer and you will become irresistible to the opposite sex." Television's poisonous magic lies in its ability to make folks suspend their disbelief. "Making you sick, then selling you the cure, that's what advertising does," said Marshall McLuhan.

Direct mail (whether physical or virtual) at its worst is in-your-face deceptive, but can never achieve the hypnotic power of television. It's the difference between the left-hemisphere and the right-hemisphere. It's the difference between the petty thief and the con artist.

The amazing thing about physical direct mail is that there's so much good stuff out there. It's slicker than it

used to be, but one still treasures the L.L. Bean catalog. And publications direct mail remains an impressive category, with some of the best commercial writing to be found anywhere.

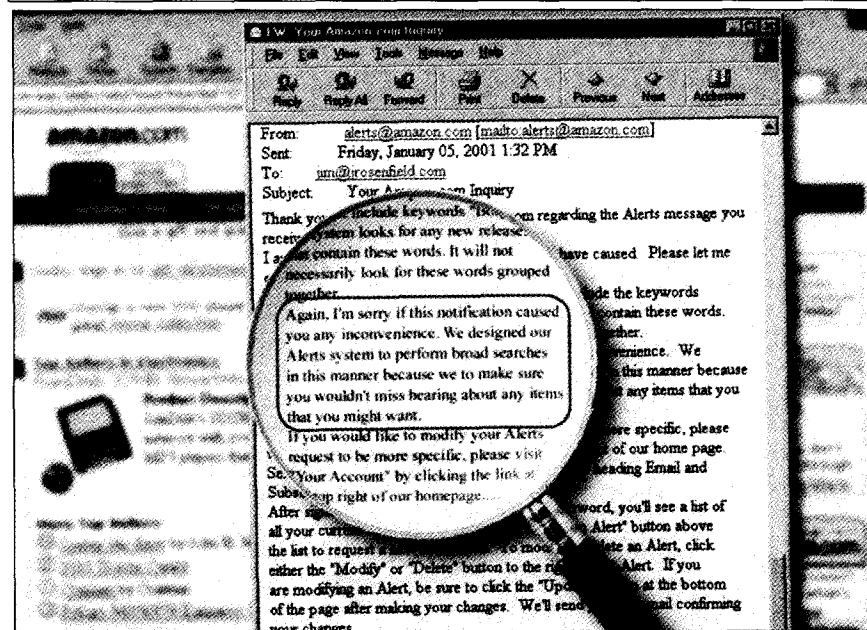
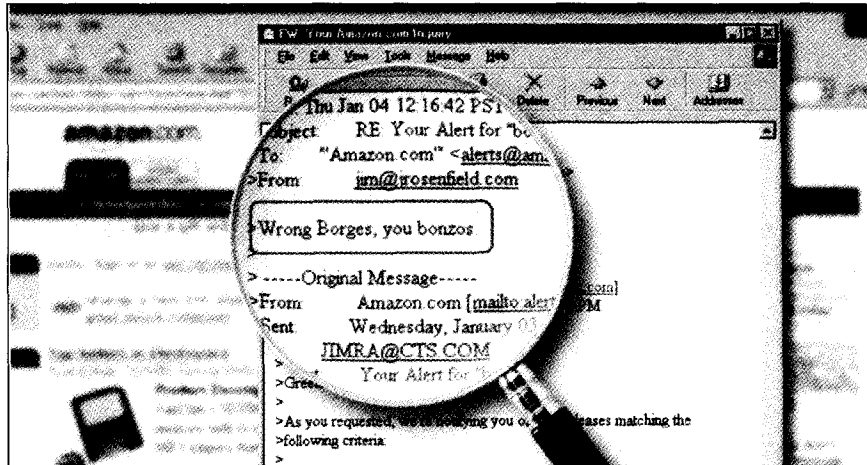
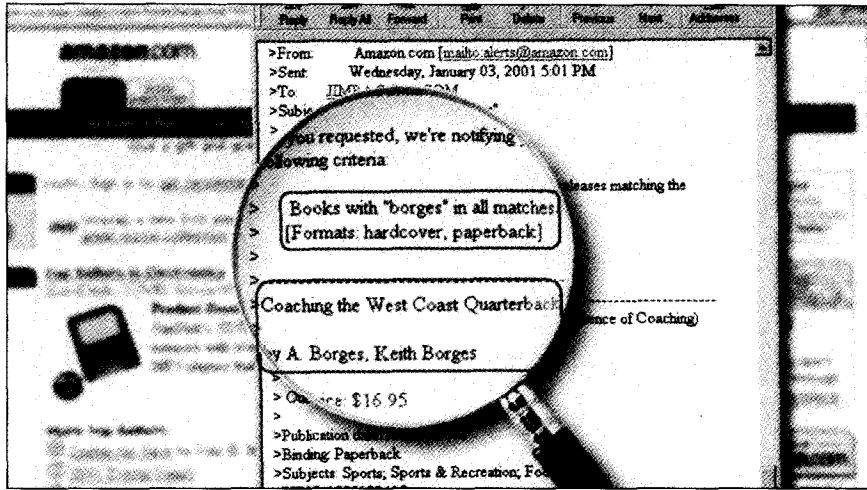
But, oh Lord, there's so much junk! I knew an old direct marketer who couldn't get himself to say "junk mail," and used to refer to the "j-word," in the hushed tones of one about to commit an ultimate sacrilege. Lighten up, guys and gals. What's junk mail? Here's my definition:

Junk Mail Defined

Junk mail is mail that is:

- 1) Irrelevant
- 2) Sleazy, dishonest, deceptive
- 3) Discarded immediately because of one or both of the above (that's what "junk" means, something that's discarded)

This works for both the physical and virtual world. It's slightly less annoying to get virtual junk mail, I guess, since all you have to do is hit the delete button. But virtual junk mail can be more aggravating than its physical cousin if it's disguised as a regular, routine e-mail message. I get numerous e-mails of this sort from marketing conferences, and I resent the several seconds it takes me to determine that no, I'd rather



stick needles in my eyes than go to one more database convention.

On the positive side, I get e-mail on a regular basis from Amazon, and it tends to be relevant and welcome. That's one of the virtues of Amazon, and it's good fundamental direct marketing practice: Communicate frequently with your good customers.

Amazon's responsiveness remains impressive. On January 3, I got an e-mail from them alerting me to a title by Borges, which turned out to be a book on coaching football. My Borges is Jorge Luis Borges, the great 20th Century Argentine writer. I replied January 4, saying "Wrong Borges, you bonzos!," and got an apology January 5, explaining in layman's language how the search for "Borges" is set up, and giving me options for tightening the criteria. Wow! I just hope they can sustain this kind of thing. Otherwise, it'll give the nay-sayers more arguments against investing in customer service.

I get mail almost as regularly from Ashford, from whom I made a \$6.95 purchase six months ago. Ashford is using good direct marketing principles also: Stay in touch with anyone who's bought from you. In their case, though, the low cost of e-mail enables them to contact me with a sort of insincere frequency. I'm not much of a customer, after all. Less frequent and more powerful offers would probably be a good way for them to go.

E-mail gives direct marketers a glorious future (if we don't mess privacy issues up too much), but physical direct mail is likely to have its place. Even if you print out e-mail documents, you still don't have the three-dimensional, tactile experience that's such an elemental part of direct mail. And keep in mind that the history of technology tells us that new media don't necessarily replace older media. They change their roles. Over the next few years, I look for direct mail expenditures worldwide to continue increasing, but I suspect quantity will gradually be replaced by quality, e.g., more expensive mailings to customers, less mass marketing.

If, contrary to historical precedent, e-mail does end up replacing physical direct mail, what a world of goofiness we will lose. E-mail has built-in accuracy, in terms

of both targeting and database hygiene, that you can't have with old-fashioned direct mail. You just can't beat the physical world when it comes to pratfalls.

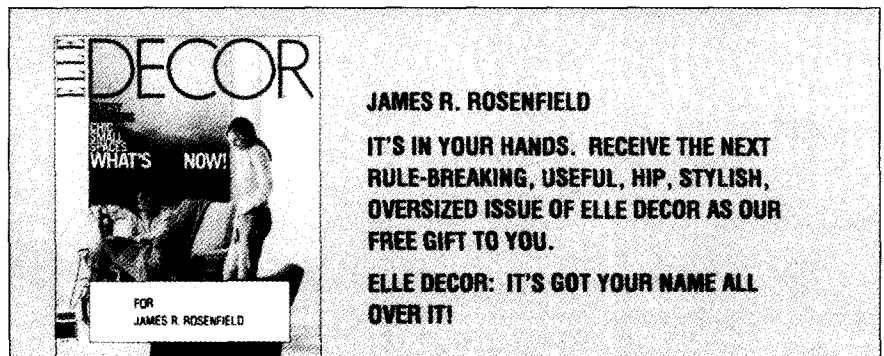
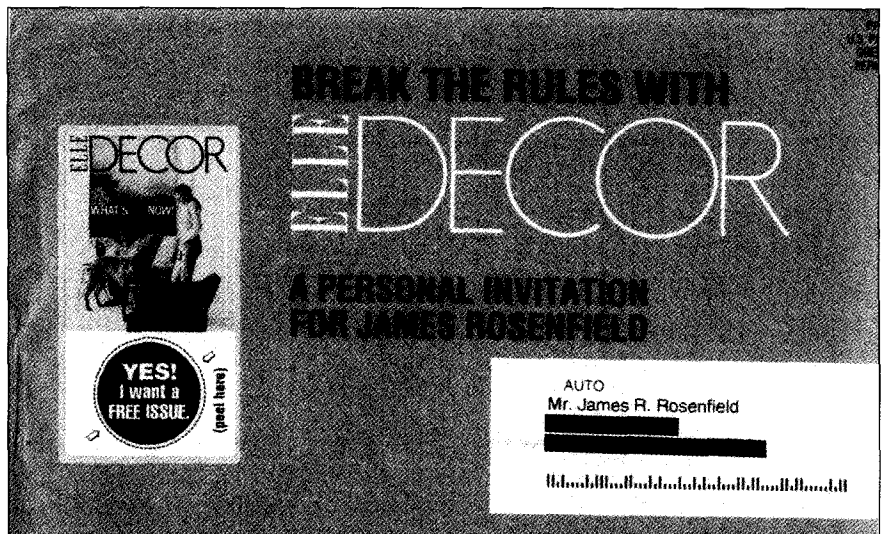
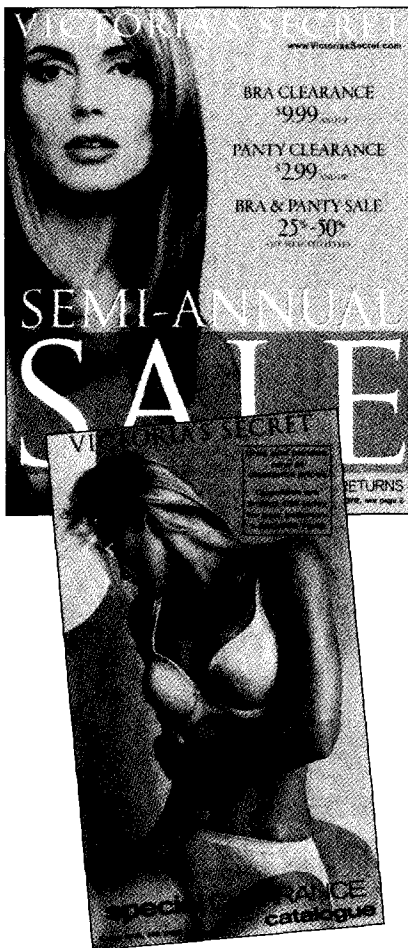
Here are some recent gems from my mailbox:

Volvo

An unending flood of mail from Volvo, one of the least appealing vehicles I have ever driven, calls me "Jim Rofenfield," making my last name sound like the bark of a lispig Doberman. Lots of science and precision here, right?

Victoria's Secret

Victoria's Secret, the doyenne of lingerie, sometimes sends three or four catalogs a day to my wife, who orders from them maybe once a year. Ditto, science and precision. It's our third decade jabber-



Dear James Rosenfield:

This invitation has your name on it. It was created for you because you won't settle for the ordinary.

You don't need everything to match, thank you. Instead you want bold ideas that match your personality.

That's why we'd like to send you the next rule-breaking, glamour-filled, trend-setting issue of ELLE DECOR, on us.

As you'll see at first glance, ELLE DECOR is NOT about stilted Versailles wanna-be's, wilted floor-to-ceiling floral chintzes, or yawn-colored Brady Bunch family rooms.

Instead, it's all about how you want to live today.

It's the passion of mixing -- not matching -- fabrics, furniture and objects from different

over please...

ing about database marketing, and most direct mail in the U.S. is executed on a "Print it up and let it fly" principle. Wasting trees or violating privacy: I guess we're pretty good at both, but still much better at the former.

Elle Décor

A magazine called *Elle Décor*, clearly aimed at females, has long desired me as a subscriber. For about 10 years, I have regaled seminar audiences worldwide with a letter that begins as follows:

"Dear Friend: You are wearing a filmy peignoir..."

Believe me, no one wants to see me in a filmy peignoir.

Flash forward to 2001, and they're still at it. Their most recent solicitation invites me to 'BREAK THE RULES WITH ELLE DÉCOR...A PERSONAL INVITATION FOR JAMES ROSENFELD...Dear James Rosenfield: This invitation has your name on it. It was created for you because you won't settle for the ordinary.

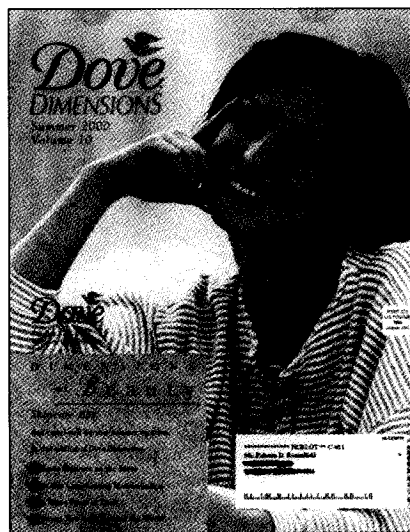
"You don't need everything to match, thank you. Instead you want bold ideas that match your personality...ELLE DÉCOR is NOT about stilted Versailles wanna-be's, wilted floor-to-ceiling floral chintzes, or yawn-colored Brady Bunch family rooms."

Come to think of it, I am JUST UP-TO-HERE when it comes to stilted Versailles wanna-be's, and DON'T EVEN ASK ME about floral chintzes!!!

Dove Soap

It's totally unfair of me to blame Dove soap and their high-priced agency for this, but I can't help but be amused at the "Dove Dimensions Summer 2000 Volume 10" newsletter sent to Ms. Paloma D. Rosenfield, who is a Golden Retriever.

The piece itself has all the earmarks of no direct marketing expertise whatsoever.



Sierra Western HOME LOANS

September 29, 2000

James Rosenfield



Dear James Rosenfield,

We are pleased to inform you that your home at [redacted] makes you eligible for a substantial savings in your existing mortgage payments. If you plan on staying in your home you may be very interested in reducing your monthly payments. Based upon your approximate loan balances of \$300,000.

SPECIAL 'ADJUSTABLE RATE' OFFER		3.95%
Existing Payment on First Loan at 8%	\$1,468	
Existing Payment on Second and/or Third Loan	\$952	
Combined payments are:	\$2,420	
New Payment at 3.95%	\$1,424	
Monthly Cash Savings:	\$996	
Annual Cash Savings:	\$11,955	



There are no opportunities for dialogue, no Web site, no 800-number. You can send a "Real-Life Dove Tale," though, "to the address below." There's a little column of "Inspirational Thoughts," excerpted from "611 Ways to Boost Your Self-Esteem," among them "Develop a favorite hobby or pastime," which may explain Paloma's invasions of the flower beds.

Some ad agency—I'm sure long since departed from the Dove stable—used to show a Dove direct mail promotion as a success story, way back in the

early '80s. Trouble is, when you looked at the mailing package closely, the return coupon wasn't keyed properly, so there was no way to record and analyze results.

Sierra Western Home Loans, and Its Various Partners In Sleaze

I've commented in the past that in the U.S. today's sleaziest mail is the junk put out by 2nd mortgage purveyors, who combine deception with invasion of privacy. A current masterpiece from Sierra Western typifies the genre.

A brown kraft envelope shouts "EXPRESS DELIVERY," and a small box contains "INSTRUCTIONS TO POSTMASTER," suggesting something important is going on here. Inside, these sleazemeisters reveal that they know not only where I live, but how much I owe on my house! Only in America, where there's no privacy at all!

A mailing from HMS Capital is even more invasive, as well as obnoxiously familiar in the use of my first name: "Dear James: Our research shows that in July of 1992, you obtained an adjustable mortgage with Bank of America."

ROCHESTER BIG & TALL

ROCHESTER BIG & TALL, a clothing catalog for large males, was recently sent to my wife, who is neither large nor male. As near as I can figure, they pegged Freddie as a frequent catalog buyer, and just let it fly. This is California, man! You can be tall, but you can't be BIG, if you know what I mean. (See "611 Ways to Boost Your Self-Esteem," above.)




The Humane Society of the United States

"URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT

Extremely Urgent: Recipient Please Hand Deliver to Addressee

URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT

Extremely Urgent: Recipient Please Hand Deliver to Addressee

1. (Sender's Name) Please Print Paul G. Irwin Company The Humane Society of the United States Address 2100 L Street, NW City Washington, DC 20032		PACKAGE TRACKING NUMBER  943875-002891-239857	Registered Post Office U.S. Postage PAID The Humane Society of the United States
2. (Recipient's Name) Please Print Frederica Rosenfield Company Address City State Zip		3. PAYMENT TYPE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sender <input type="checkbox"/> Recipient <input type="checkbox"/> Third Party <input type="checkbox"/> Credit Card <input type="checkbox"/> Cash/Check	
3. SENDERS ACCOUNT NUMBER 237-8496-4073		4. SPECIAL NOTES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Time Sensitive <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Materials Inspected <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recipient's Name Confirmed <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recipient's Address Confirmed <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Postage Paid	
		5. SERVICE <input type="checkbox"/> Standard <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Urgent <input type="checkbox"/> Saturday Delivery <input type="checkbox"/> International	

DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE - FOR INTERNAL PURPOSES ONLY

Time Sensitive Materials Inspected
Recipient's Name Confirmed

Sender authorizes Shipper to deliver this shipment without obtaining a delivery signature and shall indemnify and hold harmless Shipper from any claims resulting therefrom...

EXPRESS PRIORITY™

This is the outer envelope copy for a fundraising solicitation sent by The Humane Society of the United States.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is junk mail.

Sometimes It's Hard To Notice an Absence...

Speaking of junk mail, I just realized with a start that the New Year has begun without the usual Publishers Clearing House and American Family Publishers sweepstakes mailings.

I have mixed feelings. Perhaps these folks have gotten their just desserts, but I always harbored a great, if grudging, admiration for their sheer direct marketing skills. Have they now gone dark on us? Is this a sign of the real new millennium beginning?

One thought I have—and I won't know for sure unless I ask these guys, and we don't talk much—is that the mailings

they did in 2000, complying with various government demands, simply didn't work. And of course several years of terrible publicity can't help either.

What do you think all the guys are doing? Has the PCH Prize Patrol found honest work as neighborhood watchmen, or perhaps UPS delivery guys? Has Dick Clark, who looks extremely youthful but somewhat mummified, gone off to host sock-hops in a crypt somewhere? And what about Ed McMahon, the classic second banana of them all, a true post-modern icon, famous for being famous? Ed has to be having the last laugh, because that's his style.

Maybe they're all together in Palm Desert, smoking Havanas and drinking martinis, watching the sun set on all the rubes who bought all the magazines all the years that these guys made out like bandits. It's a short story waiting to be written! ■

Jim Rosenfield has been studying marketing, technology, and customers for over 30 years. He speaks and publishes worldwide on a wide variety of subjects, including direct mail, the Internet, customer service, and consumer psychology. He can be reached at Rosenfield & Associates, 5355 Mira Sorrento Place, Suite 100, San Diego, CA 92121 ph: (858) 597-7426 fax: (858) 597-7624, e-mail: jim@jrosenfield.com.