



Hurdles that PURLs Still Have to Clear

by Ethan Boldt, editor-in-chief, Inside Direct Mail Weekly

If you read this enewsletter on a monthly basis, you're likely well aware that personalized URL direct mail campaigns work. Yes, they are more complicated than a regular direct mail campaign, but the set-up time and money has proven to be a wise investment for hundreds of companies.

So, why aren't more marketers doing personalized URLs? I asked a few leading marketers this question, along with some others, to get a feel for how the direct marketing industry as a whole viewed pURLs, now and in the future. Here are the hurdles that pURLs, apparently, still have to get over:

1. Not in the Mailboxes, Not Yet

How can you gather momentum for a new tactic if its presence is so light? One marketer explains that pURL campaigns are just not in mailboxes, not yet. I personally go through over 1,000 pieces of mail a month in the Who's Mailing What! Archive - the world's most complete library of direct mail - and can testify that pURLs have rarely shown up in the past two years.

However, lately, that has begun to change. Our Archive director and I noticed 24 pURL campaigns in last month's batch of mail ... a record.

2. Many Direct Mailers Still Don't Know What pURLs Are

"I very rarely have somebody come to me and say: 'Hey, I want to do personalized URLs.' It's more, 'I've heard about pURLs, but what are they exactly?'" explains another marketer who recently added pURL campaigns to his direct mail arsenal of services.

He then explains what a pURL is to potential clients, who then routinely decide to stick with a standard direct mail campaign because haven't yet fully grasped the potential power of the pURL.

3. Help Mailers Understand that pURLs are the Future

One marketer believes that "one day everyone will be doing pURLs." At present, it's a novelty. But the days of prospects being freaked out by prepopulating forms on a website are gone. For a big pURL campaign for a major newspaper, for example, he encountered very few complaints.

He mentions the Direct Marketing Association statistic: 42 percent of people who respond to a direct mail offer would rather respond online. "That's just online. Add a pURL and you're talking even higher," he predicts.

This marketer then gives an illustration that could seal the deal with many wary clients. You send out 200 mail pieces with just a general URL. 50 prospects go there and 10 complete something. So now you know them. But you don't know the other 40. They're gone and may never be "seen" again. "With a pURL, you have 10 sales and know exactly where the other 40 dropped off. So now you can go after those people."

4. Be Viewed as an Opportunity Rather than as Tricky Technology

Personalized URLs represent a huge opportunity, believes a certain direct mail provider. "We're a large print direct mailer. We have continuous form, etc. We can do two million pieces a day. So how are we different from all the others that do print and mail? One, I'm high-volume. Two, I've got pURLs."

This marketer uses MindFireInc's platform and asks why reinvent the wheel? The back-end reporting and tracking that he can start capturing off the pURL is where both he and his customer win.

In other words, pURLs are a no-brainer.

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Why Marketers Should Use PURLs

by Jason Hornik, contributing writer, Inside Direct Mail Weekly

Consumers are most likely to pay attention to messages that speak to them personally. Personalized URLs deliver just that. Adopting pURLs as a marketing tool can make every message more relevant to each recipient. Used optimally, they help sellers approach behavioral targeting both online and in the mailstream.

Personalized URLs, which combine dynamic online page building with two-way data streams, are unique Web addresses that include customized information such as a target's name or user ID.

Customers and prospects who log onto their own pURLs see content served specifically to them based on prior behavior, life stages, segmentation, demographics and any other data a company may have.

As consumers view products, read, play videos, browse, click and purchase online, their activities are fed back into the marketer's data pool. This new intelligence can be used to make subsequent communication even more pertinent.

According to the industry, the average for purchased list is 1.5% and for house list is 3.5%. Additionally, site visitors who use a pURL tend to stay engaged longer and have higher conversion rates. The more marketers know about customers, the more they can deliver messaging that causes them to act. Therefore, pURLs create a feedback loop that benefits marketers and customers alike.

If pURLs sound enticing to you, take these steps to discover their value:

1. Focus on analytics.

Many services are springing up that offer marketers the ability to customize URLs for prospects and customers, but be sure the back-end analytics are also state of the art. For pURLs to work, there must be a feedback loop between driving transactions and improving data, and they must be leveraged intelligently with your goals and metrics in mind.

2. Put this project on the front burner.

The way technology moves, we can assume that pURLs will become commonplace at some point. The benefit of initiating pURLs now is that when everybody else is doing it, you'll be doing it better, having already established a feedback loop between yourself and your customers. They'll already understand that your business meets them with the best offers, personalized to their needs. That's the beauty of pURLs.

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How to Avoid Data Risks

by Crystal Upperco, contributing writer, Inside Direct Mail Weekly

As technology has evolved, so have consumers' concerns surrounding the use of their personal data. Not only are they leery of providing information, consumers also are leery of who uses their personalized data and for what purposes. Marketers can ease their customers' concerns by taking precautions, especially surrounding their online marketing efforts. Here are a few tips to think about when creating a personalized URL campaign:

1. Define and Assess Security Risks of the Website

In the planning stages you should define and assess the potential security issues with your marketing campaign to minimize their impact. If the website includes sensitive data, consider creating a threat model to identify the risks and possible vulnerabilities. The analysis assists the development team in its website set-up.

2. Take Complete Stock of the Website

Information security is not just about preventing theft or damage. It also includes ensuring your website is available, fast enough, complying with legal and regulatory requirements, providing accurate information, preventing release of confidential information to unauthorized users and inappropriate use, protecting your users, and providing the ability to analyze and learn from incidents.

3. Password Protection

Consider using a password when creating the pURL string. This keeps recipients from accidentally or purposely viewing another individual's site. For example, you may have several individuals in your mail file with the same first initial and last name, so in this case you'd have to use a number to identify each (JSmith1, JSmith2, JSmith3 ...). If JSmith2 was inclined, he could access JSmith1's pURL. It's better to assign a random alphanumeric password to each pURL so your recipients can't crack your code.

4. Test Before and After Rollout

All projects must include structured testing. Security testing involves checking what is not allowed on the site as well as the intended functionality. This requires thinking outside of the box to foresee any potential obstacles. You should proof pURL sites before a marketing campaign deploys as well as after.

Above all, use caution in handling sensitive information. For most marketers, customer data is their livelihood, and possible security issues can wreak havoc on their reputations. The Direct Marketing Association encourages marketers to establish their own security policies and procedures for secure information systems. This includes staff training and routine assessments, as well as agreements between all business partners and service providers that handle personally identifiable information.

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