

Big Jump for Online Catalogs in '03, Study Says

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By: Mickey Alam Khan
Senior Editor
mickey@dmnews.com

The number of print catalogs replicated online rose more than 60 percent from 2002 to 2003, according to Oxbridge Communications Inc.'s 2004 edition of the National Directory of Catalogs.

There were 6,097 catalogs placed online last year compared with 3,733 in 2002, the New York publisher found.

"Companies are offering online catalogs because they're more efficient, flexible, have timely production abilities and are less costly to produce," said Deb Striplin, editor-in-chief of the directory. "More companies also are making their catalogs available on the Web because of increasing consumer use of the Web, in particular, for shopping."

New entrants online include children's catalog Warm Biscuit. It launched simultaneously online and in print. Golf Works produced an online version of its print book. Stuffed toymaker Vermont Teddy Bear added an Internet-only catalog called Tastygram that complements its paper book. Similarly, PetMarket.com began an online-only cat catalog.

Per Oxbridge's calculations, 5,449 catalogs are available both in print and online formats. Another 648 are available only online.

But room for growth remains. An estimated 4,546 catalogs are available only in paper-based form.

The National Directory of Catalogs contains 221 subject categories. Books are the largest category, with 1,071 catalogs. Apparel has 711 listings. Other popular categories are education, computers, crafts, gardening, manufacturing and gifts.

Targeting paper brokers, printers, libraries and other suppliers, the directory is produced yearly to offer information as well as leads and sources for mailing lists. It covers catalogs produced in the United States and Canada.

The one-volume reference book lists contact details, names of senior executives, number and frequency of mailings, product lines, print specifications, printer and list manager's name and address, and list rental information.

In business more than 35 years, Oxbridge publishes directories for magazines and newsletters as well. It also has the 75,000-listing consolidated Standard Periodicals Directory for North America.

Meanwhile, 35 catalogs launched in the fourth quarter in more than 14 categories tracked by Direct Media Inc.'s Catalog Tracker competitive analysis tool. Most were in the home, food and gift areas.

But those additions did little to lift fourth-quarter mailings for catalogs. The Greenwich, CT, list firm claims mailings in that mostly holiday period were flat or slightly ahead of 2002 for most catalog niches.

Also static was market share by category in fourth-quarter 2003 versus 2002. Apparel catalogers held the top spot, followed by home; and general merchandise. Seen another way, the percentage of catalogs by category that were mailed in fourth-quarter 2003 stayed the same.

But a shift occurred in prospecting initiatives, resulting in mail dates later in December than in 2002. The children's market saw the biggest seasonality shift. The percentage of catalogs received in the fourth quarter grew 7 percent over 2002.

In terms of promotions, in-house credit across all categories rose to 9 percent in fourth-quarter 2003 from 7 percent in the year-ago period. Apparel catalogers were the largest users of such promotions, trailed by the home segment.

Special sales also were up, Catalog Tracker found. Most offered percent-off savings with tiered pricing. This promotion's use rose to 27 percent in the fourth quarter versus 24 percent in the same 2002 quarter.

Among other incentives, users of free shipping and deferred billing in the fourth quarter climbed to 10 percent and 7 percent, respectively, from 9 percent and 6 percent, respectively, for the 2002 fourth quarter.

Direct Media is certain that insert media as a prospecting tool is gaining acceptance. Catalogers carrying blow-ins grew to 6 percent in fourth-quarter 2003 from 4 percent in the year-ago period.

Finally, Catalog Tracker showed that the average of 67 pages for the fourth quarter has stayed the same since 2002. Only horticulture shot up from 85 pages in fourth-quarter 2002 to 112 in the following year.

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