

Everything You Wanted to Know About Junk Mail

Shôn Ellerton, March 5, 2019

Most of us hates junk mail and will do anything to stop it. However, take a step back to look at the benefits of junk mail and why many businesses rely on it.



The late Irish comedian, Dave Allen, jokingly said on many occasions if he ever caught a bloke giving him junk mail, he would gather up all the junk mail that he just dumped in the letterbox and then proceed to stick it up his arse.

Most of us hate junk mail with a passion with some dreaming of concocting elaborate ways (usually over a beer or two with other like-minded people) of rigging their mailboxes to deter or even punish junk mail droppers; which of course, would never work unless you want to incur the wrath of your local postman!

During my younger years, I was one of the above who would have quite happily hang, draw and quarter a junk mail dropper if caught; however, like so many other things in life, there is another side to the coin. Thankfully, most of us gain a little wisdom, objectivity and tolerance to the things which anger us when we experience them firsthand.

My story is that I have been supporting my wife's local Tai Chi business and part of that involves me walking the streets around our neighbourhood and

surrounding suburbs distributing glossy three-fold leaflets. Having *walked* 300 kilometres of suburban streets in southern metro Adelaide and distributing something in the order of 10,000 leaflets, I have learnt a great deal about something which I once abhorred. And the bonus? I received plenty of exercise and fresh air in doing so!

Let it be known, I don't really like the term *junk mail* as it basically covers anything which is not officially delivered by the post office or licenced courier. Exceptions to the rule are public services (e.g. power outage notices, street works etc) or governmental election material, although I disagree with the latter to some extent as I will point out later.

One disclaimer I need to point out is that I wrote this article based on my home state of South Australia; however, having lived in the UK and the US, I am not aware of any major differences except in the UK (and presumably most of suburban Europe) where most households have letterboxes on their front doors rather than free-standing mailboxes.

Do we need junk mail? Why do we hate it so much? How do you control it?

Many Small Local Businesses Would Fail Without It

One of the obvious questions asked by many is the need to have junk mail at all, especially in the age of the Internet and social media. Many also add that there is the added benefit of not having to contribute yet more material to our waste dumps.

My experience is that it has been necessary to use a balanced combination of letterbox drops, website presence, social media and, of course, the most valuable one of all, word-of-mouth from satisfied customers.

What about websites?

Having built several websites designed to promote local businesses, I am all too aware of the pitfalls of relying solely on a website. First off, you are at the mercy of your hosting provider and your website developer (if you are not doing your own). Secondly, you are trying to make yourself visible in a vast digital sea of noise competing with thousands of others doing the same thing in your area of business: to get to that coveted page one of Google. And of course, there are the pirates: hackers, pfishers, web jackers, email bombers, denial-of-service attackers, identify thieves, you name it.

What about social media?

Social media works particularly well for those customers which you have *already* secured. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are all good tools to keep your existing customers up-to-date; however, attracting new customers is not so easy with social media.

What about posters and community advertising?

Poster adverts displayed in shopping malls, libraries, shops, restaurants and street furniture (lamp posts, electrical poles, etc) can also be effective but not for all. Moreover, in gentrified suburban spaces, the availability and ease to advertise in this manner is getting increasingly more difficult. There are fewer spaces to freely advertise and your traditional community noticeboard may no longer be there or it has been replaced with padlocked display areas behind glass in shopping malls and other public spaces many of which require a fee to display your poster. Advertising on street furniture usually requires council permission and requires that you claim responsibility for any litter it may cause.

Why leaflets and flyers?

The key attribute with letterbox drops is that the recipient receives a *physical* and *tactile* object. Whether it's a glossy leaflet which, with a little hope might find its way to the coffee table, or an ad in a newspaper circular which happens to catch the eye, it is a method where the business is 'window-shopping' the potential customer rather than the product sitting in the Cloud in the hope that the potential customer is 'window-shopping' for the product in question. The aim is to catch new business from those who are not even looking for the product to begin with. This is a far harder task on the Internet much of it relying on artificial intelligence to locate potential customers. Even then, this only works if the potential customer searches on related products online. The beauty of leaflet distribution is that there is no cost to display your material. The only cost is your time and effort in designing and distributing the material plus the cost of the printing.

What about 'being green'?

There is a downside to junk mail, and that is with the amount of waste it creates from unwanted material. Most newspapers are generated from recycled paper; however, most of that still gets buried into landfill. Glossy leaflets take longer to break down due to their kaolin clay or polymer-based surface coatings; however, the unfortunate reality is that a glossy beautifully presented brochure will attract customers far more readily than a brochure made of recycled paper. It's the sad reality and it is not going to change overnight. It's a sobering thought that the car-load of boxes of brochures we printed will end up in the tip. We only intend to

deliver one round but what about the many others who distribute on a regular basis? There seems to be no easy answer.

Typical Results

On average, our Tai Chi business receives an inquiry every 200 letterbox drops on average of which, only 10 percent of inquiries become regular customers. In total, we receive roughly the same number of inquiries each from letterbox drops and our website. However, one must remember that the number of Tai Chi schools is significantly less in a given area than the number of takeaways and tradies. Percentage wise, I would expect the number of inquiries from letterbox drops by local restaurants and tradesmen to be significantly higher than those sourced from a website. Hence, the need for many local businesses to distribute flyers and leaflets to keep afloat.

We all know what happens when our favourite takeaway or small privately-owned retail outlet is shut down due to lack of business. We talk about how big businesses are mowing down the little man in the street yet many of us still demonise junk mail and place *No Junk Mail* signs on our mailboxes.

The Rise of the *No Junk Mail* Sign

I don't know how long *No Junk Mail* (or similar) signs have been in existence; however, I don't recall any occurrence in my life walking down a typical suburban street where I have not encountered them. I have noticed that, as the years go by, they are increasing in number.

How often are *No Junk Mail* signs used?

I am confident to say from my walkabout experience around the time this article was published that there was a near 50/50 split of mailboxes which display signs meant to deter junk mail droppers and those that do not display them. In some of the more opulent neighbourhoods, considerably more than half elect to display *No Junk Mail* signs. I've seen them all: *No Junk Mail*, *Definitely No Junk Mail*, *GPO Post Only*, *Posted Letters Only*, *Please No Advertising Material*, *Beware of Dog* (?), and *Only Pizza Vouchers Accepted*. Okay, that last one came from a friend of mine who encountered this one.

The number of *No Junk Mail* signs seems to increase in those more 'well-to-do' neighborhoods, of which many of the households are owned by white-collar professionals. I can empathise with this as, being one myself, we never tend to experience the real world of trying to keep a small business afloat within a

community and, hence, dismiss junk mail as a mere irritation. In most cases, households with tradies or small business owners do not tend to display them; a commendable gesture based on their own experience of the importance of advertising using leaflets or brochures. Many households with retirees actually *remove* or tape over the *No Junk Mail* sign, perhaps, in the need to feel more connected with the community.

Another factor could possibly be when new mailboxes are purchased and installed. It's all too easy to pick up a *No Junk Mail* sign at the same time!

How effective are *No Junk Mail* signs?

No Junk Mail signs are, generally, only effective in deterring third-party distribution companies delivering regular advertising material. Much of this material is in the form of those ungainly wads of newspaper which are crammed into letterboxes selfishly leaving no room for other material and regular mail. This is the real reason why we hate junk mail so much. It's not the thin glossy leaflets or one-pagers. It's those thick advertising newspaper circulars. From time to time, our own household receives small leaflets and brochures (despite the fact that we have a sign on our mailbox), but thankfully, we do not get the newspaper circulars! In essence, *No Junk Mail* signs are generally effective for deterring the bulk of junk mail.

“The real reason why we hate junk mail so much comes from those thick and horrible advertising newspaper circulars crammed into mailboxes.”



Why they are not always effective and what do I do about it

Anyone who doggedly tries anything to prevent delivery of *all* junk mail is, quite frankly, wasting energy. A simple sign will cut most of it out but there are a few reasons why some junk mail makes it through. Some businesses perform drops to *all* mailboxes regardless of signage, although this would be carried out by the business itself and not through third parties who generally avoid posting material in mailboxes displayed with *No Junk Mail* signs.

Why flout convention and post regardless? Because a substantial amount of business comes from those who *do* display *No Junk Mail* signage. It is increasingly frustrating for businesses to advertise when more than half of mailboxes in most neighbourhoods are labelled with *No Junk Mail* signs so why not take a chance to catch a few more customers on the off-chance. I know, because I've done it and experienced it firsthand and we know this because our customers sign up with their address. I drive back to the address and check the mailbox and most assuredly, many of those have the *No Junk Mail* sign.

I've experienced only two occasions where an email was sent to me complaining that junk mail was erroneously delivered. I quickly responded that it was a mistake and that it would never happen again. Naturally, as a business, you would want to keep tabs on these to ensure that it won't happen again. If you do encounter junk mail you do not want, send an email or place a phone call requesting not to have any more delivered. Just don't be emotional about it. I've never seen a leaflet without contact details.

In all honesty, I was not even aware that *we* had a *No Junk Mail* sign until recently even though we lived in the house for years. Yet, I've picked up local leaflets from the nearby pizzeria and curry house and have used them from time to time. When I have the time, I think I will change the sign to *No Newspaper Advertising Please*. I don't want the thick wads!

Is it illegal to deliver junk mail to those with *No Junk Mail* signs?

A question that some may be wondering is if it is illegal for junk mail to be delivered to mailboxes sporting a *No Junk Mail* sign. The answer is no. Some argue that it should be illegal, but like anything in the legal world, there are many repercussions and new precedents to consider. One that springs to mind is email solicitation, for example. And if the issue of trespassing is raised, more than 99% of mailboxes are accessible from council land. The list goes on.

What is illegal, at least in South Australia, is displaying advertising material in plain view of public without council consent. For example, tied to trees, pasted to poles, and so on. The material must be inside the mailbox. What is also illegal

is to take junk mail out of your own mailbox and chuck it in the street, an act usually as a display of belligerence against junk mail. It may sound unfair but that is the way it is.

What is considered junk mail?

A common question asked is what is considered as junk mail. The answer is generally anything that is aimed to promote or advertise a product or service. However, this is generally extended towards charities as well despite not promoting any product or a service for gain. Utility service, government and emergency notices are, of course, exempt from being classified as junk mail. What is interesting is that electoral campaign leaflets are not classified as junk mail; however, there is an element of personal gain with respect to the candidate in question. Another interesting observation for me is when I come across those signs only accepting official post; for example, *Posted Letters Only*, *GPO Post Only*, *Official Post Only* and so on. This suggests to me that it is okay to send out advertising material if you send it by post; the bizarre notion that, because you paid postage, it somehow becomes acceptable. Maybe some of us just don't like strangers tampering with our mailboxes!

Conclusion

Love it or hate it, junk mail will always exist. Many of us dream of a paperless future, but the reality is a practical balance of using as little physical material as possible to complement ways of advertising through electronic means. Remember that most businesses are a long way off before becoming fully paperless!

Small local businesses are an important asset to many of our neighbourhoods. I've discovered many small household businesses in residential areas during my extensive walks through the neighbourhoods: accountants, hair salons, pet grooming, alternative therapy clinics, furniture restoration, tradesman and many more. Within these neighbourhoods are small commercial enclaves sporting takeaways, general stores and grocery marts. All these businesses rely on business from their immediate surroundings. For those living in these communities, it is often tragic when these businesses fold. Driving by a deserted premise in one of these small commercial enclaves is not a welcoming sign. For these businesses, by far the most effective method is the humble and hated junk mail drop.