

Email Advertising: Exploratory Insights from Finland

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Since the advent of the internet, much speculation has ensued regarding its tangible benefits to business. This article looks at the effectiveness of email advertising to promote information to consumers. Within this email promotion context, and using data from a survey of 838 female Finnish consumers of a major international cosmetics brand, we investigate consumer perceptions of email advertising. Specifically, within an exploratory research context we address two research questions: (1) What email advertising factors may influence visits to the company website? and (2) What email advertising factors may influence visits to a physical (i.e., bricks-and-mortar) company sales outlet? Results suggest that email advertisers should strive to generate emails that are perceived as useful. Useful emails appear to influence consumers to visit the store primarily to either buy the product or view the product firsthand, rather than visit the company website. However, as consumers could not buy the advertised products from the website, these findings should be regarded as preliminary. Factors influencing perceptions of email advertising usefulness are explored along with limitations and future research directions.

EMAIL ADVERTISING, where email is used as a vehicle for the distribution of promotional messages, is fast becoming an important advertising tool. Email advertising revenue totaled \$948 million in 2001 and has been forecasted to increase by 32.91 percent to \$1.26 billion in 2002 (Gartner, 2002) and to \$7.3 billion by 2005 (Beardi, 2001). Indeed by 2004, marketers are predicted to send almost 210 billion email messages to consumers (Schwartz, 2000). Well-known organizations currently using email to contact consumers include Barnes and Noble, Borders, Hershey Foods, and J.C. Penney (Landau, 2001; Schwartz, 2000; Weidlich, 2001).

Reasons suggested for the popularity of email advertising include, first, that email is cheaper than traditional direct mail with costs ranging from \$5 to \$7 per thousand consumer addresses, as opposed to \$500 to \$700 per thousand for direct

mail (Gartner, 2002). Second, email advertising has been heralded as producing faster response times from consumers (Brown, 2002; Rickman, 2001). Gartner (2002) reports that consumers respond within 10 business days to an email campaign as opposed to four to six weeks for a direct mail campaign. Email advertising also allows for a rapid dissemination of an advertisement to a global target market. Third, email can encourage interactivity with consumers by including hyperlinks in the email (Brown, 2002; Garden, 2002). These hyperlinks can invite consumers, for example, to visit the company's website by clicking on the hyperlink in the email.

Recent research undertaken by practitioners indicates that consumers are interested in email marketing. For instance, a survey by DoubleClick of 1,015 respondents reveals that 77 percent of consumers wish to receive promotional offers by

email. Further, for 64 percent of consumers, email is the most popular means to learn about new promotions, products, and services (DoubleClick, 2002). Although commercially important, however, email advertising has been relatively neglected by academic research. In this article, we address this gap by exploring perceptions of email advertising using a sample of female consumers. Within this exploratory research context, we address two research questions:

- RQ1. What email advertising factors may influence visits to the company website?
- RQ2. What email advertising factors may influence visits to a physical (i.e., bricks-and-mortar) company sales outlet?

These research questions are examined using survey data from a sample of Finnish female consumers. Finland is a Nordic country of 5.2 million consumers situated between Sweden and Russia. It is 130,559 square miles in size, making it similar in size to New Mexico (121,598 square miles). The rationale for studying Finnish consumers relates to their widespread use of the internet. Recent statistics reveal that Finland has one of the highest levels of internet penetration in the world with 43.93 percent of the population online (Nua, 2002). Given the forecasts of increased email advertising by marketers, a study of Finnish consumers offers intriguing insights, especially since the international brand that provided the survey data for this study has been successfully engaged in email advertising in Finland since 2000. Thus, the insights we provide on perceptions of email advertising reflect what works for an experienced email advertiser for an international prod-

uct (i.e., cosmetics), rather than the results of a novice, start-up strategy.

Further, these research questions are explored in relation to permission-based email advertising that is most relevant to marketers today. Permission-based email is defined as email that has been requested by the consumer as part of an opt-in scheme (e.g., a consumer fills in their email address on a website and agrees to receive information of interest). In effect, marketers are receiving the consumer's permission to market to them. Permission-based emails are powerful because by signing up to an email list, the consumer is requesting the information from the advertiser rather than simply being exposed to it. Thus, advertisers can

rate for permission-based emails is between five and eight percent (Gartner, 2002; Tchong, 2001). Moreover, the aforementioned DoubleClick survey suggests that over 88 percent of respondents have made a purchase as a result of receiving a permission-based email (DoubleClick, 2002). Hence, this study examines permission-based email advertising.

In addition to permission-based email, there is also a growing recognition that appropriate email content plays a key role in advertising effectiveness (e.g., Carmichael, 2000; Waring and Martinez, 2002; Yager, 2001). Yet while email content as a whole is increasingly recognized as important, recommendations for what *specific* content advertisers should use tend

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gain greater effectiveness in the spending of their budgets as the message recipients have already indicated a level of interest in the messages. Consequently, permission email advertising has been heralded as offering consumers reduced search costs and advertisers an increased level of precision (Rowley and Slack, 2001).

This form of email differs from unsolicited commercial email, also known as "spam," which is an increasing problem for consumers accessing their email. Indeed by 2006, the average email user is forecasted to receive 3,800 messages each year including 1,400 spam messages (Tchong, 2001). Research suggests that response rates for spam email stand at only 1 percent of the email sent out by advertisers, whereas the average clickthrough

to be scarce and vague. For example, email content must be "targeted" (Waring and Martinez, 2002), "relevant and clear" (Carmichael, 2000), or "irresistible" (Yager, 2001). An exception is Garden (2002) who suggests (1) providing relevant product information, (2) advertising special deals, and (3) offering invitations to company functions. One of the goals of this study is to explore consumer perceptions of email content to gain some preliminary insight into what specific email topics are regarded as useful.

METHOD

Sample

The data used in this study were collected with the cooperation of the Finnish

division of a prominent cosmetics brand. This brand is one of the global market leaders in cosmetics and has products in four categories: skin care, makeup, fragrances, and body care. The company has an in-house permission-based list of its consumers from which the sample in this study was derived. Emails sent by the company, for example, advertised new products, promoted special offers, and provided links to the brand's website. The website stimuli display models and products that are uniform across the international sites (e.g., United States, Canada, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Finland) with the site modified for the Finnish market with the site written in Finnish. Thus, while the website is for a single brand of cosmetics, it offers information pertaining to a range of products.

We surveyed 2,200 people who were sent an email message containing a brief description of the survey and a link to a website questionnaire. Respondents were members of the company's permission-based, opt-in email list. The incentive to participate was a prize draw for 1 of 10 packages of cosmetics. This resulted in a database of 890 consumers who responded to our survey. Before exploring the research questions, the data were analyzed for missing values. Cases with missing values for more than 10 percent of the variables were excluded reducing the sample size to 839.

Missing values for the remaining consumers were estimated using the expectation-maximization method (Dempster, Laird, and Rubin, 1977). A posterior test on the means and variances revealed no differences between the variables before and after imputation. Hence, this technique did not distort the original data distribution. Finally, a judgment decision was made to remove the sole male respondent. As such, this study provides insights into female perceptions of email

advertising based on a sample of 838 consumers. This represents a response rate of 38.1 percent, which is in line with previous survey research (e.g., Agee and Martin, 2001; Kim and Kang, 2001). A profile of the sample is displayed in Table 1.

Survey instrument

The survey contained questions covering potential factors that may influence consumers to visit websites after receiving an email advertisement, or to visit the store.

These questions included: perceptions of email advertising usefulness; the level of interest generated by these emails; usefulness of the internet; the amount of email advertising received by the respondent; perceptions of the importance for the company to keep in regular contact with the respondent; website visits, store visits, and reasons for store visits inspired by email advertising. Three separate native Finnish speakers who were fluent in English agreed upon the following question translations.

TABLE 1
Respondent Demographic Profile

Demographics	Frequency	Percent*
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	0	0
Female	838	100
<i>Age</i>		
<20	3	.4
20-29	79	9.4
30-39	156	18.6
40-49	250	29.9
50-59	272	32.5
>60	77	9.2
<i>Household income</i>		
<50,000 mk	80	10.2
50,000-100,000 mk	414	52.9
101,000-200,000 mk	134	17.1
>200,000 mk	155	19.8
<i>Education</i>		
Elementary school	146	17.6
High school graduate	129	15.6
Mid professional studies	325	39.3
Higher professional studies	134	16.2
University degree	94	11.4
Total sample size	838	100.0

*Percentages based on totals of each characteristic.

Perceptions of email usefulness were measured by the item, "How useful do you find the emails received from (brand name)?" (1 = Not at all useful, 5 = Very useful). Likewise, email content interest was measured by the item, "What do you think about the contents of the email messages?" (1 = Not at all interesting, 5 = Very interesting). Internet usefulness was also measured by a 5-point item (1 = Not at all useful, 5 = Very useful). Respondents also indicated what types of email messages they regarded as very useful. Message types included: (1) information about new products, (2) special sales offerings, (3) information about beauty and treatments, (4) information about interesting new make-up trends, (5) hyperlinks to interesting websites, (6) information about different upcoming events, and (7) information about competitions. An open-ended question was also included for any category of importance that was not addressed by this group.

The amount of emails received from the company was measured by the item, "How many emails do you remember that you received from (brand name)?" (None, 1-4, 5-10, over 10). Perceptions of the importance of keeping in touch were measured by the item, "How important is it that (brand name) is regularly in touch with you?" (1 = Not at all important, 5 = Very important). Website visits were measured by the item, "Have you ever visited (brand name)'s internet pages?" (Yes, No). A further variable asked how often respondents had visited these pages (less than once or twice a week, once or twice a week, or more). Similarly, whether store visits had been inspired by promotional email advertising was measured on a 3-level item (never, once, more than once). Reasons for store visits inspired by email advertising were assessed by respondents indicating how many of the following reasons were applicable: to see products, to

get more information about products, to get personal assistance from a skillful salesperson, to buy products, and to visit a (brand name) event.

RESULTS

**Research Question 1:
Email advertising and website visits**

To address what email advertising factors may influence website visits, we performed a binary logistic regression that analyzed factors affecting whether the company website was ever visited. Specifically, the dependent variable measured whether respondents had visited the company's website via a hyperlink provided in the email advertising, with the alternative responses of "never," "once," or "more than once." Independent variables were email usefulness, amount of emails received, interest generated by the email advertising, usefulness of the internet, and the importance of the company staying in touch. Interestingly, this revealed significant negative associations for email usefulness ($\beta = -.363, p < .05$) and the

amount of emails received ($\beta = -.862, p < .001$, see Table 2). While only a preliminary finding, this suggests that the more useful an email message, and the greater the number of such emails received, the less likely consumers are to visit the company's website. Since consumers are unable to purchase the products via the company website but need to visit a physical store, these results suggest that useful email advertising may represent a reason for why people to go directly to the store and purchase.

To further investigate this issue of website visits, we performed a binary logistic regression on the dependent variable of website visits that were independent of email advertising (i.e., website visits that were not triggered by an email received by the consumer) to provide insights of comparison to the previous results. Thus respondents were categorized as visiting the website once a week or more, or as less than once a week. These dichotomies were chosen to distinguish between frequent and infrequent visitors to the company's website. As displayed in Table 2, signifi-

TABLE 2
Binary Logistic Regression Results

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Beta (standard error)	Exponential Value
Website visit (email)	Email usefulness	-.363 ^a (.163)	.696
	Amount of emails	-.862 ^b (.152)	.423
Website visit (general)	Email usefulness	-.719 ^b (.151)	.487
	Importance in touch	-.276 ^a (.127)	.759
Store visit	Email usefulness	.298 ^a (.103)	1.347
	Email interest	.647 ^b (.113)	1.909
	Amount of emails	.814 ^b (.114)	2.257

Note: The table includes only variables with statistically significant beta coefficients. Variables include internet usefulness.

^aBeta significant at $p < .05$

^bBeta significant at $p < .001$

cant negative associations were found for email usefulness ($\beta = -.719, p < .001$) and the importance of the company staying in regular contact ($\beta = -.276, p < .05$). Unsurprisingly, this indicates that if an email is perceived as useful, respondents are less likely to find a need to visit the company website. Likewise, if a consumer regards it as important that a company stays in touch with them on a regular basis, then again general visits to the company website are decreased. These results tend to suggest that when email advertising is seen as useful by consumers, they do not feel the need to visit the company's website, since the email is useful and provides sufficient information in the first place. Accordingly, it follows that consumers who place a high importance on a company staying regularly in touch with them do so because they find these emails useful. This view is supported by the polychoric correlation-coefficient between the importance of staying in touch and email usefulness, which is both high and statistically significant ($r = .78, p = .001$).

Two other results are also of interest. First, whether email content was interesting was not a significant predictor of consumers visiting the website either independently ($p = .26$) or by means of the hyperlink provided in the email ($p = .63$). This suggests that consumers may be goal-driven and that they look for information that is useful to their purposes, rather than merely interesting. Second, the amount of emails received from the company was also not significant ($p = .16$). This suggests that sending out large numbers of emails to consumers does not make them any more or less likely to visit the company website independently. However, since the amount of emails received from the company makes it less likely that a consumer will visit the company website via a hyperlink in an email, this suggests that after receiving relatively few

emails, consumers are likely to click on the hyperlink, yet with every following email, they are less likely to visit the website again. This could be because the website does not change often, or if it does change, the website is not perceived to be more useful than it was the first time it was accessed. We could imagine consumers accessing the site out of initial curiosity for instance, but after having visited it once through the hyperlink, they are unlikely to do so again when additional emails are received. Finally, the extent to which they find the internet in general as useful has no significant effect on either visiting the firm's website independently ($p = .39$) or through a hyperlink ($p = .21$), suggesting that consumers are driven by the usefulness of the email message rather than a general perception of the usefulness of the internet medium as a whole.

Overall, these results suggest a further question: If email advertisement usefulness may negatively affect website visits, what types of email content influence whether an email is perceived as useful? As displayed in Table 3, four types of email content are favored by more than

TABLE 3
Email Content That Makes
an Email Useful

Variable	Percent
Special sales offerings	90.2
Information about new products	89.0
Competitions	69.2
Information about beauty and treatments	68.7
Information about different events	43.9
Website hyperlinks	43.7
New makeup trends	41.3

half of the respondents as being useful. Namely, information about special sales offerings (90.2 percent of respondents), new products (89 percent), competitions (69.2 percent), and information about beauty and treatments (68.7 percent). Interestingly, information on website hyperlinks of interest were not seen as useful (43.7 percent). These results suggest that consumers are interested in new and timely information.

Research Question 2:

Email advertising and store visits

For this research question, a binary logistic regression was performed using the dependent variable of store visits and the same independent variables as for research question 1. Specifically, the dependent variable separated those consumers who had never visited a company sales outlet from those who had visited at least once. As shown in Table 2, this analysis produced three significant positive associations for email usefulness ($\beta = .298, p < .05$), email interest ($\beta = .647, p < .001$), and the amount of emails received by the consumer ($\beta = .814, p < .001$). Thus, this preliminary finding suggests that consumers may be more likely to visit a store if they perceive emails as useful and interesting, and if they have received many email advertisements from the company.

This indicates that keeping in contact with consumers by email may make consumers more likely to visit the store directly rather than visit the website. In other words, they forego the website and go straight to the store. Why is this? An analysis of frequencies indicates that the reason why consumers visit a store is to either buy the product (40.4 percent of respondents) or to see the product firsthand (40.1 percent). To a lesser degree, consumers visit the store to gain additional product information (28.8 percent).

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Consumers also visit the store for the personal assistance provided by sales representatives (19.1 percent), whereas attending in-store events (6.7 percent) do not appear to be a dominant reason for store visits. These exploratory results suggest that while much product information can be obtained by email or from the website, consumers presumably need to visit a store to experience other sensory aspects for an experiential product like cosmetics (e.g., the smell of a new fragrance).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore consumer perceptions of email advertising. Within this exploratory context, we studied what aspects of email advertising may result in consumers visiting, first, a company website, and second, a physical (i.e., bricks-and-mortar) company sales outlet. We found that visits to the company website appeared to be *less* likely the more useful the email advertisement, and the more emails received by the consumer from the advertising company. Instead, consumers who viewed emails as useful were more likely to visit the physical store. Our results suggest that the reason for a store visit is usually for consumers to either buy the product or to study it first-hand. As noted by Kover (2001), the web is ideally suited to products that do not involve human interaction with people or objects. In the case of cosmetics with fragrances or makeup products, such as lipstick, it is understandable that consumers visit the store to see if the product advertised by email suits them. Consumers who

find emails useful appear to want the company to stay in regular contact with them, suggesting that email offers advertisers the opportunity to become an important avenue for consumers to obtain information. Likewise, consumers who received many email advertisements appear to be more likely to visit the store.

We also found that the perceived usefulness of the internet medium as a whole had no effect on either website visits or store visits. This suggests that consumers may be goal-oriented, and that they value email advertisements that are useful, rather than merely interesting. Useful email content included special sales offerings, new products, competitions, and information about beauty and treatments. Interestingly, sending consumers hyperlinks in emails was not viewed as useful. This is perhaps surprising given the suggested benefits of hyperlinks as, for example, allowing consumers to obtain more information (see, e.g., Gallagher, Fosters, and Parsons, 2001). Our results therefore suggest a possible qualification to the benefits of offering consumers hyperlinks in the context of email advertising. Further, previous research in the field of print advertising offers theoretical support for this result. This research suggests that consumers consider purchase-specific advertising copy, such as information on the attributes of specific products, as more relevant than more general advertising claims, such as advertising the product class in general (Fernandez and Rosen, 2000). From this perspective, as was found in our results, email advertising copy re-

garding price and new product information should be viewed as more useful by consumers than general hyperlinks.

Limitations and future research

A variety of limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to females, which limits the generalizability of our findings. This issue is relevant given that gender differences have been found in how consumers react to advertising and process information (e.g., Martin, 2003; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). Thus, our results should be regarded as an exploratory study into female perceptions of email advertising, rather than being generalizable to the wider population of internet users. Future research should examine email advertising using gender-balanced samples of males and females, and could study populations from other cultures. In addition, as suggested by a reviewer, data could be collected involving more diverse products and sampling frame. For this study we used data from a single site and single brand. To improve predictive ability, researchers should employ two or three data sets from different e-commerce sites.

Second, most of the items in our study were single item measures. However, multi-item measures offer the opportunity to tap differing aspects of a construct (Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman, 1991). Further, multi-item measures allow estimates of reliability to be calculated and the use of statistical techniques, such as structural equation modeling, to be considered (Wanous, Reichers, and Hudy, 1997). Therefore, future research should employ multi-item measures.

Third, while we suggest that characteristics of email advertisements may influence consumers to visit physical stores, this finding requires qualification. It is important to note that the website in this study did not allow for on-line purchases.

Consumers had to visit a physical store if they wanted the product. Thus, our conclusion should be regarded as a preliminary finding. A stronger test would be provided by studying a site where consumers can choose to buy the advertised product from the company website or at a physical store and to then study what consumers choose to do. This would offer interesting insights into why consumers may choose to visit a physical store even though they can buy the product on-line.

The results of this study suggest a number of intriguing avenues for future research. For example, given that the importance of the interactive capabilities of the internet appears widely accepted (e.g., Cho and Leckenby, 1999; Yoo and Stout, 2001; Yoon and Kim, 2001), a natural extension of this study would be to examine consumer email responses to email advertising. Two areas in particular are of interest. First, consumer responses to the advertiser. Researchers have argued that in the digital domain, marketers and consumers can shape the content of promotional messages together (Rowley and Slack, 2001). Likewise, since highly focused, customized communications can be beneficial to building long-term relationships (Arnold and Tapp, 2001), it would be useful to explore how an interactive email response to email advertisements aids the development of the relationship between marketers and their consumers. Second, since email offers the convenient function of forwarding messages received to other people, the forwarding of email advertisements to other consumers in terms of word-of-mouth influence and penetration should also be examined.

A further avenue for future research involves the use of email advertising in conjunction with other media. Scholars have highlighted the need to explore the proper mix for marketers of online and traditional media (Kover, 1999; Sheehan

and Doherty, 2001). This is particularly relevant given predictions that the internet will become an important component of future Integrated Marketing Communications (Brackett and Carr, 2001). Further, research suggests that email use does not detract from the television viewing time of consumers (Coffey and Stipp, 1997), which offers the opportunity for synergistic mixes of email advertising and more traditional advertising media to be investigated. **JAR**

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