

Chance (Fall 1996)

Junk Mail

My desk is always cluttered with junk mail. It seems to pour in every day. Just yesterday, for example, the junk mail I received included a mortgage insurance application, a catalog to order X-rated videos, and the latest issue of *The Annals of Statistics*. Well, alright, so maybe it's unfair to call the catalog junk mail.

Promoters of junk mail prefer to use the term "direct mail marketing." I suppose that's because it sounds better to some official whose title would otherwise be Vice President of Junk Mail. But it's all the same to me. I insert the items of "direct mail marketing" into the proper receptacle where they are processed by a representative of our city's Department of Sanitary Engineering, who, in our neighborhood, happens to work directly for the Acting Associate Deputy Assistant Administrator of Trash.

The Census Bureau, of course, has a mass mailing every decade. For the next census, the Bureau was concerned that, if the form was mailed in a drab, official U.S. Government envelope, many people might throw it away. So the Bureau commissioned a major research study to redesign the envelope to look like a piece of junk mail. Focus group research is underway on what icon should appear on the envelope. The favorite so far is one that resembles Ed McMahon.

"Direct mail marketing" firms, on the other hand, are redesigning their envelopes, to make them look like drab, official U.S. Government notices. "You have ten days to respond to the IRS," says one envelope. Open it up to learn that IRS means the International Rugby Society. "Property tax notice" says another, and, inside, the Young Republicans are putting you on notice that the Old Democrats are ready to raise your property and other taxes.

These envelopes work, because people really respond to threatening messages. I don't need research to believe that. When I was growing up, my parents had a very expensive, chic sofa in our living room. It was so beautiful that nobody was allowed to sit on it. But, in the middle of the posh center cushion, there hung for years a stained and scrappy tag labelled "DO NOT REMOVE UNDER PENALTY OF LAW."

So, what the Census Bureau should really be putting on its envelopes are messages like: "DO NOT DISCARD UNDER PENALTY OF LAW" or "You have ten days to respond before we turn your form over to the IRS."

A lot of the junk mail I receive are ads for seminars that profess to help me in my work. "Stress Management" is the topic of one seminar ad. I thought stress is something to avoid. How can you possibly *manage* stress? Delegate it to someone? "I'm sorry, but my boss just chewed me out and you'll have to take over my anxiety for the day."

Another seminar is on "Interpersonal Communication Skills." I suppose that's to distinguish it from other kinds of communication skills, like how to talk to your PC or to the

banana you're going to have for lunch. "Listen, I know it's hard growing up as a piece of fruit, but let's not take this personally."

My favorite ad for a seminar, however, is one on "Project Management Skills." The brochure is filled with reasons to attend, such as "You will gain new knowledge that will help you become a success." The author of the ad must get his ideas from Chinese fortune cookies.

The project management seminar will, the ad promises, teach you "characteristics of successful project managers," "factors that every project manager must contend with," "keys to project planning," "strategies for project organization," and--here's the big one--"how to avoid making mistakes." I could really use a seminar just on the last topic. Imagine all the stress you could manage if you were confident that you know how to avoid making mistakes.

My problem with this ad is that I don't know what "project management" is. It used to be that a project manager was one who dealt with something really big like a NASA mission. Today, my neighborhood dry cleaners introduced me to the project manager for my shirts.

I asked a colleague of mine who is a sociologist just what is meant by "project management." "It's really a transmogrification of an evolving social construct," he said. "In the old days, we called it *work*."