



## **DRIVING THE MESSAGE HOME**

**A New England car dealership uses customized mailings to nudge prospective buyers**

**By Bruce Britt**

When customers walk into a Prime Motor Group auto dealership to check out its vehicles, they may not drive off with a new car — but they haven't heard the last of the dealership's pitch either.

Rather, as part of an aggressive follow-up campaign, Prime Motor dealerships get their messages back in front of customers within days, this time in the form of a cutting-edge and highly personalized mailing that is winning rave reviews for its immediacy and detail — and winning the dealership business with its savvy.

Indeed, at a time when many companies are slashing their marketing due to economic uncertainty, Prime Motor franchises are raising the ante on their direct-mail investment. Along the way, the Massachusetts dealership group is proving that smart and consistent customer communications, not less, can offer businesses distinct advantages over competitors too skittish to maintain vigorous marketing efforts.

Dubbed the "Thank You For Visiting" campaign, the Prime Motor effort centers on a 5 ½-inch-by-8-inch postcard that the franchise mails to prospective customers within days of their visit to one of the import dealership's showrooms or its Web site. Made of heavy, high-gloss stock, the card naturally features the prospect's name, a minimum for customized mailings. But in an even deeper dive into the personalization pool, the card also provides the names, contact information and photos of the specific salesperson who pitched the prospect and of the sales manager who assisted. Further, the card includes a photo of the exact model, color included, that the mail recipient test drove (or showed interest in online) and a savings coupons for that particular auto.

The card bears a message from a Prime Motor Group general manager: "Thank you for your recent visit to our dealership. I hope you found your sales consultant to be helpful and informative. I want you to know that we are committed to providing you with a buying and ownership experience truly 'like no other'." The message concludes with direct contact info and an invitation for the customer to call or E-mail with any questions, comments or suggestions.

When the franchise implemented the campaign, the idea was to make deeper inroads into the finicky Boston luxury car market and to reinforce brand perception of Prime Motor as an industry leader. "We're trying to give that customer some enticement to return to the

dealership and make a purchase,” says Anthony Monteiro, the Prime Motor Group director of business development and the brains behind the “Thank You” campaign. “It’s absolutely an attempt to establish a relationship and trust, but it’s also an attempt to wow the customer, to receive this postcard and basically run in the house and say, ‘Holy mackerel! Look at this!’”

Since the launch, Prime Motor Group has sent out an average of 300 postcards a month — about 7,200 since the rollout. “Thank You For Visiting” cards have gone out to potential car buyers throughout the Prime Motor Group family of franchises, which specializes in several high-end import models.

Monteiro reports that response to the campaign has been positive, with all 14 Prime franchises averaging about three to five postcard-generated sales per month. To track the effectiveness of the campaign, salespeople enter coupon information into Prime’s online CRM tool whenever a customer comes in to redeem the offer.

“We also get anecdotal feedback from the guys on the showroom floor saying, ‘There’s this guy we’ve been trying to reach for a week, and the next thing he shows up with this postcard,’” says Monteiro. “Or we get customers saying (of the mailing), ‘How do you do that?’ They’re fairly impressed.”

The new system has allowed Prime to save on its overall media expense. “We have not run a newspaper ad in three years,” says Monteiro. “We believe in procuring the customer through retention—keeping existing customers—and going after customers through electronic media and direct mail. It’s shooting fish in a barrel, versus throwing a big net out there and hoping somebody picks your ad up.”

But despite the overwhelming success of the campaign, Monteiro admits that Prime Motor Group had been giving short shrift to the mail channel the past few years despite the medium’s reliability and effectiveness. “Ten years ago, we would use direct mail for everything,” he recalls. “Then the Internet came along, and you could blow 50,000 e-mails out there and pretty much accomplish the same thing. Well, in the past five to seven years, our e-mail campaigns became ineffective because a lot of the e-mails were hitting spam filters.”

“So I said let’s do some postcards,” he continues. “When you get a postcard, you have to hold it in your hand and make a decision. Typically people put them aside if they think it’s something they can use. That’s where we found that postcards are so effective.”

As part of the campaign development, Monteiro and AmazingMail.com collaborated to create an information matrix that included various interchangeable demographic components. The system can generate personalized postcards within hours of a customer’s showroom visit or Internet inquiry. But to pull that off, Prime had to work with auto manufacturers to obtain high-resolution digital images of all its makes and models, including photos with numerous trim options. Next, Prime franchises supplied

AmazingMail.com with images of their sales and managerial staffs, along with staff members' contact information.

Now when a customer comes in to inquire about a purchase, Prime is ready with sales information and a follow-up pitch. So if the customer tests out, say, a six-cylinder, four-door Japanese luxury sedan, but decides not to buy it, Prime's system goes into action. Hours after the visit, AmazingMail.com gets a feed of the potential buyer's name, the model he or she looked at and the identity of the salesperson and sales manager who spoke with the prospect. The system will pull an image of an A4 and put it on the front of the card, and on the back include all of the information specific to that particular customer's profile and preferences. Within three days, the customer will receive that postcard in the mail, with an offer specific to that particular car.

For Monteiro, the ongoing postcard campaign has driven home the importance of promptness in seizing on chances for follow-up dialogue with prospects. "These days, when you talk to anybody at marketing seminars, you hear that the message has to be timely and relevant," Monteiro says. "Being able to accomplish that with a postcard was a home run. It's been one of our cheapest and most effective ways to bring customers back into the store."

## **SIDEBAR**

### **GET SMART**

#### **A German-owned car maker uses an integrated marketing push to atone for missteps and soothe brand loyalists**

In business, as in love, sometimes you've got to be thankful – and be willing to show that. And as anyone with any romantic experience will attest, when it comes to displaying affection, cards and gifts beat e-mail every time. So when upstart car manufacturer smart USA sought to show its appreciation for some patient customers, the company did so with direct-mail shipments packed with just enough goodies to win those hearts.

Having already taken Europe by storm, Daimler-manufactured smart (intentionally spelled with the distinctive lower-case "s") had announced in 2006 that its line of micro-cars would finally be available in the US. The problem was, smart had almost no stateside corporate infrastructure in place. "At the time, we only had a Web site and a call center set up," says smart USA director of communications, Ken Kettenbeil. "We didn't have a whole lot of information other than that the car was coming, and some general ideas on price points."

This meant that fans of the vehicle needed to wait, something enthusiasts of any stripe are notoriously bad at. To reward its patient and loyal early adopters, smart USA and Daimler Financial Services mailed "smart USA Emergency Kits" to buyers, who finally started taking delivery in 2008. Equal parts marketing ploy and gesture of affection, the

kits feature a thank-you letter and three \$5 gift cards for purchases at nationally known gas, book and coffee retailers.

“In the beginning, we basically were asking a lot of people to trust us,” Kettenbeil says. “The Emergency Kit was a way for us to thank the customers for staying behind us and being such huge advocates for the brand.”

The first “emergency kits” were shipped last March. Smart sold almost 25,000 cars its inaugural year, with kits being sent to every customer, for a total campaign cost of \$492,440. According to Kettenbeil, it was more than worth the expense. “We have received a lot of positive (consumer) e-mails forwarded from our dealers,” says Kettenbeil. “We’re getting people thanking us for sending them a thank you gift.” The campaign continues to this day.

In addition, to help mollify other customers idling on the company’s lengthy reservations list, smart also launched its “Worth the Wait” program. The campaign shipped CDs featuring an interactive “virtual drive” computer game, screen savers and digitized car brochures. The company sent out more than 50,000 CDs to eager buyers nationwide.

Instead of investing millions in TV, magazine, newspaper and radio ads, smart continues to take a direct-to-consumer approach. The company elected to communicate with its customers almost exclusively through direct mail, its corporate Web site and a monthly e-newsletter. A smart-hosted social networking site, [www.smartUSAInsider.com](http://www.smartUSAInsider.com), allows smart buyers to share passionate online exchanges.

“We’re still not doing any traditional advertising, because the car is so different,” says Kettenbeil. “We’re using the Internet, but we’re not doing any type of online ad plan.” Mail has more tactile power than any other medium, he notes — and when you’re looking to thank someone, touching and being touched can be essential.

-- Bruce Britt

## **CAMPAIGN SUMMARIES:**

**Company name:** Prime Motor Group

**Name of campaign:** “Thank You For Visiting” postcard program.

**Various media used:** Direct mail, Internet, telephone.

**Length of campaign:** Launched in April 2007, ongoing.

**Cost of campaign:** Approximately \$20,000 to date.

**Number of pieces mailed:** Prime Motor Group has sent out approximately 300 pieces per dealer since April 2007. Averaged over Prime’s 14 franchises, that’s a total of 84,000 pieces from 2007 to 2008.

**ROI or response rates:** Prime Motor Group director of business development Anthony Monteiro estimates that each of his 14 dealerships sell an additional 3-5 cars due to the “Thank You For Visiting” campaign. Though Monteiro declines to offer an exact figure, he says that Prime Motor Group turned a profit in turbulent 2008.

**Company name: smart USA Fact Box**

**Name of campaign:** New Owners Gift Campaign, including the smart USA Emergency Kit.

**Various media used:** Direct mail.

**Length of campaign:** Launched in March 2008. Ongoing.

**Cost of campaign:** Approximately \$20, per kit (includes creative and postage)

**Number of pieces mailed:** 24,622 pieces mailed in 2008

**ROI or response rates:** “Tremendous” customer response, according to smart USA director of communications, Ken Kettenbeil. Effusive consumer remarks left at the manufacturer’s social networking site, [www.smartusainsider.com](http://www.smartusainsider.com) and numerous phone calls and thank you notes to dealers and smart headquarters.