

# CONSUMER RESPONSIVENESS TO MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL CHANNELS

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## Abstract

New digital marketing channels, such as email and SMS, are considered to potentially improve the opportunities to reach consumers by allowing interactivity and personalisation of the content and context of the message. The increased number of media has led to a harder competition for consumers' attention. A key question is whether the channel affects which marketing messages consumers' notice. And how do consumers relate to digital channels? The main purpose of this paper is to understand consumers' responsiveness to digital communication channels compared to traditional direct mail. Consumer responsiveness and attention to marketing communication is influenced by the personally perceived relevance of the marketing message. Also the disturbance of marketing messages affects consumer responsiveness because the new interactive media allows more direct contact with the consumer and different channels may vary in level of disturbance. Findings from this study indicate that responsiveness to communication in the digital channels varies among consumers. The findings also showed that the main advantage of the digital channels – that they are personal – might simultaneously be a disadvantage. SMS was considered the most disturbing channel and traditional direct mail the least disturbing.

## Keywords

Consumer responsiveness, marketing communication, digital channels, permission

## INTRODUCTION

Technology developments have created new marketing communication channels such as email and SMS (Short Messaging Services). These interactive media are considered to potentially improve the possibilities to reach consumers by personalising the content and context of the message. Simultaneously there is a potential downside to the development of new digital channels. Attention and time are scarce resources for the consumers in the information age. The increased number of media has led to a harder competition for consumers' attention. Key questions are whether the channel affects which marketing messages consumers notice and how consumers relate to digital media.

### **Media effect**

In a study of Finnish experts' experience and views on the use of digital channels, digital channels were found challenging as it was hard to understand how to create added value to the consumer (Merisavo, Vesanen & Raulas 2002). The study concluded that one potential reason for this could be that communication through digital channels is not sufficiently guided by a consumer perspective. It was also obvious that different perspectives on digital marketing have been applied. Some companies have used a holistic strategy that focuses on managing customer relationships and brands while others strive for short-term effects with an emphasis on promoting sales.

In a comprehensive survey concerning consumers' experiences of direct marketing channels in Finland it was found that consumers perceived direct marketing channels differently. (Finnish Direct Marketing Association, 2002) The experiences of mail order, Internet and email experiences are more positive compared to other direct market channels such as telemarketing and door-to-door sales. 80 % of the respondents have positive experiences of mail order, 77% have positive experiences of Internet and email as marketing channels and the corresponding number for SMS and WAP is 65%. For telemarketing and door-to-door sales the number of positive consumers is down to 30% and 25% respectively. Concerning satisfaction with information, there seem to be differences between the channels. While 77% of the respondents were satisfied with the information about mail order, 66% were satisfied with Internet and email and only 48% for SMS and WAP. The study also indicated that consumers have considerable less experience of SMS messages compared to mail order, Internet and email.

Traditional marketing communication planning has focused on the marketer's objectives of reaching relevant consumers (Stewart & Pavlou 2002). An open question is, however, what reaching means when considering the empowered and active consumer. A key issue is the responsiveness of the consumer to marketing communication. Responsiveness depicts the consumer's willingness to receive and respond to marketing communication and can be viewed as a function of the content and the context of the message. Any channel can and should be evaluated according to consumer responsiveness in order to understand communication effects and effectiveness.

### **Empowered consumer and media**

When looking at marketing communication from a consumer perspective the question of media effectiveness is more challenging. It has been argued that the information age empowers consumers and creates immediate 24-hour access, which changes consumers' behaviour (Seybold 2001). Many consumers have attitudes, aspirations and purchasing patterns that are different compared to what companies have been used to. Today's consumers are claimed to be independent, individualistic, involved and informed (Lewis and Bridger 2000) which makes it harder than ever to conduct interruption-based communication. In a permission-marketing context it has been argued that if the consumers have agreed to pay attention it would be easier to reach them about offerings (Godin 1999). In traditional research concerning advertising and media effects the consumer's perspective has been largely overlooked.

New media in the digital economy have created potentially powerful tools for direct and interactive marketing. Traditional marketing communication strategies have been based on the interruption logic (Godin 1999) where the consumer is forced to momentarily pay attention. Permission marketing has lately been introduced as a new managerial approach in marketing communication. It has been argued that firms benefit from getting consumers' permission to be contacted (Marinova, Murphy and Massey 2002). Permission from the consumer would resolve the difficulties to get access to the consumer. Permission is, however, not necessarily a guarantee that the consumer pays attention, it is only a door opener and gives an indication of the consumer's potential interest areas.

## **PURPOSE**

This paper analyses and compares consumers' perceptions of direct marketing efforts via traditional direct mail, email and SMS. The main purpose is to understand consumers' responsiveness to digital communication channels compared to traditional channels. From the marketer's perspective it is crucial to know which consumers are open and responsive to marketing communication. In this paper we concentrate on modelling consumer responsiveness as a function of consumer perceived relevance and disturbance of the marketing communication. The empirical study is conducted among a convenience sample of consumers in Finland.

In the study we are applying a traditional episodic communication perspective in the sense that we only assume responsiveness to be related to marketer initiated communication as a reaction to this activity. Thus, in this study we do not imply interactivity within a customer relationship or customer initiated communication.

## **Disturbance**

Studies in advertising have been focused on understanding consumers' responses to marketing communication. The concept of intrusiveness has been suggested to influence the consumer's perceptions marketing communication. Intrusiveness may be useful to describe how negative feelings arise from advertisements (Li et al. 2002). It is related to feelings of irritation, leading to avoidance behaviour. The intrusiveness scale is based on measuring whether an ad is distracting, disturbing, forced, interfering, intrusive, invasive or obtrusive. The personal nature of direct marketing communication may even step over the line of discretion and invade consumers' privacy. For example, unsolicited email and spam mail are considered an invasion of privacy and have actually become a serious problem for many consumers (Windham and Orton 2000).

In this respect, the disturbance effect of marketing messages is of interest because the new interactive media allows more direct contact with the consumer. Consumer responsiveness and attention to marketing communication is influenced by the situation in which the consumer receives the marketing messages. Because of the interactive and personal nature of digital channels the consumer can be in various situations when receiving the marketing message. Li et al. (2002) argued that interruptions may be extremely intrusive when they are unexpected. For example, marketing messages to the mobile phone can reach consumers everywhere when shopping, at meetings, at dates etc. The time and even the place can be

more or less appropriate for the consumer to acknowledge and take interest in the marketing message. Supposedly, this reduces consumers' attention to the marketing message and it may even be perceived as disturbing.

In addition to the effect of the situation, the level of disturbance varies for different channels. Some consumers perceive traditional direct mail as disturbing and put a sign on the mailbox to avoid getting advertisements. Others dislike direct telephone selling because of the personal and direct nature of the channel. On the contrary, consumers that see the direct marketing communication as a welcomed way to receive information about offers and new product launches would probably be most appreciative of SMS offers to the mobile phone because they can be highly situation-specific.

### **Relevance**

Another aspect that influences the consumer's responsiveness to marketing communication is the interest in and relevance of the marketing message. Li et al. (2002) found that the intrusiveness of advertisements may be moderated by the utility that consumers derive from the content. It may be difficult to create relevant marketing communication content, as the relevance is most likely consumer specific. In other words something that is relevant for one consumer is probably less relevant for another consumer. For example, one consumer is interested in golf, another consumer is interested in motor sports or gardening and a golf brochure probably draws the attention of the golf enthusiast and leaves the motor sport enthusiast indifferent.

High relevance may have two different roots. High commitment to a certain brand or service provider may make the consumer more responsive to marketing communication concerning that specific brand or service firm. Similarly, high involvement in a product category or activity may lead to higher consumer perceived relevance for corresponding marketing communication. These roots of perceived relevance might be called focused relevance created by commitment and information relevance generated through involvement.

## **CONSUMER RESPONSIVENESS**

Consumer responsiveness can be considered to be based on a function of relevance and disturbance. Relevance relates to the content of the communication, *what* kind of value the consumer receives from the marketing communication. Disturbance depicts the context of the communication and includes *how*, *when* and *where* the consumer receives the communication. These aspects are derived from service quality models (Grönroos 1982) where perceived service quality traditionally has been modelled as technical (what the consumer receives) and functional quality (in which way the consumer receives the technical quality). Following the line of Balasubramanian et al. (2002) it would also seem reasonable to expect that time- and location-specific elements that create the context when and where the service delivery occurs may impact perceived service quality.

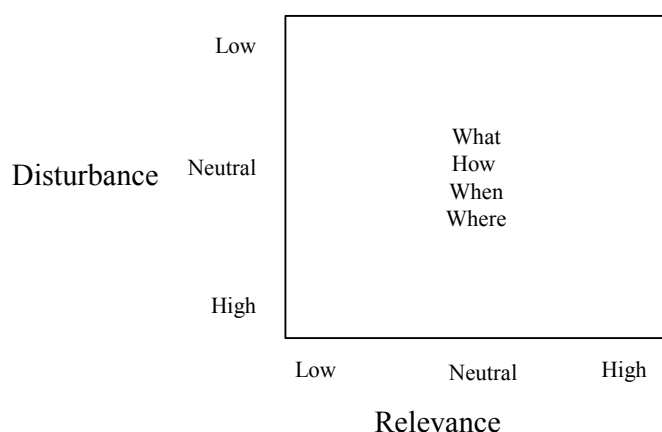


Figure 1. Factors influencing the consumer's responsiveness

The probability of obtaining attention from the consumer should increase with higher relevance and lower disturbance. The upper right hand corner in the figure is a situation where content is perceived relevant and there are few contextual disturbances. This is actually the optimal case to get high responsiveness. In contrast, the lower left hand corner depicts situations where the context is highly disturbing and the content is of low interest. In these cases consumers may be less responsive to marketing communication.

With a value creation perspective (Heinonen 2002) the upper right hand corner represents situations of low disturbance and high relevance where the marketing communication in itself creates value to the consumer and is a part of the company's total offering. Situations in the opposite corner representing high disturbance and low relevance depict negative value creation. This view where the marketing communication either creates or destroys value for the consumer contrasts the traditional media effect paradigm where the marketer's interests are in focus. Following Heinonen (2002) it can be argued that value is created on four basic dimensions: the technical, functional, spatial and temporal dimensions corresponding to what-value, how-value, where-value and when-value.

## EMPIRICAL STUDY

An empirical study was conducted in Finland in early 2002 to compare consumer responsiveness to marketing communication in different channels. Data was collected by interviewing consumers on how they perceive marketing communication concerning 15 services and products received by direct mail, email, SMS and in different situations.

The interview consisted of two parts. The first part involved open-ended questions about general perceptions of advertisements via direct media, i.e. traditional direct mail, email and SMS. This data gives a general view on how consumers relate to different communication channels.

The other part concerned more specifically consumer perceptions of the relevance and disturbance of marketing communication concerning the different services/products in each of the three channels. The size of the convenience sample was 66 respondents but each respondent assessed 1-4 offerings in 2-3 situations resulting in a total sample size of 1179

ranging from 60 to 124 respondents per service/product, and 297 to 559 for the channels. The situations represented marketing communication of offerings received when the respondent is at home, at work and on the move. For quite obvious reasons, SMS is the only channel relevant for respondents when on the move. The products and services included a variety of different offerings: cosmetics, home electronics, furniture, books, grocery products, magazines, music, office supply, printing services, apartment rental services, telephone services, language courses, pizza restaurants, hotel services, and travel services. Some of the offerings are traditional direct marketing services or products, such as music, home electronics, books, cosmetics; others are business items such as office supply, printing services and hotel services.

Respondents were asked to assess disturbance and relevance on a three-point scale ranging from positive, through neutral to negative perceptions. For disturbance the scale points were defined as “I perceive the sales activity as welcomed”, “I have a neutral view of the sales activity” and “I perceive the sales activity as disturbing and do not read”. Relevance was defined as “The offer is interesting, I might buy it”, “I am somewhat interested in the offer, I could possibly buy it” and “The offer is not interesting, I have no interest to buy it”. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed and the relevance/disturbance perceptions were coded for each respondent.

## RESULTS

For each channel the respondents' responses to all offerings are given in Figure 2-4 in percentages. Figure 2 depicts all respondents' responsiveness to all offerings via direct mail which shows that there are many modes of responsiveness to direct mail. 28 % of all respondents consider direct mail to be highly disturbing and perceives the sales activity unwelcome. The offer is not perceived as relevant and the consumer has no interest in buying. 30 % of the respondents are neutral to the channel and the respondent feels the offer as somewhat relevant. 12 % of the respondents perceive the sales activity through the channel as welcome. The distribution of disturbance shows that there are also consumers who welcome direct mail. The reason for this is related to the degree of relevance of the offering to the consumer. High disturbance seems to be related to low relevance and vice versa. Still there is a considerably high percentage of respondents who perceives low relevance but are neutral to the channel (10 %). There are also many respondents who are positive to the channel but perceive the offering only moderately relevant (11%).

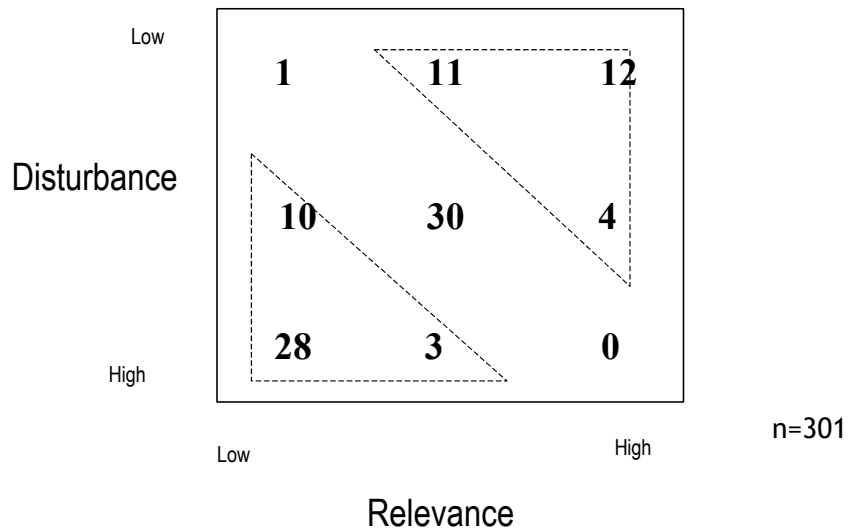


Figure 2. Direct mail responsiveness

Figure 3 illustrates the disturbance and relevance of email and shows that the responsiveness to commercial email is low. Almost half and the highest percentage of the respondents perceive email as highly disturbing and with low relevance (47 %). Still, as the sum of the first row shows there are some respondents that experience low disturbance and would probably welcome sales activities via email (13%). Also the sum of the column to the far right indicates that a total of 8 % of the respondents would probably find the offering relevant. Respondents that show indifference both concerning the channel (disturbance) and the message (relevance) represent the second highest percentage (20%).

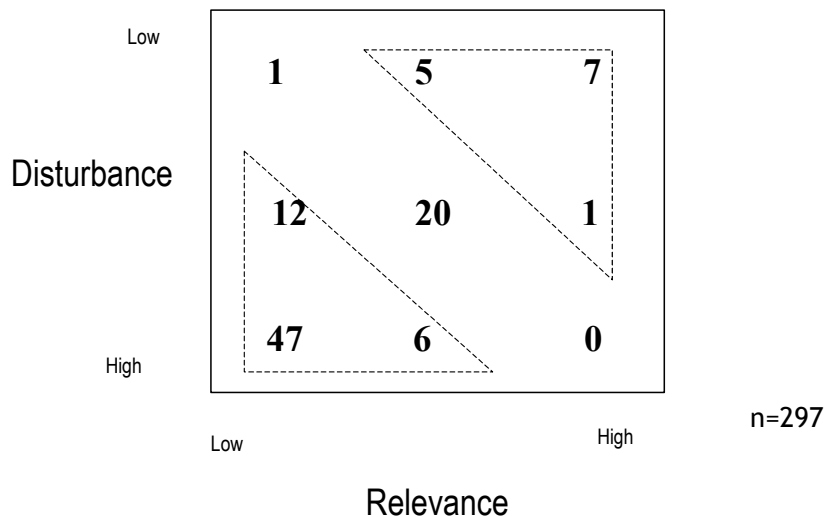


Figure 3. Email responsiveness

Figure 4 illustrates the disturbance and relevance of SMS and shows that the responsiveness to SMS is the lowest of all the channels included in the study. However, even if the majority of respondents (64%) have negative views on SMS sales activities there are also differing opinions. Interestingly, 5% of the respondents perceive commercial SMS as highly relevant and welcome. And similar to email, the number of indifferent respondents is the second highest.

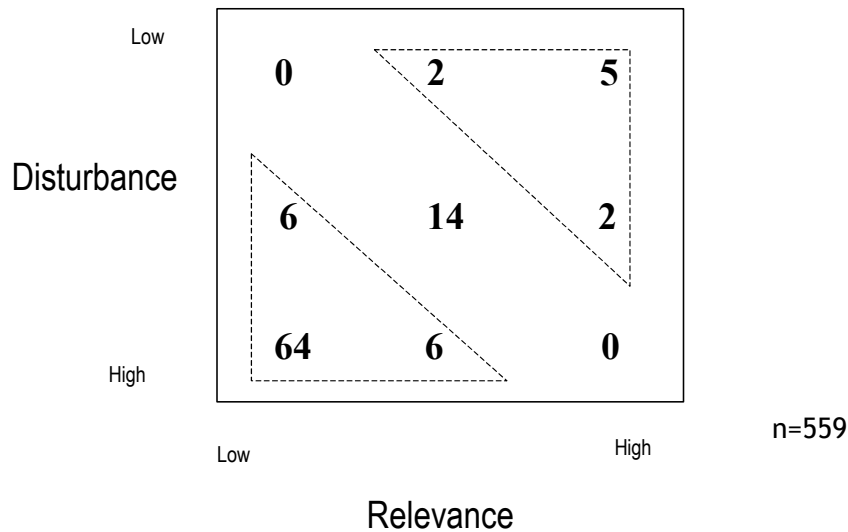


Figure 4. SMS responsiveness

To effectively explore consumer responsiveness it is helpful to create responsiveness groups of each channel. By combining the three lower left hand corner responses we get a total figure of consumers that are critical towards marketing communication based on high disturbance and/or low relevance. This triangle is labelled negative. Correspondingly combining the three upper right hand corner responses (the upper right hand triangle) we get a total figure for consumers with a positive view on marketing communication. The remaining diagonal elements represent a perception of indifference or balance between disturbance and relevance. We choose to label this diagonal indifference.

The negative, indifferent and positive responsiveness groups allow for comparison of the responsiveness distributions in different channels. These figures show that although there are different opinions about the media, there is also a consistent overall tendency indicating lower responsiveness for digital channels compared to traditional channels. Comparing the structure of the total responses for direct mail, email and SMS-messages (figures 2, 3 and 4) we can conclude that the fraction of negative respondents increase and the fraction of positive respondents decrease. In Figure 2 the distribution of responses regarding traditional direct mail shows that there are both respondents who have a negative view on this type of marketing communication (41 %) but also those who have a positive view (27 %). 31 % of the respondents are indifferent. Correspondingly, the findings in figures 3 and 4 show that negative responsiveness is 65% and 76% for email and SMS, indifferent responsiveness is 20% and 14%, and positive responsiveness is 13% and 9% respectively.

Analysing consumer responsiveness in different situations represents similar patterns as the channel-by-channel comparison. Table 1 compares consumers' responsiveness in different situations, i.e. at home, at work and on the move. It indicates that most respondents, independent of situation, have negative opinions about marketing communication. However, the responsiveness in the situation where the consumers is on the move, i.e. where they receive marketing communication to the mobile phone, is the lowest. One explanation for this may be that consumers have little experience of this kind of marketing communication.



Table 1. Responsiveness in different situations

|             | Negative | Indifferent | Positive |
|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| At home     | 61       | 24          | 16       |
| At work     | 60       | 22          | 19       |
| On the move | 79       | 13          | 9        |

Consumers' responsiveness pattern is different for different offerings. Table 1 depicts the percentages of negative, indifferent and positive responsiveness and the offerings are ordered from low responsiveness to higher responsiveness based on all channels. The findings indicate that the responsiveness for some offerings is higher than for others. For example, 80% of the respondents are not responsive to cosmetics while 3% would react positively. In contrast, 30% are potentially responsive to travel services and more than 30% are neutral to such marketing communication.

Table 2. Responsiveness for different offerings

|                    | <b>Negative</b> | <b>Indifferent</b> | <b>Positive</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Cosmetics          | 83              | 14                 | 3               |
| Home electronics   | 83              | 12                 | 5               |
| Printing services  | 78              | 10                 | 12              |
| Office supply      | 76              | 15                 | 11              |
| Apartment rental   | 74              | 22                 | 5               |
| Magazines          | 73              | 19                 | 8               |
| Furniture          | 69              | 19                 | 12              |
| Telephone services | 67              | 22                 | 12              |
| Grocery products   | 67              | 21                 | 14              |
| Language courses   | 62              | 14                 | 24              |
| Books              | 58              | 31                 | 13              |
| Pizza              | 56              | 25                 | 21              |
| Music              | 56              | 23                 | 21              |
| Hotel services     | 50              | 20                 | 31              |
| Travel services    | 40              | 32                 | 30              |

The offerings have quite different response distributions. The responsiveness to some offerings is equally distributed in the three responsiveness groups. For example, offerings that are traditionally included in direct marketing campaigns such as travel and hotel services, music, pizza and books have relative high positive and neutral responsiveness percentages. It indicates that although half of the respondents are not responsive to marketing communication related to these offerings, the rest is more or less equally distributed in the neutral and positive responsiveness groups. One reason for this could be that marketing communication for those offerings that consumers frequently receive are related to higher responsiveness. However, interestingly, the offerings that have received the lowest responsiveness are cosmetics and home electronics, which are often included in traditional direct mail.

Because both relevance and disturbance are consumer-specific, the responsiveness can be assumed to vary among different ages. Respondents were assigned to one of three age groups, one young group (13-20 years), a group of young adults (21-40 years) and an adults group

(41-75 years). Figures 5-7 depict the responsiveness to the three channels for different age groups.

The responsiveness to direct mail in table 3 shows that there are only small differences in the age groups. It seems that young adults are most responsive to direct mail where 35 % are indifferent and almost 30% are positive. Interestingly, the youngest and the oldest age groups have somewhat similar responsiveness distributions. However, the youngest respondents have most negative opinions about marketing communication through this channel (53%). This is worth to notice considering that it could be assumed that young consumers would be open to information.

Table 3. Consumer responsiveness to direct mail by age groups

| <b>Direct mail</b> | <b>Negative</b> | <b>Indifferent</b> | <b>Positive</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Ages 13-20         | 53              | 23                 | 24              |
| Ages 21-40         | 36              | 35                 | 28              |
| Ages 41-75         | 48              | 25                 | 27              |

The responsiveness to commercial email depicted in table 4 is different for the young group and the adult groups. The adult groups are considerably more negative toward commercial email. 73% and 78% of the respondents are negatively responsive compared to 54% of the young respondents. The young group has the highest number of positively responsive respondents (17%) and the lowest number of negatively responsive respondents (54%). The older adult group is less likely to be responsive with only 8% of the respondents stating that they are potentially responsive.

Table 4. Consumer responsiveness to email by age groups

| <b>e-mail</b> | <b>Negative</b> | <b>Indifferent</b> | <b>Positive</b> |
|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Ages 13-20    | 54              | 28                 | 17              |
| Ages 21-40    | 73              | 14                 | 13              |
| Ages 41-75    | 78              | 16                 | 8               |

Table 5 illustrates the responsiveness to commercial SMS and it shows that the opinions between the groups are somewhat different. Again the adult age groups are most negative towards SMS (79% and 88% respectively). The youngest age group is more indifferent than the other groups but in contrast, the number of positive responsiveness is the smallest, only 8%. Interestingly, the young adult group is most positive towards commercial SMS (12%) compared to the other two age groups. The oldest age group is the most negative towards SMS (88%).

Table 5. Consumer responsiveness to SMS by age groups

| SMS        | Negative | Indifferent | Positive |
|------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| Ages 13-20 | 68       | 23          | 8        |
| Ages 21-40 | 79       | 11          | 12       |
| Ages 41-75 | 88       | 5           | 9        |

Comparing the responsiveness of all age groups indicates that the youngest age group does not seem to differentiate between marketing communication in traditional and digital media. The number of indifferent young respondents is largest in all channels and the percentage of negative responsiveness does not increase as much as the other groups. On the other hand, the adult groups are considerably more negative to marketing communication in digital channels with negative responsiveness ranging from 36% and 48% in the traditional channel and 79% and 88% in the mobile channel.

### Disturbance and relevance of each channel

This following section is based on the qualitative part of the interview and depicts the reasons for consumer's points of view to different channels. In general the opinions about the disturbance and relevance of each channel shows that there exist varying expectations and preferences towards the channels.

Traditional direct mail was in the quantitative findings of responsiveness perceived as the channel related to relatively low levels of disturbance and high level of relevance, at least compared to the digital channels. Disturbance is often related to the amount of marketing communication, in terms of wasted paper and excess of information. In contrast, some respondents perceived direct mail in itself as relaxing to read which could indicate that direct mail could be associated with low disturbance.

*"Marketing communication is long and heavy to read, in today's information flow environment the issue must be communicated briefly to keep the reader's attention"*

*"I get a lot of information that I have to read before I know if it is important"*

*"I have to sort them out from the newspapers because they are that sort of paper that I cannot recycle"*

*"It is relaxing to read and I can read it in peace and quiet and don't have to go places to get information"*

One of the aspects that increased the relevance of direct mail was the possibility to get variation and alternative information. It was perceived as a reliable source of information about recent happenings and current events and can thus facilitate everyday life. Relevance was also related to the fact that it often is addressed to a specific person, which may either increase the interest towards the communication or create confusion because it is difficult to know where the consumer's name and address was taken from.

*"If the advertisement is objective and informal, rather than selling, it is nice to know what is happening"*

*"I feel that I am important to the company when I receive communication in my name"*

High disturbance of emails is related to activities needed to handle unwanted emails such as the time and effort to remove them. Unwanted emails are also considered hard to prevent. A result of receiving too much information makes it difficult to recognise important pieces of information. On the other hand, low disturbance is characterized by opinions where emails are considered to be information about offerings that is easy to handle.

*“I get a lot of useless garbage that I have to skim through, I don’t want to use my time to it”*  
*“It requires a bit more energy to read before I can trash it, I have to open it before I know what it contains”*  
*“I delete all messages that look like advertisements, because I get so much that I rather delete too much than risk reading something useless”*  
*“It does not take that long to read the information and it does not lay around in the apartment”*  
*“If the message is short it does not take time to skim it through”*

Low relevance of commercial email is related to situations where the consumer has not given explicit permission to receive information but has been included on an email-list based only on showed interest. Low relevance was also perceived when email had no new or specific content. The relevance of emails increase when commercial email contains more possibilities to interact than traditional direct mail, for example links and easy purchasing possibilities.

*“Information from companies that have put my information in their database because I have had sporadic contact with them but not told that I don’t want more information”*  
*“It is irritating to get messages that don’t include anything new than “we are still here...” information”*  
*“If I want to buy something I want to search for information myself”*  
*“If I want to order information I can get it rapidly”*  
*“Why not, with a link to a functioning service I could buy directly”*

High disturbance of commercial SMS is often related to expectations about the incoming message. Many respondents perceived SMS to be a personal medium and not a channel suitable for direct marketing. Disappointment is caused as the consumer cannot see in advance that the message is commercial rather than personal. Commercial SMS was also perceived as being too direct and invading the privacy of the respondent. In comparison, by closing the mobile phone, it was possible for the respondent to receive SMS only in situations that are suitable, which actually may somewhat reduce the feelings of disturbance.

*“I think that the telephone is a personal communication channel and not a medium for advertisements”*  
*All advertising messages feel disturbing, even the ones that I have requested”*  
*“The most disturbing is to get a commercial SMS when you are expecting something personal and fun”*  
*I think it is irritating to get advertisements to my personal number”*  
*“I have my phone switched off when I don’t want to be available, so messages are welcomed all other times”*

The relevance of commercial SMS is related to the possibility to get information that is connected to a specific location or situation. Mobile marketing is in this respect optimal as it can be linked to current offers and campaigns. In this respect it could actually create inspiration and enjoyment. Because commercial SMS is delivered to the consumer independently of situation, it is expected to be something important and current.

*“If it were location-based it could work as an inspiration to go to a store or restaurant” (1:4)*

*“It is fast and always up-to-date”*

*“I only want to get extremely important information that can’t wait, otherwise I can check my email”*

The perceptions of disturbance and relevance on a general level vary by channels. One common aspect about disturbance concerning digital channels is that consumers are not able to notice that the marketing communication is commercial. Often the message has to be opened to discover that it is a commercial message. Traditional direct mail is in this respect more direct as it is visually apparent that it contains other than personal messages.

Differences in the perceived disturbance of the channels may relate to consumers’ own activities in connection with the consumption of the marketing communication. For example, traditional commercial direct mail can be directly identified and disposed of where SMS-messages have to be opened and read in order to be identified as advertisements. On the other hand they are more easily disposed of than direct mail.

The opinions about the relevance of digital channels also varied compared to traditional direct mail. Marketing communication to digital channels was expected to be more updated and current and containing only very important issues. Also email communication is perceived as something closely related to some specific interest or hobby. Thus, the marketing communication can be a door opener as it creates attention and leads the consumer to places that seem interesting at that particular moment.

## DISCUSSION

This paper focused on consumer responsiveness to digital channels and the findings indicate that the responsiveness is different from the responsiveness to the traditional channel. On an aggregate level the study indicates a consistent lower level in responsiveness to digital channels compared to traditional direct mail. The mobile channel and SMS were considered the most disturbing channel and traditional direct mail the least disturbing. One reason for this may be that consumers have only limited experience of marketing communication to digital channels, especially concerning commercial SMS-messages. There are, however, diverging opinions among consumers. Some consumers are welcoming digital marketing communication, while others do not. By and large, there are three groups of responsiveness for all three channels, those consumers that are not responsive, those that are indifferent and those that are responsive to marketing communication.

The main advantage of the digital channels from the marketer’s perspective – that they are personal – might simultaneously be a disadvantage. The more personal the channel is potentially the more disturbance and less relevance it may create. Some channels are more

personal than others and this creates different expectations for messages that are delivered. Channels that are perceived as personal might create high levels of expectations. Consumers expect messages to be personal and of high interest and this makes the disappointment greater when they get undesired messages. Personal and private messages in general seem more relevant and less disturbing than commercial messages.

The responsiveness varies depending on offering and age. There are considerable differences in consumer responsiveness to different products/services. Based on our convenience sample of consumers it is difficult to draw any other conclusions than that there seems to be a need to further investigate the reasons for offering-specific differences. Younger consumers seem to have a balanced perspective on all channels while older consumers clearly prefer traditional mail to digital channels.

Taking a managerial perspective the findings represent a new view on marketing communication strategy and effectiveness measurement. A firm's customers may be divided into a portfolio of different responsiveness groups. By looking at consumer responsiveness as a function of disturbance and relevance it is possible to see four different situations for increasing the likelihood of getting the consumers' attention.

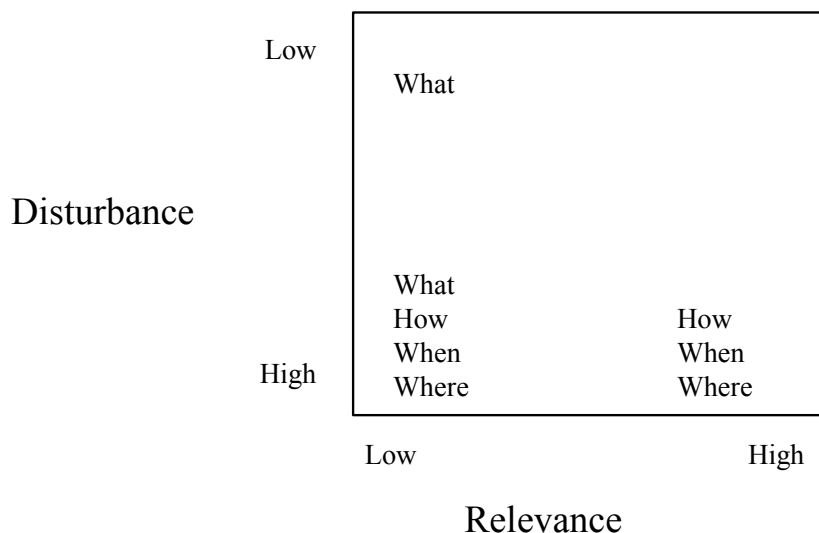


Figure 5. Communication strategies based on customer responsiveness

In the situation where disturbance is high while relevance is low it is necessary to focus on both the context and the content of the marketing communication. In other words, the marketer must improve the value consumers receive from the message, as well as how, when and where the marketing communication is delivered to the consumer. Important to discover is who perceives the communication in this way and why.

On the other hand, in situations where the disturbance is low, but the relevance is low, the context of the marketing message seem to be satisfactory to the consumer. This means that attention can be placed on making the content more appealing, i.e. working on finding relevant offerings.

In contrast, where the relevance is high, and disturbance is high, the content seem to be valuable to the consumer. In these cases it is necessary to focus on providing the marketing communication in such situations and ways that make it even more appealing. How, when and where grow in importance.

Lastly, even in cases where disturbance is low and relevance is high it is equally crucial to recognise the importance of the content as well as the context of the marketing communication. The upper right corner of the disturbance/relevance model indicates that the consumer is currently satisfied with what the marketing communication provides as well as how, when and where it is delivered. But, considering the dynamism in consumer behaviour it is essential not to forget that the situation may change.

The contribution of the paper is the introduction of the relevance/disturbance framework in the marketing communication context, a conceptualisation that points to the active role of an empowered consumer. The framework used in this exploratory study clearly points to the need for companies to measure the responsiveness of their consumers in order to understand the effectiveness of their marketing communication in different traditional and new communication channels.

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