



# Marketing Direct Is Not Selling Direct

by Michael Woody,  
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**W**hile discussing promotional efforts with a supplier colleague recently, we discovered that we had both been independently thinking about the concept of direct marketing, and how it is often confused with direct selling in the promotional products industry.

Whereas direct selling is taboo, and simply transfers existing market-share from one entity to another, direct marketing actually has the potential to increase total industry sales. Unfortunately, confusion between the two often leads to mistrust between suppliers and distributors, undermining joint sales efforts, and preventing our industry from increasing its profile as an integral component of a client's advertising program.

For example, Quill has run ads for several years in *The Wall Street Journal* and various airline in-flight magazines in order to increase brand awareness and create leads for distributors. In spite of the fact that we have an elaborate program in place to forward these leads to our best distributors, we have often been accused of direct selling. Actually, we are engaged in direct marketing.

The function of marketing is simply to prepare the buyer to buy, or put the client in a buying mode. If a supplier can, through direct marketing, take a client to the point of making a buying decision, then refer that client to a qualified distributor, is this a scenario that should be derided or applauded?

Another example of direct marketing that will have dramatic implications for our industry is the proliferation of supplier Web sites on the Internet. If structured appropriately, these sites could create new customers, or even new markets, by providing a broader understanding of promotional products as a problem-solving tool for businesses. Should the development of these sites be stymied because of a collective perception that the marketer is selling direct?

Keep in mind that suppliers can add up the numbers that demonstrate the benefits of our distribution system. According to the latest estimates, there is a potential U.S. client base for promotional products of 10 million companies. There are roughly 13,000 distributors with a total of 120,000 salespeople on the street, ready and willing to call on these 10 million clients. For a supplier with a sales force of only six territory managers, for example, to risk alienating such an extensive distribution network for a handful of direct orders would be short-sighted indeed.

Distributor discomfort over direct marketing no doubt is derived in large part from the fact that there are some suppliers who find it in their economic self-interest to sell directly to clients. However, using a broad brush to also tar suppliers who are making a legitimate effort to help distributors sell is self-defeating and potentially detrimental to our industry's growth. If more suppliers had

the willingness, the means and the expertise to market directly to clients, it would foster greater interest in the benefits of promotional products as a highly targeted, cost-effective advertising medium, and possibly help us to expand our marketshare of clients' available advertising dollars.

Consider one final question: if, every day, *The Wall Street Journal* carried 50 ads from suppliers who respect

and support our distribution network, touting the benefits of their promotional products line as part of a client's marketing mix, could that possibly be bad for our industry? **PPB**

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