

COLUMNS

Why retailers' print catalogs are making a comeback

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By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

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A certain *Wall Street Journal* [article](#) has been causing quite a stir lately. The article discusses the fact that big retailers such as Bonobos, IKEA, Athleta and H&M are releasing traditional print catalogs in a digital age – and seeing huge gains.

Digital-focused marketers have not been thinking much about print catalogs these days, but it seems they are too effective to be ignored. According to FGI Research, consumers still spend an average of [about \\$850 on catalog purchases](#) each year.

With some brands, it is easy to see where that \$850 goes.

Turning the page

Furniture retailer [Restoration Hardware](#) recently underwent some scrutiny from environmentalists and general fun-pokers for sending out a [616-page, 15lb catalog](#). Interestingly enough, the company says it produces such large catalogs to save waste by producing only a couple each year instead of several. But what is the company's overall catalog strategy?

It turns out, Restoration Hardware only holds about 20 percent of its products in-store, meaning sales of other products must come from the catalog and Web site. This can be attributed, at least partly, to the fact that a catalog is such an expansive example of the brand and its products.

Instead of seeing a short email campaign message or pay-per-click (PPC) ad, consumers can see dozens or hundreds of images and enticing slogans.

Print catalogs and online activity are not always separate experiences.

In fact, catalogs can inspire shoppers to pick up their mobile phones, tablets or laptops and do some quick shopping – even more than **social media** does. In this way, catalogs act as the style inspiration, and the Web lets the shopper quickly order using an online shopping cart, without having to call or fill out a paper form.

Although I see the value of the print catalog as an acquisition vehicle, and I certainly appreciate flipping through beautiful spreads, I argue that we should be shifting the paradigm of our Web sites to be experience-driven and to more closely resemble these traditional magazine-like experiences.

Many **magazine publishers have advanced quickly into the era of the tablet**, and have incredible versions of their magazines that are no longer flat spreads, but are enriched with videos, social engagement and an overall more interactive experience.

I keep wondering when I will receive a digital version of these catalogs, from either traditional retailers or brand manufacturers. I have almost completely switched from reading printed magazines to digital, and, like many of you, I left the printed version of the newspaper years ago.

Yet, none of the retailers I regularly shop with offers me digital versions of their catalogs.

So many times, I have picked up a print catalog from my mailbox and wanted more information on a product. However, most of the time I just throw the catalog into the bin, because it seems like too much effort to go back to my tablet or computer and then navigate to find the product.

It makes me wonder: If Bonobos had such a reaction when introducing a printed catalog, what might happen if there was a digital version delivered to my iPad's Newsstand?

Of course, we will have to keep analyzing the effect of both print and digital catalog as customers continue to **evolve in their shopping habits**.

Shop talk

There are some ways to measure how many of your online shoppers are coming from catalogs.

For example, when catalog customers navigate to your Web site to place an order, you can ask them to input their unique catalog code. Or, if a catalog recipient picks up the phone and calls the retailer to place an order, the customer service representative should

always ask for the catalog source code on the back of the catalog.

This method usually allows captures more than 90 percent. If the exact catalog code is unknown, a generic catalog code can be chosen for reporting.

Catalog companies themselves have quite a few ways of keeping track of customer data. Some employ large data companies that know a lot about **consumers' lifestyles**. For example, when people move, they may start receiving furniture catalogs at their new address.

Ecommerce teams can also take advantage of patterns the magazine publishers leverage to **understand how the content is consumed**, such as where shoppers are lingering, which part of the publication they are most engaged with, and, if there are live links, where they navigate next.

Condé Nast is one publisher that uses technology to better understand its readers.

Using an analytics program within a digital catalog experience offers marketers insights into how often the catalog is viewed, the number of days since first use, the number of days since last use, the device used, the time of day accessed, which products were viewed, and which products were purchased on the site.

The entire engagement lifecycle can be measured and ultimately optimized based on the behavior witnessed and captured.

NOT **EVERYONE** or every brand is still into print catalogs and the benefits they offer.

Many brands only provide online catalogs, which fashion companies often call “lookbooks,” or simply **digital catalogs**.

I would challenge that as millennials and the generations that follow them grow up more familiar with their digital devices than printed publications, this will be a key area in which to invest.

For the moment, we will let the analytics stand and embrace both online catalogs and more traditional print catalogs. Both seem to be making a large effect on retailers' success.

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