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SNAIL-MAIL OR E-MAIL? — A STUDY OF COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES IN PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS

Information technology has helped overcome many physical distances and borders; however, business communication via e-mail and the internet must still compete with established delivery systems. Some voices prophesy a continuing shift towards electronic communication at the expense of more traditional forms, especially telefax and mail, the latter somewhat derogatorily called snail-mail. To help shed light on current preferences, this study examines the channels of communication offered to potential customers in print advertisements in four business journals published in the United States and Germany. This data will provide insights into the acceptance of new technologies vis-à-vis more traditional methods of communication.

BACKGROUND

At a recent convention on business communication in the United States, Howard and Donofrio (1998) enthusiastically reported on the spreading acceptance of e-mail and the speed of communication via this medium, leading them to predict a death sentence for the telefax. The whole nation, in fact, seems caught up in an exuberance and dependence on computers and the internet, perhaps best exemplified by the rush to equip public schools with information technology.

A survey conducted by Carrie V. Stokes (1998) reveals that 59.5% of executives questioned¹ want intercultural and global communication skills, not just communication within one country, to be taught in busi-

¹ These included CEO's, senior staff, directors and vice-presidents in different industries such as banking, telecommunication, manufacturing and hotels.

ness communication courses. Furthermore, 40.5% regard the use of technology in business communication an important component of such a course. It is clear that professionals need skills that enable them to communicate globally with current technology, including an understanding of the appropriateness of the chosen medium in a given context.

Journals from two countries were chosen for this study in order to assess whether use of communication tools can differ in countries seemingly comparable in terms of technological sophistication. If they do, students and business professionals need to become aware of such regional differences and be able to recognize and adjust to locally accepted practices. Germany and the United States both have large economies and extensive technology industries, but various factors might produce different results of the study, among them the penetration of computer usage and differences in the business environment.

Germans use electronic communication tools less than Americans do. The number of PCs in Germany, 26 per 100 inhabitants, runs low compared to 49 PCs for every 100 US citizens (GLOBUS Gd-4702, 1998). In the United States, "computers have become a common feature of the school landscape" (Smithey and Hough 78). By the 1997-98 schoolyear, over eight million computers were in use in schools, and in higher education campus computer programs have become established, with Princeton for instance reporting that 75% of all first-year students in the fall of 1998 purchased their own computers through a university-subsidized program (Buchsbaum 22). In contrast, a study by the Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft reported in *Wirtschaftswoche* (15 Oct. 1998, 8) declares that nearly half of all German students commencing their university studies have only superficial computer knowledge or none at all.

German investments in information technology nationwide equaled merely two percent of GDP in contrast to four percent in the United States (Ussler and Mörer, 12).

German businesses, especially small and medium-sized firms, continue to meet the internet with skepticism. Only 40% have internet access and fewer than 20% their own web-site (GLOBUS Gd-5005, 1998). Large companies with national and international exposure do offer web-sites, but smaller and more regionally-oriented companies have not found the internet useful so far.

Environmental factors that might produce different communication practices include advertising regulations, which often prevent businesses

in Germany from establishing unsolicited contact with potential customers. Providers must persuade consumers to request information and thus give permission to the seller before sending mail or placing a phone call. Print advertisements provide a common method of establishing contact between supplier and customer. They may include an address or phone number, often accompanied by a direct appeal to the reader to contact the firm for more information. The choice of the particular communication channel offered to the reader and potential customer offers some insight into the preferred means of communication and the use of information technology.

Established custom as well as the availability of communication technology determine the choices given to readers of the advertisements. This initial study does not, however, explore the reasons for choosing particular communication channels over others. This would require an extensive survey. Instead, the published print advertisements in two German and two comparable American business journals provide the foundation for the analysis.

METHOD AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Print advertisements with appeals to readers to request more information appear in many magazines and journals. Since this study endeavors to assess the communication channels preferred in business situations, four business journals provided the data: *Business Week* (published in the US) and the German *Wirtschaftswoche*, both weekly magazines targeting the business community as well as the general reader with a strong interest in business and economics; *Absatzwirtschaft*, published monthly in Germany for marketing professionals, and *Sales and Marketing Management*, a US publication with a similar layout, publication frequency, and range of topics.

A count of all advertisements in three issues of each of the journals yielded the results for this study. Since these turned out quite similar for different issues of the same journal, the following data reflect the totals for three issues of each journal. Tables 1-3 offer a summary of the most significant findings; Table 4 in the appendix includes the count for all possible combinations of communication channels. Percentages are based on the total number of advertisements (3 issues per journal) and are rounded to one decimal point.

Not included in the count were personal, classified and job ads and any duplicate ads within the same issue. Also disregarded were special advertising sections and a few hard-to-classify cases, such as non-profit organizations providing only a bank account number for donations. The US magazines introduced a variation not found in the German magazines, the response card on which readers can circle a number corresponding to a firm in order to request information. Since most advertisers still included other points of contact in their ads, including some mailing addresses, these cards were noted but not considered equivalent to providing a mailing address.

RESULTS

Communication Media.

The advertisements include combinations of five communication options: mailing address, telephone number, telefax number, e-mail address and website, plus the additional option of providing no point of contact at all. The data in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 show the frequency of each option offered. Of the 184 advertisements counted in three issues of *Absatzwirtschaft*, for example, 105 (57%) included the firm's mailing address, but only 45 (24.5%) indicated an e-mail address. The category "E-mail" represents advertisements including a direct e-mail address, for example, <business@net.com>, in contrast to a website (usually a worldwide web based URL) which may eventually also lead to an e-mail option.

The telephone emerges as highly popular in all four magazines, especially so in the two marketing journals. Since many of the advertisers in these publications offer highly customized services, potential customers clearly must contact the provider to discuss details. The fax has a low priority in the US (15% in *Sales & Marketing* and 3% in *Business Week*) but still shows strongly in the German magazines, particularly in *Absatzwirtschaft* (71% vs. 40% in *Wirtschaftswoche*). Further research is needed to show whether there is a decline in fax usage in the United States due to increasing popularity of e-mail and internet communications.

Table 1.1
Communication Choices Offered to Readers:
Total Number of Occurrences (German)

	Absatzwirtschaft (184 ads total)	Wirtschaftswoche (333 ads total)
Address	105 (57.1%)	114 (34.2%)
Telephone	158 (85.9%)	217 (65.2%)
Telefax	130 (70.7%)	134 (40.2%)
Website	55 (29.9%)	230 (69.1%)
E-mail	45 (24.5%)	62 (18.6%)
No option provided	14 (7.6%)	30 (9.0%)

Table 1.2
Communication Choices Offered to Readers:
Total Number of Occurrences (US)

	Sales&Marketing (235 ads total)	Business Week (272 ads total)
Address	46 (19.6%)	18 (6.6%)
Telephone	227 (96.6%)	201 (73.9%)
Telefax	36 (15.3%)	9 (3.3%)
Website	164 (69.8%)	235 (86.4%)
E-mail	44 (18.7%)	18 (6.6%)
No option provided	4 (1.7%)	12 (4.4%)

Germany clearly lags behind the United States in internet usage, particularly in the realm of smaller service providers, including many advertisers in *Absatzwirtschaft*. The frequency of websites is quite comparable for *Business Week* and *Wirtschaftswoche* with 86% and 69% respectively; however, in contrast to 69% in *Sales & Marketing* fewer than 30% of ads in *Absatzwirtschaft* provide a website, a finding that supports the assertion that small and medium-sized businesses in Germany use the internet sparingly.

The postal address still plays an important role in Germany with 57% of ads in *Absatzwirtschaft* and 34% in *Wirtschaftswoche*. The respective figures for the US-magazines (20% and 7%) are much lower, clearly de-emphasizing this medium known as snail-mail.

The least popular option in all four publications turns out to be e-mail. The low figure of 6.6% for *Business Week* perhaps reflects the concern that too many readers might contact the firm without first having looked up additional information available on the website. Within the typical company homepage, the shopper can then locate the interactive e-mail option. The website in a way functions as an initial screen as well as a location for frequently requested information. The somewhat higher e-mail figures for the German magazines, on the other hand, reflect the fact that fewer German firms have websites. However, not one single advertisement in any of the four magazines provided an e-mail address as the sole option.

Common Combinations.

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 show the most common combinations of communication methods chosen by the advertisers. Several choices did not occur at all, for example “telephone number plus e-mail address.” This differed by journal: the *Absatzwirtschaft* ads used only 21 of 32 theoretically possible combinations (including the option to provide no point of contact). *Wirtschaftswoche* ads used 26; *Sales and Marketing Management* and *Business Week*, on the other hand, only 18 and 15 different combinations respectively, with an overwhelming number clustered around one choice: “telephone number plus internet site.” The two German magazines each have one preferred option with more than twenty percent of all ads: “telephone plus website” in *Wirtschaftswoche* and “address plus telephone plus fax” in *Absatzwirtschaft*, but they also use about five other options heavily. In order to keep the values for the German and American journals comparable, the categories in Table 2.1 and Table 2.2 match, even though this meant the inclusion of less common choices for some journals (* indicates value below 5%).

Table 2.1
Most Common Choices and Combinations
(German)

	Absatzwirtschaft (184 ads)	Wirtschaftswoche (333 ads)
Telephone only	25 (13.6%)	25 (7.6%)
Website only	5 (2.7%)*	45 (13.5%)
Telephone+Fax	19 (10.3%)	4 (1.2%)*
Telephone+ Website	8 (4.3%)*	65 (19.5%)
Address+Telephone+Fax	41 (22.3%)	14 (4.2%)*
Teleph.+Website+E-mail	0 (0.0%)*	7 (2.1%)*
Addr+Tel+Fax+E-mail	18 (9.8%)	8 (2.4%)*
Addr+Tel+Fax+Website	14 (7.6%)	27 (8.1%)
All five options	15 (8.2%)	27 (8.1%)
No point of contact	14 (7.6%)	30 (9.0%)

Table 2.2
Most Common Choices and Combinations
(US)

	Sales&Marketing (235 ads)	Business Week (272 ads)
Telephone only	43 (18.3%)	12 (4.4%)*
Website only	8 (3.4%)*	57 (21.0%)
Telephone+Fax	8 (3.4%)*	0 (0.0%)*
Telephone+ Website	100 (42.6%)	156 (57.4%)
Address+Tel+Website	12 (5.1%)	10 (3.7%)*
Teleph.+Website+E-mail	12 (5.1%)	8 (2.9%)*
Addr+Tel+Fax+E-mail	2 (0.9%)*	0 (0.0%)*
Addr+Tel+Fax+Website	3 (1.3%)*	1 (0.4%)*
All five options	14 (6.0%)	1 (0.4%)*
No point of contact	4 (1.7%)*	12 (4.4%)*

German firms use more variations, combining the different communication methods to suit their purposes and abilities; advertisers in the United States focus on two options: “telephone plus website” or just the telephone. Overall, the use of websites appears much more pronounced in the United States than in Germany.

A small percentage of ads provide no point of contact at all, typically very large firms with widely recognizable names, such as Honda, Bosch, and Samsonite. The ads often do not promote a particular product but the name and image of the firm. Two other product types are notable in this category, specific book or magazine titles and also television programs. Since distribution points for these products are clear (bookstores and the television), consumer contact becomes less important.

The data for the category “website only” underscores the difference in the two types of publications. Advertisers in the marketing journals include more small and medium-sized firms offering services such as market research, seminars and software solutions, whereas the business weeklies count many large and well-known companies among their advertisers, which routinely use websites in their advertisements, for instance banks, chemical companies and manufacturers of cars, clothing and office equipment. The figures for the option “telephone plus website” reflect this difference also for the two German magazines; however, *Sales & Marketing Management* uses this combination nearly as much as *Business Week*; it is in fact the preferred choice in both US publications. While it is also the most common option in *Wirtschaftswoche*, the frequency of 19.5% remains far below the comparable data in the US magazines with 42.6% and 57.4%.

The telephone distinctly appears a strong contender among communication technologies; it takes first place in overall frequency in two out of four magazines and second place in the other two (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2). Clearly the phone is considered a reliable and widely available means of communication; still, it receives strong competition from websites as the communication path of choice by firms advertising in the business weeklies.

The most typical ads include two or three possible methods of response (see Tables 3.1 and 3.2). German advertisements apply much greater variety, whereas the American ad has evidently developed standards that cut across industries and size. In *Business Week*, 57.4% of ads rely on the combination of phone and web-technologies; an additional 21% provide only a website, a total of 78.4% of all ads. The figure of 46% for these two categories in *Sales & Marketing Management* still lies far ahead of any combination of two categories for the German publications, where no such standard for communication options emerged.

Table 3.1
Number of Choices Provided to Readers
(German)

	Absatzwirtschaft (184 ads)	Wirtschaftswoche (333 ads)
None	14 (7.6%)	30 (9.0%)
One choice	35 (19.0%)	79 (23.7%)
Two choices	34 (18.5%)	90 (27.0%)
Three choices	49 (26.7%)	61 (18.3%)
Four choices	37 (20.1%)	46 (13.8%)
All five options	15 (8.2%)	27 (8.1%)

Table 3.2
Number of Choices Provided to Readers
(US)

	Sales&Marketing (239 ads)	Business Week (272 ads)
None	4 (1.7%)	12 (4.4%)
One choice	51 (21.7%)	69 (25.4%)
Two choices	119 (49.8%)	163 (59.9%)
Three choices	38 (16.2%)	26 (9.6%)
Four choices	13 (5.5%)	1 (0.4%)
All five options	14 (6.0%)	1 (0.4%)

Mail, that is snail-mail, finds itself in last place in the United States, displaced by more modern communication technologies. The notable exception to this trend is the reader response card. A majority of advertisers in *Sales & Marketing Management* (93.4%) employ this service; *Business Week* makes use of such cards on a smaller scale. German snail-mail manages to hold on, but usually in combination with other communication options. Fewer than one percent of all firms, both German and American, rely on a postal address alone.

CONCLUSION

For producers and readers of print advertisements, electronic media play an important role, but they have not replaced older forms of communication. Particularly the telephone remains a key technology. Mail

and telefax emerge as less important methods of communication between the potential consumer and the seller. However, this particular study cannot explain whether computer technology, specifically the availability of companies' homepages on the internet, has replaced more traditional communication options or has provided additional choices.

Acceptance of internet technology in the German ads lags notably behind the US levels; though German firms advertising in the US magazines, for example Siemens, have adapted to local trends. Probably the extent of website technology as an avenue for interaction with customers is not just dictated by the firms' acceptance of new technologies. Rather, these sellers may have realistic expectations of the capabilities of their customers since approximately twice as many Americans as Germans have access to personal computers.

Direct access to e-mail has not become a dominant form of communication in either country, likely for different reasons. German consumers are just warming up to internet surfing and many businesses still have not established their own websites. In Germany, e-mail addresses at times provide an alternative to the homepage on the web, whereas the majority of US firms have taken the next step and established websites containing e-mail access within the webpage. In the United States, the widespread popularity of the internet renders direct e-mail access unnecessary. If the reader first visits the provider's homepage, some potential questions disappear after exposure to the information provided. Furthermore, these pages then lead to the option of sending a direct communication via e-mail as well as enabling the placement of "cookies," allowing the firm to send follow-up messages later on.

While the German magazines clearly exhibit less penetration of electronic technology in their advertisements, other cultural factors did not emerge. The geographic expanse of the continental United States over four time zones (compared to one zone for Germany) apparently does not diminish the importance of telephone communication. Nearly all advertisers in *Sales & Marketing Management* (96.6%) and three-fourths in *Business Week* (73.9%) supply a telephone number. The figures are somewhat lower in the German magazines, perhaps a reflection of higher costs in the telecommunication industry, which only recently has admitted private competition. Also the expectation that the strict advertising laws in Germany could lead to more extensive use of appeals to readers and of communication options did not bear out. A slightly higher per-

centage of German advertisers did not include any points of contact at all. However, the German ads make more extensive use of all the different communication channels and offer three, four and even five methods of contacting the firm at higher rates than the US firms. Questions regarding changes in communication choices over time and the success rate of new technologies remain the subject of further studies.

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Wirtschaftswoche 45 (Oct. 29, 1998)

APPENDIX

TABLE 4
DATA FOR EACH CATEGORY OF COMMUNICATION CHOICES

	Absatzw 184 ads	Wiw0 333 ads	Sales&Mk 232 ads	BusWeek 272 ads
Address only	2	3	0	0
Telephone only	25	25	43	12
Fax only	3	6	0	0
Website only	5	45	8	57
E-mail only	0	0	0	0
Fax and tel	19	4	8	0
Fax and address	3	6	0	0
Fax and e-mail	1	0	0	0
Fax and website	0	3	0	0
Tel and address	2	2	7	3
Tel and e-mail	0	1	4	3
Tel and website	8	65	100	156
Address and e-mail	0	0	0	0
Address and website	1	7	0	1
E-mail and website	0	2	0	0
Addr/tel/fax	41	14	3	2
Addr/tel/web	1	7	12	10
Addr/tel/e-mail	0	0	2	1
Addr/fax/e-mail	0	0	0	0
Addr/fax/web	0	11	0	0
Addr/e-mail/web	0	0	0	0
Tel/fax/e-mail	4	4	2	4
Tel/fax/web	3	16	7	0
Tel/e-mail/web	0	7	12	8
Fax/e-mail/web	0	2	0	1

	Absatzw 184 ads	Wiwö 333 ads	Sales&Mk 232 ads	BusWeek 272 ads
Addr/tel/fax/e-mail	18	8	2	0
Addr/tel/fax/web	14	27	3	1
Addr/tel/e-mail/web	1	1	3	0
Addr/fax/e-mail/web	2	1	0	0
Tel/fax/e-mail/web	2	9	5	0
All 5 options	15	27	14	1
No options	14	30	4	12