**Coupons: A Fresh Look at an Age-Old Approach**

Coupons have been around for as long as any of us can remember and continue to be among the most effective marketing strategies in existence. Consider the fact that the use of coupons contributed to the incredible success of Coca Cola in the late 1890s, when the company mailed and inserted in magazines millions of coupons for free tastes of the soft drink. By 1914, it is estimated that more than eight million free Cokes had been served to upwards of 10 percent of the American public!

In 2013, American shoppers redeemed nearly three billion coupons. While coupons are a way of life for some (think of the television show *Extreme Couponing*), they are an intermittent pursuit for others. But their continued popularity and effectiveness — as well as the fact that consumers associate coupons with newspapers — suggest that publications would do well to ask if they are capitalizing on this time-honored advertising vehicle.

**Invest in good design.** Coupons work best when they grab readers’ attention. Since studies show that after scanning a headline, many readers jump immediately to the coupon offer, make sure that the ad starts with a strong headline that leads to the coupon.

Distinguish coupons from the rest of an ad with a bold border or slotted rule, an eye-catching image, and a clearly stated offer. Expiration dates are key and add a sense of urgency. It’s also worth remembering that people often save coupons but discard the ads that housed them. This means that coupons have to stand on their own and function both as reminders to act and reinforcers of the advertiser’s brand.

**Offer deals that lead to sales.** Coupons are most effective and most often redeemed when they offer sweet deals — a substantial percentage discount, a two-for-one offer, or a free item with the purchase of an advertised item. Both print and digital coupons not only generate foot traffic for advertisers, but also offer opportunities for additional contact with customers. For example, businesses looking to beef up their mailing lists can ask for buyers’ contact information at the point of redemption. Coupons also enable advertisers to easily track the promotion’s effectiveness.

**Sell coupons by the book…** Many publications have successfully countered competition from Valpak and other direct-market coupon providers by producing their own coupon books. These promotions can revolve around a holiday — “July 4th Specials,” — a geographic location — “Main Street Savings” — a season —“Summer Vacation Coupon Guide” — or a cause — “Shop Locally.”

**Or by the page.** Consider developing daily or weekly themed coupon pages that group related businesses together to generate additional attention for advertisers and a regular reader following.

If the deals are sweet, anything goes!

*This article was written by Jo-Ann Johnson of Metro Creative Graphics, Inc.*