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This Isn't the Holiday Catalog You Remember

Sears and Other Retailers Use the Old-World Books to Drive Shoppers Online

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CHICAGO (AdAge.com) -- The holiday catalog -- slick, shiny, full of promise and gone the way of the passenger pigeon -- is wending its old-world way to a mailbox near you. The festive books, including the great-granddaddy, the Sears Wish Book, are making a comeback. But gone are heavyweight tomes packed with every item the store sells and designed as direct-sales agents. This year's offerings will be sleeker, more lifestyle-oriented and focused on getting you online.



Look familiar? Today's Wish Book.

Case in point: the Sears Wish Book, discontinued in 1993 and resurrected for 2007. The book, once published in August and September at 700 pages, has been replaced with a 188-page version. It's packed with product shots and item numbers but also includes full-page room designs in an attempt to sell not just single gifts but the whole enchilada. Each page has a dual refer: the call center and the web.

Guiding shoppers

It might seem an obvious point, but catalogs -- previously panned because they were old-fashioned and expensive to produce and ship -- enhance the web-shopping experience. By providing a clear starting

point and thematic organization, it's harder to get lost. Amazon.com is great when consumers know what they're looking for, but when faced with a long list of people and a short list of ideas, having a catalog to act as a guide can be a boon.

Sears, of course, isn't alone.

"Our catalog is itself an advertising vehicle, and it is an effective way to drive traffic to our website," said Mary Rose MacKinnon, an L.L. Bean spokeswoman. "We want our customers to have a choice, and while more and more are using our website, they mostly peruse our catalog first and then decide to either go online or call in their order."

More than 40% of retailers with online components to their businesses said they would increase the importance of catalogs the coming year, according to a recent study by Shop.org. The new catalogs are designed to drive online sales. Indeed, 66% said the catalog's success is measured by its ability to boost web sales.

Evolution

Retailers said 13% of their new online customers last year came because of catalog mailings. About 43% of catalog customers also buy online. And a number of online-only retailers have introduced their own holiday catalogs that are mailed. EBay, Red Envelope and Uncommon Goods all assemble holiday catalogs, said Scott Silverman, president of Shop.org.

"Catalogs have evolved over the last few years," Mr. Silverman said. "Retailers are looking at the catalog as a driver of online sales. That's very different from when catalogs had a stand-alone P&L associated with them."

Sears and many others initially stopped shipping the books when they saw how easily and cheaply the content could be put online.

"The pendulum swings, and people like to look for one answer," Mr. Gerstein said. "When internet ads began, we -- and everyone -- thought all ads would be on the internet."

Back to roots

Obviously that wasn't the case. And people simply missed catalogs.

"Years ago we were the catalog company," said Richard Gerstein, CMO for Sears. "When you go way back, that's how we started."

When Mr. Gerstein's department sat down to brainstorm about the holidays this year, they always came back to their own experiences, as children, sitting down to mark the Wish Book's pages with things they wanted as gifts. Customers felt the same way.



L.L. Bean and Crate & Barrel's holiday catalogs

"The Wish Book kept coming up ... and really fond memories from growing up; it represented dreams and wishes during the holidays," Mr. Gerstein said. Sears has added other catalogs over the past year -- simply outdoors, simply indoors, work wear.

And while the catalogs are meant to drive traffic online, there is a benefit for those who do it the old-fashioned way and pick up the phone. Real, live Americans are waiting on the other end to take your order at the U.S.-based call centers for Sears, L.L. Bean and Crate & Barrel, to name a few. Catalog phone operators are predisposed to help and can also provide advice relating to size, color and shipment dates -- not to mention the occasional inside scoop on additional sale items.

Tools

In addition to catalogs' role in driving traffic online, Mr. Silverman said, "they've evolved into a marketing tool." Retailer Crate & Barrel sends out eight of its well-known catalogs a year to about 15 million households. The frequent, seasonally themed catalogs drive sales to the company's website and to its call center, but the real payoff is keeping the brand fresh on buyer's minds.

"We consider the catalog to be our best marketing tool," said Bette Kahn, Crate & Barrel spokeswoman. "There's no question, when people receive the catalog, it's a call to action. It brings them into the stores as well as online."

Still, Ms. Kahn said, the company's catalogs won't work if they're just put online.

"Some people can do it, we can't," she said. "As long as we can afford the postage, our catalogs will be going out."