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How the Brain Responds to Print vs. Digital

One of the marketing surprises of the last few years has been how strongly Millennials—the smartphone and fully wired generation—respond to direct mail. In fact, according to "USPS Mail Moments 2016," Millennials are more likely to read, organize, and sort their mail than all other generations. They are also less likely to discard their mail without reading it.

Why do so-called digital natives still respond so strongly to print? Could it be, in part, how we are wired? The answer is yes. Neuromarketing research shows that our brains react differently to printed material than to digital media.

To more fully understand how the brain reacts to physical vs. digital mail, the United States Postal Service partnered with the Center for Neural Decision Making at Temple University's Fox School of Business to gauge responses to physical and digital advertising pieces. Researchers used brain images, biometrics (e.g. heart rate and respiration), eye tracking, and questionnaires to measure reactions.

They found that:

- Participants processed digital ad content more quickly.
- They spent more time with physical ads.
- Physical ads triggered activity in a part of the brain that corresponds with value and desirability.
- Participants had a stronger emotional response to physical ads and remembered them better.

Canada Post found similarly intriguing results in its neuromarketing research project. They measured the response to campaigns that used the same creative and messaging for both physical and digital media.

They found that:

- Direct mail campaigns required 21% less cognitive effort to process.
- Participants' recall was 70% higher if they were exposed to direct mail rather than a digital ad.
- Activation in parts of the brain that correspond to motivation response was 20% higher for direct mail.

As human beings, we are wired to respond more strongly to physical, printed messages. For marketers who want advertising with long-lasting impact and easy recollection, printed materials can clearly make a difference.

Excerpted and edited from the USPSDelivers.com presentation "Still Relevant: A Look at How Millennials Respond to Direct Mail" (2017).