STRATEGY

Service Characteristics and Yellow Pages Advertising Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Advertising in the Yellow Pages often constitutes an important component of promotional strategy for many small businesses. For some, these directories may be their sole means of advertising. This study examines the role of consumer Yellow Pages in the information search patterns of an increasingly important market segment, young adults, for a selected group of ten services. Findings from this study suggest that Yellow Pages are more likely to be used as an information source when subjects are searching for certain services than for other services. Furthermore, results indicate that certain characteristics of a service may influence the likelihood of a consumer consulting these directories. Practical implications on how to make the most out of Yellow Pages advertising are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Yellow Pages have been gaining ground as a valuable source for consumers in their external information search efforts. In fact, these directories may be the fastest-growing major advertising medium in the country. Since many small businesses may rely on them as a major means of advertising, it is important that these firms—especially those with a limited promotion budget—realize that the Yellow Pages has its unique capabilities and unique audience characteristics. Often, proper use may mean the difference between success and failure. Hence, this paper attempts to address the significance of making a conscious effort to evaluate the appropriateness of the Yellow Pages as a viable media alternative, before including it in one's strategic plan.

BACKGROUND

According to an independent research commissioned by the American Association of Yellow Pages Advertisers, 98 percent of consumers used the Yellow Pages an average of 36 times per year in 1985; and among those with multiple directories, 70 percent used more than one Yellow Pages (9). Consumers reported that they regard these directories as a generally unobtrusive, inoffensive medium that can help find products and services conveniently.

The success in revitalizing the image and acceptance of Yellow Pages directories is directly attributable to some of the recent improvements made by their publishers on what has been regarded as a basically mature product (3). Through expansion of the directories to include useful consumer and community information, and introduction of "specialty" publications

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geared towards women and ethnic populations, Yellow Pages publishers have high expectations in their ability to emerge as a viable advertising medium. In fact, Yellow Pages revenues have grown over the last decade from \$2.9 billion to the 1990 level of \$8.3 billion (22).

The type and extent of Yellow Pages advertising, however, differs substantially across product classifications, and within product classes from one business to the next. While some advertisers have used the Yellow Pages to carry most of their advertising loads, others seem reluctant to accept these directories as anything more than a medium — with a low profile and almost no top-of-mind awareness — that does not lend itself to heavy use for timely information (23). Yellow Pages are used by these advertisers mainly to complement advertising in other media — what the industry refers to as directional advertising in the media mix.

This perception of Yellow Pages directories as merely a "directional" medium implies a major barrier for their continuing success. The creative media — television, radio, magazines, newspapers — claim that Yellow Pages are not designed to create brand awareness or a desire to buy, a fact even their publishers readily acknowledge (3, 12). These critics argue that consumers referring to a Yellow Pages directory have already decided to make a purchase, e.g., an owner of a new camera needs service from a "factory-authorized" service center (9).

Can Yellow Pages directories be used as a primary means to advertise a business? What types of services are best suited for this medium? It is imperative that service providers know the answers to these questions before including the Yellow Pages in their media mix. Interestingly, while effective advertising may be difficult to create, the choice of media for efficient dissemination of information relating to one's service offerings is largely within a provider's strategic control (7). It simply requires proper attention to achieve a balance between resources and results, and it could make all the difference in the outcome of an advertising effort.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. One goal is to examine how often consumers rely on a particular media alternative, the Yellow Pages versus other sources of information, in their purchase decisions. It is reasonable to expect that a consumer's propensity to consult the Yellow Pages might vary as a function of the service needed. A second objective is to address the "situational" perspective of Yellow Pages' effectiveness. It is possible that certain characteristics of a given needed service might influence the probability that the Yellow Pages or some other sources will be consulted.

These two hypotheses were examined in the context of an increasingly important market segment, college students. There are 13 million college students nationwide, many of them affluent. Nevertheless, these consumers are tricky to snag because they are seldom reachable through mainstream channels (1). Trans World Airlines Inc. had advertised a special discount card through travel agencies — what they thought was a "cost effective" technique — with dismal results. Reason: many students don't use travel agents. Tambrands, marketer of First Response home pregnancy test, originally ran ads for the product in university directories. Upon learning that directories are better suited for products like computers and calculators, the company moved their ads to college newspapers instead. This study intends, among other things, to shed some light on the information search patterns among these inherently skeptical and increasingly sophisticated consumers.

METHOD

A survey was conducted to investigate if differences across service attributes might account for variation in young-adult consumers' propensity to rely on a particular medium as a primary source of information for that service. One hundred and eighty-two undergraduate students from a western university were recruited to serve as participants. Each subject completed a questionnaire (Appendix A) as part of a class exercise.

In the first part of the survey, subjects were asked in an open-ended question to indicate which one source of information they would most likely consult when they needed: a physician, a chiropractor, a dentist, urgent medical care, a florist, a travel agency, pet grooming service, air conditioning repair, auto repair service or a plumber. Subjects were then asked to rate each of these ten services along a set of ten characteristics on a 7-point scale. Table 1 is a summary of these attributes.

Inexpensive	:_	_;_	_:_	_:_	:_	_:_	_:_	_:	Expensive
Exact Same	:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	;_	_;_	_:	Different
Unessential									
Unimportant									_
Changeable									
Boring									Interesting
									Unfamiliar to me
									Difficult to choose
Well regulated									

ANALYSIS

Subjects' responses to the question on preferred source of information were contentanalyzed and categorized into one of four groups: Yellow Pages; media advertising (television, radio, newspapers, and magazines); personal advice from friends and relatives; and other sources (e.g. Consumer Reports Magazine, Better Business Bureau, referral services). Given the exploratory nature of this study where little is known about the sample population, a confidence level of .95 was used to test the statistical significance of their relationships.

A crosstabulation of these ten services by preferred source of information is presented in Table 2. As can be seen, a chi-square of 492.69 with 27 degrees of freedom (p < .000) indicates that subjects would consult the Yellow Pages and other information sources with different likelihoods depending on the service needed. Interestingly, these college students did not seem to regard media advertising as a primary source of information for any of the services tested. Only seven percent of the subjects said they would refer to media advertising for information when looking for a travel agency. The percentages were much lower for the other nine services.

Twenty-five to thirty percent of the subjects said they would consult the Yellow Pages when they needed a personal care provider (physician, a chiropractor or a dentist), while thirty-five

percent of them would consult the Yellow Pages when they needed auto repair service. Nevertheless, the majority of them exhibited a high propensity to turn to personal advice from friends and relatives when they needed information on such services. The Yellow Pages would be most likely consulted as a primary source of information when subjects needed a florist, a travel agency, pet grooming service, air conditioning repair, a plumber, or urgent medical care.

Table 2. Crosstabulation of Service By Preferred Information Source

		Information Source										
	Type of Service	Yellow Pages (%)	Personal Advice (%)	Media Advtg. (%)	Other Sources (%)	Row Total (%)						
1.	Physician	24.2	61.8	0.0	14.0	100						
2.	Chiropractor	30.6	50.3	1.1	18.0	100						
3.	Dentist	26.7	58.9	1.1	13.3	100						
4.	Urgent Medical Care	44.7	25.3	1.8	28.2	100						
5.	Florist	83.4	11.6	3.3	1.7	100						
6.	Travel Agency	61.1	29.2	7.0	2.7	100						
7.	Pet Grooming	69.2	20.3	3.3	7.2	100						
8.	Air Conditioning Repair	79.6	14.0	1.6	4.8	100						
9.	Auto Repair	34.9	55.4	2.7	7.0	100						
10.	Plumber	72.0	26.9	0.0	1.1	100						

Chi square = 492.685 with 27 degrees of freedom (p < .000)

Next, we explored whether certain intrinsic characteristics of a service might render it more suitable for advertising in the Yellow Pages. All responses indicating a predisposition towards using the Yellow Pages as a primary source of information were pooled. The remaining responses implicating all other forms of information as primary sources constituted the comparison group. T-tests were performed to determine if these two groups of respondents differ significantly in their perceived attributes of the services. The intent was to investigate whether this difference in perception might have contributed to subjects' choice of primary information source when deciding on the purchase of a needed service. Table 3 presents a summary of the results.

Table 3. Comparison of Service-Characteristic Perceptions Between Users of Yellow Pages and Other Sources

		Primary	Source of Inform	nation
	Service Attribute*	Yellow Pages	Other Sources	Significance b
1.	Expensive	5.544	5.865	.000
2.	Different	4.597	5.187	.000
3.	Essential	4.868	5.504	.000
4.	Important	4.968	5.560	.000
5.	Unchangeable	3.094	3.354	.000
6.	Interesting	3.839	4.259	.000
7.	Unfamiliar To Me	4.056	3.600	.000
8.	Difficult To Choose	3.514	4.112	.000
9.	Poorly Regulated	3.802	3.653	.022
10.	Unsafe	2.994	3.050	.376

a. All of the adjectives listed are the high-end anchors (7 in a scale of 1 to 7) in their respective adjective pairs. The higher the reported mean score, the closer the average response approaches the corresponding description of the anchor adjective stated here.

b. Statistical significance (p-value).

Consumers were more likely to consult the Yellow Pages than other information sources for products which are perceived to be significantly: less expensive, less differentiated between offerings from competing providers, less essential, less important, more easily changeable, less interesting, less familiar to the purchaser, easier to choose, and less well regulated. These results suggest that the Yellow Pages may not be suitable for some types of service such as health care, financial planning, jewelry, and auto repair to name a few. Before advertising in these directories, owners of such businesses should pay special attention to the search process through which their target consumers select providers, so as to ensure more effective and efficient media planning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

The 1990s promise more intense competition for retailers of products and services because entry barriers will remain relatively low (13). Marketers rather than merchants will be the key movers of retail businesses (11). For most small service providers, resource poverty mandates a keen adherence to the marketing concept and solid comprehension of one's competitive activities (10). One area which small business owners cannot afford to overlook is media strategy.

The increasing number of media choices has made the media planning process more and more complex. To date, there is a magazine (or more) for each possible demographic segment or special interest. For example, American Express Co.'s publishing unit started mailing out a new

quarterly called Connections to student cardholders on 600 campuses. We have also seen the entry of the Fox network and many more cable channels, and a proliferation of highly specialized directories such as Silver Pages for senior citizens and a Chinese-language Yellow Pages in San Francisco. An astute business owner must recognize that information search patterns may be more product/service specific than was traditionally expected.

Challenge Yellow Pages' Fit Into A Media Mix

This study has established that different media types may not lend themselves equally to consumers as primary information sources for all of their purchases. The findings suggest that the choice of media may be equally important as the message content (6); especially for personal health care providers contemplating the use of Yellow Pages or media advertising. The results reflect an interesting departure from a prevailing contention that Yellow Pages is an appropriate communication medium for health-care providers such as physicians (27, 2). Furthermore, findings from this study seem to confirm the prudence of those older, established dentists who were reported in Becker and Kaldenberg's 1990 study (4) to have relied mainly on word-of-mouth for attracting new patients. Perhaps these seasoned practitioners have already discovered that media advertising would neither increase the demand for their services nor assist new patients in their information search for dentists.

It may be true that more than 1 billion consumers consult the heading "Physicians and Surgeons" in the Yellow Pages every year to select a doctor (27). One must question if these browsers were picking a provider based on their credentials listed in these directories, or simply locating the address or phone number of a recommended physician. It is imperative that one closely monitors and evaluates each media type's appropriateness in order to get the most out of an advertising dollar. This applies to Yellow Pages as well, particularly when there is no generally accepted, independent and objective information to prove distribution and usage (19, 22).

Examine Credibility of Distribution and Usage Claims

The multiplicity of available media types and vehicles overwhelms many service providers, causing them to feel uncomfortable making professional media decisions. Hence, many rely on the advice and assistance of media sales representatives on creative ideas and media selection. Clearly, this situation is bound to produce a biased program. Each salesperson is compelled to focus on one's ability to help build store traffic for the client's business, while de-emphasizing the potential usefulness of other media. While television and radio have their Nielsens and Arbitrons to certify their ratings, and direct mail can document its measurable responses, Yellow Pages currently lacks such comparable independent measures to substantiate its effectiveness claims (19).

For example, a Yellow Pages Publishers Association proprietary study examined the relationship between product/service purchase decisions and the use of the Yellow Pages in 1989 (28), and reported that Yellow Pages advertising could lend a strong supportive influence on the reach of the other media. Specifically, the study reported that when used alone, newspaper advertising by chiropractors, dentists and physicians had an average reach of 5 percent; television, 2.3 percent; and radio 1.3 percent. When supported by advertising in the Yellow Pages, the reach of these media increased dramatically to 10.1 percent, 7.9 percent, and 7 percent respectively.

The study had failed, however, to address the overall low reach achieved by media advertising with or without the support of the Yellow Pages. This observation is consistent with one of the crucial findings highlighted in this study — only a small percentage of our student consumers look to the Yellow Pages or media advertising for information when they need a physician, dentist or a chiropractor. These respondents would be more likely to consult personal advice from friends, relatives or other referral services. It suggests that the preferred advertising medium for this category of services is neither media advertising nor the Yellow Pages directories, but through word-of-mouth publicity.

Fortunately, the Yellow Pages Publishers Association's Market & Media Research Committee is collaborating with the Advertising Research Foundation in setting standards that will pave the way toward credible Yellow Pages usage research. Service providers owe it to themselves to demand independent, third-party research data on Yellow Pages effectiveness before committing any investment in this medium.

Ideas On Improving Yellow Pages Efficiency

Demand Guaranteed Results. Both NYNEX Information Resources and Donnelley Directory have taken the first step toward offering guaranteed results to gain a competitive advantage against other directories (12). They are testing guarantees to businesses, which purchase at least a quarter-page ad in their directories within certain markets, that their advertising will deliver results or NYNEX will reimburse the advertiser an amount ranging from 40 to 100 percent of the annual cost of the ad.

This idea is nothing new. Television networks like NBC have offered rating guarantees to up-front buyers. Even DDB Needham, an international advertising agency, announced earlier this year that it too would be offering interested U.S. and Canadian clients a "Guaranteed Results" program. The agency expects to be able to offer the same arrangement throughout the rest of its worldwide network by 1991. As costs to advertise in Yellow Pages directories continue to sky-rocket, business owners need to be more assertive in demanding more accountability for their advertising dollars.

Ask for Rebates. Some Yellow Pages publishers have incentive programs which literally pay their customers to advertise in other media (22). The advertiser receives a rebate of its directory advertising costs if its TV or radio spots mention its ad in the directory. This way, a small-business owner can stretch one's budget farther to increase a media plan's overall reach and efficiency.

CONCLUSION

If indeed an economic slowdown in the early 1990s is inevitable, many businesses will look to cut their advertising expenses as an easy means to scale back. This is in direct contradiction to the marketing logic — advertising must be treated as the fuel for, not the result of sales. Promotion is especially crucial in a slow economy. Any cutback from these activities will result in a self-fulfilling decline in sales.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest that small businesses conduct careful media planning regularly. Efforts are needed to impress upon them the notion that proper advertising planning is an essential step towards successful marketing. Given the fact that media costs often

account for up to 90 percent of a small business' annual advertising budget, any discussion of an advertising program without considering the importance of external information sources, as perceived by consumers, would be incomplete (22). Several studies have already begun to investigate the knowledge of planning in small firms (4, 11, 12, 19). We hope this study will serve as a catalyst for more research in this area.

Specifically, three research extensions await exploration. Since the participants in this study represent a narrow segment of college students with a rather homogeneous profile, the generalizability of their opinions may be limited. Future research involving a larger and more representative sample would prove useful. Secondly, the present study has only approached the issue of information search from the consumers' perspective. A follow-up study can explore if small businesses are aware that their customers' search patterns are product/service specific, hence necessitate a customized media mix. Finally, this study has identified some common patterns in consumers' search efforts which suggest that service characteristics may be more important determinants than industry classification in media selection. Can these findings be generalized to other services not examined in this study? Answers to these and other questions should help small businesses operating in similar settings identify more appropriate media mixes for their promotion programs.

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APPENDIX A SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

YOUR OPINIONS PLEASE

Please answer all the questions in the survey. The completeness of each questionnaire is vital to our study. We are interested in your opinions. Since we want your opinions, there are no right or wrong answers to any of the following questions.

SOMETHING ABOUT INFORMATION SEARCH

Below is a list of purchase scenarios. Please indicate for each scenario which SOURCE OF INFORMATION you will most likely consider when deciding on the purchase of the specified service.

List your answers in the spaces provided.

1.	likely consult
2.	If you were new in town, and you needed a CHIROPRACTOR, you would most likely consult
3.	If you were new in town, and you needed a DENTIST, you would most likely consult
4.	If you were new in town, and you needed URGENT MEDICAL CARE SERVICE, you would most likely consult
5.	If you were looking for a FLORIST, you would most likely consult
6.	If you were looking for a TRAVEL AGENCY, you would most likely consult

7.	If you were looking for PET GROOMING SERVICE, you would most likely consult
8.	If you were looking for AIR CONDITIONING REPAIR SERVICE, you would most likely consult
9.	If you were looking for AUTO REPAIR SERVICE, you would most likely consult
10.	If you were looking for a PLUMBER, you would most likely consult
pai yoi	SOMETHING ABOUT THESE SPECIFIC SERVICES reach service listed below, please indicate your rating by placing a check mark between each or of adjectives, above one of the spaces that best describes your impression. For example, if a were asked to rate "Doublemint Gum" on such a scale, the 7 places between each pair of ectives should be interpreted as follows:
The	Tasty: : X : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : :
	Inexpensive : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : :

2. I think CHIROPRACTORS are:

Inexpensive	:_	_:_		:	_:	<u>:</u>	_:_	_:	:	Expensive
Exact Same									:	
Unessential									:	Essential
Unimportant	:_	_:		<u>:</u>	_:	_:_	_:_	:	:	Important
Changeable	:_	_: <u>.</u>		:	_:	_:_	_:_	;	;	Unchangeable
Boring	:_	_:		:	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:	:	Interesting
Familiar to me										Unfamiliar to me
Easy to choose	:_	_:_		:	_:	_:_	:	;	:	Difficult to choose
Well regulated	:	_:_		:	_;	:	_:_	_:	:	Poorly regulated
Safe					_:				_:	Unsafe
	1		2	3			<u>-</u> -	<u> </u>	7	

3. I think **DENTISTS** are:

Inexpensive	:	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	:_	;	:	Expensive
Exact Same			_:_						Different
Unessential			_:_						Essential
Unimportant	:_		_:_						Important
Changeable			_:_						Unchangeable
Boring	:	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:	Interesting
Familiar to me			;						
Easy to choose	:_	_:_	_:_	_:	_:_		_:	_:	Difficult to choose
Well regulated	:	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	;_	_:_	;	Poorly regulated
Safe	:	:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	_:_	:	Unsafe
	1	2	3			5	6	7	

4. I think URGENT MEDICAL CARE SERVICES are:

Inexpensive	:_	_;		<u>:</u>	.:		:_		:	:		: Expensive
Exact Same	:	_:		:	_:		:_		:	_:		: Different
Unessential	:	_:		.:	_:_				_	_;		: Essential
Unimportant	:	_:.		:	_;_		:_		:	_:		: Important
Changeable	:	_:		:	_:_		:_		_	_: <u>_</u>		: Unchangeable
Boring	:	_:		:	_:_		:_			_;_		: Interesting
Familiar to me	:	_:_		:	_:_		:_			_:_		: Unfamiliar to me
Easy to choose		_:_		<u>:</u>	_;_		:_			_:_		: Difficult to choose
Well regulated	:	_;_		:	_:_		:_		:	_:_		: Poorly regulated
Safe	:	_:_		:	_:_		:_			_:_		: Unsafe
	1		2	3		4		5	- 1	۲.	7	

5. I think FLORISTS are:

Inexpensive	:	_;		:	_;_	:		:	_:_	:	Expensive
Exact Same											Different
Unessential	:	_;		:	_;	:	:	_	_:_	:	Essential
Unimportant	:_	_:		:	_:_	:		:_	_:_	_:	Important
Changeable											Unchangeable
Boring											Interesting
· ·											Unfamiliar to me
Easy to choose											Difficult to choose
,											Poorly regulated
Safe		_									Unsafe
	1	_	2	- 3		4	5		6	7	

6. I think TRAVEL AGENCIES are:

Inexpensive	::::	Expensive
	:::	Different
Unessential	:;;;;	Essential
Unimportant	:::::	Important
	·	Unchangeable
Boring	::::	Interesting
Familiar to me	::::	Unfamiliar to me
Easy to choose	::::	Difficult to choose
Well regulated	:::::	Poorly regulated
Safe	::::	Unsafe
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	

7. I think PET GROOMING SERVICES are:

Inexpensive			•	•		:	:		:		:	:	Expensive
•													Different
Unessential	:		:_	_;		:_	_:		:_		:_	_:	Essential
Unimportant	:_		:	_;		:_	_:		:_		:_	_:	Important
Changeable													Unchangeable
Boring													Interesting
Familiar to me	:_		:_	:		:_	;		:_	_	:_	_:	Unfamiliar to me
Easy to choose	:_		:_	_:		:_	:		:_		:_	_:	Difficult to choose
Well regulated	;_		:_	;		:_	:		:_		:_	_:	Poorly regulated
Safe	:_		.:_	:		:_	:		:_		:_	_:	Unsafe
		1)	3		4	5		6		7	

8. I think AIR CONDITIONING REPAIR SERVICE	Sare
--	------

Inexpensive	:	_:_	_:_	_:_	:	:	:	:	Expensive
Exact Same	:_	_:_	_:_	_:	_;_	_;	:	:	Different
Unessential			_:_						Essential
Unimportant									
Changeable	:	_:_	_;_	_:_	_:_	_:	:	:	Unchangeable
Boring	:	_:_	_;	_:	_:_	_:_	_;	:	Interesting
Familiar to me	:	_:	_:_	_:	_;_	_:_	_:	;	Unfamiliar to me
									Difficult to choose
Well regulated	:	_:_	_:_	_:	_:_	_:_	_:	:	Poorly regulated
Safe			_;_						Unsafe
	1	2	2 3	4	-	5	6	7	

9. I think AUTO REPAIR SERVICES are:

Inexpensive	::_	:	_ ;_ ;	::	:_	;	Expensive
Exact Same	::_	_:_	_::	:	:	<u>_</u> :	Different
	::_						Essential
Unimportant	::_	;	_;;	::	:_	:	Important
Changeable	::_	_:	_::	:_	;_	:	Unchangeable
Boring	::_	:_	_;;	;_	:_	:	Interesting
Familiar to me	::_	_:_	_::	<u>:</u> _	:_	:	Unfamiliar to me
Easy to choose	::_	:	_ : :	:_	;_	:	Difficult to choose
Well regulated	::_	;	_::	:_	_:_	:	Poorly regulated
Safe		_:_					Unsafe
	1	2 3	4	5	6	7	

10. I think PLUMBERS are:

Inexpensive	:	_:_	_:_		:	_;_	;	:	_:		: Expensive
Exact Same	:	_:_	;		:	_;_			_;		: Different
Unessential	:										
Unimportant	:	_:_	_:_		:	:	;		_;		: Important
Changeable	:	_:_	:		:	:	:		-:		: Unchangeable
Boring	:	_:_	_:		:	:	:		_;		Interesting
Familiar to me	:										
Easy to choose	:	_:	;		:	:	:		_:		Difficult to choose
Well regulated	:										
Safe											Unsafe
	1	2	2	3	4	_	5	-	5	7	