

Handle your digital data with care and respect



By [Marcus Stephens](#)

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South African publishers and brands that want to experience the best returns from their investments in digital advertising and marketing, must be responsible and ethical in the ways that they use the wealth of consumer data they harvest.

Abuse of customer data by unethical brands and publishers poses a threat to the growth of South Africa's digital media landscape because it undermines consumer trust in the channel.

Spamming consumers

There are far too many publishers and brands in South Africa who mercilessly spam any consumer unlucky enough to have provided contact details to them, or even worse, take consumer data they collect online and sell it to third-parties without first securing the customers' permission.

When the hapless consumer experiences a tidal wave of SMS and email spam, as well as a deluge of marketing phone calls after requesting a quote online from an insurer or registering to test-drive a car, his or her trust in digital marketing and commerce is often irreparably damaged. In addition to violating best practice and some of South Africa's laws, spamming consumers and selling their data is just bad business sense.

Apart from its legal and regulatory implications, unsolicited direct marketing or spam is bad for brands and their customers because it interferes with legitimate marketing and commerce, destroys trust in the online channel, and wastes time and resources for both sender and recipient alike.

Impacts of spam

One impact of spam is that legitimate marketing messages often don't get through to consumers who might want to see them. Users delete SMS messages without reading them if they look like marketing, while spam filters at ISPs and companies shred commercial mails indiscriminately.

And if your domain has been used to send spam in the past, you'll have an especially hard time getting past ISPs' defences to reach customers, even with credible business communications.

Marketers should take their cues about how they use customer data from existing laws as the Consumer Protection Act (CPA) and Electronic Communications and Transactions (ECT) as well as from the tougher Protection of Personal Information Bill (POPI), which was signed into law last year. In addition, industry bodies such as the Internet Service

Providers' Association and the Wireless Application Service Providers' Association offer practical best-practice guides about how companies should interact with their customers.

Choice to opt-out

Under the CPA and the ECT Act, it is legal for companies to send "direct marketing" communications as long as consumers are able to opt-out. POPI takes a harder line - when it comes into effect, brands will only be able to conduct direct marketing with consumers who have opted-in or who are their existing customers.

We believe, however, that companies should always ask consumers for permission to direct market, especially when it comes to re-marketing. This fosters trust and helps brands to target their messages at people who are interested in what they have to offer. It's efficient, it builds better customer relationships, and helps to protect the organisation's brand and reputation.

Brands can build healthy opt-in customer databases if they treat their customers with respect. That means crafting communications that are personalised, relevant and interesting to their customers; focusing on offering quality content; and providing incentives such as vouchers and discounts. Though it may seem like harder work to build this sort of direct marketing strategy, it will ultimately provide a superior return on investment to thoughtless spamming.

ABOUT MARCUS STEPHENS

Marcus Stephens is general manager at Howzit MSN. As general manager of Howzit MSN - a division of Kagiso Media - he oversees the strategic growth and day-to-day running of one of South Africa's largest Web portals. Stephens has more than 18 years of experience in advertising and publishing across new and traditional media.

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