

The Dwindling Legacy of the Yellow Pages



For many small companies, placing an ad in the local Yellow Pages was once an unavoidable cost of doing business on par with paying the rent, utilities, salaries and insurance.

Not anymore.

The prosaic Yellow Pages have become somewhat of a dinosaur. That belief is clearly articulated by scores of homeowners who leave these well-established printed books at the bottom of the driveway, sometimes turned into a pile of sludge by the rain.

Many business-owners have correctly come to the conclusion that their customer's fingers are now pre-

dominantly "walking over" computer keyboards instead of printed directories.

As the Internet has grown to become the search medium of first-resort, the printed Yellow Pages, the old-stand-by in advertising, is becoming one of the least desirable places to list a product or service. They are no longer a must-do for local businesses.

Are they headed for extinction? Probably not. Should television sales reps write them off? No way. But in our digitalized world, their effectiveness has most certainly waned. People are no longer thumbing through the phone books with any degree of regularity. Most now opt to surf the net for local listings.

The Yellow Pages Are Not What They Used To Be

The industry has been around for a very long time - much longer than television. According to legend, the Yellow Pages are yellow because, in 1883, a printer in Cheyenne, Wyoming simply ran out of white paper, while publishing a phone book for A.T.&T.

The phone giant loved the new look, but chose not to trademark the name or the walking fingers logo. They instead focused on promoting the idea of the Yellow Pages as an advertising medium so universal that any business would pay for a listing.

It worked.

Although competitors have freely published other directories for decades, most Yellow Pages markets were dominated by their local telephone companies. For well-over a century, customers "let their fingers do the walking" over Yellow Pages whenever they needed to find a particular product or service. The reliable publication always provided the listing and phone number.

For a business owner, what could be better? The Yellow Pages were a means for getting your name into the public domain. Anytime consumers used the Yellow Pages, they were ready to buy. Consumers did not just merely browse the Yellow Pages. They were ready to act.



For many of those years, the traditional pitch for selling space in the printed Yellow Pages was, "Well, of course, you use the Yellow Pages yourself."

That's no longer the case. That's no longer the sales-pitch.

Printed Yellow Pages are now viewed as generic, with very little brand differentiation. They do not generally create a desire to buy. Once printed, they cannot be updated to reflect business changes that occur during the year.

The books are simply too cluttered. There are too many categories and sub-categories, often leaving the prospective customer confused. If a business is fairly specialized, chances are none of those categories are a good fit. Categorization forces businesses onto the same page or in the same general vicinity as all of their local competitors. Potential customers, therefore, gain exposure not only to the client's ad and offer, but also the ad and offer of the competition.

Many homeowners, meanwhile, have come to see the books as an annoyance, taking up too much space in the cabinet and seemingly showing up before the previous one has been broken in.

Yellow Pages' sales reps, now, encourage clients to outspend each other in order in exchange for a more prominent ad placement. It becomes an annual auction. The only real winner is the book's publisher.

Disadvantages of Advertising in the Yellow Pages

Generic	Most ads are not very creative and do not generally create a desire to buy
Cluttered	Ads are classified into too many categories. Businesses are forced to place ads alongside their competitors.
Static	They cannot be updated to reflect business changes such as new sales and offers.
Unwieldy	Many would-be customers discard the books because they take up too much space in the cabinet or on a shelf.

SOURCE: The Yellow Pages Association

Top 10 Yellow Page Headings in 2006

Rank	Heading	References (In Millions)
1	Restaurants	1,343.6
2	Physicians	1,188.4
3	Automobile Parts	576.9
4	Automobile Repairs	500.3
5	Pizza	399.3
6	Attorneys	329.4
7	Dentists	301.2
8	Automobile Dealers	297.8
9	Beauty Salons	267.8
10	Hospitals	259.9

SOURCE: The Yellow Pages Association