

# **A Research Study of the Correlation between Citizen Presence on the Edited Electoral Roll and the Receipt of Unsolicited Direct Marketing Communications.**

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## **Source Research Data:**

The British Marketing Survey  
Available from [www.thebps.co.uk](http://www.thebps.co.uk)

## **Abstract:**

In 2002, general access to data derived from the UK electoral roll was restricted to data relating solely to those citizens who had chosen not to be excluded from the “commercial” roll. This arose as a result of concerns that individuals’ human rights and privacy were being violated because, in order to exercise their voting rights, they were being exposed to un-wanted and unsolicited direct mail marketing communications. As the operation of the edited electoral roll is currently being reviewed, it is timely to compare the presence of a citizen on the edited ER and their receipt of un-solicited mailings about business products and services.

This white paper uses the data available within the British Marketing Survey, currently 23,041 interviews, to assess citizens’ experience. The study was able to match to 20,159 individuals’ presence or absence from the edited ER. This showed that a higher proportion of citizens who have removed themselves from the edited ER receive un-solicited mailings compared to those who have remained on the edited ER. This proportion is 47.8% compared to 42.2% over the past 22 months. Reasons for this effect are suggested by a consistent trend based upon which year citizens absented themselves from the edited roll. Receipt of unsolicited mailings appears to plateau at approximately 48.8% after 3 to 4 years absence from the edited electoral roll, compared to 44.1% for those who recently left the edited roll in 2008..

These outcomes run contrary to the perception that a citizen can reduce their exposure to un-solicited mailings by removal from the edited ER. The trends in exposure to unsolicited mailings suggest that this misconception is a result of a failure to appreciate the importance to the communication industry of reliable and comprehensive reference data sets that allow for good data linkage and, as a result, more clearly refined targeting of communications to relevant individuals. As individuals becoming more detached from the edited ER they are harder to reference correctly and so get included in wider, less refined, communications.

Based upon an estimate of an annual mailings total of circa 4 billion communications, and the long term increase in un-solicited mailings outside the edited roll of, on average, 6.4%, this would suggest that circa 256 million mailings could be mailed wastefully without the support of the edited roll. An estimate of the costs of these mailings at £0.51 per item, provides an estimated cost of £130M per annum, along with all the hidden costs of the perceived intrusion of un-wanted communications. It is likely that this cost will fall disproportionately on smaller businesses, as larger organisations will find it more straightforward to offset the costs of acquiring alternative sources.

The alternative benefits of wider access to the full electoral roll for validation can also be quantified. Reducing unwanted mailings to the currently unverified group represents potential reductions in mailing volumes of 108M pieces, with the consequent benefits to citizens, improved environmental impact and a financial saving to industry of circa £58M per annum.

This suggests that the overall impact of access to the electoral roll for referencing and validation represents changes in mailings volumes of 320M items per annum, and financial costs to UK business of £190M.

### **Introduction:**

This short study seeks to use the data available within the British Marketing Survey to estimate the impact of the potential removal of access to the edited Electoral Roll, along with the benefits that could be accrued by wider access to the Full Electoral Roll for validation and referencing purposes.

### **Introduction to the British Marketing Survey:**

The British Marketing Survey (BMS) is an ongoing monthly series of face to face interviews in homes, captured under strict Market Research principles and codes of practice to ensure a GB population representative survey of consumer experience, behaviour and attitudes to various forms of marketing communications. It currently consists of 23,041 face to face interviews, captured in monthly waves since March 2008.

The BMS explores with interviewees their experience of, and responses and attitudes to, different marketing channels and different sectors of business. Our attention here is focused purely on a very small part of the interviewees' responses. Part of the BMS survey deals with the consumers' recent experience of direct communications, and interviewees are asked to indicate which of the following types of marketing have they seen, or received, during the last few weeks.

- a) Leaflets through your door
- b) Leaflets in your newspapers/magazines

- c) Mail addressed to ‘The Householder’ or ‘The Occupier’ or similar
- d) Mail addressed to you by name from companies you have not dealt with in the past
- e) Mail addressed to you by name from companies you have dealt with in the past
- f) Newspaper/magazine adverts
- g) Customer ‘magazines’
- h) Radio Advertisements
- D) TV advertisements
- j) Leaflets/samples handed to you in the street
- k) Leaflets/samples handed to you or picked up inside shops
- l) Poster Advertising
- m) Email
- n) Internet advertising
- o) Text messages on your phone
- p) Telephone calls

For the purpose of this research we focus purely on the selection of option (d), “Mail addressed to you by name from companies you have not dealt with in the past” (Un-solicited Mail, colloquially termed “Cold” mailings). It is this type of marketing communication that appears to raise so many objections and also to be associated with access to the current edited Electoral Roll.

In order to ensure conclusions that are representative of the UK population, substantial work is conducted to ensure that firstly field interviews are conducted to reflect the underlying population. In addition, following interviews each month, each record is weighted against the expected proportions of the population found within the following categories: age; social grade; geographic region; working status (within gender); tenure and ethnicity. To enable understanding of the impact of this weighting, data is presented in the body of this paper in both weighted and un-weighted forms.

### **Presence on the edited Electoral Roll.**

Through the support of AFD Software Ltd, we were able to match interviewees to each of the versions of the edited Electoral Roll back to the original release in 2002, as well as additional “in-filled” data provided by alternative commercially available sources. This matching was done within the strict guidelines and Code of Practice of the Market Research Society to ensure interviewee confidentiality. As a result we were able to identify 20,159 matched interviewees, a match rate of 87.5%, and ascertain when those individuals first removed themselves from the edited Electoral Roll.

### **Results:**

The chart indicates the comparison between the interviewee’s recollection of receipt of un-solicited mailings and the absence of the individual from the edited ER.

Source	Receipt of Un-solicited Mailings	
	(Un-weighted)	(Weighted)
On Edited Roll	40.7%	42.4%
Absent from Edited Roll	45.1%	47.7%

Base: 20,159 matched interviewees:

A comparison of the impact of weighting shows that, although the overall proportions change, the difference in experience of un-solicited mailings remains relatively stable, 4.6%, and 5.3% respectively. This reflects, as can be seen below, our ability to match more easily those present on the edited electoral roll as indicated by the table below:

<b>Citizen Selection</b>		
	(Un-weighted)	(Weighted)
On Edited Roll	60.3%	58.0%
Absent from Edited Roll	39.6%	42.0%

Base: 20,159 matched interviews:

In fact, this very factor - the relative ease with which individuals can be verified when present on the edited Roll as opposed to when absent - is taken as a possible cause of the un-intended consequence of absence from the edited Roll. Whilst correlation cannot be taken as evidence of cause, these results indicate that, far from individuals reducing their exposure to un-solicited mailings by absence from the edited ER, they potentially increase their exposure by limiting an organisation's ability to properly target and differentiate communication targets.

Further detail of consumer behaviour and its consequences are shown below. Here a comparison is made with the year in which an individual absented themselves from the edited ER.

<b>Initial Year of Absence</b>	<b>Receipt of Un-solicited Mailings</b>	
	(Un-weighted)	(Weighted)
2002	48.1%	50.4%
2003	43.9%	46.2%
2004	46.7%	48.8%
2005	46.7%	49.8%
2006	43.3%	46.1%
2007	42.6%	45.1%
2008	40.9%	44.1%

Base: 20,159 matched interviews:

This table suggests that whatever factors are affecting individuals' receipt of un-solicited mailings take 3 – 4 years to work through, and a plateau is reached after this period. It could be argued that this plateau represents the position that would be reached should access to the electoral roll be removed all together. Taking an average of the long term plateau at 48.8% receipt of un-solicited mailings for those absent long term from the edited ER, suggests a long term increase in experience of un-solicited mailings of 6.4%.

### **An estimate of the consequences to citizens and business of removal of access to the Electoral Roll.**

Given the current volume of mailings per annum of circa 4Billion, a long term difference of 6.4% represents 256M un-necessary mailings per annum. The consequence of this additional volume affects both citizen and industry. For the

citizen, the harm is likely to be felt by those who experience irritation and nuisance from communications that the industry are less able to target appropriately. For industry these unwanted mailings represent an un-necessary and potentially damaging cost. If these mailings are costed at approximately £0.51 each, the cost to UK industry is around £130M, notwithstanding the difficulty in measuring the hidden costs of communication to citizens who are annoyed by a brand's perceived intrusion.

### **An estimate of the benefits to citizens and business of wider access to the full Electoral Roll for validation purposes.**

As much as removal of access to the edited roll could have the un-intended consequences outlined above, wider access to the full electoral roll has various virtuous benefits to both citizens and industry. Based upon these research findings, citizens have the potential to receive less unwanted mailings. Should the 42% currently absent from straightforward verification be included, and their receipt rates fall in line with these estimates, there would be a further pro-rata reduction in overall volumes of 2.69%, representing a reduction of 108M mailing pieces with all the benefits in reduced irritation and environmental impact. Commercially it also has the potential to reduce costs to UK business by circa £57M per annum, as well as improved perceptions from citizens of brands able to deliver more appropriate and targeted communications.

### **Conclusion:**

The study indicates that despite the perceived threat of intrusion by mailed marketing communications, through availability of information via the electoral roll, the long term consequence has been a resultant increase in exposure to un-solicited mailings rather than the reverse.

No one benefits from this situation. More citizens are un-necessarily irritated and feel their privacy has been invaded, and organisations and business have increased costs and a negative impact on their brands.

The study has estimated that the costs of removal of access to a UK wide reference could be around £130M per annum, along with the increased irritation to citizens of circa 256M items of additional unwanted mail. Conversely, it has estimated that wider access to the full electoral roll has the potential to benefit UK business by reducing costs by £58M and reducing mailing volumes by approximately 108M items per annum.

Directly as a result of this decision, mailing volumes could be effected by over 300M items per annum and costs to UK business by £190M per annum.