

Catalogs continue to play vital role for retailers

By Elizabeth Holmes, Wall Street Journal

When everything is available for sale on your smartphone, why do catalogs still clutter your mailbox?

The old-school marketing format has survived to play a crucial creative role in modern e-commerce. Today, the catalog is bait for customers, like a store window display, and a source of inspiration, the way roaming through store aisles can be. The hope is shoppers will mark pages they like and then head online, or into a store, to buy.

Today's catalogs are no longer phone-book-size compilations of every item a retailer sells. Instead, they have fewer pages and merchandise descriptions, and more and bigger photos and lifestyle images.

For retailers, creating the inspiration comes with hefty costs, including expensive photo shoots and rising postage rates. And with catalogs produced many months in advance, they lock retailers into specific trends and merchandise, unlike digital marketing pieces that can be updated in minutes.

Even so, the potential for boosting sales has brought new interest in print catalogs. Some retailers founded primarily online are entering the fray, including Bonobos, the menswear brand built on the idea of better-fitting pants. And many traditional store retailers with a history of catalogs remain as committed as ever.

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