The opt-out register, previously referred to as MPS or mail preference service, is a database of consumers who want to be taken off the distribution lists of direct marketing companies who are members of the DMASA. By registering with this database, consumers will no longer receive promotional marketing mail and will therefore be able to control the mail they receive from marketing companies. The opt-out register is the DMASA’s attempt at aligning itself with government’s proposed new consumer protection and privacy legislation along with the existing National Credit Act and Electronic Communication Transfer Act.

The DMASA, which was established in 2005, also seeks to regulate and professionalise the direct marketing trade with this initiative. It is about fostering trust, honesty and accountability within the industry.

The idea is that before direct marketing members that subscribe to this industry body embark on any new campaign, they will first need to access the opt-out register and compare the data with their mail distribution lists. Any name on the marketer’s database as found in the opt-out register must be deleted accordingly. This practice is to be enforced by the proposed new legislations and, if marketers fail to comply, they could land themselves in hot water, facing hefty penalties. Brian Mdluli, CEO of the DMASA, says: “We have not seen a negative thus far on the usage and existence of the register. We are very happy that members are indeed keeping to their pledge of responsible marketing and are using the register. It is just worrying that some marketers are completely ignoring this practice and are still communicating with consumers who have registered on the register. We will, however, endeavour to bring these marketers into the fold so that we can partner towards consumer protection.”

According to DMASA, since the launch of the opt-out register about 70 000 consumers have registered. Registration can be done via sms, the DMASA call centre or online at www.dmasa.org where the consumer’s name, telephone, email and home address contact details are saved. Aside from assisting consumers in dealing with unwelcome mail, the register saves direct marketers the effort of approaching consumers who are not interested in their offers, meaning they will only interact with those open to new product opportunities. When it comes to the issue of consumers running the risk of missing out on valuable direct marketing campaigns, consumers signing up on the opt-out register have the

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option of choosing the information categories they want to be exempt from. In this way, marketing information is tailored to their specific needs and requirements.

The opt-out register will be updated monthly. Those direct marketers that do not hold DMASA memberships will be required to pay a stipulated fee to make use of the database list whereas this service will be free to existing members.

If consumers thought they were at the mercy of marketing promos and every amazing offer being shoved down their throats, the proposed new laws aim to bring some relief to all the marketing overload. The thought behind the legislative framework employs the opt-in and opt-out marketing model. As cited on www.dmasa.org, the opt-in model means “the consumer decides whether or not they will receive marketing communication and then elects to provide or decline his or her information”, whereas the opt-out model is when the consumer “is sent initial marketing information at contact level and then the consumer is given the choice of whether he or she wishes to receive further marketing communication with the option to either remain on the database or opt-out”.

Direct marketing in South Africa is a growing trend. Internationally, according to the US DMA (Direct Marketing Association) www.the-dma.org, the website is the most used direct marketing method, followed by email and direct mail. This follows the results of an internet survey undertaken by the DMA last year with 101 US retail participants. The survey revealed that 20% of direct marketing companies with actual stores and 22% of websites were the major generators of sales revenue last year. The website medium, like email, elicited an immediate response by the consumer with the only effort being the click of a mouse. After all, the technology prompts a “now” response rather than later from the consumer interested in purchasing a particular product or service. This is ultimately the aim of direct marketing.

The DMA UK’s Participation Media 2007 report detailing the consumer experience of direct marketing reveals that direct marketing accounts for 9% of consumer sales in the UK. It also showed that internet- and email-based direct marketing initiatives were being more accepted by consumers. As cited on www.themarketingsite.com, direct marketing is expected to grow steadily on a global scale at 6.3% up to 2011, while the internet as a direct marketing tool is expected to average a yearly growth rate of 19%. Also there is the upward trend for direct marketing companies to become greener. The industry is seeking to promote enviro-friendly business practices and play a part in conserving natural resources.

However, it must be noted that ours is a developing consumer market not so accustomed to direct marketing of goods and services as yet. Therefore the opt-out marketing model becomes more applicable to the local context, according to the DMASA. The organisation is in constant lobbying and promotion of direct marketing issues especially where government’s new legislation will impact the industry. It seeks to voice the concerns of industry role-players as well as ensuring the interests of the local consumer.

DMASA members must also adhere to a strict code of ethics and practice as promoted by the association. Its opt-out register is a step in the right direction in striving for professionalism and promoting the practice of direct marketing in South Africa.