

## Basics Prevail When It Comes to Direct Mail

Despite postal increases, paper price increases, regulations tightening for security and machineability reasons, direct mail is still the most effective way to reach a defined large scale audience, build sales and brand awareness, and move units. It is direct, it's accountable, it's relatively predictable and efficient, and it can be tested and refined to maximize results.

For those just entering the arena of marketing, and for some seasoned professionals who are stuck in a rut or have been cornered by their corporate circumstances, sometimes it's best to return to basics to boost response, for the keys to success are often there in plain sight.

The tenets set forth here are merely guidelines – there are no “rules” in direct mail, except those imposed by the postal system. Some of the greatest successes occurred because someone broke the “rules,” and approached something from a different angle. Direct mail is a game of dollars and details – execution details can spell the difference between success and failure. An increase of \$200 in expense can also yield many thousands of yield dollars, if spent in the right place. But you don't need years of experience or thousands of campaigns under your belt to put together an effective basic campaign that gets results. If you stick to the basics and grow from there, you'll rarely go wrong.

**1) Keep It Simple** – a highly complex integrated multi-media offer may work, but there is far more that can go wrong. The more elements you integrate, the greater the chance that something will not perform up to expectation. If the chance exists for you or your vendor to get confused, think about how easily the recipient will be. Stick to a simple offer, a straightforward response device, and a good simple tracking system. Use as many “standard” components as you can, including standard-size #9 return envelopes. For letter packages, standard size pages are very comfortable for most people, and with some careful design decisions will be the least expensive, compared to off-size, out-size of unusual shape pages. Number 10 envelopes are the most widely machineable size, but you can make them stand out in the mailbox with over prints, teaser lines, unusual colors, kraft and other mock-immediate envelopes that don't affect machinability. With regard to sizes, be sure in the design phase that your mailing follows the “Gosinta” rule (I said there are no rules, but this is a pretty easy guideline to meet), that the response device “Goes In To” the reply envelope cleanly, without a lot of folding or manipulation – you don't want your recipients to have to be expert origami craftsmen to send you back your reply device! I don't know how many packages I've tried to reply to that the reply coupon was too long for the #9 response carrier, or just a shade too tall to let it close cleanly. Be sure the designer checks carefully. All this is an effort to keep it simple for you to produce and track, and easy to respond to for the recipient.

**2) Keep Your Priorities Straight** – Focus on what will provide the greatest gains, in order. First priority is the list. The most spectacular offer, with copy that is pure poetry, designed by Michelangelo won't pull if it goes to the wrong audience.

**The List** - Spend your time and money on getting the best list, in the cleanest form possible. A good clean list saves waste, it reduces production costs, it boosts response all by itself as a percentage of outgoing mail, and can make or break your mailing. Clean the list, standardize and update the addresses, merge/purge gang or compiled lists and get your final

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outgoing data in its purest form, and the battle is half won. Even the cleanest list of the wrong names won't help, so do your homework and take careful stock of your selects. If you're using exclusively in-house lists, take your cut of the database carefully with logical query selects to target the audience most closely, based on your profile of the ideal customer. If you're using rented lists, merge/purge priorities are extremely important, and your list processor can work you through the options to get you exactly what you need. If you're using compiled lists, select excessively, until it hurts – when in doubt, throw it out. Compiled lists are the least reliable, the lowest mailability level, simply because of the nature of the process.

**The Offer** – The next priority is putting together a price, a process and a product that will instantly and compellingly appeal to the target audience. What that means is that when the recipients read your offer, it should seem almost too good to be true, certainly too good to ignore. Your design and copy can set this up by creating expectation for the value of your product, but the offer in black and white, the “What You Get, for What It Costs” is the kernel of your mailing, and will help crystallize all the other elements for the reader – it's the bottom line for the mailing. The offer should be clear, concise, straightforward and logical. Copy can come from other angles and other motivators, but the offer should at least make sense and pass the “sniff” test. “A” should yield “B” in a very recognizable form, or the recipient will get confused. It should also be unequivocal – if you ask the reader to make a choice, they will – none. They should only face one choice, to buy! Make it easy to respond, and they will – if the reader has to jump through a lot of hoops to return the response device, you'll lose a great percentage of them. That's not to say that the response device shouldn't be engaging – generations of sticker mailings and scratch-off tickets have taught readers that there's some mystery to the offer and the action engages the reader, then response will increase, for certain audiences. In an era of “To respond, visit our website,” making it easy has never been more relevant.

**The Copy** – Tell the story you need to tell to be compelling and to engage the audience. In letter packages particularly, there are lots of accepted truths about copy, its focus, its length and other parameters, that may or may not be valid. The most valid one seems to be, “copy should be as long as you need to tell the story.” That holds pretty well as long as it's used within reason. The copy length must also be appropriate for the audience demographic – a three-page letter is unlikely to engage teens or time-starved college students, with short attention spans and MTV instant reward mentality. It might work extremely well with seniors, who have the time, attention spans and language skills to understand, appreciate and be engaged with long stories leading to a conclusion. Copy should be persuasive, and lead the reader down the path to the purchase. That doesn't mean it can't appeal to the reader's various emotions, including greed, envy, loneliness, self-esteem, lust or others. Emotional motivators rule the day, but the format and the pathway for the reader should be logical and discernable, and keep the audience's attention long enough to get to the pot of gold at the end.

**A Word about Copy** - Copy should contain Benefits, not just Features. Copy that is benefit-laden puts the reader in the position you want them in – one where their problem, real or perceived thanks to you, is solved. Benefits show them how the product or service will solve the problem, through example – features leave the problem-solving to the reader's imagination – if they don't connect the dots from your feature description to the benefit to them, you lose them. Features describe the product, benefits show what the product *does for them*. Do for you is better. Benefit laden copy sells, and that's the object of the game.

**3) Get It Opened** – You can have the greatest package on the inside, but if it never gets opened – no sale. Pick a format that creates intrigue, mystery, or curiosity, and your package will at least get opened. Teaser copy on the envelope is just one way to do this. Others include colored outer

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carriers, formats that look like invitations, formats that look like express envelopes from various well-known third-party carriers, formats that look like telegrams, repositionable notes posted on the outside, the now famous “You May Already Have Won!” stamp, and the words FREE and URGENT still have great appeal and are quite powerful if used correctly. Whatever direction you choose, it should be harmonious with the offer, the contents, and the brand of the sender company. If you got a sweepstakes envelope from Hershey’s chocolate selling a record club, you’d be a bit confused – those three components don’t meet with your brand awareness of those companies – you’ve not heard of Hershey’s having a sweepstakes, and you’ve never associated Hershey’s with music, and you’ve not heard of record companies holding a sweepstakes – they don’t add up, and you’d probably throw the package away in confusion. Align the format, the teaser and the action you want and good things happen.

4) **TEST, TEST, TEST** – the most powerful component of direct mail is that you can see if your package works *before* you mail it in large quantities. Testing of offers, lists, packages, teasers, colors, prices, copy, and other components of the package is the scientific weeding out of ineffective portions and replacing them with effective ones until you maximize results. Testing is performed much like a scientific experiment – a blind study involves a pool of recipients with a common characteristic, splitting them evenly into sections, and applying all the same attributes to each except the one you want to test. You level the playing field and test the variable or combination of variables you wish to adjust. The easiest and most productive is a single-variable test – usually testing lists, or offer, even price. In a list test, the same package goes to a number of different list segments or selects in small quantities, and you see which one returns the most. Offer tests involve taking a larger list segment that is highly homogenous, and splitting it randomly, and sending a different version of the offer in the same package to each segment. You can test offers, carriers, price, formats, copy, benefit focus or other single attributes this way, with great effectiveness. The single variable tests give you a quick read on the audience. Price testing this way allows you to judge where the price curve is for that product to that audience. Testing 6-7 prices on the same product will give you a chartable curve in response vs price, and you should select the price at the top of the curve as the “winner” of the test – that price is the highest amount of money people will be willing to pay for the product without negatively impacting response or sales volume.

All this testing helps you home in on the essential components of the package, and tells you which ones work, and what’s extraneous. The adage linked to this type of winnowing is that you want to “test the Cadillac, and work back until you’re mailing the Volkswagen Beetle.”

5) **Believe the Numbers** – All this testing is going to give you a great deal of data to read and interpret. If you’ve conducted the tests fairly, accurately and precisely, then you have good solid data that you can reliably use to make decisions. One of the biggest errors you can make is to not believe or trust your data – numbers really don’t lie, unless you’ve made them, by shading the tests in some way – changing quantities, adjusting lists by throwing in odd segments you’ve seen work well before on similar packages, only applying those to one test and not the control, etc. There is an art to properly interpreting test data, and only experience will teach you those nuances and shades of meaning that make the difference between a moderate responder and a star.

6) **Cleanliness is Next to . . . Success!** – Good, clean lists are critical to efficient, profitable mailing. In today’s climate of rampant postal increases, and shared effort for fewer discounts, you need to make every name count. There are any number of mechanical, computerized process to which you can subject your lists to boost it’s “mailability.” Genderization, address and zip+4

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standardization, accuratized salutation, suppression and appending with the National Change of Address File (NCOA), Deceased file, Do Not Mail file, and other suppression cleaning will reduce your overall mailing volume a bit, but it will sharpen your focus on the target audience and reduce waste. Remember, you only pay for those that you actually mail! The other key component of your list work involves working with the merge/purge report to focus your list properly. If you've rented a basket of lists, all with similar selects revolving around a tight target audience, chances are you have some overlap and some repeat names. Getting rid of those duplicates, and keeping just the names you paid the least for (and the inverse, jettisoning the one's you paid dearly for), can save you money and make your mailing more profitable. The pricing model that drives this efficiency is the "Net Name Arrangement," meaning you only pay the list owner for the names you keep after the merge and purge of duplicates. Work closely with your list processor and they will set up the computerized sorting process to purge the expensive duplicates and keep the cheap ones. The merge purge report is a powerful tool in many other respects as well, and learning to read one is an invaluable skill to develop.

**7) Talk To The P.O. Early, Or Repent At Your Leisure Later** – The key partnership you need to develop prior to doing any mailing is one with the Post Office. Before you rent a list, before you print a thing, before you write a word, create a basic idea of what you want to mail, take it to your local Bulk Mail Acceptance Center, and ask to speak with the Postmaster. He or his Direct Mail Specialist will review your mock-up with an eye toward size, color and contrast, required permits, proportion ratio, weight, and a host of other parameters that will give you some options on paper stock, size, and other issues to provide you the maximum discount allowable and save you money. The less effort the post office has to expend to drop your mail, the lower your prices go. Many large printers who specialize in printing direct mail components have a postal expert in-house, and some even have an acceptance station within their plant, complete with its own postmaster/inspector. They can help you get your mail prepared properly for maximum discount. By getting them involved early and making sure your mail conforms, you'll avoid the possibility of having produced and delivered your mail to the post office only to be turned away as undeliverable. Why roll the dice?

All these guidelines (and there are many more not represented here) are intended to help you produce and mail to your intended audience successfully and profitably. The less you spend on postage, wasted list names, rejected mail, producing unnecessary components that don't boost response, the more money you can spend on mailing package that pull, building revenue and enhancing sales volume. Mail is a game of efficiency/return trade-offs – make the right decisions, and you'll get back more than you could have imagined. Get it wrong, and you're throwing money down a hole. Nobody gets raises and bonuses for that, do they?

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