

How To Make Direct Mail More Effective!

According to the Direct Marketing Association (DMA), direct mail can pull in response rates as high as 15% or as low as 0.03%. With such a large gap, it is easy to see why many companies have lost their faith in this very popular marketing practice.

The performance of a direct mail program depends on the chemistry of three elements—**format, offer, and list**—and whether or not you have designed the program with enough frequency and follow-up triggers built in. Before you can pull these three elements into the most effective direct mail program possible, you need to first determine:

- The goal of the direct mail piece (For example, is your goal lead generation or direct-to-order?)
- The current relationship you have with the list. Is it a cold list or has qualification already occurred? (For example, have they already attended a seminar or webinar of yours or downloaded something from your website?)

Then follow this advice as you design your direct mail program:

- **FORMAT:** Direct mail comes in a variety of formats—the postcard, the business letter, or the 2-D or 3-D package to name just a few. The truth is, all three of these formats pull about the same percentage of responses, when used correctly. The magic then is to choose the format most suited to reach your goal and specific audience.
- **OFFER:** The offer is a critical element to a successful direct mail effort. The strongest direct mail offer is one aimed at driving traffic to a website or retail location for further qualification and/or selling (qualification if the contact is still cold and selling if it's a contact where qualification has already occurred through a previous marketing activity). This offer can be anything from a free product demonstration, an online ROI calculator, an article/whitepaper download from the website, or simply retrieving more product or service information.
- **LIST:** The list is possibly the single most important element to an effective direct mail effort. If you have the best format and offer, but send it to the wrong list you will still have nothing. And, even if you are sure you have sent it to the right list, if that list has not yet been qualified you will waste a lot of money. Even a house list can get quickly out of date. Conduct a qualifying call down of any list you plan to mail to and make sure the list is still a) accurate and b) qualified to receive your offer. Keep the call short (3-4 qualifying questions at the most). Only after you've connected with and qualified

the prospect should you place them in your direct mail engine. This will save marketing precious dollars and sales precious time, while ultimately making the entire campaign more effective.

Direct mail will always be one of the most compelling ways to prospect, and when done strategically, pulls high open rates and generates excellent leads. Make relevant and cost-effective choices, implement with a frequency of at least three impressions, be sure to follow-up on every prospect you get to take an action...and watch those leads pour in!

More on Formats

Over the years we've learned how well a direct mail program performs depends on the chemistry of three elements—format, offer, and list—and whether or not you have designed the program with enough frequency and follow-up triggers built in.

Specifically, we want to provide guidance on when it is best to send a postcard or a letter format, and when you should use a more unique delivery method, such as US Priority Mail or FedEx. Below are some key tips for each format to help you create a successful campaign:

- **Postcards:** This relatively inexpensive direct mail format is best used when your program goals are to a) build brand awareness, b) extend a transactional offer (i.e. discount, free gift), or c) drive prospects to your web site for further qualification (to download an article, etc.). Due to very specific postal guidelines, space is limited so your creative and copy must be compelling and brief. Postage rates can be as low as .23/unit, so it is wisest to choose postcards when targeting a larger, less qualified prospect pool.

Standard postcard dimensions are as follows: 4.25" x 6", 6" x 8.5", and 6" x 11".

When planning your mailing, keep in mind that 4.25" x 6" is the largest size that still falls within first class postcard postage rates, and all other sizes will be charged at higher postal rates.

- **#10-sized Letters:** Letter mailers are best suited to marketing a) more complicated offers, b) long-term commitments (subscriptions, memberships), c) personal products, and d) upscale products or audiences. In fact they should be mostly used when qualification has already occurred and only carefully used on cold lists (for example, they have already attended a seminar or webinar of yours, downloaded something from your website, etc.). To improve your open rates, write out addresses by hand. While more time-consuming to complete, hand written addresses create a more personal connection with your contact and pull a nearly 100% open rate.

Once opened, your letter has 2 to 4 seconds to grab the recipient's attention. So tell them why you are contacting them and how you can help them in the first few sentences of your letter—you won't get another opportunity. Remember, most people are slow readers, so once you

have captured their interest, break your copy up into small, easy-to-digest paragraphs and use 12 point type or larger. Never end a page with a period, unless you want your reader to stop reading at that point. Finally, always include some value-added content with your letter (i.e. case studies, articles, etc.).

- US Priority Mail or FedEx Packages. These campaigns can be very effective, but like the #10-sized letter, only when you have already built awareness with the recipient through prior marketing programs. Remember opting to send direct mail pieces with US Priority Mail or FedEx (or a similar service) ensures a higher open rate, but can cost upwards of 3 to 4 dollars per unit. Make sure it is worth the cost by targeting only your most qualified prospects for these types of mailings. Then create a compelling enclosure—one that clearly matches your offer to your audience and your key marketing objective.

Note that you don't have to send a free gift or odd-sized enclosure to justify this expense. Many companies will simply send their brochure and a handwritten note via FedEx to ensure their hottest prospects sit up and take notice just one more time.

Copy: First of all your piece must take into account that most readers are slow... or skim readers.

- Break your copy into digestible chunks.
- Make sure that you have no more than 60 characters, no less than 20 characters per line .
- While copy is harder to read on glossy paper, it is also the industry standard and can save you money to use glossy paper.
- For body text, use a Serif font (Serif Types generate 65% reader comprehension compared to 12% with Sans Serif Types) and for headlines use a Sans Serif font.
- Use black for body copy (again comprehension rates are 70% for black vs 29% for blue and 10% for red) but consider color in headlines and call outs.
- Body typeface should be 11 point or higher (and if you're using a Sans Serif font, increase leading).
- Reverse type is okay for headlines, not body copy.
- Keep all caps to a minimum. Use bold instead.
- Copy within a border or sidebar is read before any other copy.

Graphics: Graphics are a critical creative element for direct marketing. There are some graphic treatments that just pull better than others:

- The use of people or people using the product/service is more appealing than product shots alone

- The larger the illustration, the better (larger illustrations get more "sight time"), if you have high quality images. Images need to be relevant to your message
- Warm colors (yellow, red, orange, pink) pull more than cool colors (green, blue, gray, beige)
- Use color carefully...do not overdo it

Layout: As critical to a direct marketing piece's success as copy and graphics, the layout can make or break a piece:

- For magazine ads and postcard type mailings, the eye goes from right upper, to left middle, and ends at right lower...design your piece to consider this flow
- Also, it is best to follow a Picture, Headline, Body Text format (67% comprehension) over having the Headline and/or Picture under or alongside the Body Copy (34% comprehension)
- For letters the eye starts left upper and zig zags to an end at lower left (this is why a P.S. in letter is so important)

These ideas are provided as guidelines. Any one of these suggestions can be "broken" when done skillfully. Graphic Designers are trained the break the rules and know when something works and when it doesn't. These guidelines are to help non-professionals create better marketing pieces.

There are a lot more details that go into a successful direct marketing program (offer, audience/list, frequency), but getting your creative just right will, in and of itself, improve your results.

Green Graphic Design can help you create an outstanding direct mail campaign.