

An Insider's Guide to Successful Direct Mailing

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Ten Basics Of Direct Mail Copy Writing

There have to be at least a gazillion rules & quotes for writing effective direct mail copy. And, unlike other forms of advertising, these rules are proven to be effective through measured response. There's nothing new here. These rules have been around since Mr. Sears first gave a postal carrier a hernia by sending nine pound catalogs through the mail. Here are ten of the basics.

1. Sell benefits, not features.

Your reader doesn't care how many teeth are on your machine's gears. He only cares that your machine will grind his rocks into cement cost effectively. Show him how your machine can do that.

2. Sell him, don't tell him.

Your reader doesn't have the time to peruse the family history of your company's founding fathers. Sure, you can tell the company story. But you should try to phrase it in the form of a reader benefit. Example: Don't say "we've been in business for fifty years". Say, "our customers have been profiting from our grommet's superior performance since World War II.

3. Be conversational.

One of my early mentors said it this way. "Write it like you'd say it, then go back and take out all of the cuss words". Damned good advice, if you ask me.

4. Get to the point.

If you dilly-dally around about telling your reader what you have to offer, you'll lose him for sure. It's best to get to the point at the very beginning of the letter. Preferably in the first five lines.

5. Always include a postscript.

Research shows that the letter is the first thing the reader looks at in the package, after the outside envelope. And, a majority of people will read the PS before they read anything else. So, always include a PS. In addition, it's best to state your proposition in the PS, just as you do at the beginning of the letter (see #4, above).

6. Long copy sells better than short copy.

I'm not talking about lead generation here. I'm talking about selling. I'm talking about picking your prospect up by the ankles and shaking him until all of the money falls out of his pockets. That takes a few words. And testing has shown that a four page letter...or even longer...will almost always out pull a two page letter when going for the sale. This is a fact. It's not just my opinion.

7. Forget grammar.

Please don't interpret this to mean that it's all right to sound stupid. It's not. But, it is better to write like the reader reads than to write like Mrs. Fletcher taught you to in her eighth grad English class. Research shows that most people read at about the eighth grade level, anyway. That includes college graduates. So, if you're thinking you should try to correct the way people read, forget it. This is advertising. We're not pursuing a social agenda.

8. Use words that are "active" rather than "passive".

You can increase response simply by using action oriented copy. It's better to say "get your new whatchamacallit!" than it is to say "send for your new whatchamacallit." Say "dial this toll-free number", instead of "call this toll-free number." Get it?

9. Always follow AIDA.

She'll never lead you astray. Attract -attention-. Stimulate -Interest-. Create -desire-. Incite -action-. Do this every time on every direct mail component and you will surely succeed.

10. Copy is never finished.

I think it was Stephen King who said, "There is no such thing as writing. There is only rewriting". Type your project into the word processor. Edit it at least once on screen. Then, print it out. Edit it at least once on paper. Then, set it aside for a day or two and go through the whole process all over again. I've been writing for direct mail for a quarter of a century and this is the only way I know of to turn words into power communication that sells.

Graphic Design and the Desktop Computer

Somewhere along the line, graphic design has deteriorated from the once elegant, communicative form that existed prior to the mid 1980's to the muddled "explosion in a type foundry" mess that it is today. I'm talking about advertising graphics in general here... not just direct mail graphics. And, I know what caused this debacle. The desktop computer.

Sure, the computer is a blessing. It saves time and lowers the cost of design and production in most cases. But, for some reason, many designers think that just because they have the option to do this and do that...coupled with the fact that it takes so little time... they should do it. So, we end up with ads that have unreadable type and images that repel, rather than attract.

The purpose of graphic design in direct mail is to attract the readers attention, make the words communicate with the least effort on the part of the reader and to illustrate products and services clearly and concisely. That's all. Graphic design is not an artistic outlet for the designer.

Graphic Design Basics

Letters should look like letters.

That may sound like a no brainer, but it's one that has been overlooked by a lot of people. Don't set text type in Helvetica or Times or any other popular type face. Set it in Courier 10 or some other font that looks like the letter came off of a typewriter. If you're dealing with a short note, you might even want to use one of the fonts that looks like handwriting. The bottom line is, a letter should look as personal as possible. Using foundry fonts kills this illusion.

Use black on white for text.

Dull? Maybe to a designer. But not to a reader. Research shows that people will read letters and brochures more often if they are easy to read, and black on white is the easiest. Obviously, this does not include headlines, subheads, banners and bursts. It just applies to text copy, 12 point and under.

Do not reverse text type.

Knocking text out of a colored background, especially a textured colored background, will make body copy virtually impossible to read. Just don't do it.

Make letters look personal, even when they're not.

Make the signature look real. Add handwritten margin notes. Simulate a yellow highlighter to call out important copy. Do it even on form letters. It will improve response.

Give complete instructions.

People will tend to do what you tell them to do. So, always give complete instructions, especially on the reply device. "Fold and tear here", "Over, please", and all the other little bits of instruction that may look moronic to you are actually important tools in achieving maximum response. Actually, a good copywriter will put this copy in his or her manuscript. But, only the artist can tell when and where they are actually needed.

Concentrate on the envelope.

It is, without question, the most important component in any direct mail package.

Research shows that you have less than a second to attract someone's attention. Acting like a little billboard, it is the envelope's job to do this. If the reader doesn't feel compelled to open the envelope, the entire mailing package is wasted. Trees die in vain. Copywriters sweat without reward. Clients cringe. And your reader buys from someone else. This is not a good thing. So, work with the writer to make sure you communicate the psychological as well as the sales content that is desired.

Origami is cool.

Before you sit down to design a package, it's best to play with blank paper first. I call this the origami session. You fold and scribble on plain paper to make sure each piece of the package is designed for maximum impact on the reader. Figure out how headlines will cross folds, how illustrations will be displayed and how the reply device functions. It's also helpful for production. After all, it's important to make the address show through the window on the envelope without chopping off the ZIP code.

Forget about making everything match.

Every designer I know has a tendency to make each piece of the direct mail package match each other piece. This is a "no, no". Each piece serves its own function and should be designed accordingly. Sure, it's O.K. to make a letterhead match an envelope. But, if you can do a better job of selling by making them different, then do so. At the risk of sounding blasphemous, corporate identity should take a back seat to function in a direct mail package. Think of it this way. What's more important? Making people think you're a nice guy? Or, getting people to buy your product or service? Enough said.

Production cost is important.

Unlike a lot of collateral, direct mail must be designed for specific production methods. Large runs are printed on huge, block long presses that turn out millions of pieces each day. Letter shops have certain limitations that effect production. All of this should be considered before you design a direct mail package. In addition, success or failure is determined by comparing income to cost. So, watch the production costs. In most cases...not all, but most...keeping costs down is necessary for a successful mailing.

Yes, you can still be creative.

But it's best to follow a few established guidelines first. The guidelines, after all, are proven to work. So use them. Then figure out how to be creative in spite of the restrictions. This is the sign of a true top-of-the-line direct mail designer.

The Control Package

There is a concept in direct mail marketing known as the "control package". This is the direct mail package that has proven itself to be a winner. It pulls the response you need, at a cost that makes sense. In other words, for every dollar you spend to mail it and administer the project, you get more than a dollar in new sales. If, indeed, that is how you measure success. Some people, like book and magazine marketers, have different criteria for judging success. But, regardless of your mode of measurement, if you are in the direct mail business, you must have a control package.

Many marketers, upon establishing a control, will start to pick-away at it until it stops working. Bad move. Testing should be employed here. That is, if you want to find out if you can delete something from the package, or otherwise reduce production costs, you should implement a controlled test to find out if you can do so without seriously damaging response rates.

Some marketers will also "noodle" the copy after it has proven itself to work. This is not a good thing to do without testing. Sure, you might be able to improve response rates, but your chances of reducing response are even greater. Unless, of course, you are an experienced direct mail writer.

The bottom line here is, if you want to cut costs or change wording in an effort to improve response, you should test your ideas before you implement them for the whole direct mail program.

Think of it this way. If you were a drag racer and you wanted to improve the performance of a winning car, you wouldn't enter a race without testing a new engine, would you?

Direct mail is an excellent medium for generating sales leads for a field sales force, a telemarketing crew, catalog distribution or for direct mail fulfillment. But getting cost effective leads through the mail is entirely different than making one-step sales through the mail.

Tips For Effective Lead Generation.

Less is more.

It is way too easy to tell your prospect too much about your product or service in a lead generator. You'll get a lot more leads if you "sell the sizzle, not the steak". Most lead packages don't even need a brochure. A simple letter and reply device will usually do the trick.

A package works better than a self mailer.

In most cases, that is. Self mailers tend to look like what they are...advertising. An envelope with a letter in it is more personal and, thus, more effective.

Personalize it.

If your budget allows, you should avoid form letters. Computer personalization will get you more response. It will make your company look better in the process, too.

Make it a no risk offer.

Be sure to let your prospect know that it's free information they are sending for. There is no risk or obligation. You will get to that part in the fulfillment package or sales presentation. In other words, a lead package is an "opener", not a "closer".

Give them a deadline.

Even if none exists, it is better to administratively dictate one. You will get more leads this way. Note that if you do place a deadline on your offer, you have to live by it. There are regulations on this, somewhere. On the other hand, you can always administratively extend the deadline...know what I mean?

Always use business replay postage.

You pay for the return. But it's well worth it.

Offer a "kicker".

You know. Like they do on those Ginsu Knife commercials. "But wait, that's not all! Call now and you will also receive a chrome plated whizbang, guaranteed to make your farbles yoik!" The kicker can be something as simple as a booklet relating to the product or service or as "nice" as a free solar calculator.

Include a reply card and a phone number.

I've seen a lot of lead generators that rely on a toll-free number only to facilitate response. That's a big mistake. The most recent research I can find on the subject says you will double your response if you include a business reply card or other form for written response. Apparently, some people just don't like to call for fear of being accosted by a salesman over the phone. Go figure.

What should be included

There are a handful of things that should always be included in any direct mail package, if you can afford them and if they are appropriate to the product and/or offer. These are...

A guarantee.

Of course, not every product and offer lends itself to the inclusion of a guarantee. If this is the case, make one up! Guarantee fast delivery. Guarantee low prices. Guarantee personal service. Just guarantee something.

A letter.

Believe it or not, I've seen hundreds of direct mail packages that have big fancy brochures and order forms...but no letter. This is a big mistake. If you are one of those people who believes that prospects are too dumb to read a letter...or one who believes the inclusion of a letter "just gets in the way of the brochure"...you ought to be shot. The letter is the most important part of the mailing, after the outside envelope. Period.

Postage paid reply.

Always include a business reply card or a business reply envelope into which your reply device may be placed. Don't assume that including a toll-free number is enough. It isn't. Research shows that about half of your responses will come in the mail...even in this day and age.

A reply deadline.

If you don't have a real deadline, use a "soft deadline". Like this: Please reply by June 1, 1997.

A toll-free telephone number.

If you don't have an inbound WATS line, you should consider getting one. They've come way down in price in recent years, and including a toll-free number will increase your response.

A "free gift" offer.

Give the reader a freebie for responding promptly. When choosing a gift, it is better to try to find something that relates directly to your product or offer. Be careful not to go overboard with this concept...you could generate a lot of bogus orders or leads.

Testimonials.

You'll get a lot of mileage out of those old "valentines" sent to you by satisfied customers. Don't forget to get signed releases before using names and addresses, though. The lawyers are rich enough already!

General Guidelines for Working with Advertising Professionals

Believe it or not, you can keep control of the situation without completely shackling the creative resources of an ad agency, graphic designer, or freelance writer. You, after all, are the expert when it comes to your company, your products and your services. Therefore, it's up to you to make sure everything is accurate and honest. You can do this without making your ad agency or freelance sources feel like their hands are tied, creatively.

Put it in writing.

Take a few minutes before making each assignment to put the assignment's "do's and don'ts" down on paper. List product or service features. List benefits. Describe the mailing list selection criteria. Tell them how many pieces of mail you are going to test...and how many you hope to roll out later on. Give guidelines for corporate I.D. like logo size, color and placement restrictions. Give a deadline.

Show samples.

Let them see what you like and don't like. Use stuff you get in your own mailbox or old projects that worked...or didn't work.

Look at the copy before it goes to design.

You can save a lot of time and money if you insist upon seeing the copy in manuscript form, before it is laid out by an artist. It may be a little difficult for you to visualize what goes where, but at least you can make sure the "flavor" and content are to your liking.

Don't review copy with a red pen in your hand.

Go through it at least once without writing anything on it. Put yourself in the seat of the target reader. Then, go back and "bleed" all over it if you feel it necessary. You will often find that copy you might find troublesome at first glance is clarified or justified later in the manuscript...and it works really well that way. If you start scratching on it without reading it through once or twice first, you might end up chopping up some pretty effective copy.

Give the creative team everything they need right up front. Don't give it out in dribs and drabs.

Nothing stops the creative flow worse than a change in direction after work has already been done.

Don't be afraid to ask "why"?

You might stumble on a piece of copy and not really know why it's there. Ask the writer what he or she is trying to say. Chances are, they will tell you in words that make more sense than the words they put on paper.

Have the writer edit your editing.

You are not a professional writer. Once you have put your comments on the manuscript, have the writer go over it and smooth it out. Otherwise you might wind up with a camel. That's a horse put together by a committee.