

Topic:
Direct Mail

Win or Bin - Give Your Mailing the Best Chance

Estimates vary as to how long the average manager looks at the content of direct mail before deciding on its fate. The pessimists say about four seconds. If you believe the optimists, relax - you may have as much as *eight whole* seconds in which to grab their attention.

Much has been written about direct mail letters, with conflicting advice available on every aspect from envelopes to endings. When you are planning a direct mail, put aside these details for a moment and focus on what the letter has to achieve within a few seconds of being opened. The recipient must understand:

- the relevance to their business
- the benefits to their business
- what to do next

Be realistic about what you are up against. The Direct Mail Information Service (DMIS) estimates that the average manager receives 14 items of direct mail weekly. So what tactics can we use to make our mailings stand out and bring reluctant readers to the three levels of understanding above?

The Opening

Is a message on the envelope going to aid your cause? A teasing phrase can convince the recipient to at least open it up. But beware - a poorly chosen message just screams out 'SALES LETTER!' and may have the opposite effect. Targeted mail shots to named individuals do not need such messages - a plain envelope addressed to a senior manager will always be opened.

Grab Their Attention

Most direct mails use an attention grabbing statement as an opening. The safest option is the punchy summarising of a key benefit. Provocative openings can be effective, i.e. challenges to the reader to take a certain course of action - but don't imply any criticism of their current operations.

Off the wall, zany statements can work - but make sure the link to the main text is not too contrived and the relevance to the reader is quickly established.

Get To The Point!

After you've drawn the reader in, don't try to be too clever or subtle. *'Fifty years ago, Tommy Smith was selling vinegar hardened conkers in the playground...'* may make the odd person misty eyed over their own entrepreneurial beginnings - for the rest, life is too short. Hit them with your best shot. What's in it for them? Ensure that you stress benefits, not features. Make sure the letter is written from the customers' perspective, not your own.

To Joke Or Not To Joke

It seems obvious that a humorous mailing stands a better chance of registering in the memory. But some direct mail experts feel that humour rarely works in direct mail. If you think you have an amusing line that doesn't mask the key benefits, run it past enough people to ensure it's not just your own warped sense of humour. If you decide to play it straight, avoid stuffiness and appearing to take yourself too seriously.

Feed The Eyes

Whether you are using letters, cards, leaflets or a combination of these, make all the elements of your mailing visually appealing. It's amazing how many large companies send out glossy, well-designed leaflets accompanied by a plain, stodgily worded letter. If your budget doesn't run to multi-coloured cards, your letters can be pepped up with clip-art or other graphics. Eye-catching images also aid telephone follow up, serving as a useful memory jogger to mail weary recipients. Whatever presentational methods you use, don't let them distract from the core aim of getting the reader to quickly understand the relevance and benefits for their business.

Don't let the desire to be different lead to bizarre approaches unsuited to your market. A radically different approach may be right for certain markets - sending out vegetables tattooed with feisty messages could be a hit with an advertising agency, but may not cut much ice with your average manufacturer of extruded plastics.

Play Your Cards Right

Promotional offers can increase response rates considerably. But rather than leading with this offer, try to convince the reader of the benefits of the actual product first. For example, the overline *'20% off Whizzy Wham Software'* will lose people whose knee-jerk reaction is *'I don't need any more software'*. If they see however that the product improves customer relations, pinpoints red hot prospects and volunteers to organise the Christmas party - and then they discover there's a 20% discount - the response may be more positive.

End With A Bang

If you are sending out letters, use a 'PS'. According to American direct mail guru Herschell Gordon Lewis, the 'PS' is the most read part of a letter after the overline. Use it to maximum effect. It should reinforce a key selling point, exhort readers to action, or introduce an extra benefit.

Invite Action

Ensure you are making it as easy as possible to respond to your mailing. Include reply-paid cards, envelopes or fax back sheets to minimise effort on behalf of your prospective customers. Offer more than one method to respond.

Now Don't Just Sit There!

It's proven that follow up mailings can increase response rates. Herschell Gordon Lewis explains helpfully that the success of our mailings depends on 'the reader's demographic, psychological and attitudinal position of the moment'. Roughly translated, he's telling us that our mailings may be offering the right product at the wrong time. So keep plugging away until your time comes.

Targeting

We all know about the power of truly targeted marketing, but it's worth making the point that mailing to named decision makers in your target market is the single most important element for a successful campaign. But if you can combine this with a mailing that grabs them by the purchasing intentions - you've got it cracked.

Analysis of Direct Mail Pieces Received By a Dealer in One Week

1. Sun Microsystems

A4 letter with leaflet giving details of the free 'Sun Developer Connection Program'. The leaflet is laid out logically with the benefits clearly expressed. The minimal use of colours/graphics makes the text look rather dense - but it has a pleasingly 'clean' appearance. The letter is a let down. The overall appearance is bland - no colour, small font, with a rather vague '*Are you ready to join the . com revolution*' as the 'attention grabber'. It takes ten lines to find out what they're offering -the first 9 lines are devoted to describing the web revolution. A mailing of two halves - the letter needs a team talk. **6 out of 10.**

2. Extended Systems Ltd.

One piece mailing offering resellers the ExtendNet 4000 solution for networked Internet access and e-mail. The phrase on the front of the eye catching folded card '*The Internet is moving fast... make sure your customers move forward with YOU!*' is a little obscure. Inside there is no clear 'opening' that the eye is drawn to first - but the benefits of the product are well laid out. Readers are offered a free 15 day evaluation and additional £50 margin. A reply paid tear-off card is included, but no other suggested method of requesting information. Good colour design, slightly cluttered, but the right messages are there. **7 out of 10.**

3. Best Power Technology Ltd.

A one side A4 letter with an A5 folded card opening up to five panels, seeking to recruit resellers for their UPSs. The mailing makes its offer - a chance to win a holiday - as the central feature. This becomes rather distracting. The 'attention grabber' on the letter is '*Your chance to win a holiday to the value £1000*' rather than driving home a key benefit of becoming a Best Power reseller. The fold-out card is laden with holiday images (let's remember that only one person is going to win this prize) - but it's well written and really pushes the 'what's in it for us' buttons. There are three ways to respond - free phone, pre-paid reply card and Internet address. Great in parts, shame about the overbearing beach theme. **6 out of 10.**

4. Wick Hill Ltd.

An A4 letter with an A4 information sheet. The mailing is seeking resellers for a range of business solution software. The letter is very direct: the 'attention grabber' alerts us to increased revenues and good margins, and the first line spells out why the reader has been targeted. But the letter lacks zip - if you opt for a straightforward, visually unappealing letter, at least the text should be snappy and enjoyable. There's not much excuse for a line that starts *'We, working closely with our Business Partners, as an added value distributor, provide joint marketing initiatives, training...'*. More emphasis on benefits is required. There is a good range of response methods - phone, e-mail, fax-back and web address for more information. There's merit in a 'tell 'em as it is' approach, but give it more oomph! **5 out of 10.**

5. Computer Books Direct

Double sided A4 letter accompanying booklet detailing book offers. Letter is simple but effective - the relevance to the reader and the benefits are established in the first three lines. The 'hand written' message scanned in at the top right hand corner works very well and serves as the 'attention grabber' - 'Our members save up to 25% on every book they buy. Why should you pay more?' However the box bulleting the three key benefits is rather uninspiring. The offer of three books for £1.99 each is brought in at the right point after the 'what's in it for me' message has hit home. Simple reply coupon and pre-paid envelope provided. The booklet is attractively laid out. A winner! A neat, readable letter that needs no effort to understand relevance, benefits and action required. **8.5 out of 10.**

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