

CREATING EFFECTIVE LETTERS AND POSTCARDS

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WRITING COPY

No matter what approach your direct mail campaign takes--catalogs, personal or nonpersonal letters, postcards, etc.-it will entail writing copy. All successful direct mailers agree that this is one of the most important features of any direct mail campaign. Writing effective copy is something that can take years to master. If you are a first-time direct mailer, you may want to seek the assistance of an experienced professional. Consult your local business directory under "Advertising."

What follows are some basic guidelines to consider when writing copy for a direct mail package:

Keep copy simple and easy to understand

Many readers will simply glance at your direct mail package and, unless the message can be understood immediately, there may be little chance of its grabbing their attention.

Make effective use of headlines

Headlines break up long blocks of copy. This makes them more readable and allows the consumers to get your message quickly. Headlines also attract the attention of the reader and highlight key points described in the text.

- Avoid puns and double meanings in your headlines. There is a danger that readers will not understand your intended meaning and will not invest the effort to figure it out. In addition, puns and wordplay distract from the selling message. Headlines sell; they do not entertain-
- Personalize your headlines. You will attract a greater number of qualified prospects if you address them by name, title or area of interest in your headline. People scanning over their direct mail will stop and read a piece if they know it contains information of specific interest to them. This topic is also discussed on page 28 of this publication.
- Include your product or company name in the headline. Since many people will read only the headline of your direct mail package, you should take every opportunity to increase the lame recognition of your product or company. By placing the company's name or product on the top line, your company or product will get a great deal more exposure.

Tell your customer how to respond

One way to get more customers to respond to your direct mail package is to tell them exactly what you want them to do. Be clear and precise in describing what has to be done to inquire about your product and when it should be done.

Warn of a limited supply or an impending price increase

Advise potential customers to take action immediately because delay could result in missing out on the offer entirely. Be sure to inform your prospects if your price represents a temporary reduction or if it is going to increase in the near future.

Emphasize guarantees

Guarantees increase inquiries for direct mailers because they enable the buyer to overcome any concerns that the product will not perform as advertised.

Use testimonials

Testimonials are an effective sales method when writing copy. They lend credibility to the direct mail package by implying approval from a credible and respectable third party other than the actual seller. Of course, make sure you have written permission before using a testimonial.

Use action devices or offer bonuses for action

Using a premium with a time limit or a bonus if action is taken before a certain date encourages immediate action from people who may put off responding to a direct mail solicitation.

Emphasize special prices

Bargain prices, discounts, new lower prices, and easy-payment terms should be emphasized. In addition, any special price reductions should be placed prominently on your direct mail package.

The following are additional, more specific tips that you should consider when writing advertising copy:

- A void using words like "official," "best" and "guaranteed." These words not only lack specificity, they may also raise some legal issues.
- Try reading your copy as if you were a pessimistic customer who's looking for "the catch."
- "We" establishes your company's position; "I" makes a personal commitment.
- Avoid overly aggressive or submissive openers. Present yourself at the same level as the customer.
- The use of numbers and statistics can lend credibility to your message.

LAYOUT

The layout of your direct mail package can be as important as its content. The overall visual impact of your page should be well- balanced, easy to read and inviting, but it should not be so dramatic as to divert attention from your main idea. A good layout will complement the text and emphasize your main point. The layout involves the arrangement of text blocks, headlines and graphics on the page. In general, you should select the most important element of the advertisement, and then arrange text and graphics in order to focus attention on it. Keep in mind that areas of white space are useful in this regard. A headline or text block surrounded by white space is more prominent than one buried among other print.

The page should be well-balanced and appealing to the eye, with no single portion of the page dominating the overall appearance. This is only a general rule; you may want the reader's attention focused on a "starting point" from which the rest of the elements flow.

You should be careful, however, not to have the piece so balanced that it becomes boring. A dynamically balanced layout will have as much "weight" on the right side of the page as the left, but the two sides will not be symmetrical. For example, you might place text at the upper left and lower right corners, with a graphic or a headline running from the lower left to the upper right corner.

Here are some tips that may help make the visual impact of your page more effective:

- Avoid trying to put too much on one page. A cluttered layout may turn the reader off.
- Avoid using overly fancy typefaces for your text. This may make your advertisement harder to read.
- Make sure that your illustration reinforces your headline. .Break up large text blocks with graphics or white space. .Don't try to emphasize everything. Let the reader know what your main point is.
- If you want your readers to cut out a coupon or order form, let them know it by placing a dashed or dotted line around the form.
- Remember who your audience is. If you're selling to young people, don't make your piece look too formal or imposing.
- If you are using two facing pages, as in a catalog or brochure, integrate their layouts to create a single visual impression.
- Never lose sight of your main goal, which is to stimulate interest. Don't get so caught up in the creative process that you forget to sell your product.

SEASONALITY AND TIMING

An important consideration when conducting a direct mail campaign is seasonality-the timing of a mail campaign. This issue depends on the product or service you are selling. There are some rules of thumb that can help guide your efforts.

If targeting around time-sensitive events, such as a sale or seminar, leave adequate time for mail delivery based on the class of mail you will be using.

Additionally, consider the following times:

- December is an extremely heavy mail time; so unless a product is related to the holiday season and is a last-minute item that can be received quickly, it is recommended to forego December.
- August is a slow month for business-to-business mailings because many business people are on vacation.

Common sense is the best guide for knowing when to mail, or when not to mail, certain seasonal products. For example:

- Summer sporting goods may not sell well in Nebraska during the sub-zero winter months.
- June is the most popular month for marriages, and April is an excellent time to sell wedding products.