

Get Top Results When You Crank Up the “Direct” in Your Direct Mail

By its very nature, direct mail promotions are designed to be one-to-one communication vehicles. As marketers, we are all aware of this in the back of our minds, but in practice, sometimes the “direct” portion drops off the map, and we end up producing unplaced promotional brand ads in an envelope. If you want to see the best returns possible from your direct mail program, make sure the “Direct” angle gets full attention.

There are several ways to rev up the “you” in your programs. The most effective one starts with the concept of the mailing itself. As you envision the final mailing, conceptualize your offer, the list, the copy platform, the thematic graphics and other elements, get a good fix on your target audience for this particular mailing.

The “It” Person

Now take this to the next level, and picture in your mind a specific individual who fits the descriptors and parameters of your typical customer in your target market. Ask some key questions about your mailing with regard to this person: 1) Would this mailing appeal to this person? 2) Is the offer suitable for them and their needs? 3) Would this copy and these graphics attract their attention and resonate with them in an *emotional* way? 4) Is there enough reason for them to respond, to pay, to write a check and send it in?

If the answer to any of those questions is no for that mythical person in your head, then adjust, correct, edit and revamp until the answer is yes to all of them.

Copy is King

Many of these personal elements start with the copy. Often, the offer is what it is, and either can only be changed minimally to match the audience or is inviolate based on the time and resources available. If you’re in that box, then the solution is to start with the copy.

The word “You” is extremely powerful - indeed, you can’t write a true direct mail piece without it. If your copy speaks directly to that person in your mind, you are by fiat having that one-to-one conversation, and must use “You” to address that person directly, in first person voice. In today’s highly digital climate, the use of a person’s name in the copy is almost passé, but you would be surprised how little it actually gets used, aside from personalized laser letters. For postcards, fixed multipage packages, and other formats, digital technology allows for the use of the recipient’s name and other information in repeated appropriate fashion, to juice up your message and really push the audience’s emotional buttons. This will drive your point home almost as powerfully as the word FREE in the offer, and will draw in the reader and involve them in your description and your message.

Good copy for direct mail should tell a story. Listing benefits, describing features has its place, but the meat of the piece is a message directly specifically at the reader like there is no one else around, and it’s just the two of you having a short conversation. The story should be illustrative, persuasive, cohesive, and have a point. No matter how long it is, (and there are endless debates about copy length – see Hershel Gordon Lewis for details on both sides) you should make a

point, explain why your point is the best, make your point again, and get out after asking for the order.

Let the Data Be Your Guide

To be able to write persuasive, effective copy, to concoct an effective working offer, you have to really know the audience. You can get to know the audience, but to do that, some research is in order. Carefully select your list to be as homogeneous as possible, to select as many similarities as you can to define the audience as finely as you can. That list if selects is the basis for your research. In order to get to know those people (and a market never bought anything, people buy products), you have to have an actual conversation with a few of them, to pick up the subtleties, the similarities and the things that really push their buttons emotionally that get them going, that get them excited.

To gain this seemingly insider knowledge, pull a random selection of twenty names and addresses from your list. Engage a service to reverse locate these folks' phone number, take an evening and call 5 of them, and make your pitch, in as low-key, responsible, easygoing manner as you can, and listen carefully to the prospect. Create a set of pre-scripted questions, and ask them in a natural organic order, like a regular conversation, and listen carefully to the responses. Record them if you can (with the permission of the person on the other end), and review them carefully, listening not to frame your next response or question, but just to isolate the answer.

While you're listening, ask yourself these questions:

- 1) How does this person speak, what word choices do they make?
- 2) How do they synthesize the information you are presenting? Do they parrot it back to you verbatim, or do they absorb, summarize and paraphrase your concepts?
- 3) Do they pick up and use any jargon you use related to the product?
- 4) Does the product seem to be something they need, or just want?
- 5) Do they seem to understand the product you are offering or are they just being polite?

Armed with the answers to these, after about 10 interviews a pattern should emerge in the answers that will guide the adjustment of your offer, your copywriting, even your creative approach so that it will resonate with this audience. It is also a great way to verify your list selects, while you have your test subjects on the phone (do you really have a minivan, is your income really \$80,000 a year, etc.).

These ideas should give you plenty of ammunition with which to shoot down your current work and start from scratch, to really personalize your direct mail and make them truly "Direct" to the audience. Apply these techniques to your last project, recreate it with the new approach, and A/B test it against your control – you will be surprised at the results.