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38 WAYS TO OPTIMIZE DIRECT MAIL

1. Start With a Few Key Questions

- How is the mailing list segmented?
- Who will receive this mail piece; administration, middle/upper management, high level executives?
- What are the hot buttons or emotional benefits of each mail recipient?
- What specific action do you want them to take? Make a purchase, call our sales team, pass the mailer along, visit a website.
- Is this mailing intended to stimulate response from new prospects or existing customers?

Your answers to these questions will determine the most cost-effective format.

Generally speaking, the higher the cost per piece the more you should know about your target audience. Consider conducting initial prospecting efforts with lower cost mail pieces. Invest more per piece with mailings to better-qualified prospects and in cross-sell efforts to customers. To mail more cost-effectively, test many direct sources and compiled lists, invest more in data overlays, targeting, list refinement and personalization. Then, roll-out subsequent mail drops to the best performing lists with the best performing offers and creative while continuously testing new lists against your control group. If you just want your prospect to visit your website or call a 1-800 number, consider leading with just a few key points that will entice the recipient to take action to find out more. For initial prospecting resist the temptation to explain all the details of your offer.

2. Post Cards and Self Mailers

Postcards are limited to 5" by 9", but self-mailers can measure up to 6 1/8" by 11.5". Self-mailers can be folded and tabbed in a number of ways and offer lots of flexibility to any B2B mailer interested in cost containment. Properly designed self mailers can very effectively convey just enough information to get a prospect to respond. Designed correctly, a self-mailer will quite often outperform other more expensive B2B direct mail formats.

3. Enveloped Mailings

Envelopes can conceal the promotional nature of your message. Consider testing unique envelopes that boost response and overall campaign ROI. A see-through envelope is one example that may work to entice the recipient to open the letter. Also, depending on the message consider the use of confidential or certified mail tags.

In some instances windowed envelopes may work well for B2C mailings, but we recommend against this when sending mail to businesses. Teaser misses the mark, the envelope will get tossed before it gets opened. Plus printing teaser copy on envelopes can add more cost to your mailing and sometimes clue in your prospects into the promotional nature of the letter.

Letters within envelopes are more expensive to send than postcards and quite often more than self-mailers. However, this may still be a more effective medium when your prospects are already aware of your company. Providing detailed information (that will fit on a self-mailer) has proven to be effective at getting a response. Your vendor should work closely with you to determine when to use a personalized letter and how to test it so you know you are getting the best results.

4. Get Personal with Letters

Help the recipient identify with a person more than a corporation by using "I" more than "we". Identify a person that can answer any questions. Be professional and enthusiastic but don't exaggerate. Use conversational writing, personal pronouns, contractions, incomplete sentences, loose grammar and just plain talk.

5. Don't Forget the PS Line

The Postscript message should be used to drive home key points of benefits. It's more likely to be read than most of your body copy so include a link in it when driving traffic to a personalized landing page. Also consider adding color to your PS Line.

6. Johnson Box

With Letters, the Johnson Box is a tried and true design element proven to lift response rates. The Johnson Box typically appears near the top of the page and contains the call to action. We recommend highlighting key copy in the Johnson Box with color for some added "pop"; cool doesn't mean its going to sell. You have a solution to their problem. Identify the problem. Make sure it's something they can associate with and then follow up with details on your solution.

6. Oversized Letters and Packages

Many companies bark at the high cost per piece associated with letters and packages, but remember, campaign ROI is the key metric not the cost per piece. Expensive mailings limit your reach and can quickly drain your marketing budget, so be very cautious and adequately test before rolling out any high volume campaigns.

7. Delivery

Costs that go into the creation of an effective mail piece include the expense of creative, design, paper, print and postage. So it makes sense to ensure that your direct mail designer is well versed in postal regulations that impact design and mailing costs. Your designer should anticipate the placement of a post net bar-code on certain mail pieces. Having this affixed label cover your key call to action could be devastating. Your designer should also consult on many other details: 1) how the piece will be folded and tabbed, 2) how much white space should be allocated for addressing, 3) how to ensure the mailing indicia is readable, and 4) the thickness of paper for over all postage cost and compliance with automated mail processing machines.

8. Don't Over Design

Be careful when it comes to creative talent. Find out if your creative team has worked with advertising. Many creatives work to build their portfolios with artwork that highlights their creative diversity. The primary focus of an advertisement is the message and the call to action, not glitzy images and beautiful design. Make certain your creatives understand the nuances of direct mail design that will yield a response and they don't over design your piece.

9. Use Legible Fonts

Scripts don't read well. Arial, Eurostyle, and Verdana are legible and more prominent. Don't use too many font styles in a single piece. Once you have decided on a font, use only three sizes and avoid inverted and italics as it's also harder to read. Resist the temptation to place text over images. Readability is more important than design. If you plan to run the same advertisement numerous times with a different edge, continue to use the same font. We suggest companies decide on a font that adequately represents their company brand and they use it across all mediums of communication.

10. Identify Yourself

Make sure your logo, phone number and return address is visible. Advertisements that don't obviously identify the sender may work in some instances with consumers but we don't recommend it with businesses. Even if you are lacking space, put detailed contact information in small print on the bottom of the piece.

11. Brand Consistency

Would you hire a separate firm for your website, collateral, advertising and promotions? I hope not. Brand consistency is impossible with multiple firms and your corporate identity can get lost within the opinions of different creative professionals. Use a single designer and keep the design techniques consistent with your brand. Use colors, images and fonts that communicate your corporate message. If your call to action sends prospects to another location (website for example) make certain the offer is visually consistent with the advertisement. This will create maximum impact, exposure and cause less confusion for your prospects to follow through with their inquiry.

12. Use Images to Send the Message

Images should support your copy and ideally reinforce your call to action. Try to use images that invoke emotional benefits. For Instance, if you are offering a trip to Hawaii as an incentive to respond, presenting a tropical image will be far more effective than simply listing the give-away in text. To follow, you never want to loose site of who your audience is. Outside of promotional uses pick images that people can associate with. For example, if you're a mover, show a picture of a family happily moved into their new home.

13. Use Product Images

Use clean product images to support your copy and reinforce your offer. A clean product photo on a white background is a no-brainer.

14. White Space. Because Number 14 is on the bottom. I decided to put more white space on the top and bottom of this paragraph. Improve your readability by using plenty of white space. Use white space to guide the eye to copy that is most important.

15. Be Relevant

Increase relevancy and you'll increase response. The more you know about your prospects, the more you can customize the mailer. There are many creative ways to do this so working with a direct marketing firm can take personalization to the next level. First impressions really do count. You have a limited budget to make the most out of each impression, so customize both the content and copy for each mail recipient.

Depending on how you segment your mail file, consider dynamically printing unique copy and images for various prospect segments. This fosters a more intelligent dialogue aimed at making your prospects receptive to sharing more information with you. For instance, print on one side the eye catcher/primary offer and follow up with a dialog that your prospect can associate with on the back.

16. Be Personal

Anticipate boosts in response when your mailings are highly personalized. This doesn't mean using the recipient's first name 10 times in the same piece. Instead of sounding overly familiar, use the first name sparingly and inject other personalized data like the company name and other relevant profile data you've collected to really boost response rates, display a personalized URL or website link that includes the person's name. Encourage the prospect to check out their own customized landing page. In our experience, this more than doubles response rates. Just be sure to also apply a high level of personalization to each landing page otherwise the experience will be a let-down.

17. Be Timely and Persistent

The most effective sales people make multiple attempts to close the sale. Likewise, mailing a couple of times to the same prospect (while testing list performance) is a prudent B2B mailing strategy. However keep track of mailing history so you don't keep mailing to the same non-responders time after time. Strike a balance between reaching new prospects and making multiple impressions.

18. Add a Sense of Urgency

What is going to compel your reader to take action? Use a deadline, an expiration or limited quantity that encourages immediate action. You will see your response rate increase significantly with this one minor change. Always deliver on this promise and don't make false deadline statements that could potentially decrease your credibility in the future. We've all been suckered into a sale that never really ended. It's more important to gain the trust and credibility of your clients then hype a deadline or false incentive.

19. Offer Relevant Incentives

Incentives are very effective at generating a response. However, we recommend you offer very relevant incentives like information. When you offer valuable information, instead of a free Palm Pilot or other typical give-aways, your captured leads are inherently better qualified. Consider having phone follow-up efforts identify whether the information was valuable. Talking about specific points in the information will further indicate whether the prospect is actively engaged.

20. Keep Your Promise

What good is "CALL NOW" without anyone answering the telephone. When you drive prospects back to a landing page for more information, make sure that information is valuable and ideally exceeds the responder's expectations. Most importantly, keep any promise to follow up by email or phone.

21. Use a Powerful Headline

The headline is the most powerful part of your ad and the first thing read. Summarize the offer next. Give a short sentence at the top of your piece near the headline with a bit more detail. Statistically 75% of the pull is in this teaser. If your advertisement has teaser copy to encourage further reading, you are going to increase the chance that the prospects gets your call to action. For ongoing examples of great headline writing. We suggest you pay close attention to the tabloids in the grocery check-out or log on to MSN.com and read the upper left hand featured news articles. Both examples use great headline writing tactic's to compel readers.

22. Give Them a Reason "Why" to Buy.

Prospects want details, not buzzwords. Just because it sounds cool, doesn't mean its going to sell. You have a solution to their problem. Identify the problem. Make sure it's something they can associate with, and then follow up with details on your solution.

23. Provide Unique Visuals

Most consumers just flip the pages of a magazine until they see something that pertains to their interest. This can be a well-defined headline or even an abstract image or design. Getting your prospect to stop and take notice is the first step in presenting your offer. Using stock or mainstream visuals tend not to enchant the prospect. A commonly over used photo is people standing in a board room or talking on the phone.

24. Avoid Branding Campaigns

Advertisements that only provide name awareness are expensive. If you are a small to medium size business, a direct response format will generate the best response. Have a solid offer, tell them why and have a call to action.

25. Be User-Centered

Your client is the star, not your product. Speak the language of your target audience. Use phrases, colors, adjectives that speak to them specifically. If you haven't researched your target audience, you are simply wasting marketing dollars without this knowledge and information. Can you imagine writing an ad for an engineer the same way you would for a new parent? Not good.

26. Have a Solid Offer

Get to the point very quickly and state your call to action. The very first sentence should immediately grab the reader's attention and encourage the prospect to continue reading. Consider doing trial closes and multiple calls to action throughout your ad so the prospect is continually guided to take a final action.

27. Be Concise

Limit sentences to no more than 20 words. Avoid run on sentences and keep paragraphs short, about five sentences per paragraph. Don't repeat the same benefit five different ways. Lose the fluff and ditch unnecessary adjectives and prepositional phrases. Use the active voice and include plenty of action words. Once you've done all this, proof your copy and cut it in half again.

28. Limit the Main Choices

Be generous with benefits and straightforward in your call to action. Your mail piece is not the right time to tell everyone everything about your company (I always liked the vomit analogy). In fact there's never really a right time for this, because your clients care more about themselves than you. Imagine you're at a restaurant and the waiter just starts reading the entire menu to you. Do you sometimes feel irritated by the specials alone? At first they are new and different, but you really just want to peruse the menu and then ask specific questions that suit your needs. We only take in the information that is immediately pertinent to our current needs and if you are liberal with the benefits, then your prospect will be better prepared to respond to one strong offer.

29. Give Directions

If you want your prospects to do something...tell them. Instruct them simply and assertively. Tell them how easy it is. (i.e. 3 easy steps)

30. Use design to drive your prospect down a path.

People will generally be attracted to the dark areas first. They will see large images. If you have text, the prospect will read left to right. Photos of people will take their eye in the same direction the person is looking. We suggest anyone that is advertising regularly pick up a book "The Science of Advertising."

31. Convey Exclusivity

Be careful here. It's obvious when an offer is clearly not exclusive, but good copy can overcome this. Your message should be derived from research. When conveying exclusivity, make sure your prospect can associate with the product or service. They are more apt to feel like it is a truly exclusive offer.

32. Bullets Are Out

The idea of summarizing and highlighting information is extremely valuable, efficient and reader friendly. But the best creative's paragraphs with sub-headlines to achieve the same result. A strong sub-headline engages the prospect to continue reading the paragraph. Each sentence should powerfully guide the reader to read the next one...and the next one...and the next one, then you got 'em. The information should flow in the form of a story and the reader speeds up just to get to the end.

33. Choose the Right List

There are three major types of lists available. The first kind is simply compiled information, taken from directories, phone books, motor vehicle records, etc. Take the "Geo/Demo" step before using this list. Define the characteristics of your ideal prospect, comb through your customer records to find common characteristics, like region, age, etc. For B to B look for common industries or SIC (Standard Industrial Classification) codes that a majority of your business comes from. Your ideal customer may be a man age 45-55, who drives a Chevy Chevette, lives with his parents, and watches Pro Wrestling but at least you will know who your target audience is. The second type is a direct response list. People who have bought or responded to direct marketing before. People that have purchased a similar product from the same medium. Go down to your local Library and ask the librarian for the SRDS (The Standard Rate and Data Services) Direct Mail List Source Directory, usually in the reference section. Or you can get more information at: <http://www.srds.com>. It's a huge reference with nearly every public list available for rental -- it's the bible for direct mailers. The last type of list is your "own list", if you don't have a database of your customers then kill yourself now because 80% of everyone's new business comes from their existing customers.

34. Get Your Letter Opened and Read

Most people will tell you to save money and use 'bulk-mail' but at the post office its considered the 'dumpster rate'. In fact the Post Office freely admits that 20%-30% of all bulk mail gets thrown out for various reasons. There goes your savings. All your mailings should go out first class and use a real "live" stamp. That also means don't use mailing labels or even worse than that, is a "postage indicia". All these scream "junk mail". The closer you can make your envelope look like personal correspondence the better. People sort their mail over the trash can. That means you only have a split-second for them to decide if they'll open your letter or not.

35. Appeal to Wants and Needs

You are solving a problem for them not touting how great your product is. Understand, and speak to the needs and motivations of your prospect. Convert unique product and service features into benefits and ideally benefits that the recipient can emotionally connect with.

36. Save on Postage

This is easy; absolutely make sure you are receiving "tax-free" postage rate status! One of my new CU clients was using a local commercial marketing vendor/agency to develop, print & send their direct mail and was paying 24 cents per piece for their direct mail postcards when they qualified for 14 cents. That's a lot of money saved when you add up the total cost of the mailing.

37. Avoid Noise

Anything that causes your prospect to loose focus and detract from your message. Noise includes spelling and grammar errors, inconsistent formatting and clutter. I think you get the idea. If it's not perfectly proofed and edited you'll lose the effectiveness of your message and valuable advertising dollars. Spell check every piece at least 5 times. Have at least three sets of eyes review your piece to give feedback.

38. Hire Professionals

Some advertising can be expensive, get the best bang for your buck. If you break your leg, you're not going to try to fix it yourself. Look at your company's marketing in the same respect. Be careful though, not all Advertising and Creative firms are alike. Ask for references, and a track record. Shop around, and have a good idea of what your ad response will be before you deploy.