



The Great Response Influencers

Base your direct mail strategy on the synergy of multiple elements

I recently revisited the columns I've written for *Target Marketing* in the past few years and noticed that several of them focus on specific direct mail tactics such as creative postage options, postcards and other direct mail formats.

After a recent meeting in which all my client wanted to talk about regarding his upcoming mailing was the format, I thought it time to offer this gentle reminder to both clients and readers: An effective direct mail strategy is based on the synergy of multiple key elements working together to generate cost-effective response—not just one or two tactical pieces.

Focus on only one—such as the format—at the expense of the rest, and you'll dramatically limit your response.

Yes, direct mail formats are important and unique to the medium. They're also important and powerful enough to test. But if you start and end your discussion of a mailing (postal or e-mail) focusing only on format, you'll overlook the combined impact of these response influencers.

Your Audience

Who is your audience? Answer this

question before you do anything else. Once your audience is defined, communicate the definition to everyone working on your mailing, including print production and your creative team.

them to respond?

The offer is the direct marketer's secret, and often misunderstood, weapon for dramatically influencing response. And yes, your offer is more than just your product, an add-on free gift or a discounted promotional price.

A strategically sound offer includes a whole package of influencers working together to push your reader over the edge of indecision. Effective offers include different combinations of elements—everything from deadlines disguised as first or fast fifty rewards and discounts positioned as temporary employee buying privileges, to free gifts, free

trials, and other unique opportunities created to motivate specific audiences. Even your guarantee is an important influencer, particularly for first-time buyers who aren't familiar with your company.

Your Message/Format

How are you communicating your message? OK, now we're finally getting to the nitty-gritty of creative, including direct mail formats. And yes, direct mail formats are great response influencers on more than one level.

For starters, your format plays a

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Why? If you're not mailing to the right people, it doesn't matter what format you use, what offer you make or the message you communicate. Defining your target and developing a plan for reaching it gives you the advantage of ruling out the tire kickers and tailoring all aspects of the mail piece to those most likely to respond. Mailing smart is your No. 1 response influencer.

Your Offer

What is your offer? Once you've defined your audience, what are you willing to give these folks in exchange for the time and effort it takes for

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starring role in getting your mail piece past the mail screener—at home and at the office. This is critical because if your mailing doesn't get past the screener, your intelligent list selection, awesome offer and cool creative don't matter. Making sure your mail piece gets delivered to the right audience is a huge responsibility for a postcard, #10 envelope or any other format.

Once the mailing has skirted the screener, the format, copy and creative work together to get your mail piece opened, read and responded to.

Your Methods Of Response

Originally, all response to direct mail was by mail. Thanks to technology, this has changed and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

First, we added the option of phone response. Then fax. Now we encourage customers to e-mail us or visit our Web site. Including mail, that's five ways to

respond. Should you offer them all? If not, which ones should you cut?

Start by finding out which response options are most used by your customers. This probably will change over time, so do the following: Track methods of response. Periodically monitor them. And when you see one dropping off, delete it. You don't want to confuse your customers by giving them more options than they need. Too many choices can depress response.

For example, if you no longer get faxed orders, stop offering the fax number. It's one less phone number to show on order forms, reply cards and in letters. Or take a tip from catalogs that now get the majority of their orders by phone or online. They either encourage customers to use their ink-on-paper order forms as order organizers or have eliminated the order form altogether.

The key is to make it simple and easy to respond. Offer your customers

response methods they want and use ... and make your decision based on the numbers. Drop a response method for your company's convenience or cost-savings and it could significantly influence response—in a negative direction.

Now back to my opening concern about the client who wanted to focus only on the format.

As we've just discussed, there's much more involved in the success of a mailing than just the size, shape and components of the format.

An easy reminder is Ed Mayer's 40-40-20 Rule. It states the success or failure of any mailing hinges 40 percent on reaching the right audience, 40 percent on making the right offer to that audience and 20 percent on sending the right message. ■

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