



Much of What I Know About Direct Mail, I Learned in High School

By Hugh Chewning

Some of the best training I've had for becoming a direct mail copywriter came when I sold magazines door to door as a teenager.

I quickly learned that not every homeowner welcomed me. Some would not even come to the door, some would close the door in my face and others would listen but not buy.

Soon, I learned to better my odds. Each time I approached a house, I gathered all the available information on the homeowner and developed a plan before knocking on the door.

My marketing "data" came from what I could see in the homeowner's front yard. Were there toys in the yard, indicating children lived there? Was a newspaper delivered to the home? Were there indications that someone in the house played sports? Was there a fancy car in the driveway or a well-cared-for garden?

By gathering and analyzing this information, I could define my offer—in this case, which magazines I would present to the homeowner. I had newsmagazines, magazines for sports fans, children, expectant mothers, car fanatics, and gardeners—literally pages and pages of magazines to choose

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from—and by using my data to select which ones to show to the homeowner, I found that I could greatly increase my sales.

In effect, I was targeting my market.

When homeowners did come to the door, their eyes would give me a quick scan before they decided whether to give me even a minute of their time.

But as the door inched open a little wider, I would quickly give them just enough information for them to listen to what I said next.

Typically, I would start by briefly describing “magazines their neighbors had just ordered.” Then, I would focus the discussion on the magazines I thought—based on my collected data—would be of most interest to the homeowner.

My sales skyrocketed.

Then I learned not to talk *about* the magazines, but instead, to describe what the homeowner could *get* from the magazines—inside information on their favorite sports team, timely tips on how to increase their garden’s harvest, or how the homeowner’s discussions with friends and coworkers could improve with easy-to-read information about the latest news and developments.

There were also words I learned to avoid, such as “reading” and “learning,” because the homeowner could consider these as work. I found it was much better to talk about “seeing,” “discovering” and “having ideas come to your home.”

And I would never walk away without asking for the order.

After explaining that there was no risk to trying a new magazine because they could cancel the order at any time, I would ask, “For how many months do you want to *try* the magazines?” rather than “Do you want to place an order?”

Once I made the sale, I didn’t linger. I said “Thank you,” and went to the next house.

More times than I care to remember, I got the door shut in my face. But when this happened, I tried to learn from my mistakes, improved my approach and moved on to the next home.

Today, as direct marketers, we certainly have more sophisticated approaches to gather information, but in reality, our sales approach—whether we’re working online or with direct mail—is much the same as it was when I was

a teenager selling magazines.

Regardless of the medium, we all:

- Share the same objective—making the sale.
- Must show prospects how they will benefit when accepting our offer. We don't sell subscriptions; we offer information that makes the prospect's life more interesting, enjoyable and profitable. We don't sell insurance; we offer security, protection and peace of mind. We won't even promote a cure for cancer, but we will give the prospect hope that their family can be free of its suffering.
- Use easy-to-understand language to capture the reader's attention, create interest, show how the offer benefits the prospect, and instruct the prospect to take a desired action.
- Evaluate success by measuring our return on investment.

And when things don't go our way, we listen to our customers and adjust our offer so that it better meets their needs.

Selling via direct mail or online today doesn't need to be any more complicated than when I sold magazines as a teenager. After all, the objective remains the same—cost-effectively persuading the prospect to take a desired action.

Walking door to door selling magazines proved to be great training for my direct-marketing career. I just didn't know it at the time.

About the author:

Hugh Chewning is a direct marketing copywriter, strategist and consultant who helps consumer, nonprofit and business-to-business organizations acquire, retain and cross-sell customers. Located in Irvine, California, Hugh provides tested and proven tips on how to boost your campaign's profitability in his free blog, [Direct Mail Insight](#). And for information on his free, no-risk package critique, visit his web site at www.cdmdirect.com.

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