



How to Get More Value from Your Direct Mail Copywriter

By Hugh Chewning

When I started my direct marketing career, I wanted to be a copywriter. Copywriters were the agency “hotshots”; it seemed like they were the star attraction.

Yet my mentor told me that the people of most value to the agency were direct mail “generalists.” Taking his advice, I spent the next six years learning how to initiate, develop and manage successful direct mail campaigns.

I studied list selection, graphic layouts, the letter’s structure, print production and lettershop capabilities. And I gave special attention to what and how to test.

Yet today, most of my income comes from direct mail copywriting.

Over the years, I’ve tested against other copywriters who wrote fancier words, enjoyed reputations that are more widespread and commanded larger fees.

And I freely admit that others write copy that’s richer, less choppy and often, they select particular words that I wish I had thought to use.

Yet when testing head-to-head against these higher-profile writers, my packages regularly generate higher profits.

It isn’t because of the words I choose. It’s because of the lessons I learned long ago.

Before putting a word on paper, I invest time to learn about the mailing lists that will be used, review current and past mailing packages, study test results, and ask



Empowering Your Copywriter

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about the printer's and lettershop's capabilities. And once the copy is accepted, I work with the graphic designer to review the layout, the graphics, and the selected font, plus do little things like make sure paragraphs are indented and pages break in mid-sentence.

Giving attention to the details is a nearly unbeatable advantage.

Yet too many agencies, clients and managers fail to give their copywriters these practical advantages.

Today, many agencies have consolidated into mega-agencies. And as they grow larger, they tend to become more stratified.

A team leader—usually an account executive—is assigned to every account. Other team members work on the campaign strategy, select the lists, and handle design, production or back-end analysis.

Too often, the copywriter isn't brought into the picture until after other team members have developed and released the creative brief. Essentially, the copywriter becomes an order-taker.

But to do our best work for the team, the client and the organization, copywriters need to be direct mail people first and wordsmiths second. For example:

- **List Selection.** The best copywriters understand that good list selection is more important than the words they put on paper. You can rehash common statements like "The list is 300% more important than copy," but in fact, the list is infinitely more important. Even if you have the all-time world's greatest package, if you mail it to the wrong people, you'll fail. It's that simple.

To be successful, the copywriter needs to know which lists work and which don't, and have access to all available demographic and behavioral data. A copywriter should also get to know the list brokers, study the "data cards" and ask to be included in new list announcements.

- **Graphic Design.** You want your copywriter to understand how graphic design affects readership and, thus, how it affects response. He or she should work closely with your design team and understand that it's in the designer's DNA to make things pretty and want to win awards. It's the copywriter's job to fight for a layout that encourages readership and directs the recipient to take a specific action. Pretty isn't important. Results are. Let the designer do his or her thing with your collateral pieces, but for anything being measured by its response, the direct mail people—including the copywriter—should have the final word.

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- **Production.** Encourage your copywriter to meet with your printer and lettershop, and include him or her in meetings with new vendors. Copywriters don't need to be production experts, but they do need to know the full capabilities of the printer and lettershop. Otherwise, they can't take advantage of the technology and unique capabilities that they can use to drive results.
- **Back-end Analysis.** Direct mail isn't "fire and forget." Share results of past mailings with the copywriter so he or she can take advantage of your new findings and avoid repeating past mistakes.

If you need an outside copywriter to sign a nondisclosure agreement, do it. If you don't want to share specific results, assign an index to the numbers. If you can't trust the copywriter with this, why are you using him or her anyway?

And for the record, once a piece mails to thousands, if not millions, of people, it's no longer confidential, so give a sample to your copywriter. (A pet peeve.)

Whatever your cause or whatever you're selling, you can achieve greater results by making the copywriter a full participating member of the account team. Bring him or her into the job early in the campaign's planning stages and you'll get better results.

Life doesn't have to be complicated. Empower your copywriter and enable him or her to deliver greater profits. After all, higher profits keep the client and/or the board of directors happy, pay the bills and will give you a good night's sleep.

Hugh Chewning is a direct mail specialist providing copywriting, strategies and consulting for consumer, nonprofit and business-to-business groups. 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*. To subscribe, and, for information on his free, no-risk package critique, visit his website, <http://www.cdmdirect.com/>

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