
For Direct Mail Success, Sweat the Details

By Hugh Chewning

Too often, people and organizations put all their attention into getting the big things right, but ignore the details.

There's a word to describe this. It's "mediocrity."

Giving attention to the details can't ensure your success, but ignoring the small stuff can quickly bring about your downfall.

Every detail has bottom-line repercussions and it's irresponsible to think of any aspect of direct mail as trivial, unimportant or inconsequential.

Here are a few fine points often overlooked in a mailing. None will ensure your success, but collectively, they can make a huge difference in your mailing's success.

- Double-check the planning schedule. Don't assume that someone has selected and ordered the mailing lists. Has the copywriter submitted his or her work in time to get it approved and into production in time to meet your mail date? Have the envelopes been delivered to the mail house? Too many projects never get off the ground—or mail at an unfavorable time—because no one monitors the planning schedule.
- Make certain all the mailing's components—the outer envelope, the letter, the response form and other components—synergize into one mailing



package. It's one direct mail package, not a collection of individual components.

- Understand that giving attention to detail is not the same as cluttering the package's design with details. Including too many graphic elements in the design can confuse the eye and keep the reader's attention away from where you want it to flow.
- Check the art and make certain the letter uses a serif font. If anyone questions the value of using a serif font in the letter, have them pick any book from the library or look at any magazine or newspaper, and they will see that they all use serif fonts. Why? Because a serif font is more readable. And having more people read more of your letter can only increase response. When you want something read, use a serif font.
- You wouldn't start a conversation without greeting the recipient, so make certain the letter includes a salutation. And give attention to title codes—Mr., Mrs. and Ms., for example. For me, there's nothing more impersonal as "Dear Hugh Chewning." It makes everything sound like a sweepstakes letter. Open the letter with "Dear Mr. Chewning" or, when appropriate, "Dear Hugh." And provide a "default" for names that you can't match to a title code. For example, "Dear Member," "Dear Customer," "Dear Neighbor" or even "Dear Friend."
- Keep the letter's paragraphs short and provide plenty of white space for the margins. Wide margins and short paragraphs invite the reader's eye to the page. Fat paragraphs and long sentences are intimidating and unwelcoming to the reader. You want to get the letter read, so make it warm and comfortable to the recipient. (Compare the pages of a novel written in the 1930s or earlier with those of a contemporary book and see which you find more inviting.)
- Make sure the letter's paragraphs are indented. Eye-camera studies show that indented paragraphs "catch" the eye moving down the page and make the letter more readable.
- Check for asterisks and, whenever possible, eliminate them. Asterisks are for the lazy and they announce that you're hiding something. If there's something you must say, just say it. It's far better to announce a limitation or condition than for it to appear that you're hiding the full truth. In a four-page letter, put required legal information on page two or three—very few people read those pages anyway.
- Format the letter as a "friendly" letter rather than a business letter—even for business-to-business mailings. Think of the letter as a one-on-one conversation between the recipient and you—the salesperson. To whom

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would you be more likely to respond—a salesperson who comes across as warm and friendly, or someone who is formal and distant?

- Read the letter aloud. Its copy is a conversation you're having with the reader and that's how you want it to sound.
- Don't let a page—other than the last—end with a complete sentence. Any newspaper—with the possible exception of *USA Today*—will force you to turn a page to finish the front-page article. Why? They want you to see the advertisements. In direct mail, we also need the reader to turn the page to discover the benefits of our offer and reach the letter's call to action.
- Give attention to the letter signer's signature and any margin notes. The signature needs to be realistic but readable. You don't want it to look like an artist signed the letter, but the signature needs to be legible or it's going to hurt the letter's credibility. And make certain any "handwritten" note in the margin is in the same handwriting and ink color as the signature.
- Has the letter used any in-house words or abbreviations without providing an explanation? Don't assume the reader—even customers—will understand the terms that are unique to your business. If your spouse, best friend or neighbor aren't familiar with the term, you need to explain it or omit it from the copy. When you do use abbreviations, always spell the word out when first used. For example, rather than beginning a letter with "ACLU," you would write, "American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)." You'll lose all momentum if the reader must turn back to the start of the letter to understand what you're talking about.
- On the response form, tell the reader to whom their check is to be made payable. Don't make them guess or give them any reason to hesitate. And it's not "Make your checks payable to ..." You're only asking for one check, so use, "Make your check payable to ..."
- Check the response form and make sure it fits into the return envelope. And, if appropriate, have you included a toll-free telephone number or a website the recipient can use to respond?
- When you do offer a toll-free number or webpage as a method of response, make certain that you have procedures in place to include these responses in the mailing's results report.
- Finally, have the letter proofread. Don't expect the copywriter to be the *final* proofreader of his or her own work.

Managing any one of these details isn't going to produce a huge lift in your direct mail results. But collectively, getting the details right can be the difference

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between success and failure. Plus, it's the professional thing to do.

You'll often find the greatest success within the smallest details. And when it comes to making a difference in your mailing results, a penny is a penny. And pennies make dimes and dimes make dollars.

Sweat the small stuff. Strive for perfection and you'll achieve excellence.

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