How to Help Your Direct Mail Copywriter Make You Money

By Hugh Chewning

Whether you're promoting an idea, a product or a service, successful direct mail copy persuades the reader to take a desired course of action.

Years ago, the televangelist Don Stewart successfully wrote to his supporters saying, "Send $25 now. I'll explain later."

But today we live in an "age of skepticism," and without facts to support the letter's claims—and a clear understanding of the mailing's purpose—the direct mail copywriter cannot write his or her most persuasive appeal.

Facts help build creditability, and every promise needs to be supported with believable data. But, to do his or her best work, the direct mail copywriter needs more than product information. Before beginning to write, your copywriter also needs to know:

- What's the purpose of the mailing?
- Who will receive the mailing?
- How will the offer benefit the reader?
- What are we asking the recipients to do?
- Are there any terms or phrases that must be included or excluded?
- Who is signing the letter?

Additionally, I want to know current **response rates, average order and the cost** of the control package so I can estimate how much we can spend on a new test package. Does it make sense to add an insert to the mailing, use a

larger format or include a premium? (See my past blog entry, *How to Use a Pre-Event Routine for More Profitable Direct Mail Testing*.)

Why share mailing list information?

The best direct mail is a one-to-one communication between the letter signer and the mailing's recipient. And only by understanding who will receive the mailing can the copywriter effectively communicate the offer.

When we meet someone for the first time, our conversation becomes much more effective once we learn a little about each other. The same is true for the copywriter when writing to prospects or customers for the first time.

Understanding which mailing lists or segments are most successful—and least successful—along with all available demographic information and buying/contribution history, can help the copywriter speak more effectively to the mailing's recipients. Plus, the copywriter can use this information to personalize the letter copy—which typically increases results.

Why mail volume is important to the copywriter

Including involvement techniques—surveys, CDs, samples, admission tickets, address stickers, etc.—in a test package is often a great way to achieve breakthrough results. The same is true of oversize formats and premiums.

All of these add-ons come at a cost, but with the price breaks typically available with large volumes, the copywriter can consider testing "bells and whistles" that would not make sense for a low-volume mailing.

And when knowing there will be more mail volume, the copywriter can propose more tests.

For example, if your mailing is only 100,000 pieces, it doesn't make sense to mail five different tests of 10,000 names each. This would put half of your total mailing at risk, and that's not a good idea for cash flow. And, depending upon the response rate, making your test cells smaller might not generate enough responses to achieve statistically valid results.

Yet when mailing a million pieces, assigning the same 50,000 names to testing would only represent one-twentieth of the total mail volume—a far less risky investment.

Sharing potential mail volume can help the copywriter make better use of

your test dollars.

<div align="center">More information is better</div>

The more information the copywriter has the better job he or she can do. Here are several other things I want to know before I start to write—and why:

- **Who is the letter signer?** I ask for a biography of the letter signer because the direct mail copywriter speaks for him or her. And the more the copywriter knows about the person signing the letter, the better he or she can relate the copy to the recipient's needs.

- **Who are the client's competitors?** A competitor presumably shares at least a portion of the audience I'll be writing to, so I want to see how they present their offer and review the benefits they promise.

- I also want to see samples of the company's **space ads, collateral, and radio and television ads**. Direct mail is only part of the organization's marketing plan, and the copywriter needs to create a synergy between the different advertising mediums. The company's communication to the targeted audience—whatever the source—needs to share a common image and message.

- Share **testimonials** and **press clippings**—both positive and negative. They can add creditability to the copy.

- Provide the copywriter with a **sample of the product** or let him or her experience the service. Holding, feeling and using the product or service lets the copywriter experience its benefits, and as a result, he or she can then better relate these values to the prospective buyers.

- **How will the client judge** the package's success? Will it be net dollars, number of new customers, customers making a second purchase, click-throughs, telephone calls or the number of leads received? The client will judge my performance by the package's success, and we can avoid disagreements by agreeing on the rules beforehand.

<div align="center">Share mail samples</div>

Some organizations worry that sharing past mail samples will limit the copywriter's creativity and influence the work. But <u>creativity isn't the job of the</u>

copywriter. Increasing response is.

Past mailings should influence the copywriter. After all, the whole concept of direct mail testing is to build on past successes and avoid past mistakes.

If there are particular techniques that consistently work, I want to consider including them. If there are concepts that have consistently proven not to work, I want to avoid them.

And the argument not to share samples because the organization must preserve its confidentiality just doesn't work. Once the package mails to thousands of complete strangers, it's not a secret. Share it with your copywriter.

To achieve the highest return on the organization's test budget, share information, samples and past results with your copywriter. When you do, everyone wins.