
21 Steps to Direct Mail Success

By Hugh Chewning

*This is the **first** of a **two-part** series.*

The key to success is to avoid making mistakes. And with direct mail, getting the basics right accounts for 95% of all successes.

You can find many articles about effective direct mail testing, copy and design in my other posts, but here I focus on key—but often overlooked—elements of a successful direct mail campaign.

Below are 11 essential elements of a successful direct response campaign. In my next post, I'll follow up with an additional ten steps that you'll want to incorporate in every direct mail campaign.



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1. **State the campaign's objective clearly.** Get everyone focused on the same goal before launching the campaign. Generating a lead is quite different from closing a sale with a prospect or cross-selling to a customer. Each effort has its own expectations and everyone needs to understand how to measure success.
2. **Start with a budget.** Every direct response campaign is measured by its results. Know how much you can spend to meet these expectations, and before you mail, establish how much money you'll have to follow up on your initial tests. It doesn't do you any good to achieve breakthrough results unless you have the resources—time, money and personnel—to exploit your success.
3. **Establish a mailing schedule.** Knowing that even the best plans will change, I schedule mailings twelve months out. Holidays, annual events, anniversaries, etc., often inspire donor and customer mailings, and these dates can become the core of your schedule with other "To Be Announced" mailings planned around them. For acquisition mailings, schedule follow-up mailings

45-60 days after the test is in the mail—or the number of days it will take to receive, process and analyze the returns plus the time required to produce the follow-up mailing. Without a schedule, project dates quickly begin to slide and things just don't get done. A schedule is one of your strongest planning tools.

4. **Do the math first.** There is no reason to spend money on a direct mail campaign if the results needed to turn a profit are unrealistic. We all enjoy a challenge, but, for example, a 20 percent break-even response on an acquisition mailing isn't realistic. Do the math first and avoid any mailing that has little chance of success. (See [How to Use a Pre-Event Routine for More Profitable Direct Mail Testing.](#))
5. **Focus on the mailing lists.** The creative portion of the mailing may be the most fun, but it's not the most important. Turn your attention to selection of the mailing lists. Nothing will play a greater role in your success or failure than list selection. No matter how good the copy or offer, you're not going to sell lawn mowers to Eskimos. Work with a list professional who has experience in your market and will take the time to learn about your company, its competitors, the mailing's offer and your past mailing results.
6. **Show the benefits.** No one really cares what your gadget does or how worthy your organization is. What they care about is how they will benefit from responding. The benefit can be tangible or intangible, but fulfilling the prospect's needs is far more important than anything you're selling. Show how your offer meets the prospect's needs and you'll make the sale.
7. **Don't reject a promising test based on price alone.** Just because a test cost 50 percent more than the control doesn't necessarily mean you need to increase response by 50 percent or more. Rather than ask how much the test costs, ask, "What response does this test need to beat my control?" (See link provided above in #3.)
8. **Test new offers.** The offer is what you promise the recipient and what you ask in return. And your offer is second only to the mailing list in terms of its effect on the campaign's success. If you're looking for breakthrough results, test the offer. (For ideas on offer tests, see [17 Ways to Improve Your Direct Mail Offer.](#))
9. **Test enhancing your mailing package.** You're more likely to increase net profit by adding to the package than you are by eliminating a component. Test new package components that promote the premium, display testimonials, emphasize the guarantee, and add credibility to the organization or letter

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signer. “Bells and whistles” like address labels and peel-off stickers for the prospect to move to the response form still work and often give you a big bang for the buck. (The one component you probably don’t want to add is a brochure. If you use a brochure now, see what happens when you drop it. It’s likely a drag on results.)

10. **Hire a professional direct response copywriter.** You may have someone within the organization who, because of his or her intimate involvement with the group and the sincerity of his or her beliefs, can produce a letter that outperforms copy written by a professional direct mail copywriter. But these people are few and far between. Hire a professional direct response writer. It will be money well spent. And recognize that copywriting for general advertising and direct response copywriting are two different skill sets.

11. **Now is the time to test.** Don’t wait until your control stops working before testing new lists, offers, formats and copy. If you do, cash flow will come to a halt and you’ll feel like you’re standing in a hole trying to dig yourself out. It’s not a career-enhancing move.

In my next post, I’ll publish ten more easy steps to take to achieve direct mail success. (Subscribe to my blog—see sign-up in the navigation column to the left—and you’ll receive this next post automatically.) In the meantime, best wishes for your continued success.