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# *How Your Direct Mail Letter's Layout Can Increase Readership and Response*

By Hugh Chewning

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When you get down to basics, a direct mail letter is a conversation between the letter signer and its recipient.

A successful direct mail letter is one that motivates the reader to take a specific action. And to motivate the reader, you' need them to read your letter.

Yet too often, we receive direct mail letters that are offensive to the eye. Big blocks of text crowd the page. Narrow left and right margins choke the life from the words. And small sans serif type printed over a colored background makes the copy difficult to read.

At best, these letters are uninviting – even intimidating – to read. And with only a few seconds to capture the reader's attention, any distraction to the reader's eye flow can doom the mailing.



Higher readership equals greater response.

But by applying a few proven techniques to your letter's layout, you can get the prospect to read further along in your letter. And the more time they spend with your letter, the greater the likelihood of persuading the reader to take the desired action.

Few people – even those who respond – will read the complete letter but you can increase readership of your direct mail letter and achieve a more

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profitable mailing campaign b following these 11 simple steps.

1. Make the letter look like a letter. People know what to do with a letter – read it. Don't confuse them with something that looks like a brochure, flyer, or some creative hybrid approach. Most people will recognize the letter as part of a “mass mailing” but the perception of a personal letter will increase readership.
2. Include a salutation. You wouldn't start a conversation without a greeting so include a salutation with your letter. And assign title codes. You want to speak to the recipient by name and there is nothing more *impersonal* than “Dear Tom Jones.”

Too many clients argue against using title codes because a portion of their file lacks the information. But isn't speaking to a portion of your file by name better than talking impersonally to *all* your customers or prospects? You can always use a default for the names without title codes.

3. Use wide margins and double space between paragraphs. And don't justify your right margins. Flush left, ragged to the right.
4. Use a serif type for your letter copy – Georgia, Courier, Garamond, and Times Roman are examples. Serif type has the little “feet” at the bottom and is proven to enhance reading flow and reduce eye strain. Graphic designers seem to love sans serif type – Arial, Helvetica and Verdana are examples – but save it for headlines and things you don't want read like disclosures.

The readability of serif fonts isn't debatable. You can find proof in your home or office. Look at any newspaper or pull any book from your bookshelf. They all use a serif font. Why? Because serif fonts improve readership.

5. Keep your paragraphs short. You want to vary your paragraph length to keep your copy interesting and flowing. But as a rule of thumb, limit each paragraph to no more than five lines.
6. Always indent your paragraphs. Eye-camera studies show that indented paragraphs “catch” the eye moving down the page and make the letter more readable.
7. Single space the letter. Double space between paragraphs.
8. Don't end a page with a complete sentence. Look at your newspaper. To finish practically any article, you have to turn the

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page and that's exactly what you want the reader to do with your letter – keep reading toward the final call to action.

9. When using "handwritten" notes in the margin and/or underlining, be sure the letter signer uses the same pen when signing the letter. This is one letter, written by one person, to one other person. Make it believable.
10. Use nothing smaller than 10-point type (except for disclaimers) and for an older audience, you'll want to use a larger 12-point type.
11. Make sure there's good contrast between the letter's text and the background. If you want it read, forget about colored screens and watermarks behind the text.

As direct mail professionals, we can't close the sale without getting the prospect to read our letter. Use each of these proven tips to increase readership and you'll see a positive impact on response rates. Your thoughts?

**About the author:**

Hugh Chewning is a direct mail specialist providing copywriting, strategy and consulting for consumer, nonprofit and business-to-business groups. For more free tips on how to increase your direct mail profits, visit his blog, go to his website, [www.cdmdirect.com](http://www.cdmdirect.com) and subscribe to his blog, *Direct Mail Insight*.

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