

# How to make the most of your direct mail dollars

By Gary Bohringer

As competition over the ever-shrinking business pie heats up, business owners and marketing managers find it necessary to promote their products and services more aggressively to ensure they stay visible. Yet to keep the business afloat, they also need to ensure that every marketing dollar spent produces a return on investment (ROI).

One tool that many small businesses overlook is direct mail. Long thought to be feasible only for large companies with big marketing budgets, direct mail can be affordable, testable and measurable if used properly.

Here are 12 tips for a successful campaign:

**Build your budget.** Before investing a dime, determine a budget. First identify what a new customer or sale is worth. Then make an assumption about your response rate to determine how many prospects you will need to contact to achieve your ROI, as well as break even on your marketing expenses.

**Target your customer.** The best initiatives are highly targeted and personalized. Identify your ideal customers, and develop a message that speaks to their concerns and desires.

**Segment your mailings.** To quickly discover which message, offer and format combination is most effective at reaching your audience, divide your mailings into small, manageable groups. With each mailing, test a different element of your marketing. For example, your first mailing could test a postcard against a direct mail letter. The winner becomes the control, and your next mailing will pit the control against a new test piece to further improve your results.

**Use multiple marketing channels.** Using multiple ways, or "channels," of marketing enables you to reach a larger share of your marketplace. Integrating different forms of marketing communications, such as a Web site and direct mail, also improves your ability to convert prospects into customers.

**Increase your frequency.** Studies have shown that it can take up to eight attempts to get someone interested in buying your product or service. The more you contact prospects, the more leads you will generate and the more sales you will close.

**Define the offer.** Be clear about what you want to sell. What is unique about the product or service? Why is it unlike, and thus better than, any other choice on the market? How is it perceived? Is the price right? Can you offer prospects an incentive to try it? For the greatest ROI, test one offer against another to identify which produces the most responses and the greatest profit.

**Develop clear content.** The clearer your marketing message, the easier it is for customers to understand what you're offering and how to respond. Read your copy from the perspective of your prospect. Do you understand what's being offered and how it will benefit you? Is there a call to action that tells you what to do next? Are there multiple ways to reach you? To maximize response, make it as easy as possible for customers to understand your message and respond to your offer.

**Pick the right mailer.** When determining the type of mailer you want to use, consider your prospects, their environment and your message. A self-mailed brochure might work well in one situation, but a letter in a No. 10 envelope might work better in another.

**Minimize postage expenses.** The size, weight, shape and quantity of your direct mail package are a few of the many considerations that affect the price you will pay for postage. To ensure that your mailing is sent in the most cost-effective, timely way, make sure that your mailer is "Post Office friendly." Personnel at your local post office can provide advice if needed.

**Use design strategically.** A well-designed piece is key to getting your offer in the hands of your prospects. If you are unsure of what aspects to include in your design, look at

other direct mail pieces and note of what you like or dislike. Review your observations with colleagues and other people who will give you an honest, unbiased answer. Simple and uncluttered designs are a safe bet, as they direct prospects' attention to the parts of your message that are most important. Also ensure that all of your marketing components are branded consistently. By giving all of your marketing collateral the same look and feel, you quickly build a sense of familiarity with your audience.

**Follow up.** To maximize the leverage you get from your direct mail campaign, it's critical to have a follow-up system to convert leads into customers. The system should be in place before launching the campaign. If a marketing campaign is successful but the follow-up stinks, you lose customers and credibility.

**Measure your results.** To gauge the success of your campaign, you need to be able to measure the results in a concrete way. Depending on your campaign, you might want to measure the number of inquiries received, visits to your web site or sales.

Building a successful direct mail program takes time and patience. By using these 12 tips, however, you'll increase the chances of developing a campaign that produces a healthy return on your marketing investment.

Gary Bohringer is a 21-year direct marketing veteran and creator of *SimplySmartMail.com*, a service that allows small businesses to integrate their Internet and direct mail marketing. To contact him, call 630-279-6635 or visit *SimplySmartMail.com*.

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