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# ***21 Basic Rules for Successful Direct Mail Testing***

**By Hugh Chewing**

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We all know the importance of direct mail testing, but too often money is wasted on unproductive and unwise tests. Here are 21 basic rules worth reviewing to get the most from your marketing dollars:

1. Before you start production on any test, do the math first. How long will it take to recover your test costs, and what increase in results will you need to beat the control? Proceed with the test only after showing that there's a reasonable chance that it can *economically* increase response.
2. Don't test just because you're curious to know "what if." Have a solid plan of how you'll turn the test results into a profit before you invest in the test.
3. Be sure you test a sufficient quantity to obtain reliable test results.
4. "Replicate" each test when possible—rather than mail one test cell of 10,000 names, split the names into two equal groups and mail the same test to two groups of 5,000.
5. When possible, mail the same number of pieces for each test.
6. Create two test-size cells from the names that will receive your control mailing and use them as the baseline for measuring your tests' success. These "control cells" will eliminate any bias that mailing to a larger body of names might cause, and, if there's a production glitch, they can protect your cash flow. Now, rather than hold the entire mailing until the production problem is corrected, you can mail most of your control and hold these test-size cells until your tests are ready to mail.
7. Constantly test for new lists. Nothing will make a greater difference in results. And when you get a new package breakthrough, review

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the lists you tested earlier and see if your new, better-performing control makes them worth retesting.

8. Rely on the experts for list selections and data work, but make certain you understand what they're doing. You don't necessarily need to understand the math behind modeling, but you do need to be certain that the experts understand your objectives.
9. Test new offers. Second only to lists, you'll get the biggest return from your test dollars by testing new offers.
10. Test new graphics for the outer envelope. These are among your most cost-efficient tests, and they can help keep a control "fresh."
11. Mail your tests and the control at the same time and, as much as is feasible, from the same postal outlet.
12. You can't argue with the test results, but don't follow them blindly. Pyramid—roll out with ten times the number of pieces tested—and reevaluate and/or back test.
13. Don't get test-happy. Test only those things that can make a meaningful difference to your mailing's success. It may make sense to tweak the control for incremental gains if you're mailing in large volume, but if not, limit your tests to the big things—lists, offer, format and copy.
14. Follow up quickly. And minimize your risks and improve the reliability of your results by using proven lists for your tests.
15. More often than not, you'll increase profitability by increasing the package's cost—not by taking away from it.
16. If you're not using a premium, test one. If your control uses a premium, test a new one.
17. If your control includes a brochure, test without one. A brochure often distracts readers and delays their move to the response form. (This is one exception to rule 15.)
18. Make sure your tests receive full credit. Are replies to the 800 number and the website being counted?
19. When calculating how well your test will perform against the

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control, use rollout costs.

20. Measure your results by net dollars—not response rate or cost per order. If you can't spend it, it doesn't count.
21. And, as elementary as this may seem, be certain that you have a competent system in place to receive, count and report results.

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to succeed in direct mail. But you do need to know what, when and how to test. And you must have the discipline to follow the results.

Let these 21 rules guide you and you'll have a great start toward a more profitable direct mail campaign.

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