



36 Do's and Don'ts for the Successful Direct Mail Letter...

By Hugh Chewing

INTRODUCTION

Too often we forget what a direct mail letter is all about.

At its best, it's one letter written by one person to one other person. Whether you're mailing a few hundred letters or millions, direct mail is a personal communication.

As direct response professionals, we're not artists, authors and certainly not general advertisers. We're salespeople.

And what we sell are benefits. Not features but benefits.

For example, we don't sell insurance. But we do sell security, protection and peace of mind. And a good direct response writer doesn't sell subscriptions. Instead, we offer information that makes your life more interesting, enjoyable and profitable. We won't even sell you a cure for cancer. But we will give you the hope that you and your family can be free of its suffering.

Awards, pretty packages and beautiful designs don't measure our success. Net profit does. Often we don't even write in complete sentences and our child's fourth-grade teacher would never approve of our grammar. Our graphics are

often so “elementary” that our artist hides our direct response work when his advertising clients visit the studio.

Yet what we do better than anyone is *motivate people to take a desired action*.

We can prove it too because everything we do is measurable. If we segment our list differently, revise our offer, rewrite the letter, change the graphics or test a new format, we know exactly how it affects the client’s profitability.

There’s no need to argue over what worked best. The evidence is recorded, documented and examined. There’s no hiding from it. Our success or failure is on display.

What follows are *36 Dos and Don’ts of a Successful Direct Mail Letter*. Each of these tips is tested and proven to make your direct response letters more effective. Ignore them at your own risk.

36 FREE IDEAS

1. Make the letter look like a letter.
2. Include a salutation.
3. You’re writing one letter to one person. This is an “I” to “you” medium. Not “us” and “we.”
4. Sell benefits, not features.
5. For fundraising copy, appeal to the emotions.
6. Use your ability to personalize but do it wisely. Assign title codes. There is nothing more *impersonal* than “Dear Mr. Tom Jones.”
7. Use wide margins and double-space between paragraphs. And indent your paragraphs.
8. Use serif type for everything other than headlines – and things you don't want read.
9. Tell the reader what to do. Remind him and then tell him again.
10. Don't typeset your letter. Remember, you’re mailing a personal letter.

11. Don't assume your readers understand what you're talking about. Tell them.
12. Remember, as the salesperson you're competing for people's time. Get to the point and stay with it.
13. Typically, the first and last pages are more widely read than the "inside" pages. So if you have disclaimers or copy the client insists on using, put them on the inside pages.
14. Don't asterisk copy. If you must add legal disclaimers, work them into the copy and bury them on the inside pages. Asterisks say, "Excuse me, this is not totally true."
15. Most of all, remember you're trying to communicate, not impress. You don't want to seem crude but your prime concern is getting the message across and generating the desired action. If that involves incomplete sentences, the use of contractions or a preposition at the end of a sentence, then so be it.
16. Tell your readers what they want to hear, not what you want to write. Sell the benefits.
17. Specifics and facts sell; just don't overload the reader.
18. Rather than write, "Eighty percent of our customers are repeat buyers" say, "Eight of every 10 customers are repeat buyers." Rather than 75% of kids are hungry, it's three of every four.
19. Relate to the reader. As a rule of thumb, if you can't spell a word – or don't understand it – don't use it.
20. Keep your first sentence short. Remember, you're the salesperson getting your foot in the door. Push the benefits.
21. Make 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.
22. Always indent your paragraphs. It makes the letter more readable.
23. Single-space the letter and double-space between paragraphs.
24. Don't end a page with a complete sentence.
25. Always use a P.S. It's one of the most widely read parts of the letter.

And because it's read, use the P.S. to repeat your call to action. (Tell the reader what you want him or her to do.)

26. When using abbreviations, always spell out the word the first time it's used. For example, rather than beginning a letter with "ACLU" you would write, "American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)."
27. Don't assume that your reader understands the benefit of what you're selling. And don't use in-house terms without explanation. At the same time, don't avoid words your audience normally uses. For example, if you're writing to doctors, don't shy away from medical terms.
28. When using "handwritten" notes in the margin and/or underlining, be sure the writer uses the same pen used to sign the letter. This is one letter written by one person to one other person. Make it real! Make it believable.
29. Involve the reader in your sale. Surveys, petitions, punch-out tokens, samples of cloth, address labels, greeting cards – anything you can use to get the reader involved will increase response.
30. Your copy must fit the format, and the format must fit the message.
31. Each component must support the others but stand by itself. Every component should include the offer and return address.
32. Assign a deadline.
33. Don't justify your right-hand margins. Flush to the left, ragged to the right.
34. Use nothing smaller than 10-point type (except for disclaimers).
35. Remember, you're not writing to win awards. You're writing to close a sale.
36. **Always include a guarantee.** Every offer has a guarantee. Put it at the close of your letter *and* on your response device.

This list of "dos and don'ts" is continuously expanded, contracted and refined. What can you add to the list? I'd like to hear your ideas so give me a call or send me an e-mail with your suggestions.