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# ***Direct Mail Testing and 7 Costly Mistakes to Avoid***

By Hugh Chewing

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J. Paul Getty once said the three keys to wealth and success are, “Rise early. Work hard. And strike oil.”

That may be good advice. But for those of us who must depend upon something other than striking oil, I say the three keys to success for a direct marketer are to TEST, TEST, and TEST!

But before we test, we must recognize that not all tests are productive or cost-effective. My next post will be “What, How and When to Test” but in the meantime, here are 7 costly mistakes that you’ll want to avoid when testing:

- When you’re looking for breakthrough results, it makes no sense to test small things—the color of the return envelope, minor copy changes buried in the letter or a different paper stock, for example. When you need a breakthrough, test the big things—list, offer, format and copy—to get big results.
- Do the math first. *Before* you make the test mailing, you need to know how much of a “lift” you need to break even. Make sure you have a *reasonable* chance of winning. On the other hand, don’t conclude that the test “costs too much” without doing the math. Increasing your package cost by 50% doesn’t necessarily mean you have to increase response by 50%. Much will depend upon the size of your average order, so do the math first.
- Don’t ignore past test results. At times, we get valid test results, but they weren’t what we expected so we’re tempted to ignore them. Your test results are the voice of your customers, so listen to what



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they're saying—even if it's not what you expected to hear.

- Don't test more than one thing at a time—or test everything. You can't test a new format to a new list and conclude that the format made the difference. However, you can test new copy and a new format—to the same list—as long as you recognize that you're testing the *package*, not the format or the copy.
- Don't think that just because something worked for another mailer, it will work for you.
- Rather than become stuck in a “make it cheaper” mode, test adding features and benefits to your package. More often than not, you'll increase profits by adding to the package rather than by taking away features and benefits.
- How many times have you heard, “I don't need to test; my control is still working”? The best time to test is when your control *is* working. Don't fall into the trap of complacency. Otherwise, you're going to put a serious hurt on your cash flow.

To succeed in direct mail, you don't need to be a rocket scientist, but you do need to understand the fundamentals of testing and have the discipline to follow the results.

Test results are like a road map, and when you follow them, they'll lead you to success.

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