
How to Kill a Perfectly Good Direct Mail Offer*

By Hugh Chewing

Direct mail is a sales medium. We use it to sell ideas, products and services. And like any other form of sales, its success is based on trust.

Regardless of how much the prospect may value your offer, if he or she doesn't trust the person attempting to make the sale, it's not going to happen.

In direct mail, our salesperson is the letter signer. And to establish trust we use testimonials, money-back guarantees and clear, straightforward language.

Yet any trust we establish is diminished when we insert an asterisk into our headline or copy.

By definition, an asterisk "indicates omission..."

An asterisk signifies that the claim being made isn't complete. There are qualifications and/or limitations to what you're being told. In blunt terms, an asterisk says that you're not being told the whole truth.

Recently, I received a mailing with the headline "Save \$1,000.*"

Seeing the asterisk, I read this headline as "Save \$1,000? It Depends."

The headline makes a big claim but the asterisk warns me that I'm not getting the full story. Continuing with the letter, I encountered three more asterisks before I completed the first paragraph.

Where's my trust level now?

I've never been impressed by fast-talking salespeople who oversell and promise something they can't deliver. If there are restrictions or qualifications to



become eligible for an offer, just say so in clear, straightforward language.

Full disclosure is not only a legal responsibility and a matter of conscience, it's good salesmanship.

I expect that on more than one occasion you've walked away from a sale because you sensed the salesperson was more interested in making a sale than giving you all the information you needed to make a good buying decision.

Isn't this the same message an asterisk delivers to our readers?

There will be times when using an asterisk to direct the reader to the disclosure is your best choice. But too often we use an asterisk because it's easy. All we need to do is insert an asterisk and drop the legal department's comments into an endnote and we're done.

But typically, there's a more effective way.

- When making a statement that requires a comment, write, "You'll find the full details and limitations below." You'll still have the endnote, but you'll avoid the asterisk.
- In a four-page letter, try to work the mandatory copy into page two or three where it won't disrupt the flow of the letter.
- Rather than try to hide the legalese, see if you can find a way to feature the disclosure copy. Be upfront and let the reader know, "Here are facts that you need to know." People want to do business with people they trust—someone who doesn't hide information concerning the sale.

Recently, I attached a Post-It note to the letter's first page and wrote:

As you might expect, with an offer this good—and discounts this huge—there are certain conditions that apply. You'll find complete details printed on the blue insert I've enclosed.

You may not like this particular idea and I can't say how well it worked because we didn't test it separately. But my point is that we can meet regulatory and legal requirements without littering our copy with asterisks.

Here are a few examples:

- Often we see an asterisk pointing to a disclosure that reads, "For new customers only." Instead, try adding copy to the letter that says, "The savings and benefits offered are reserved exclusively for our new

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customers.” Now, the mandatory copy adds exclusivity to the offer.

- If the offer is only good for a limited time, don’t hide it in the disclosure. Turn the “limited time” into a deadline to respond and add urgency to the offer.
- Using diet products as an example, you often see “With diet and regular exercise” added to the disclosure. But rather than put this into the disclosure, include letter copy that says, “With regular exercise and proper diet, you can see amazing results with XYZ product.” You’re communicating the same message but the qualifying statement is now part of the benefit.
- When promoting Certificates of Deposit rates, financial institutions often add “New Money Only” to the disclosure. Instead, try putting this into your copy: “Because we’re looking to raise money to make new home loans, this special rate is limited to new money—money that’s not already deposited with the bank.” This not only gets rid of an asterisk, it also opens the offer to existing customers.

There will be times when directing the reader to the disclosure with an asterisk is still the best approach. Sometimes there’s just no better way to communicate mandatory information. But don’t make it the first thing you try because more often than not, you can make better use of the disclosure information in the letter copy.

Including required information in your letter copy can increase the believability of your offer and build trust. But using an asterisk to point to a disclosure in eight-point type can only hurt the mailing’s creditability.

*To kill the perfect offer, use an asterisk in the headline and letter copy.