



5 Common Direct Mail Mistakes to Avoid

By Hugh Chewning

We all make mistakes, but years ago a teacher told me, “If you’re not making mistakes, you’re not doing enough.”

Mistakes can be learning experiences, but as valuable as it is to learn from our own mistakes, it can be more profitable to learn from the mistakes of others.

Throughout my 30-plus years of direct marketing, here are five of the most common mistakes I see mailers make. And regardless of our own experience, we can always profit from the lessons others had to learn the hard way.

1. Refusing to make a long-term commitment to direct mail

Successful direct mail is methodical. It requires a plan and the discipline to follow the plan. It is not a get-rich-quick scheme.

Not everything will go right on every mailing. Whether you are a startup or a mature mailer, some tests will lose money, and your organization needs to have a long-term commitment to its direct mail program in order to get through these situations. You can’t repeatedly start and stop a direct mail program and hope to be successful.

You can test direct mail and if in six months it doesn’t prove profitable, you can get out. But, with very few exceptions, you can’t make direct mail profitable in six months. Successful direct mail is a process of building upon test

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results from one mailing to another. It takes discipline and commitment. There are no shortcuts.

2. Not doing the math first

Before investing money in a mailing, determine the results you need to justify its costs. Without this information, you can't make an informed decision on whether the mailing makes sense.

It's one thing to read test results and acknowledge that a mailing failed, yet it's far better to avoid any test that has little chance of succeeding.

Too often mailers test offers, formats and premiums that because of their cost require an unrealistic response to beat the control. And just as often I've seen mailers reject a promising test because they thought it cost too much.

Performing a few easy calculations—using rollout costs—before you commit to the test will help you determine whether a test makes sense. (See [*How to Use a Pre-Event Routine for More Profitable Direct Mail Testing.*](#))

3. Ignoring list selection

Nothing plays a greater role in your mailing's success than list selection. No matter how good the copy or offer, you're not going to sell lawnmowers to Eskimos. Work closely with a list professional who has experience in your market and who will take the time to learn about your organization, its competitors, the mailing's offer and your past mailing results.

Yet as invaluable as a good list broker is, don't make the mistake of forfeiting responsibility for list selection.

Take list selection personally. Marketing directors should understand the list selection process, what the selected lists have in common with existing customers or donors, and where the names originated. (Are these survey names, previous buyers, subscribers, etc.?) Copywriters can't talk effectively to the recipients without knowing what lists are being mailed. And only by understanding who will receive the mailing can a graphic designer select the proper colors, fonts and graphics.

Stay involved with your mailing's list selection. There's nothing more important to your direct mail's success.

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4. Failing to invest in a regular testing program

I'd be a rich man if I had a dime for every time someone said, "I don't need to test. My control is still working." Or "I can't afford to test."

In truth, you can't afford *not* to test. And you certainly don't want to wait until your control stops working before launching a testing program. That would be like waiting until you crash your car before buying auto insurance.

There are a limited number of people who will respond to your mailing, and that number shrinks each time you mail.

Even the best mailing packages get fatigued. To remain competitive, you must continue to test new lists, offers, formats and copy. Even the few direct mail letters that remain the control year after year need to be "tweaked" to maintain response. A successful direct marketer is always pushing for better results, and you can achieve this only with a disciplined testing program.

5. Don't ask for the order

Direct response is sales pure and simple. If you're too embarrassed to ask for the order or contribution, or if you believe that asking doesn't reflect your organization's image, then you're in the wrong business.

As direct marketers, our job is to convince recipients to take a specific action. Whether it's to buy a product, make a contribution or provide contact information, you need to tell the recipients exactly what you want them to do. Then remind them and, finally, tell them again.

You must ask for the order. Otherwise you're engaged in a public information or brand-building effort. And while these are both noble exercises, they are not direct-response marketing.

This list of five common direct mail mistakes isn't intended to be a complete list of "learning experiences." You probably have an experience or two you want to add to the list, and I would appreciate seeing your comments below.

But let's all agree that it's better to learn from the mistakes of others than to pay to make the same mistakes ourselves.

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