
Understanding how people read your direct mail can increase response

By Hugh Chewning

The purpose of a direct mail letter is to motivate the recipient to take a specific course of action. But to persuade the reader to take action, we must first get him or her to read our letter—or at least its key parts.

Readers typically start at the top of a direct mail letter by reading their name in the address and salutation. From here, they go to the end of the letter to see who signed the letter. After the signature, readers typically go to the P.S.



Let's see how we can use this reading pattern to increase response.

Addressing your letter

Your direct mail letter is a one-to-one conversation between the letter's signer and the recipient, and nothing assures the recipient that your message is intended for him better than seeing his name at the beginning of the letter.

People love to see their name, and today's technology makes it cost-effective to personalize your mailing. But when you do personalize, use title codes—Mr., Mrs., Rev., etc.—in the salutation. There's nothing less personal than a letter beginning with "Dear Hugh Chewning." Without a title code, the attempt to personalize seems insincere and reeks of a mass mailing.

For names to which you can't assign a title code, provide a default salutation that puts the reader into as exclusive a group as possible. For example,

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“Dear Member,” “Dear Homeowner,” or “Dear Veteran.” Whatever you choose, you want the reader to know that your message concerns him or her.

Before moving from the salutation to the signature, most readers will take a fraction of a second to scan the letter’s subheads and any text that’s underlined or highlighted.

Knowing this, you can use underlining, highlighting and notes written in the margin to call attention to your offer’s benefits and your call to action, and to pull the reader’s eyes across and down the page.

Just remember that when you underline or add a “handwritten” note in the margin, it’s best to use the same pen and handwriting used to sign the letter. This is one letter written by one person to one other person. Make it believable.

Who is writing?

After scanning the letter and perhaps reading the opening paragraph, the reader will typically look to see who signed the letter.

It helps to print the letter signer’s name and title under the signature and avoid “creative” signatures. Scribbled signatures don’t build trust, and eye-flow studies show that readers respond negatively to a signature they can’t read.

The value of the postscript

Once readers see who signed the letter, nine out of ten will read the P.S. before moving back to the top of the letter. Keep the P.S. to three to four lines and use it to restate your offer’s benefits, promote any premium and tell the reader *exactly* how to respond.

If you can personalize the P.S., do it. Inclusion of the recipient’s name at the beginning of the postscript will draw even more attention to this recap of your offer and your call to action.

Give the reader a reason to read your letter

My favorite words to open a letter are “You” and “Your,” quickly followed by text that shows how the reader will benefit from responding.

Speak directly to the reader. This isn’t a letter from an organization to a prospect or customer. Your letter is a one-to-one conversation between the

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letter's signer and the recipient.

Write in a conversational style as if you were speaking face-to-face with the reader. And, as in a conversation, don't be concerned about using incomplete sentences, contractions or a preposition at the end of a sentence. You won't be graded on grammar but on the number and cost per response.

Use your words to create an image for the reader. If the reader can see himself in the situation you create, he'll take an interest and read on. It's like selling a house. When you hear the prospective buyers discussing where to put the sofa, you know you've made the sale. Same thing here. With your words, let readers picture how they'll benefit when responding today.

The longer a reader spends with your package the more likely he or she is to respond. So test involvement devices—surveys, petitions, punch-out tokens, address labels, greeting cards—anything that makes sense with your message and gets the reader involved with your letter.

Make your letter inviting to the reader's eye

No one wants to read long blocks of copy in a hard-to-read font. To make your letter visually inviting, keep your paragraphs short, left justify your lines and provide plenty of space for your left and right margins.

Indent your paragraphs—they “catch” the reader's eyes and help lead them down the page—double space between paragraphs and use subheads to show readers what they can expect from your letter.

For enhanced readability, use a serif font—Courier, Times New Roman and Georgia are examples—for the letter. Practically every book, newspaper or magazine printed in the Western world uses serif type because it enhances reading flow and reduces eyestrain. If you want it read, use a serif font. And use a font large enough to be easily read by your audience. If the copy doesn't fit, add another page or cut the copy. Forcing five pages of copy onto four pages creates a crowded document that visually turns away readers.

And don't end a page with a complete sentence. Look at your newspaper. To finish practically any article, you must turn the page, and that's exactly what you want your readers to do—keep turning pages until they reach the call to action.

You're a salesperson competing for the reader's time, so get to the point and stay with it. And to pull the reader into your letter, create the perception that your direct mail letter is a personal communication between the letter signer and the recipient. Increased readership translates into greater response.

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