



Personalizing Direct Mail Copy

By Hugh Chewning

You have probably seen how personalizing a direct mail letter can lift response and increase profits.

Personalizing our letter often means having a computer extract information from our database – the recipient’s name, address, past purchases, contribution history, names of elected officials, etc. – and inserting it into the letter copy.

We know this works. It’s been tested countless times and we regularly see the added cost of computer personalization justified by increased profits.

But when used incorrectly, attempts to personalize the letter can actually depersonalize it.

For example, my pet peeve are letters that begin “Dear Hugh Chewning.” Who would talk to me this way? Isn’t a direct mail letter a one-to-one conversation? It’s either “Dear Mr. Chewning” or “Dear Hugh.”

Yet I’ve had clients argue against assigning title codes because they can’t match all their customer or donor’s names with a title. And how about Pat? Is that Mr., Mrs., or Ms?

My answer is “Who cares?” Use a default salutation for those names and when you can greet people by name.

It’s not unusual for a third of the names on a database to be without a title code. But isn’t addressing two-thirds of your donors or customers by name better than speaking impersonally to the entire file?

Once you personalize the salutation, don’t stop there. The cost difference between personalizing only the salutation or personalizing the salutation *plus a*

CHEWNING DIRECT MARKETING

www.cdmdirect.com

Phone: 949-854-5401 • Email: HChewning@CDMdirect.com

©Chewning Direct Marketing

few other paragraphs on the same page is virtually zero. Just don't overdo it.

And when you do insert the recipient's name, put it at the very beginning of the paragraph or at the end so that it's seen.

But personalizing your direct mail piece is more than inserting "computer fill" into the copy. It's giving your mailing the feel of a one-to-one conversation.

For example, to personalize your copy:

- Give your letter a voice – that of the letter signer. Invest the time to learn about the signer's background and perhaps you'll find ways to help the reader accept him or her as "one of us." Including details about the letter signer can also add credibility to the mailing and help the reader identify with your message.
- Write in a conversational style. If this includes incomplete sentences, the use of contractions or a preposition at the end of a sentence, so be it. Write as you talk because with your letter, you're having a conversation with the reader.
- In your copy, use "I" and "you," not "us" and "we." Your copy is one person speaking with one other person. It's not a group event.
- Show that you understand the reader's needs and tailor your offer to fulfill them. For example, if you're promoting a get-a-way vacation to couples with children, your message will be different than how you describe the trip to younger, child-free couples. Or to a retired couple. Personalize your message to the audience.
- Make the letter look like a letter. Don't confuse them with something that looks like a brochure, a flyer or some hybrid approach. People know what to do with a letter – read it.
- Test "handwritten" notes in the margin. Just be certain to use the same pen and handwriting used to sign the letter or you'll lose credibility.
- When including pictures in your mailing, use images that reflect the people you're writing. The more you preserve the reader's feeling of inclusion, the greater success your mailing will have.
- And once you think you're done with the letter, read it aloud. Your letter is a conversation with the reader and you want to talk (write) naturally.

You can also use graphics to personalize your appeal. For example, I once

CHEWNING DIRECT MARKETING

www.cdmdirect.com

Phone: 949-854-5401 • Email: HChewning@CDMdirect.com

©Chewning Direct Marketing

printed a coffee cup stain on the back of the outer envelope. On another mailing, I hand wrote a "To Do" list – including a reminder to pick up the dry cleaning – on the back of the envelope.

Call these "gimmicks" if you like but they gave the perception that human hands touched the mailing and both tests produced a meaningful increases in response. Just keep it believable. Most people will know that your letter is part of a mass mailing but preserve the perception of an individual, personalized letter.

Personalization – with or without variable data –helps your reader identify with your message and enhances their inclination to read your direct mail piece. And greater readability translates into higher profits.

About the author:

Hugh Chewning is a direct mail specialist providing copywriting, strategy and consulting for consumer, nonprofit and business-to-business groups. For more free tips on how to increase your direct mail profits, visit his blog, go to his website, [www.cdmdirect](http://www.cdmdirect.com) and subscribe to his blog, *Direct Mail Insight*.

Copyright © Hugh Chewning. All Rights Reserved. You may reprint this article online provided that you keep the links live and keep all the content "as is," including title, author byline, article text, and "about the author" information.

CHEWNING DIRECT MARKETING

www.cdmdirect.com

Phone: 949-854-5401 • Email: HChewning@CDMdirect.com

©Chewning Direct Marketing