



How to Use a Pre-Event Routine for More Profitable Direct Mail Testing

By Hugh Chewning

If you watch sports, you've seen a "pre-event routine" in action.

In baseball, major-league batters will go through their pre-event routines before every pitch. Watch them and you'll see some batters come to the plate, take two swings and then tap the edge of the plate with their bat before each pitch. The routines vary with each batter, but practically every major leaguer has an established routine.

You'll see the same thing in basketball. The next time you see a player taking a foul shot, watch what they do. The player may bounce the ball twice, hold the ball and then bounce it again before taking the shot. Whatever their routine, they will go through the same sequence of events each time they take a foul shot.

Athletes use pre-event routines to prepare for success. It gives them focus and purpose, and helps them achieve a higher level of performance. Now we need to develop our own pre-event routine to make our direct mail more profitable.

How direct marketers can use a pre-event routine

As direct marketers, we know the importance of testing. But what do we test? Dick Benson, in his book *Secrets of Successful Direct Mail* said, "Any idea you honestly believe can economically increase response is worth testing."

But how do we know whether a test idea has a reasonable chance of *economically* increasing results?

First, let's acknowledge that to increase our mailing's profitability, we need to do more than increase the response rate or generate a higher average

order. For our test to succeed, we must generate more net income than the control. And while we can't always predict which test will succeed, we can insure that we don't waste money by testing things that have little hope of increasing profitability.

Here's a real-life example that proves the point.

Several years ago, I worked with a client whose previous agency produced a test package that everyone predicted would increase response. And it did.

The test package was creative, the graphics were incredible and the format was certain to stand out in a crowded mailbox. In fact, it was so impressive that the agency predicted that people who received the package would display the mailing on their office bookshelf. And perhaps they did.

But unfortunately, the client lost a bundle of money—and the agency lost the account—because no one bothered to price the test package's rollout costs and determine out how much additional response would be needed to justify its higher cost.

If they had, they would have realized that this elaborate package needed—this is a true story—a 476% increase in response to break even with the control.

Now, I'm not saying that you can't outperform the control by nearly five to one. But is it a reasonable expectation? Even if the test package doubles or triples the response rate, it's a big loser. And this is where a pre-event routine helps.

Doing the math first

Before we invest our own money—or the client's money—we need to do a little math and determine what results a test package must generate to justify its cost. And with this information, we can make an informed decision on whether the test can give us a reasonable expectation of *economically increasing response*.

My routine is simple and works like this: If the test cost \$100/M more than the control and you currently average \$25 per order, then the test will need to generate four additional responses per thousand pieces mailed. Therefore, if your control is pulling a 1% response rate, your test needs a 1.4% response to break even.

At the bottom of this post, you'll find a simple worksheet that I use before committing to a test. This approach may be too simplistic for your needs but, regardless of our methods, we all need a pre-event routine that causes us to ask,

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“Is it realistic to expect this test to increase results by 40%? Is this test a good investment?”

With a pre-event routine, these questions are answered before we spend a dime on the mailing. And whatever approach your pre-event routine takes, the process is essential to getting the greatest return from your direct mail test dollars. Like professional athletes, we’ll achieve a higher level of performance with good preparation.

Direct Mail Pre-Event Worksheet

How much of a “lift” does the test mailing need to break even with the control?

A	Control’s cost/M	\$
B	Control’s average response rate	_____ %
C	Control’s number of responses per thousand pieces mailed (response rate x 1,000)	
D	Control’s average order/contribution	\$
E	Test package’s rollout cost/M	\$
F	Difference between the cost of control and the test package (E-A)	\$
G	Number of additional responses per thousand pieces mailed that your test package needs to match the control’s performance (F/D)	
H	Percentage “lift” needed for your test package to break even with the control $([G+C] \times 10)$	_____ %

About the author:

Hugh Chewning is a direct marketing copywriter, strategist and consultant who helps consumer, nonprofit and business-to-business organizations acquire, retain and cross-sell customers. Located in Irvine, California, Hugh provides tested and proven tips on how to boost your campaign’s profitability in his free blog, [Direct Mail Insight](#). And for information on his free, no-risk package critique, visit his website at www.cdmdirect.com.

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