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# *10 Easy Ways to Strengthen Your Direct Mail Offer and Beat the Control*

By Hugh Chewning

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When attempting to beat the control, the temptation is to focus on new copy. But testing new copy alone has far less potential to influence results than does making changes to the mailing's offer.

Here are 10 easy ways you can increase direct mail response by revising your offer.

1. **Offer something free.** Your mailing can include an offer for free shipping, free financing, 3 months' free membership, address labels, a bookmark, a decal, etc. On the back end, you can fulfill a nearly endless list of gifts – in all price ranges – for those who respond.

If you already offer a premium, test a new one. It doesn't need to be expensive – or even relate to the organization's mission – as long as it has a perceived value.

Unfortunately, many groups – and especially boards of directors – hate premiums, believing they cheapen the organization. But most donors and customers respond to them, and in my experience, when used properly a premium will increase the mailing's net profit.

Some worry that if you acquire customers with a premium you'll need to offer another premium to renew them. So what? The issue isn't how



many premiums you give away but how many net dollars you generate.

If one premium is working for you, test offering two. And with back-end premiums, test including a separate insert to promote the free gift.

2. **Provide a guarantee.** If you can't guarantee the buyer's satisfaction, you shouldn't be selling the product. Even a nonprofit can guarantee to use the donor's money wisely or promise to refund the initial contribution if the donor ever becomes dissatisfied with the organization.

Few people will take undue advantage of a guarantee, so if you already offer one, **make it stronger**. Instead of a "1-Year Guarantee," test a "3-Year Guarantee." Or a "Lifetime Guarantee."

Use the guarantee with your letter's call to action, mention it in the P.S., and display it on the response form. And test a separate insert to promote the guarantee.

Guarantees overcome buyer resistance and should be included in practically every mailing. Consider them a revenue generator rather than an added cost of doing business. (See [How a Guarantee Builds Direct Mail Profits.](#))

3. **Turn your offer upside down.** Typically, people respond better to an offer that helps them avoid losing something rather than to an offer that saves them money or protects what they already have. For example, if you say "Save \$400 on your auto insurance," test "You're paying \$400 too much for auto insurance." And in fundraising, you can raise more money to defeat an enemy than you can to protect or elect a friend.

You can sell a product at "50% off" or offer the reader the chance to "Buy one and get one free." If you offer a product for "\$24.99 plus \$5 for shipping," test selling it for "\$29.99 with free shipping." The cost is the same – to the mailer and to the recipient – but repositioning the offer can lead to a big difference in results.

4. **Use specifics.** Rather than offering to save the reader \$400, test offering a savings of \$398.43. It's a smaller savings, but the specific dollar amount can attract more attention and gives the offer added credibility.

When possible, **avoid using percentages**. What does it mean to save 25%? Instead, say "Save \$19." Rather than "Sixty percent of all consumers agree," use "Three of every five consumers agree." Use terms people can visualize.

5. **Test new prices and/or asking amounts**, and show how these amounts **relate to the reason** you're writing. For example, rather than asking for \$25 in a fundraising package, ask for \$24.68 and show how the gift will feed 3 hungry families. (Document your claim.) When selling a product, test lowering \$25 to \$24.99. And as another test, consider increasing a \$25 price to \$29.99, because people often associate a higher price with better value.
6. Include a **trial offer**. Like the guarantee, a 30-day trial offer limits the prospect's perception of risk. It implies less of a commitment than a purchase does and typically reduces the prospect's concerns about responding.
7. Make the offer for a **limited time only**. By including a specific deadline in your offer, you can nudge the prospect into taking action.
8. Offer **Early Bird** savings or gifts. ("If you act within the next 10 days, you get ...") Or test a **Fast 50** in which the first fifty respondents receive a gift. This is less expensive than offering a premium to all respondents and often generates similar response.
9. Offer a **Bill Me Later** option or installment payments to make large-ticket items seem more affordable.
10. Test a **monthly price** rather than an annual cost. Recently I refused to renew a subscription because it cost too much –\$180 per year. But a few days later, I renewed a similar publication that costs *only* \$15 per month. Go figure.

When you need **breakthrough results**, test your offer. Other than careful list selection, nothing will make a bigger difference in your success.

You often get the best results by **combining two or more unique offers**. For example, if you find a premium that works, perhaps adding free shipping or a discount will increase the mailing's net revenue even more.

Getting every possible response is always worth the effort. But regardless of your offer, **sell only one thing at a time**. This is one of the oldest rules of sales, and ignoring it can prove costly.

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