

Does direct mail (still) work?

“Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising.”
(Mark Twain)

For many businesses and organizations, direct mail does just that!

By Erica Waasdorp, President, A Direct Solution

Even with the many different media you’re exposed to in your everyday busy life, direct mail is still one of the most successful and most cost-effective media to consider when advertising your product, service or organization.

All companies and organizations in the U.S. together are expected to spend almost \$50 billion on direct mail this year. .And sales driven by direct mail generates more than 10 times that for many small and large businesses and organizations.

Even more interesting was a national research study, organized by the USPS and conducted by InnoMedia in the fall of 2004, among 1,500 households to see how and what people think of and do with direct mail.

Some findings:

- 77% of consumers sort through their mail immediately.
- 67% of the respondents felt that mail is more personal than the Internet
- 56% said receiving mail is a real pleasure
- Consumers, on average, spend more than 30 minutes reading their mail
- Most respondents mentioned that they use the mail catalogs to go shopping online, which makes that direct mail and the Internet complement each other, rather than compete.

Why is direct mail still so successful? Because it’s next in line after the personal visit and telephone call, people like receiving mail. Who would want to see their mailbox empty?

So, should we all jump on the direct mail bandwagon?

It depends on the goal and the type of business you’re in. Some practical tips.

1. It’s absolutely crucial to maintain your current customers in some type of database. Make someone responsible and make sure that there is adequate backup within the organization. (Make sure that multiple people know how to work with the database, but do set strict rules on maintenance). Your customerbase becomes a major asset in your organization.

2. If you're starting out with direct mail, keep it simple. Once your customers or donors know you, you can expand.
3. **Spend most of your time determining which target group (we call it "names") to mail to.** It's for more than 50% responsible for the results of the mailing. Creative and look are 20%, Offer 20%, 10% other factors (such as timing etc.). Too many organizations agonize for days, even weeks about words in the letter or the brochure, but spend very little time on lists. E.g. if you send someone in Alabama an invitation for an event on Cape Cod, chances are response rates will be low. However, if you ask for a donation for an animal welfare organization and you're mailing to other animal welfare donors, you're more likely to do well.
4. Make the mailing as personal as possible, but don't go over board. Many think that you have to personalize response piece and letter and envelope, but that really only pays off when you have a relationship with the customer or donor. If you personalize one piece in the mailing, make it the response device. The respondent can make corrections to his or her name and address, tick a few boxes, give the payment information and drop it in the mail.
5. Develop a clear offer and try to give people a deadline.
6. Unless you're sending a post card, always include a letter in your mailing.
7. Always include a P.S. no matter what. It's one of the first things someone reads. Make sure it includes the crux of the offer.
8. Test things first if you can, especially if you're considering something including something more expensive than what you're currently doing. Of course you must be able to measure the results and set up systems for easy comparisons of campaigns.
9. Brochures typically don't work for nonprofits, they're considered 'expensive' and donors don't want you to waste money. For businesses, it totally depends on the product or service and the value of the product or service you're selling.
10. Always include a reply envelope, return address, a phone number, and the web site. You want the person to respond, right?

There are so many more practical tips to consider. Fortunately there are many resources available to help increase your direct mail results. Fact is: direct mail is not going away. It will continue to be an important part of the marketing efforts for many organizations and businesses for many years to come.

Erica Waasdorp started her direct mail career many years ago at Reader's Digest in Amsterdam and moved on from there to work for several publishers, seminar organizers

and fundraising organizations in the Netherlands and the U.S. She joined a direct marketing agency in Plymouth before starting her own direct marketing consulting business A Direct Solution in Marstons Mills. Erica can be reached at adirectsolution@comcast.net or (508) 428-4753.