



Direct Mail Advertising

Direct mail advertising has several advantages over other direct response media. You can be selective in who you mail to. You have an unlimited range of choices in format. It is personal. And, at the time that the prospect/customer is reading it, no other offer is competing for their attention. This last factor is also an advantage that direct mail has over digital formats including email. There are constant distractions competing for the reader's / viewer's attention in digital media. It is the most testable medium. And, as a medium it offers you the marketer the capability to involve the recipient in the process.

There are a wide variety of formats including the classic format letter package (letter, brochure, response device, outer and inner envelope), self-mailers and catalogs.

In direct mail advertising, copy is king and development starts with such practical considerations as to whom the package going to, what is the package supposed to accomplish and what are the economic realities.

Research is an important part of the background work that goes into writing effective copy. You need to become an expert on the product or service that is being offered and learn what has been done or is being done by others.

Keep in mind that much of what is covered here also applies to email advertising and promotion, especially the sections covering copy writing.



Function of the Direct Mail Package

The direct mail package is a salesman. It must be noticed. It must be interesting and inviting. It must make the reader feel a certain degree of positive involvement with the product being sold. It must be designed in such a way that it will be easy and convenient for the reader to follow through on their decision to buy or respond. Although email has limitations that direct

mail doesn't have, the email promotional package should have the same functions.

Types of Direct Mail Packages

The types of direct mail packages include:

- Solo Mailings – Classic letter package
- Self-Mailers
- Catalogs
- Card Decks
- Post Cards
- Package inserts / statement stuffers
- Newsletters



Classic letter package

The classic letter package includes a letter, brochure and a reply device. Not all direct mail packages have a separate letter, brochure and response device. Some only include a letter and response device. Others are self-mailers and all the components of the basic package are incorporated into the self-mailer. The package may also include:

- Second letter (lift letter or publisher's letter)
- Buck slip (a buck slip is a slip of paper, often the size of a U.S. dollar bill, that includes additional information about a product.)
- Versioned inserts
- Selection aids
- Testimonial flyers

What goes into the letter? The letter covers all of the primary reasons for buying. The classic sequence of letter copy is to begin by evoking the dream, transition to the product, explain specifically what there is about the product that will make the dream come true and end with a statement of the offering that incorporates a reason for immediate response. It should be noted that packages with letters out pull (generate a higher response) those without letters.

Remember, the letter is the primary sales presentation and it should be long enough to say what must be said to generate a response from the reader. Every single word and phrase must be meaningful.

Copy

Letter Copy Fundamentals

- Create a copy checklist to establish your ground rules.
- Get in step with readers/listeners right away – don't beat around the

bush.

- Your opening paragraph/statement should promise the reader/listener a benefit.
- Thoughts should be arranged in logical order.
- Your messages should be clear and easy to read.
- Your messages should be easily understood.
- Phrasing should be fresh and friendly.
- Copy should be correct and well-formed.
- Ask for action in your close.
- Include a postscript.

Remember to keep it simple stupid. Make it easy to read and understand. Dr. Rudolph Flesch in his book “The Art of Plain Talk” suggests in his “reading ease” formula that you stick to words of five letters or less. For every 100 words you write, make sure 75% of them are five letters or less. Shorten your sentences. Avoid using clichés that are hackneyed or old. Avoid using jargon that may not be understood by the reader. Think in a straight line to make sure your phrasing is fresh and friendly. Use similes and metaphors to create picture building images.



General guidelines for developing strong direct mail packages

Copy

Here are the 21 rules of good copy writing from Don Kanter, one of the best-known direct response copywriters in the history of the industry. They were valid when he first wrote them and they are just as valid today in our digitally focused world. Use them when you are evaluating the work of your creative supplier. Most of the rules apply to all other mediums when developing copy for a direct response promotion.

1. Know your product.
2. Know your market.
3. Use language the prospect will understand.
4. Make a promise to the prospect and deliver on it.
5. Get to the point at once.
6. Is the copy germane to the selling proposition?
7. Is the copy concise?

8. Is the copy logical and clear?
9. Is the copy enthusiastic?
10. Is the copy complete?
11. Is the copy designed to sell?
12. Use short sentences.
13. Avoid semi colons slows reader down.
14. Keep copy in active tense.
15. State the price and offer on all interior package elements.
16. Include testimonials if available.
17. Specifics are always more effective than generalities.
18. Follow the rule of three more rhythm and balance.
19. Odd numbers more effective than even numbers.
20. Always seek rhythm in copy.
21. If the sentence has to be reread for clarification, change the copy.

Headlines

1. The headlines, subs, boxes, photo captions and sunburst in brochure should be a full selling presentation.
2. Never ask the reader a question in a key headline or on the outer envelope. The reason is that you may inadvertently ask the reader a question that they can possibly answer “No” to and this will response will stop the reader dead in their tracks.



Outside envelope

1. Many consider the outside envelope the most important element in the package.
2. Imply some reward for opening envelope. Teasers that imply some great deal or benefits to the reader are effective envelop openers.
3. Don't reveal the total sum or substance of the offer.
4. Use good headline words related to offer.

Letters

1. The letters in a package should be personal.
2. The first paragraph should be no more than 2 and 3 lines at most.
3. At least the first page of the letter should break to the next page in mid

-sentence.

4. If it's a multi-page letter, always mention the product on page 1 of the letter and include the price and offer.
5. A postscript is one of the most read portions of a letter.
6. Underlines, indents and the use of second color in the letter should be used for pacing and to make key selling points.
7. In concluding the letter, return to the theme that began it.
8. Explain specifically what there is about the product or service that will make the dream come true. Tell the reader the primary benefit that they will receive or derive from the purchase.
9. Conclude with statement of the offer incorporating reason for immediate response.



Direct mail letter copy – fundamentals

The most important aspect of good letter copy writing is to remember that it should have a personal – me to you – orientation. To achieve this, you need to put yourself in the mindset that you are writing to an individual, not a market. Pretend that you are writing to someone you know, someone who might be interested in what you are selling and then tell them about it in a friendly and persuasive way. Your letter should be conversational and you should put yourself in the mind of the reader.

You need to speak to the reader's interest and connect your ideas in a logical sequence while staying narrowly focused on your offer. It must be simple and understandable. There are no hard and fast rules on how long a letter should be, but the length should be adequate to convey the benefits of the offer and all the information the reader needs to make a decision and take action. Your intent is to drive the reader to take action now and not later and if it doesn't it will fail miserably. Other things to keep in mind:

1. Follow a logical order of thoughts.
2. The copy phrasing should be fresh and friendly.
3. Get in step with the reader at once.
4. The opening paragraph must promise a benefit (the most important one) or benefits to the reader...what will the offer do for the reader.
5. Immediately follow by enlarging on the most important benefits.
6. Tell the reader specifically what they are going to get and what it is

- going to cost.
7. Tell the reader what they might lose if they fail to act. Overcome inertia!
 8. Answer every question the reader might ask and also address possible objections.
 9. Back up your statement with proof and endorsements when possible.
 10. In the closing paragraph rephrase the main benefits.
 11. Ask for the reader to perform some action in the close.
 12. Include a postscript to restate a major benefit and ask for action.

Remember:

Personalize the letter with the prospect's name.

1. Promise a benefit in the headline and make it the most important one.
2. Immediately enlarge upon the key benefit and build up interest fast.
3. Tell the reader specifically what they are going to get.
4. Do NOT assume that they know your product.
5. Point them very clearly at the reply devices.
6. Write rather as you speak - as one human being to another.
Avoid jargon.
7. Shorter sentences and paragraphs are easier to read than longer ones.
8. Build your argument by anticipating objections and winning confidence.



Letter Postscript

Use the post script to restate your offer. If you offer a money back guarantee, it's a good place to restate it. The response device is also a good place to direct the reader to another element of your mailing. The postscript is also a good place to include testimonials to lend credibility to what you have said in the letter.

Brochure

The brochure that accompanies the letter in a standard direct mail package shows the product and visually demonstrates the dream. It is less personal than the letter and more informative. It is used to reinforce the essential reasons for the reader making a response to the offer and it should restate

them differently. The brochure copy should expand on that in the letter and offer the reader additional information about the product and offer. Graphics should enhance and never overpower the copy. The brochure is the place to describe all of the technical details.

Not all products/services being offered require a brochure. You use a brochure when you need to visually demonstrate the dream, to reinforce the essential reasons for response by restating them in a different way and to offer additional information such as technical details, etc.

A brochure can increase the emotional involvement by visually showing the advantages of responding to the offer. It can show the different uses of the product. More points can be covered in the brochure by the use of panels, captions, boxes, etc. The brochure can be a good place to show secondary features and benefits of the product and also reinforce the primary benefits presented in the letter.



Both the letter and the brochure should lead the reader to the response device. Only in special cases should the letter direct the reader to the brochure for such things as legal information and terms of service in situations where such information is required, such as in insurance or credit card offers.

What goes into the brochure?

Don't worry about duplication. In direct mail, every piece must stand alone and each piece reinforces the selling message.

List every selling point listed in your general copy platform.

Use opening page to make the basic appeal and dramatize the offer.

Use spread (broad-side) area for the most impressive illustration.

If the mailing is benefit-oriented, show the benefit.

Consider making the brochure an element of apparent value – a keeper.

Brochure Checklist:

1. Is the brochure designed for the market you're trying to reach?
2. Is the presentation appropriate for the product and offer?
3. Is the design consistent with the other mailer components?
4. Is there a big idea behind the brochure?
5. Do the headlines stick to the key offer?

6. Is the product dramatized to its best advantage?
7. Does it show the product in use?
8. Does it follow a logical sequence?
9. Does it tell the complete story?
10. Does it state the price, offer, guarantee, etc.?
11. Can it be cut from regular size paper?
12. Is the paper quality in keeping with the presentation?
13. Is color used to show the product in its best light?

Response devices / order form

This is the place to provide the reader with clear directions on how to respond to the offer. Today, most direct mail package include 800 numbers and URLs to give the customer multiple options to respond. If you use a printed order form, try filling it out yourself to make sure it's well designed for data capture. On the device, you should also clearly state how the information you are collecting on the form will be used.



In today's digital world, do you need a response device? The answer is that it depends on the type of promotion and the type of offer. But, in many cases, including a response card or order form will increase response even if the customer does not use it to reply. The best thing to do is test it to find out if it bumps your response rate enough to cover the additional cost of the reply device. For example, catalogs with order forms will generally out pull those without order forms, because the customer may use the order form to list out the items they want to buy, even though when placing the actual order, they do so on the web or call in the order.

Remember:

1. Offer a combination of response options. (Mail, fax, telephone, email, website landing page)
2. Do not use glossy card that is hard to write on.
3. Do not use a dark background color.
4. Ask for extra information to enhance your database.
5. Make sure that you offer an "opt out box", for those who do not wish to receive further direct mail.

Extra Slips, Memos, Etc.

Many direct mail packages use them as reinforcement devices to restate major benefits of the offer and as a reminder to the reader of what they may lose if they don't respond to the offer. These devices can lift response rates; however, you need to perform a breakeven analysis to determine if the increased responses will offset/exceed the additional cost of including the device.

Direct Mail Package Design

Overall package design – graphics, art, layout

The function of graphics is to get a direct mail package opened and to sell the product by supporting the copy. Make sure that the package imagery and vocabulary are suited to the market and the product. There should be a sense of continuity between elements of the package. Ask these questions to evaluate the potential effectiveness of the package design:

1. Does it stand out in mail box?
2. Are the pieces designed as a whole—relate both physically and graphically to one another?
3. Do the pieces relate to each other?
4. Does it give away too much up front?
5. Does it have the necessary initial impact to make the recipient want to open it?
6. Does the letter invite the recipient to read on once the package is opened?
7. Does the package deal honestly with the recipient with regard to both the product and his wants and needs?
8. Has the designer found the most cost-effective and economical means of producing the package without taking away from the product merits or graphic philosophy?
9. Has the product been “glorified” enough to warrant the reader's buying it?
10. Is it easy for the reader to respond and/or order without confusion or inconvenience?
11. Does the response device invite the reader to do something?
12. Is it a cost effective, economical package?

Letter Design

The letter ranks first in the mailing package. The letter should be easy to read. The reader needs to be guided through the text smoothly. Use the following techniques to help with this, but don't use them all at once.

1. Indent paragraphs and vary paragraph widths.
2. Underline benefits.
3. Use sub-headings to break up the page.
4. Use a PS to restate offer or benefits.
5. Use a Johnson Box. (A Johnson Box contains the key message of the letter and its purpose is to draw the reader's attention to the key message.)
6. Use different color ink to call out points.
7. Use Serif fonts, they're easier to read.

Brochure Design

Design the brochure for the market you are trying to reach. Suit the presentation to the product or service you are offering. The brochure must be consistent with the rest of the mailing package. It should be large enough to sell the product.

The brochure can go a long way to accomplishing the second step in the sales process and that is getting the reader positively involved in the product being sold. Appearance is a very important aspect of accomplishing this objective and the designer should consider the following when designing the brochure:

1. The use of color must work in all instances.
2. The folds need to work both functionally and decoratively.
3. The quality of the artwork should be appropriate for the piece.
4. The type selections should be appropriate.
5. There should be a big idea behind the brochure.
6. The headlines should stick to the key offer.
7. The product should be dramatized to its best advantage by the format.
8. The product should be shown in use.
9. The entire presentation should tell the complete story and follow a logical sequence.

Remember:

1. It will cost extra if the brochure can't be cut from standard paper stock.

2. The quality of the paper needs to be in keeping with the presentation.
3. The color(s) should be employed judiciously to show the product in its best light.
4. Use reverse type sparingly. It's difficult to read and should be used to call out key messages, special offers, etc.

Outside Envelope Design

The outside envelope is the opening statement for any direct mail package. It's your foot in the door or your place in the wastebasket and if it doesn't attract, interest, and incite, it's going to end up in the latter. There are several points to consider in its development:

1. Size, paper stock, die cuts
2. Type, colors
3. Artwork: photography, illustrations, show-through windows
4. Involvement devices such as scratch & sniff, tokens, peel-offs, stamps

Response Device/Order Form Design

Make it look valuable, include certificate borders, safety paper backgrounds, simulated rubber stamps, eagles, blue handwriting, seals, serial numbers, receipt stubs, etc. Include involvement devices. Don't call it an order form. Call it an invitation, a reservation, a membership application, a free-gift check, etc.

Remember:

1. The form should induce readership.
2. The form should push the reader to take action.
3. The form should have plenty of room for the respondent to fill in the requested information.
4. The form should look too valuable to throw away.
5. Call the order form something else besides order form.
6. Make sure it includes involvement devices.
7. The form should restate the offer and benefits.

Creating The Classic Direct Mail Package

Follow these guidelines to create the classic direct mail package.

- Outer envelope
 - A simple or dazzling design will work depending on the market and the offer, so keep these in mind when designing the outer envelope.
- Brochure
 - Designed for market you are trying to reach.
 - Presentation must be suited to product or service.
 - Restates the big idea behind circular.
 - Headlines must stick to key offer.
 - Product or service must be dramatized to its best advantage by format and/or presentation.
 - Show examples of your product or services.
 - Presentation must follow a logical sequence and tell a complete story - including price, offer, and guarantee.
 - Can it be cut out of regular size paper.
 - The paper stock quality should be in keeping with the presentation.
 - The color should be employed judiciously to show product or service in best light
- Order form
 - Don't call it an order form.
 - The more going on the better.
 - Add personal involvement devices - Yes, No - tear offs.
 - Restate the offer on the order form.
- Gift slips and other enclosures
 - Make them stand out if you insert them.
 - 5) Business reply envelope
 - Prepay the postage.
 - Self-address.
- Letter
 - Make it look inviting.
 - Use copy length appropriate to stating the benefits, offer and what you want the reader to do...people will read long copy as long as it interests them.

Improving The Direct Mail Package

If you want to improve a mailing package, try a new approach. For example if you're using a positive appeal, try switching to a negative appeal. If the first approach was based on a love appeal, try switching to a fear appeal. You can try changing the type of lead in your letter. You can add things to your mailing package or you can take things away from your mailing package.

In general, you can follow these guidelines to develop a more effective direct mail package:

1) Letters

- Form letters using indented paragraphs will usually out pull those not using them.
- Underlining important phrases and sentences usually increases results slightly.
- A separate letter and circular will usually do better than a combination.
- A form letter with effective running headline will ordinarily do as well as a filled-in letter.
- Authentic testimonials in a sales letter ordinarily increase the pull.
- A two-page-letter ordinarily out pulls a one-page letter.

2) Brochures or Circulars

- A brochures dealing with the proposition presented in the letter will do better than one that is institutional in character.
- A combination of art and photo will usually produce a better brochure than one using either or.
- A brochure/circular usually proves to be ineffective in selling publications or news services.
- In selling big ticket products, deluxe large size, color brochures virtually always warrant the extra cost over 11 x 17 or smaller brochures.

3) Outside envelope

- Illustrated envelopes increase response if their message is tied into the offer.
- Variety in types and sizes of envelopes pays, especially in a series of mailings.
- Try to imply some reward from simply opening the envelope.
- Don't reveal the total sum and substance of your offer.
- Don't hesitate to employ the good headline words like "new," "now," "how," "special," "guaranteed" . . . and if there's anything free in

connection with your offer, don't keep it a secret.

4) Reply forms

- Reply cards with receipt stubs increase response over cards with no stubs.
- Busy order or request forms that look important usually produce a larger response than neat, clean looking forms.
- Postage free business reply cards generally bring more responses than those to which the respondent must affix postage.

5) Reply envelope

- A reply envelope increases cash with order response.
- A prepaid reply envelope increases response.

6) Color

- Two-color letters usually out-perform one color.
- An order form in colored ink on colored stock out performs one in black ink on white stock.
- A two-color circular generally more effective than a one-color.
- Full color is warranted for certain products.

7) Postage

- Third class ordinarily pulls as well as first class (if you watch delivery).
- Postage metered envelopes usually pull better than affixing postage stamps.
- A permit usually does as well as metered.

Evaluating the Direct Response Package

In evaluating your direct response package you need to look at the following things:

- Copy
- Design
- Typography
- Scan-ability
- Offer /call-to-action
- Clarity
- Logic

- Involvement
- Honesty/integrity/believability

In all cases, any changes that you make to your direct mail package need to be tested against the control, which is your original package. It's always good sense to test changing one variable against another. For example, if you change the look of your outside envelope, don't change any other variable in your package until you see whether the change to the envelope has had a positive impact on your results. Something as simple as adding a teaser to your outside envelope can increase your response rates. But, all changes need to be tested.

Direct Mail Self-Mailers Creative

As a direct mail package, self-mailers may be a good alternative to using the classic direct marketing package, which includes an outer envelope, letter, brochure and response device. In a self-mailer all of these components are built into the self-mailer itself.

Depending on the product/service being promoted, the self-mailer may be a good alternative. Self-mailers actually work better for certain types of product and service offers. They are typically very good vehicles for educational products, services and all types of seminars.

The advantages of using a self-mailer are that they are easier and quicker to produce. They have lower production and labor costs. They also have lower mailing costs than the classic direct mail package.

The disadvantage is that they have lower response rates than the same offer in a classic direct mail package. The flip side of this is that since they are generally less costly to produce and mail, they require lower response rates to achieve your breakeven and ROI objectives.

Other than the format, all of the other rules that apply to copy and design practices and guidelines of the classic direct mail package also apply to self-mailers. The direct response letter, the supporting brochure and the reply device are all incorporated into the self-mailer.

About DWS Associates

Founded in 1982, DWS Associates is a full service marketing firm that develops and implements multi-channel marketing programs for organizations targeting business-to-consumer and business-to-business audiences in global markets. Our focus is on data-driven, innovative lead generation, lead nurturing, retention, and referral programs that attract, engage and retain profitable customers. Our staff is highly experienced in market research, competitive intelligence, business intelligence and analytics, strategic planning and campaign management - so we help you increase sales and marketing performance while building strong, unique, differentiated brands.

About the Author

Dudley Stevenson, founder and CEO of DWS Associates, has over thirty-five years' experience in consumer marketing, business-to-business marketing, and direct marketing, including developing, planning, and implementing go-to-market strategies. He's also the author of "Marketing Direct: Breaking Through The Clutter." Working with organizations ranging from start-ups to Fortune 100 companies, he and his team have helped clients such as IBM, SAS Institute, Sony, Neiman Marcus, Arizona Highways, Marshall Field & Co., Mrs. Field's, UNICEF, SSA Global Technologies, Hartmarx, and Patagonia implement successful direct marketing programs. A longtime member of the Direct Marketing Association and the American Marketing Association, Stevenson is also a sought-after speaker. He's given hundreds of presentations and workshops on marketing and direct marketing. His "Marketing Planning 101" workshop alone has reached more than sixty thousand marketing and sales professionals.



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