

How Re-thinking Your Creative Process Can Increase Response— And Your Bottom Line. *Would YOU Respond To Your Direct Mail Appeals?*

BY DAVID HAZELTINE



I've picked up a few exercises that force me and the many talented creative people with whom I've worked to step back and take a good hard look at the direct mail packages we create.

I see it all the time. Busy marketing and development professionals often defer to old habits, like simply "picking up" artwork from previous mailings as they create new direct mail appeals. In an effort to meet the mail date, and with so many other things on your plate, perhaps you—like so many others—will invest most of your time poring over the copywriting, re-writing, and approval process for the new letter. You'll invest time in selecting the right mailing lists, crafting the right offer, and even getting quotes on the print/mail production, too.

Don't get me wrong, spending time to craft a great letter is important. But in an effort to keep things moving and get your mailing out on time, some equally important elements simply get "picked up" from a previous package. Many of the details take a back seat, such as how you want your prospects, donors, and customers to respond; what information you collect on the reply device (and its aesthetics); and last, but by no means least, the outer envelope. If not given the attention they deserve, these elements can have a dramatic effect on the results of your mailings.

It's important to give some serious thought to how you, personally, view, filter, process, and respond to the direct mail you receive at home. Whether you realize it or not, you look at mail packages

Over the years,

I've picked up a few exercises that force me and the many talented creative people with whom I've worked to step

you receive very differently than the mail pieces you create at work.

It's really as simple as this: When most people *create* direct mail, they create it using what I call an inside-out process. They write/create the letter first, then move to the reply device, then (maybe) to the reply envelope, and finish with the outer envelope. Alternately, when we all *receive* direct mail, we are forced to process it from the outside in. The outer envelope—all by its lonesome—is how we gauge whether or not we're even interested in opening the piece (we all know the three-second rule). If we like what we see, we'll decide whether it makes it to the "keep" pile—along with the bills, birthday card from Mom, and our favorite catalog.

Now, if you were to change the ways you create your mail packages, using the outside-in approach, you'll likely make it more appealing—and that's half the battle to getting a response. Appealing mail makes it to the "keep" pile, gets opened, and hopefully compels the recipient to become your next donor or member. Here are three best practices for creating better mail packages—using this outside-in approach:

1. Write your outer envelope's teaser copy first.

This assumes you're using one, of course, as not all DM outers should have a teaser. But if you are, think about this: By the time you've sat down to create your DM piece, you likely have a theme for the letter, copy points, and know who will sign the piece. Imagine that all the thoughts in your head have come together as a perfect DM package, complete with a killer letter and offer and right-on mailing lists or house-file data selections. Now, what should the outer envelope say to get me, the recipient, to open it?

2. Mail it to yourself.

Mock up and mail the package to yourself *before* you finalize the artwork and send it off to the printer. This is a practice I've used for years, and it really works. When your package elements are 98 percent complete, print them out in full color; trim and fold them just as you want your lettershop to do; make up a outer envelope (if it's the same format you've used before, simply paste your new OE art over a previous mailing); and then add your inserts, seal it, add a First Class stamp, and toss it in the mailbox.

In a day or two, when you're not really expecting it, you'll see it in your mail among some competition. Open it slowly. Try to handle and read it as a prospective donor would, and see what you think. There's a very good chance you'll be making a few important tweaks to it the next day. Note: This step does require an extra two to three days in the schedule, but it's worth it!

3. Emphasize the "you" factor.

Make the package as a whole about "you" -- the individuals you are mailing -- and not about "we" (your organization). Your content should, of course, include the wonderful things your organization does, But we all subscribe and listen to WII-FM -- "What's In It For Me?" Consider using the words "you" or "your" on the outer envelope. In your letter, make sure the number of times the word "you" appears exceeds that of "we." Also, consider *how* you want people to respond, by both giving them choices and making each of those options very clear.

I hope that I've provided you with a "take-away of the day," and that you'll look at your creative process a bit differently. Put these practices to work ASAP (tomorrow's okay) and then reap the benefits!

David Hazeltine is vice president, fundraising, at DMW Direct Fundraising in Plymouth, MA—a results-driven agency that provides full-service direct response fundraising and membership marketing to over 50 nonprofit organizations nationally. David can be reached at dhazeltine@dmwdirect.com, at 508-927-6034 and at www.twitter.com/davidhazeltine.