

101 INSIDER TIPS-DIRECT MAIL

Breakthrough ideas and reminders that drive results and savings for your direct mail programs



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INTRODUCTION

No matter if we're talking this year or next year (or the year after that), one thing's for certain: direct mail is not going anywhere.

Why are we so sure?

Direct mail appeals to our senses in ways no other marketing channel can. In recent neuro-marketing research, it was discovered that touch is extremely valuable in the marketing experience. It helps shift the brain into a deeper level of engagement while building knowledge (DMA Statistical Fact Book 2017).

And, regardless of age, 86% of consumers get their mail at the first available opportunity and then sort it at first available opportunity, which is usually same day. USPS notes this indicates the high value of mail (USPS Mail Moments 2016).

Direct mail matters, which is why we wanted to share with you some of our favorite insider tips—101 to be exact. In the following, you'll find universal, timeless principles as well as unique and timely discoveries.

Whether you have just joined the industry, or you've been around long enough to have seen it all, we think you'll find these tips useful, insightful and worth sharing.

STRATEGY

Forming the right strategy is the first step to marketing success. It is also the sounding board for all tactical decisions involving list, offer, format and copy.

- A key challenge in developing a winning mailing is differentiation from your competition. If you substitute your competitor's name throughout your copy and it seems to read perfectly, well, then you need to go back to the drawing board.
- If you are hiring a creative team to redo or initiate a design for a mailing, make sure you give them a brief in writing. It should include:
 - Purposes of the mailing: leads, traffic or orders
 - Descriptions of audience: customers, non-customers, relevant demographics
 - Basic offer: explain the deal you are offering to the consumer
 - Product attributes, key differentiators, superiority over competitors
 - Customer feedback, letters, CSR statistics
 - Tone and manner: what general look and emotional levels you expect
 - Past promotional history: what works, what doesn't, key improvements required
 - Timing, and any other media or activity which coincides
 - An outline of your expectations from the creative team
- Every sales letter is enhanced if you can quote or point to a third party who is happy with your product. So always ask for testimonials.
- One of the acid test rules for direct mail creative is WSF:
 Worth, Story and Fit. If you are considering the addition of a format feature, a freemium, or an additional component, ask yourself:
 - Does it deliver value to the reader?
 - Does it tell a better story?
 - Does it fit the reader's circumstances?

If you can't say yes to at least one of these tests, the addition probably won't improve results.

05	Color is important if you are selling clothing, cosmetics, furniture, landscaping, fast cars. But if you are selling confidence, self-awareness, comfort, peer recognition or excitement, color may not add much. Positioning is everything in sales. Don't assume that high color content is a necessity in a direct mail offer.
06	Don't date your mailing pieces, just in case you decide to hold it. Then you can preserve your production for a later mail date.
07	Don't get caught in the minutiae of testable factors. Be firm in testing the big ideas first.
	 Is it a flat or a letter? Is it a self-mailer or an envelope kit? Is it a soft offer or hard? Is it creative positioning A or B?
	When you have the big drivers under control, then worry about incentives, color, number of pieces, use of personalization.
08	Postcards are not large to start with, so every square inch counts. If you mail a card without a carrier route bar code in the address, you can expect the USPS to liberally apply a barcode label of their own over top of your carefully designed artwork. Avoid the blemish: ask for automated mail sort at the list house.
09	Given that postage is often the single largest component of your cost, you should get the most for your money. Learn to optimize size and weight specifications, sortation densities, and machinability.
	With every mailing we have the opportunity to test. Incorporate it into your routine to ALWAYS test something: a new list, a feature change, the incentive, the hardness of the offer, maybe a few words of copy. While it may seem like work to orchestrate the test, the results provide valuable, accurate insight into your customer profile.
	Should you ask twice? Yes, it's worthwhile. A repeat mailing to the same list, two to four weeks later may generate up to half of the response of the first mailing.

- The disturbing element drives response. One of the reasons that a package can generate extraordinary interest is that it presents an unusual visual or idea that draws attention. Is it in the offer, format, or the copy? Does your mail have what it takes to stop the reader in their tracks?
- Indispensability is a key factor in good direct mail design. When you send a kit that has enduring value in the content, your recipient can't throw it away. Hence the successful strategy of including freemiums: tips, calculators, advice, directions, maps, calendars, booklets, pads, bookmarks, labels. The sale may not be immediate, but you are planting the seeds of obligation and goodwill.
- Always judge your premium on the basis of its effectiveness in increasing net dollars, not its cost.
- Guarantees are the clearest illustration of your competitor's real value proposition and value delivery system. Compare them with yours, as they reveal the infrastructure used to back up the guarantee.
- Test costs always look inordinately large, compared to normal roll-out costs, so sometimes we don't test as much as we should. But if we combine our test costs with our normal production or roll-out costs, the incremental cost per order is relatively small. As a percentage of your total production costs, testing may only be 5%–10%. The purpose of testing is to find new breakthroughs. A 5%–10% lift in response rates will recover your test costs and is an achievable goal.
- Resist the urge to change your control just because you are tired of it. As long as it works, it is doing its job. The only opinion that counts is that of the person at the mailbox.
- You should have a swipe file. This is a collection of pieces you've received, copy that you've read, and graphics that have impacted you. Next time you start a creative project, pull out the swipe file, and see what new ideas are there for you.

- Customers disappear because they:
 - Are ignored, or under thanked
 - Experience poor product quality
 - Are lured by competitors
 - Have friends who introduce options
 - Move away
 - Die or withdraw from the market
- The question frequently arises, "what's a good response rate?" A good net response could be anywhere from 0.01% for luxury cars, to 100.0% for the IRS. The financial model of the industry is what determines the quality of a response rate. Don't be tricked into committing to a number until you know the game.
- While the weightings may seem arbitrary, it is generally true that direct mail success is attributed to:
 - The List 40%
 - The Offer 30%
 - The Format 20%
 - The Copy 10%

LIST

Your list is your future, far more valuable than any other direct marketing component. Know it, and treat all its members with integrity, love and respect.

- Your audience defines your creative approach. Are they current customers or past customers? Cold prospects? What are their demographics? What are their supposed buying habits with respect to your product? If you have widely divergent audiences, you'll most likely need more than one creative strategy.
- We have a preconception that age groups reply differently to graphic quality and format design. Don't count on it entirely. The best way to improve response rate is to combine the best offer to the best list.
- Segment your file by frequency of purchase, or visit, or response. Your high frequency names are a treasure trove for advocacy mailings: member get a member, reader get a reader, buyer get a buyer. Introduce them to a theme mailing that rewards them for bringing in new customers.
- More than 40,000,000 Americans change their address every year. USPS rules require 90-day file revisions to avoid higher postal costs. National Change of Address, NCOA, is a very necessary process that you should request through your data service.
- Testing has its priority categories. Your most significant response drivers will always be list and offer, then format and copy. When testing lists, vary the offer to the lists you already use. Segment your responses by gender and you may find predictable differentiation in results. Changing the offer or copy for either gender is a viable test.
- The more successful lists will be rented by companies like your own. Ask your list broker if any of your competitors have tested the list and if there were roll-outs.

- Shopping for the right list starts with the interest of the people on the list. Check the secondary descriptors in the list:
 - Method of response
 - Average dollar value of response
 - Response frequency
 - Recency of response
- Before you mail, spend time and money to delete duplicates in your list, remove non-payers, nix out the "do-not-mail-me" names, and current customers who may not be candidates for your specific offer. Next, have it cleaned up: address standardized, old addresses corrected, and obits deleted. You can save 10%-20% of your mailing costs by removing these names which have zero market potential.
- Inactive customers are one step from being lapsed or lost.

 After paying the cost to acquire a customer assure yourself of converting and renewing these jewels by follow-ups earlier rather than later. They responded to you because they liked you; let them know the "feeling is mutual."
- When examining the pedigree of a rented list you want to know who has tested it. Be sure to ask if it has been used for roll-outs? In other words, did it test successfully?
- Read all the detail of the merge-purge reports your data house provides you. Not only do you want to know that lists were de-duped in order of priority and how many records survived, but where the overlap exists between competing files. This knowledge can help you when you are looking for more new names in future, similar mailings.
- Make it easy for your direct mail recipients to indicate their wish to be on your mailing list or to control the passing of their name to other marketers.
- Use more than one list broker. Apart from the competitive environment you create you also get the value of their varied experience. They generate research and make recommendations based on different perspectives. When the list is the most influential component of your mailing, it deserves the best development.

- The more comprehensive the detail in a list datacard the more likely the list owner has used, manicured and cared for the names within that list. This is purely an indication of high usage and will likely deliver better results.
- Adding basic demographic data to your house mail file is valuable because it allows you to segment profitability by external identifiers. It also enables you to market your list on those occasions when it is appropriate to do so. The more your list is thus described, the better third parties can tailor their offer to generate the best possible results.
- When you are testing several new lists, hedge your bets.

 Create one extra panel of your current control list. Hold it in reserve in case one of the test lists you rented doesn't arrive in time.

OFFER

A good offer far exceeds the impact of any format or collection of words in generating profitable response.

- The Platinum Rule of Direct Marketing is to make the right offer to the right list. All other success factors pale in comparison.
- When you are prepared to discount, offer the savings in terms of a related product. For instance, if you were selling cars, rather than allow a \$300 discount, offer a month's worth of free gas.
- Take advantage of what you know about a customer. If they have an account, when did it first open? On your correspondence with them don't hesitate to note somewhere, "Customer Since August, 2012". The next logical progression is to leverage that loyalty by making special offers to customers who have been so for a period of time.
- Look at the invoices that you are mailing now, and ask how you can provide a variable offer on the invoice to make an additional purchase, right then and there. The easiest time to close a sale is immediately after the preceding order.
- Varying coupon values according to buyer demographics and purchase history allows you two luxuries:
 - Optimizing the discount for the highest returns at the least cost
 - Nudging your consumer into the desired purchase value bracket

Develop a strategy that protects you from the wasteful broadbrush "one discount fits all."

- Use PIN numbers or key codes as a means to tracking new customer referrals back to the initial customer who volunteered the names of their neighbors, friends or family. Remember to incent BOTH the initiator and the new customer.
- Never offer a premium or a price discount unless you combine it with a deadline. Premiums and price deals are rewards for promptness... and, by the way, decisiveness.

- When you offer a discount, or a premium, remember you have "upped the deal." To that end, couple the incentive to a deadline to create a decision. Think of it in reverse: if the consumer asked you for a discount, you would automatically respond, "Sure, if you buy it right now."
- Make your mailing indispensable by including freemiums: pieces or copy that have real value. Some more common examples are address stickers, bookmarks and calendar cards. But stretch your imagination to consider:
 - Weights and measures tables
 - Currency calculators
 - Interest tables
 - Maps
 - Top ten lists
 - Sports calendars
 - Calorie counters
 - Rulers
 - Birthstone and anniversary gift lists
 - State and country facts

Always tie your offer to the copy on the freemium.

- Stuck with a price disadvantage versus your competition?

 "They charge \$45. We charge \$55. We're sunk." Not exactly. Your task is to cost justify the difference. Explain how your \$10 premium is due to quality or service. Still not convinced? Amortize the \$10 over the life of the product. For instance, less than 3 cents a day for a year, during which time that service is in effect.
- In B-to-B mailings the typical call to action is often to "request information". It's a weak appeal. If you are attempting to generate leads, give your sales people something more tangible to respond with. Close your direct mail campaign with a specific actionable offer, with measurable goals: "show me how I can reduce sales costs by 24% using the ACME software kit."

The harder the offer, the stronger the guarantee must be presented. If you are asking for payment with order, you have to be clear in your promise to return the money if the customer is not satisfied. Mouseprint, weasel clauses and **asterices will dilute such a guarantee, soothing your legal advisors, while overall depressing net results. Use "cents" in your pricing. \$10.99 is always better than \$11. \$10.99 may even be more persuasive than \$10. The ".99" always implies the marketer's wish to present the best deal to the consumer. Rounded up prices, e.g., \$10, \$500, \$10,000, present a "floor" pricing mentality to the buyer: it can go up, but it will never go lower. In the heat of designing a beautiful package, don't forget the main point was to deliver an offer. Is it obvious? If not, you are assuming too much on the interest of your reader. Give it to them straight. There is no magical date to drop your mail. By category however, retailers may have a target, based on weekend activity, magazine publishers based on newsstand schedules, fundraisers based on the news. Know your customer's buying triggers, and you know the right in-home date. When you consider new creative or re-issuing a control mailing, take the time to try out the offer yourself. Follow your own instructions: respond, phone, write the check, mail it, wait for fulfillment, experience the buying cycle. See what it feels like. Compare that with what your mailing promises. Email is a successful avenue for customer communication. If you are requesting email addresses, be sure to give your direct mail respondent the choice to opt in, or opt out of which types of email they will receive as a result of providing you the address. Disclosure of your intentions will capture better-suited addresses with fewer complaints later. In every offer, you have four levers to pull. Choose from these:

Risk-reduction through guaranteesExtra value added with free gifts

Deadline on any of the above to act immediately

Price discounting

- Pay special attention to offers and incentives that work on first-time buyers. These are more likely to be the deals that continue to activate long term buyers as well as lapsed customers or donors.
- When evaluating the potential of an offer concept, take your own bias out of the equation. Just because you wouldn't respond to an offer doesn't mean the offer is without merit. More likely... you aren't on the target list.

FORMAT

Your package design is a workhorse. It delivers the offer and merchandises your message, staking a claim on your reader's eyes, hands, and desires.

Everything we tell you here must be tested to validate. But still, you owe it to yourself to see how the following format tweaks can improve openings, readership and response:

- Make it larger
- Use pressure sensitive stocks
- Personalize the outer envelope and internal pieces
- Involve die-cutting
- Present a card
- Design envelopes within aspect ratio. The larger the envelope, the better the open rate. But remember, the largest letter-sized envelope is 11.5" long. As you increase size, the width-to-height aspect ratio must not exceed 2.5. Otherwise you are mailing a flat which incurs a higher postal rate.
- Good direct mail design entices a consumer to keep the piece.

 The longer it remains in your prospect's possession the more opportunity for response. So you want to make your mail worthy of saving.
- Order form and reply form design is critical. Here are some stunningly obvious reminders that designers still seem to fumble:
 - Return mailing address
 - Accurate, working phone number
 - The agreement statement, eg. "Yes I would like...etc."
 - Room to write in credit card number, address and name corrections
 - Record #, account # to track individual response
 - Key code to track segment response
 - Too large to fit the reply envelope
 - No reply envelope at all
 - Paper stocks that repel pencil or pen
 - A keepsake on the form that discourages a responder from sending it back

- Understand why you are creating a direct mail design. The enjoyment of clever mail construction is in creating unique folds, pop-ups, slides and working parts that catch the eye. If you fundamentally believe that a special feature will increase the impact of your offer, then use it. If it is creative for the sake of your brand identity, use it. However, do not place the burden of financial success on the addition of an intriguing format feature. That's the responsibility of the list/offer
- If you mail similar-looking direct mail packages regularly, switch the second color you use. Mailing the same offer to the same list but changing color boosts response. People think it's different, and they're more likely to open it. Switch colors as soon as response falls off; it usually works.
- Small stationery notes that are affixed to your direct mail letters raise readership, comprehension and response rates. To add to the impact, personalize them using the imaging systems at your disposal. Try blue inkjet with a handwritten font for extra impact.
- Always give serious thought to colored imaging. Over time you have come to expect black imaging as the standard. A fresh look at your mailing piece may awaken you to the fact that it is not as eye-catching as it could be. Test highlights or spot color imaging.

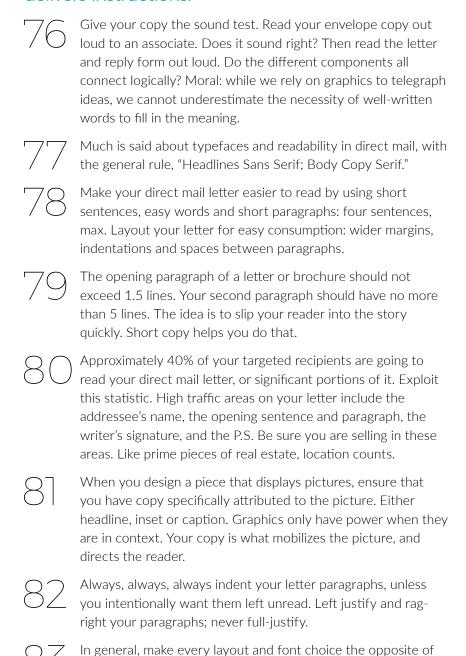
- The reply form is easily the most important part of your mailing. Make sure it works. Here are some tips:
 - Ensure it restates the entire offer
 - Verify the reply instructions are clear and understandable
 - Give it to your co-workers to fill in
 - Make it a different color from the rest of the paper in the envelope
 - Die-cut corners and YES/NO stickers actually lift response
 - Have your fulfillment or response data entry department review it to ensure it captures all of the information required
 - Use receptive paper stock, and avoid varnishes that repel ballpoint pen, pencil and ink
 - Leave room for the responder to provide the info you require
 - If it's at all confidential, plan on providing a reply envelope
 - Don't use screens or background colors that black out when photocopied
 - Provide the complete name and address of the recipient on the form for convenience
 - Ask for an e-mail address
- Retail traffic builders can use savings coupon and percent discount post cards. For an extra kick, create a duplex-imaged wallet card that is tipped into a folded self-mailer. Present the consumer's name, variable discount and bar code on the face and image the store location map on the back.
- Size is a determining factor in direct mail effectiveness. The larger the piece the more likely it will be noticed. The economic argument against largesse is that it supposedly costs more.

 Bear these two points in mind:
 - The larger your mailing piece, the more space you have to communicate
 - Up to 3.5 ounces, your Standard Mail Flat postage cost is the same
- What to test on an envelope:
 - Size: flat or letter
 - Orientation: landscape or portrait
 - Paper Stock: white, colored, kraft
 - Customized teaser copy
 - Postage: indicia, meter or stamp, first class or standard

- Remember: the outer envelope has three jobs:
 - Deliver the letter intact
 - Set up the consumer's expectations
 - Get opened
- It's the little things sometimes that jiggle the consumer's inertia in your favor. Rather than merely adding a loose lift note to your kit, or a bookmark, or a business card, or a game piece, why not "tip" it onto the letter? Tipping is an all-inclusive term for attaching one piece to another with a little dot of low-tac glue. The effect is interesting. While a loose piece may flip out onto the kitchen table the tipped piece now has to be physically removed, thereby forcing the reader to touch it, look at it and think about it.
- If you are looking to expand your freemium portfolio beyond address labels, create a list of every type of label your prospect or customer still needs to have: bookplates, gift tags, bumper stickers, window stickers, shelf labels, file folder labels, canned fruit labels, freezer labels, "gold star" labels, repositionable labels, drawer labels, door labels, his-her-mine-and-yours labels, expressions labels, locker labels, favorite saying labels, biohazard labels, no smoking labels, DVD labels. While there is still empty space on the planet, humans are inclined to label it.
- If you are delivering coupons to build traffic it pays to make those coupons look valuable. Give them the swirls and lines that say "money". While a stark set of numbers or percent discounts set on white will work, adding some monetary embellishment will only improve understanding and use.
- Direct mail format and the selling message are interdependent drivers. For a copywriter to present and merchandise their words successfully they first need to learn how to fold.
- With few exceptions, the incremental profit derived from enhancing a package will exceed the savings earned from slimming that package down.

COPY

Good copy sets the tone for your offer, identifies you with your reader, builds confidence, and delivers instructions.



what you would see in the fine print section of a contract.

84	The secret of successful direct mail copy is that it never stops enticing, selling, educating and closing. If you write to fill up space, the only space that gets filled is the wastebasket.
85	Don't forget the positional impact of your corporate logo. It's invisible to you, but others see it.
86	Most prospects will decide very quickly after a cursory look if they are going to consider your offer. If they are interested, the letter is one piece of evidence the reader will read to help form a final decision. The longer it is the more material and logic you get to leverage in your favor. This gratifies your prospect, elevates your credibility, and sets the stage for your offer.
87	The most convincing sales arguments rely on disarming buyer skepticism with third party opinion and documentation. The technique of "feel-felt-found" includes:
	I know how you feelI've felt the same way myselfBut here's what I found
	And with that the speaker produces documentation and testimonials to prove his point.
88	Energize and pique your reader's interest with the outer envelope. Apart from the name address area, personalize the envelope to improve your prospect's interest in opening it. Try references to benefits, local geography, postal service, speed, and an urgent call to action.
89	What kind of envelope teaser copy works for difficult subjects, e.g., laser eye surgery? Answer: call out the problems your product or service will fix. In this case, appropriate copy on the outside of the envelope might be "Thread a needle count the freckles on your child's nose never squint at the TV again details inside."
90	Repetition is the key to getting your message across. Too often, for the sake of brevity, or a misguided concern for the patience of our prospects, we never say something twice in a letter or mailing piece. The fact is, you have to say it again and again to catch the casual reader. Your English literature teacher wouldn't approve, but your banker will. Repeat your offer.

- The Johnson Box, named for its creator, Frank Johnson, is an arresting and focused display device that appears at the top of your letter. The box itself is a border of asterisks, or a solid line. Inside is a 3-or 4-line statement which capsulizes the essence of a "consumer moment" or which presents the offer in starkest terms. It is a proven attention device.
- Always get an outside opinion on your copy and design, if just to check for the obvious. True story: We recently received a very elaborate mailing promoting a Victorian mansion for entertainment functions like corporate parties and wedding receptions. The copy spells out the beauty and charm of the place, but somehow neglected to provide a physical address. We have no idea where it is.
- Testimonials are integral to good direct mail sales copy. Keep and file all comments, letters and satisfaction survey results to use when you are creating new designs. To make them more interesting, use quotation marks, place in a side bar, and attribute them to real people, including name and city. Don't forget: Get their permission first!
- Humor rarely works in direct marketing copy. Parting with cash is a very serious affair, and should be remembered in your creative platform.
- Make sure your numbers are understandable. Because you know the numbers so well, you may assume that your readers will absorb them instantly. Not so. Use very clear, understandable graphs and charts, and get someone not familiar with your offer to proof them for clarity.
- Bold type in a letter is persuasive if it is done sparingly.

 To maximize impact, you may bold the same offer or idea repeatedly. This alerts the casual reader to your main point quickly.

- We are conditioned to lists. When you use lists in your direct mail copy, you always improve readership. Here are seven reasons why:
 - We like easy to understand bits of information, pre-packaged.
 - A list has a beginning and a pre-defined end, for time economy.
 - We tend to quantify our possessions, including knowledge.
 - Lists are logical building blocks.
 - They also offer opportunity for comparison.
 - Lists are easier to read than paragraphs.
 - They focus the reader.
- Next to "free", and "guaranteed", some of the most important words you can utter in direct mail offers are: "you save." Check your copy. If you say, "15% off," then take another breath to say, "YOU SAVE \$(xx) off the regular price." This might be obvious to you, but not necessarily to your readers.
- Fear of loss is greater than the desire for gain. When you form an argument for a reader to purchase or respond, be sure to point out the downside of remaining with the status quo.
- Don't assume people automatically understand the benefit of a feature. You can build logical benefit copy with the Feature-Advantage-Benefit formula:

With this feature + you get this advantage = which delivers this benefit

Deliver the Right Message to the Right Audience at the Right Time

Relevance equals response. That's the cardinal rule of direct marketing—and for more than 150 years, RRD has been perfecting it.

If you are ready to start delivering the connected experiences that transform your brand into your customer's favorite brand, **contact us** today.

About RRD Marketing Solutions

It's the age of the customer. More than ever before, consumers are at the heart of marketing strategies and messaging. They're informed and empowered, and they have high expectations for a personalized experience.

RRD Marketing Solutions helps brands optimize engagement with their customers across all touchpoints—online, offline and onsite. The group activates marketing resources in the most impactful way, through a combination of predictive insights, inspired content and meaningful interactions.

RRD Marketing Solutions empowers brands to execute marketing programs with maximum return and enables customers to experience brands in their own way.

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