

## IMPROVING YOUR DIRECT MAIL COPY

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Most of you use direct mail as at least part of your promotional program, but many business people like you have told me you lack confidence in writing your own copy or evaluating the copy a hired agency writes for you.

With this in mind, I set out to create a set of guidelines that would help you evaluate and improve your direct mail copy. Some themes will repeat throughout the presentation. Just as you have to reach your target audience with your message more than once before you can expect them to act on it, so I have to bring my message to my target audience--you-- more than once.

Some of the examples of good direct mail pieces I will be describing are not from lawn care or landscape contracting, which shouldn't be a problem because:

1. We should use the best and avoid the worst of other industries.
2. When your direct mail piece arrives at my home or office, you are competing with many other pieces for my attention and action. In a typical week, I get direct mail from: cable TV, carpet cleaning, financial management companies, insurance companies, churches, real estate agencies, grocery stores, and every mail-order catalog in the world.

I get a good deal of direct mail and I LIKE IT. I like the way direct mail brings the product directly to me, to evaluate at my convenience. Am I the exception? Not really. According to Simmons Market Research Bureau,

3% immediately throw away all direct mail pieces  
 30% open some  
 67% open all the direct mail pieces they get

5% want more than they get  
 42% want less direct mail than they currently get  
 53% get the right amount.

To give these number better perspective, compare them to telemarketing.

7% hang up on all calls  
 42% listen to some calls  
 51% listen to all calls

2% want more calls  
 24% get the right number of calls  
 74% want fewer calls

The industry likes direct mail, too. 55% of the contractors, mowing/maintenance companies and lawn services say direct mail works best for them, followed by the Yellow Pages.

Some advantages of direct mail over other methods you use to reach current and potential customers are:

1. It is personal.
2. It doesn't demand an immediate answer--like telemarketing does.
3. It provides more information than ads in the newspaper or Yellow Pages do.
4. People like getting mail in general and, as we have just seen, some want even more direct mail.

Older people respond better to direct mail than young people.

Rural people respond better than city people.

January is the best month for a response to direct mail.

Tuesday is the best day for it to arrive.

Lest I paint too rosy a picture of direct mail....

1. Third class mail is the fastest growing class of mail, and last year it represented 30% of all mail. That spells a good deal of competition for the recipient's attention.
2. The usual response rate is typically about 1/2%--but you ought to be getting 40% acceptance from the people who do respond.

#### THE GREAT MOTIVATORS

When what you send out is the printed work, you need to choose those words--and concepts--that are the greatest motivators. Psychologists tell us that the greatest motivators are:

1. FEAR. We are afraid of failure, not being accepted, being taken advantage of, missing an opportunity. Using fear as a motivator is not a technique for a beginner. Unless you want your challenge to be weak, write a direct challenge.  
DIRECT--What will you do when drought destroys your lawn?  
INDIRECT--What will you do if drought destroys your lawn?
2. GREED. Wording like "Special extra discount applied only to preferred customers" illustrates this motivator and leads to the next motivator...
3. EXCLUSIVITY. Example--"Quite frankly, the Putter's Green program isn't for everyone. Only the most..." When you use exclusivity, you establish status--his and the status of your offer. Two ways to do this are with a limited offer and a special offer to discriminating customers.
4. GUILT. This is good for fundraising but not so good for direct mail selling.

#### PRESENTING NEW INFORMATION

Three good ways to approach the presentation of new information are testimonials, asking a question (that you intend to answer) and using parallel logic.

The testimonial can come from a celebrity or authority/expert, an unidentified person, a self-testimonial (like Wm. Marriott speaking on behalf of Marriott Hotels), a bulk or user testimonial, and (the weakest) putting something in quotes so it looks like a testimonial.

Bulk testimonials are often taken from letters of praise and they create the feeling that everyone is doing it. These may or may not include the name of the person, his city and state. ALWAYS GET WRITTEN PERMISSION BEFORE USING A TESTIMONIAL.

When you ask a question, be sure the recipient will answer YES.

Parallel logic is harder to use. "If George Toma uses---at Arrowhead Stadium, then don't you want us to use---- on your lawn?"

#### SPECIFICS OF DEVELOPING THE MESSAGE

The elements of good copy are contained in the word AIDCA:

A--attract ATTENTION  
 I--develop INTEREST  
 D--DESCRIBE the product  
 C--CONVINCE the reader  
 A--get ACTION

These tips are from a free lance copywriter:

1. HAVE ONE PRIMARY GOAL. It could be to make sales or generate leads. Do you want quality or quantity? Know what you want before you start to write. Concentrate on one prime appeal, like security, safety, convenience or prestige.
2. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE and narrow your focus to reach that audience. To do this you may need more than one mailing--one for residential and one for commercial customers. The reader should feel like a participant in the message, not just the recipient of it. In general, the three things your recipient is most interested in are ME, MYSELF and I. Tell him what is in it for him.
3. WRITE THE WAY YOU TALK--personal and informal. Use contractions. Example--"Finally, you'll have a green, healthy, weed-free lawn..."
4. FREE YOURSELF OF THE CONSTRAINTS OF FORMAL GRAMMER.
5. HIGHLIGHT THE POSITIVE.
6. OPEN WITH A PRIMARY BENEFIT. Fire your biggest gun first. Five times as many people read the headline as read the rest of the copy. Headlines that work offer a benefit. Example--"How can you get five more days of vacation every year for free?"
7. START WITH A STRONG LEAD THAT PUTS THE OFFER UP FRONT. Exposed offers draw 100 percent better than hidden offers. The average reader scans the piece for 5 seconds before deciding to read or discard it. Example--"20 percent off on first mowing."
8. KEEP IT SHORT AND COME TO THE POINT QUICKLY. Use no excess words, sentences or paragraphs. If your best ideas don't fill the space, it is

better to use larger type than to use more words. Don't waste your reader's time with words that don't add to his knowledge, information or ABILITY TO MAKE A DECISION.

9. WRITE FOR FIRST-READ COMPREHENSION. Break up long sentences into two or three shorter ones. You are writing to persuade, not to impress people with your vocabulary. Research shows that people tend to stop reading when they stumble over a difficult word or a complex phrase. To know how effectively the words communicate, read them aloud. If you stumble, so will your reader.
10. KNOW HOW MUCH TO TELL. For a new concept, you need to tell more. For a familiar concept, concentrate on your one or two strongest advantages over similar products or services.
11. SELL SPECIFICS. Tell the reader exactly what he is going to get--and what he might lose if he doesn't act. Poor example--"Save money." Good example--"Save \$40.00."
12. USE COMMAND COPY. Be blatant. Tell the reader to fill out the order, check the box, make a call, punch out the coin, lick the sticker, order now. Don't wait for the last paragraph for command copy--because many readers won't get that far. Begin subtly and become bold.
13. USE YOU COPY. Poor example--"We offer ...". Good example--"You get..."
14. INCLUDE PRICE. 80% of your readers at least want to know the price, and for 40% of them it will be the deciding factor.
15. SPECIFY BRAND NAMES when they are familiar and will help sell your products or services.
16. INCLUDE RELATED SERVICES, but don't do it to the dilution of your chief selling point.
17. URGE THE READER TO ACT NOW. Rephrase the prominent benefit in your closing offer and incorporate a feedback mechanism--a postcard, telephone number to call, etc. A postcard is most effective. 75% of the people who will respond will do so in the first 3 weeks.

#### WORD CHOICES

The words you choose to convey these concepts are important, so measure them carefully. Here are some of the best words and phrases:

FREE	EASY...
NEW	YOU PAY ONLY...
AT LAST	YOU'LL BE ABLE TO...
YOU	TWO WEEKS FROM NOW YOU'LL....
ONLY A FEW AT THIS PRICE	PRIVATE INVITATION TO...

GET is a good word to use in a headline. Example--"Get the fifth application free." Poor example--"Receive the fifth application free...."

Effective promotional adjectives

real life	tough	practical
strategic	hidden	individualized
down-to-earth	step-by-step	fresh
timely	creative	powerful
unprecedented	automatic	critical
specific	latest	new
proven	tested	

Effective promotional nouns

results	strategies	clues
measures	benchmarks	details
prerequisites	focus	benefit
highlight	gain	target
profile		

Effective promotional verbs

benefit	measure	maximize
sharpen	test	target
master	tackle	conquer
track	monitor	diagnose
focus	alert	highlight
survey	expose	probe
learn	receive	gain
clarify	compare	eliminate
anticipate	initiate	get more mileage

## WORDS AND CONCEPTS TO AVOID

1. Avoid abstractions like dependability, quality, performance and value. Make these concepts real by describing your level of quality or value in measurable, concrete terms.
2. Never again use the words truthfully, frankly, or I'll be honest with you...

## OFFERING DISCOUNTS

There are several ways to offer a discount, and they will appeal to different audiences.

- .SECOND ONE FREE is good for people who want two of them.
- .HALF PRICE is better for the person who wants only one.
- .TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE moves more products than half price does.

When you offer a discount, some of your options are:

1. 10% off when you include full payment with the order.
2. 10% savings when you order two or more.
3. 10% discount--it's our introductory offer to you.
4. 10% off on the fourth and fifth services. (This is the strongest

business offer because you get their business long before they get their discount.)

#### TO INCREASE RESPONSE

1. Make it easy to respond with large words that tell the recipient what to do, or include a detachable postage-free postcard.
2. Give something free or at a discount. Ideas include a free last service of the year, an almanac or calendar, a plant book, a package of house-plant fertilizer, or a free diagnosis or estimate. You can state that a representative will call or deliver the freebie. This will decrease your responses, but they will be better responses and you will be getting your foot in the door. (Giving something away FREE pulls better than offering a discount, so offer something small free rather than an equivalent discount on a larger item.)
3. Establish a time limit, especially on the freebie. Example--"Good through June 15, 1988."
4. Offer a guarantee. It is no longer enough to guarantee. We have come to expect overstatement--"absolute guarantee of satisfaction or your money back." (Free gift is another example. Is there any other kind of gift?)
5. Personalize. Even when we know the computer did it, personalization improves response. Include a change-of-address request; as much as 30% of your mailing list might be outdated.
6. Close with a call to action. Direct mail can't yield a customer until you get a response.

Include your phone number in large, bold type. Tell when to call. Example--"Call any time between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m." When possible, give the name of the person the prospective customer should call.

Include a guarantee on the reply form, even though it may be included elsewhere.

Tell the prospect how long he or she will have to wait for a reply.

If the reply card actually asks for the order, give payment options.

State the time limit clearly.

Give enough room for the prospect to write all information, especially the name of the city he lives in. Too often, the line is too short horizontally as well as vertically.

7. Tell the prospect what action you will take when the form is returned to you.
8. Include a visual presentation of any premium.
9. Consider involvement devices like tokens or a message to rub off, etc.

10. Make the return card postage free.

#### WHAT SHOULD THE PIECE LOOK LIKE?

1. On your first attempt, keep it simple--a letter and a reply card in a #10 business envelope. On a later piece, add a gimmick like a second color or a photograph and see if the added response justifies the cost. (Two-color letters generally out-pull one-color.)
2. If you want lots of leads, keep it short. If you want fewer but better leads, give more information like technical details, prices and specs.
3. Use a dominant element--a strong headline, an illustration or other feature to get quick attention.
4. Make it easy to read without over-using attention-getting devices. Some possibilities are varying type sizes, bold face type, varied margins, illustrations and lines (rules). A little underlining and bold-face type are fine, but they become a distraction when you over-use them--and distraction kills sales.
5. Single-space a letter; double-space between paragraphs. Indent paragraphs. Copy should be ragged-right, flush left--the way it comes from a typewriter. If you want to set off some copy, center it or indent all lines.
6. Keep paragraphs to 7 or fewer lines long.
7. If the letter is longer than one page, don't end a paragraph at the bottom of the page. People will feel complete and may not turn the page.
8. Use headings and subheads. Reading them should give the basics of your message, and some people will read only the subheads and headings.
9. Use white space. Just because you paid for the space, don't think you have to fill it with ink.
10. Get the most from illustrations.

Your logo should reinforce your name--and you should use it often.

Make your literature easily recognizable with a familiar character or illustration (like the Michelin tire man or the Pillsbury dough boy.)

Select an illustration that shows the benefit of using the service you provide.

11. Include a PS

#### PHYSICAL PRESENTATIONS TO AVOID

1. Reversed copy (white type reading out of a solid background).

2. Copy running the full width of the page. (It is hard to track back to the correct line when you go back to the left-hand side.)
3. Copy that snakes around too many illustrations.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE ENVELOPE?

1. Odd-size envelopes will stick out from the rest.
2. Color says "open me first."
3. Decoration attracts interest.
4. Envelope copy increases readership of the material inside. Three formats for envelope copy are--

A note that looks hand-written.

A printed message

A typed lead-in. (The words on the envelope are completed by reading the words inside.)

What you say is more important than the format you use. The best statement will answer the question what's in it for me? rather than the question what's in it?

Four words that work all the time are PRIVATE, ADVANCED, INVITATION and EXCLUSIVE. Other good words are FREE, NOW YOU CAN..., and I'M THINKING OF YOU.

#### WHAT ELSE CAN YOU MAIL TO KEEP YOUR NAME IN FRONT OF YOUR PROSPECT?

1. A "thank you for your business" card.
2. Holiday greeting cards--for holidays other than Christmas, too. Consider Easter and Fourth of July.
3. Calendars and almanacs.

#### WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Pay close attention to what your competitors are sending. If they all use green ink with a line drawing of a man holding a hose with the truck in the background, you won't stand out if you illustrate the same thing.

Focus your attention on what the prospective customer wants to get from your service. The better you convey that concept, the better your chances are that he will become YOUR customer.