

Your “creative” is a key factor in the success of your Direct Mail effort. It’s not only communication from you, but, to the consumer, it IS you. It’s also how you present yourself to customers, so your product, as well as your corporate image, *must* be presented in the best possible light.

Also, remember that, since Direct Mail is a carefully targeted medium, a successful creative execution is one that is done with the audience in mind. If your product/service targets an upscale audience, you’d be foolish to send out a postcard with starbursts or garish graphics. However, if you’re targeting teenage boys, it might be just the thing to get their (limited) attention.

Beginning your creative

Before all else comes the creative brief, a kind of “blueprint” that helps you design and build the most effective mail package. A good brief not only sets forth a step-by-step plan for bringing your Direct Mail program to life, it also provides an objective way to evaluate your program’s results.

Ideally, your creative brief should answer 8 critical questions before addressing anything at all with words, pictures or formats:

1. *What is the specific objective of this mailing? What measurable result am I seeking?*
(See “Copy—Your voice that calls to action” later in this section.)
2. *What is the budget? How much can I afford?*
3. *Who is the target audience? Who am I mailing to?*
4. *What is my deadline? What seasonal factors, competitive activity or inventory needs will affect my production and mailing schedule?*
5. *What is unique or special about my product? How does it differ from the competition?*
6. *What is the ONE most important benefit to my audience?*
7. *What is the offer? What enticement does my audience have to act NOW?*
8. *What is my competition doing? What barriers from my competitors do I need to address?*



Once your brief's written (and agreed upon), two important factors will determine precisely how your mail package will take shape, what it will say, and how it will look. These are the format itself (envelope, postcard, self-mailer, tube, high-impact package, etc.) and the creative execution—specifically, art and copy.

Format

While the format itself might not seem “creative,” it's crucial because it dictates how the art and copy will come into play. The copywriter and art director need to know exactly what vehicle you want to use, since it affects how much room they have to get your message across.

Do you want to send out a postcard? That means a message that's a “fast-read.” Are you sending a letter and a brochure? Now you've got the luxury of more space to sell prospects on your product, so the creative team can get very detailed in what they communicate via words and pictures.

Oftentimes, the decision of which format to use is a financial one, driven by budget and/or necessity.

Perhaps a shared, or “co-op” mailing is the way to get the most reach for your dollar. Budget considerations need to be addressed first, however, before a single word of copy is written, because they do have a direct impact on the creative product.

If your sales message requires more space, more detail and a larger format than you'd anticipated, you may want to consider actually reducing your mail quantity. Sending an incomplete message to more people, rather than a complete message to fewer people, may lead to rather disappointing results.

Look to your creative brief for the right Direct Mail format

- What's your objective? (Don't send a brochure if a postcard will do, and don't mail a simple letter if your sales message requires an audiocassette.)
- Consider your audience and the format of mail they get. What would interest your target? If they receive plenty of “business mail,” try sending an envelope other than the standard #10. Are you sending the correspondence to their home or a busy office? Is it

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“screened” by an administrative assistant or family member before it reaches your target?

- What is the product, cause, service or event? (You probably won't want to mail to Fortune 500 executives with a one-color flyer, nor solicit charitable funds with an expensive-looking, glossy, full-color brochure.)
- What is your competition doing? Do you need to respond to a specific sales initiative or offer?
- What can you afford?



Which format is best?

The beauty of Direct Mail is that you're not limited to a single magazine page, newspaper classified ad, billboard or 30-second slot over the airwaves. Direct Mail gives you virtually unlimited freedom with a wide variety of formats to choose from. (Of course, much of it depends on your budget requirements. Once you determine your budget, you can make the best choice in order to accomplish your mail goals.)

There are formats for every conceivable purpose, and then some. Besides your budget, the format also depends on the kind of product/service you have and what you want to say.

Your prospect may consider your Direct Mail package for only a second or two before deciding whether to read it immediately, set it aside for later or simply toss it. Your choice of envelopes, for starters, will impact this decision profoundly and immediately.

10

The #10 envelope is the most frequently used Direct Mail format.

Monarch 3 7/8" x 7 1/2"

#10 4 1/8" x 9 1/2"

#11 4 1/2" x 10 3/8"

#12 4 3/4" x 11"

#14 5" x 11 1/2"

The *envelope, please*

The most common envelope sizes are the #10, the 6"x9", the 9"x12" and the monarch. Selecting common-sized envelopes or "carriers" such as these saves money, of course, but may not stand out among other advertisers' mail. As a result, many mailers routinely use custom-sized and designed (and costlier) envelopes to gain immediate attention and prompt opening. In any event, it may be worth a test to see if a custom envelope with a premium price justifies its cost versus a standard-sized envelope with the same message.

In either case, any size envelope gives you the option of a very personal, more costly "closed-face" carrier with the prospect's name/address printed on the envelope surface, or a "window" carrier where the prospect's name/address appears on a piece inside the package and shows through the envelope window.

Ultimately, you'll weigh the cost of such options against what it takes to make your Direct Mail package get noticed, get opened and get results.

Self-mailers are also a popular format due to their efficiency, because there's no envelope and the mailer is self-contained.

If you choose to mail a box or sample to prospective customers, be warned! There is an excellent chance that your little (or big, for that matter) package could end up beneath three tons of mail. Make sure that the box you're mailing it in is sturdy!

There are also elements like buckslips (used to make another offer, sometimes the "free bonus"), and lift notes (used for "testimonials" from an author other than the one that signed the letter, attesting to the merits of your product/service), that are frequently included in Direct Mail packages and which you might want to consider, if appropriate.

The latest wrinkle:
More and more Direct Mail packages refer consumer and business audiences alike to Internet websites for special announcements, product launches and more.

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Pushing (past) the envelope

The newest ideas in Direct Mail involve the sending of formats that were difficult to produce just a few years ago.

Videotapes

are almost always watched, but expensive to produce. Today, some companies are sending Direct Mail packages with Business Reply Cards (BRCs), urging consumers to send for a free video, thus allowing customers to self-select. Other companies, when reasonably certain of their database analysis, have sent unsolicited videos to customers. (Companies doing such a mailing, of course, need to be quite certain that their customers will be interested in the product or service.)

3-dimensional

mail pieces are now more possible, especially in a pop-up format. This gives the sender the ability to send a flat piece which can become a “stand-up,” attention-getting piece once out of the envelope. The use of

dramatic holograms is also expected to expand in the future.

Sampling

technology has been advanced in recent years and it's now common to send small amounts of products in new packaging. For example, toothpaste manufacturers may have sent small tubes of samples in the past, but they were bulky, expensive to ship and relatively fragile. Today, it is more common to see a sample of toothpaste in a flat, sturdy, plastic format that can be shipped economically, and arrive in better condition.

A work of art

“Art” in Direct Mail doesn't necessarily refer to “museum-quality” pieces (although some advertising art directors would beg to differ). In Direct Mail, as in all advertising, “art” refers to everything from illustrations to colors used in the mail package to photography. Essentially, it's everything other than the words.

As with everything else, the art must be appropriate for the specific “image” of the company sending the mail as well as for the target audience. Think how differently you'd choose the

Full color

is important in the promotion of products such as food, clothing, furniture and other merchandise, but the color reproduction must be good.



images for a mailing to high school students and one to retirees. Similarly, you wouldn't send out a Direct Mail package covered with starbursts and bold graphics to the head of an accounting firm, although that image might be just fine for 12-year-old girls.

Remember your creative brief and keep a clear image of your target prospect in mind.

One last word about art in Direct Mail: Don't get carried away with all that's technologically possible in designing your package. Full color, for instance, is important in promoting food, clothing, furniture and other products, but it isn't always necessary. A package printed in one, two or three colors can be just as effective (sometimes even more so) as a slick, costly mailing with expensive photography.

Copy

Your voice that calls to action

"Copy" defines the words throughout your Direct Mail package, from headlines to letter and brochure text, margin notes, envelope teasers, even legal disclaimers and terms and conditions.

The tone of your copy is of paramount importance, because how you say something is just as significant as what you say. For instance, if you have one product geared to teenage girls and another targeting CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, you're certainly not going to use the same "voice" for both. The copy tone and content must be appropriate for your audience, whether it's a letter or postcard or brochure. Also crucial is your "call to action." It should be crystal clear:

What do you want the recipient of your mail to do?

Phone? Fax? Mail? Visit a location? Go to your website? Make sure that you communicate it clearly. It's not a bad idea to repeat your call to action a few times, in fact.

—DIRECT MAIL BY THE NUMBERS

Hitting the target

Getting them to open your Direct Mail

One of the most important elements in a Direct Mail piece is the copy on your outer envelope, commonly called the “OE line.” If it’s generic, or not relevant (like “Special Offer Enclosed!”), your target won’t even bother to open it.

Successful OE lines are intriguing “teasers” (with irresistible copy, like “When you’re alone at home, do you close the bathroom door?” or “Does orange juice really do any good?”). Other Direct Mailers swear by the “blind” envelope, one with no return address or OE line, to get people to open their mail. Their rationale is that people will open it to see who it’s from. This debate is not likely to be solved, since both types of OEs continue to meet with success.

A good strategy is to be as specific as possible with your OE line. The flexibility of Direct Mail lets you “version” the mailers you send, and there is always the opportunity to test versions, or to test an OE line against the blind OE.



Here's one way to look at it:

If you only had enough money to send ONE Direct Mail package to ONE prospect, what would you put on the OE to make sure it got opened?

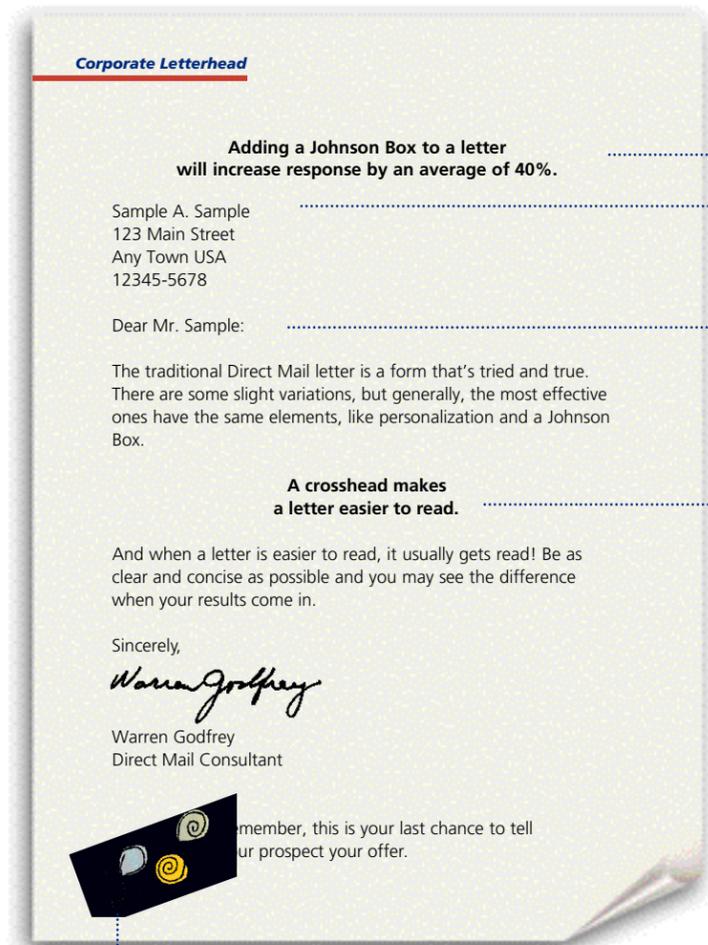


The Letter

The letter should be a unique and impactful part of your Direct Mail piece because of its personal tone. Think of it. How many other forms of advertising begin with “Dear”?

Your letter is your company’s way of sending one-to-one communication.

There are several identifying features on a typical Direct Mail letter. The first one greeting your target will be (if you choose to



Your letter should be benefit-driven.

Tell your target what your product/service can do for THEM.

Johnson Box

A typical addressing vehicle for a window envelope

Personalizing a letter raises response rates

Crossheads help break up the copy

The P.S. is almost always read, so be sure to reinforce your message here.

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have one) a “Johnson Box.” This technique was devised by a Direct Mail writer named Frank (you guessed it) Johnson many years ago.

The Johnson Box is the “headline” at the top of your letter that is set apart from the main text. Research has shown that adding a Johnson Box to a letter will increase response by an average of 40%. It should be short, one or two lines, at most, and include the main benefit, offer or anything else that might intrigue your customer to read on.

The “P.S.” is another important feature, as studies have shown that people usually read the Johnson Box and P.S. of a letter, even if they read nothing else. It’s also your last (and best) chance to reiterate the offer and benefit to your prospect, and a great place to reinforce your call to action.

Use crossheads to break up copy

Crossheads are also common, those “headlines” in the middle of the letter that reinforce your offer. They can often work as a design element, as well, “breaking up” a copy-heavy letter and making it easier to read (like the one atop this paragraph, for instance).

A good letter should persuade the reader to act, as well as guide the reader to another element in the mail package. A common mistake in many mail packages is reiterating what the letter stated in the other elements enclosed, without offering a new bit of information. Each piece should reveal a bit more. Consider the letter an “overview,” and let the ensuing elements give the reader the details.

The letter sells.

The brochure tells.

The reply card compels.

As for the “right” length for your letter, it depends on what you want to do. (You may want to test the copy in varying lengths.) Most people will read a one-page letter, but not a 14-pager. Make it as long as it needs to be to sell your product/service.

What’s important to remember is to state your offer, as well as what you want the customer to “take away,” in every single element of your mail package. If it’s just mentioned once in the letter and then the letter gets separated from the rest of your mail package, your customer is left with a brochure he’s interested in and no way to remember what the offer is and/or how to contact you.

Self-mailers are cheaper to produce, but they practically never outpull envelope-enclosed letter mailings.



Color pulls better response rates than black and white.

TRICKS

OF THE TRADE

DID YOU KNOW THAT:

1. "Fake" handwriting on the letter margins has been proven to attract readers?
2. Gifts like free stamps or address labels draw more donations to charities?
3. These free gifts make the recipient feel obligated and, therefore, more likely to donate?
4. "Live" stamps (the kind you'd use at home on your bills) usually get more response than metered postage?
5. "Personal" letters consistently outperform most others?
6. "Free" is still the most powerful word in Direct Mail?
7. The most effective letters end with a "P.S."?

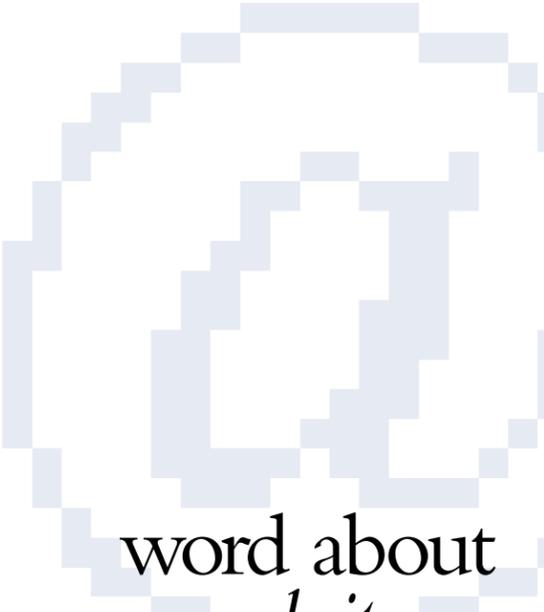


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Besides using Direct Mail, many businesses today are also taking advantage of the Internet. In your Direct Mail, you should give your customers the option of getting in touch with you through your website.

You can guide them there for fulfillment, customer service or more information. Direct Mail gives you abundant flexibility. Why not use it as an integral part of a unified, synergistic advertising program? And don't forget to ask customers logging on to the website for demographic and psychographic information, such as relevant data ranging from household income to hobbies.

One word of caution: Some companies use one agency or in-house staff to create their Direct Mail programs, and another to design their websites. In these cases, it's vital that the "look" of their Direct Mail, advertising and website all work together. For in Direct Mail, as in all marketing, a company's image in the marketplace is often a matter of synergy and consistency.



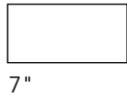
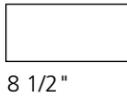
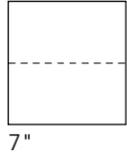
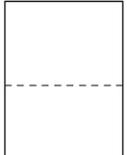
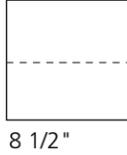
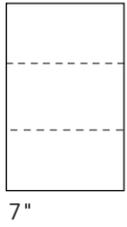
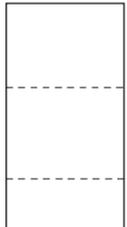
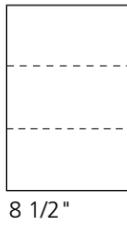
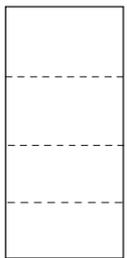
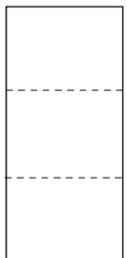
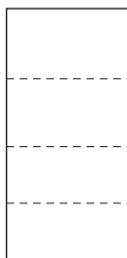
word about
websites

WWW.COM

Common Direct Mail formats

	Monarch	Small Invitation	#10
Letterhead Flat	<p>7x10" 3 1/2" 3 1/2" 3"</p>	<p>7x10" 5" 5"</p>	<p>8 1/2 x 11" 3 3/4" 3 3/4" 3 1/2"</p>
Folded	<p>7" 3 1/2"</p>	<p>7" 5"</p>	<p>8 1/2" 3 3/4"</p>
Outer Envelope	<p>7 1/2" 3 7/8"</p>	<p>7 3/4" 5 1/2"</p>	<p>9 1/2" 4 1/8"</p>
Business Reply Envelope	<p>7 1/4" 3 1/2"</p>	<p>7 1/4" 4 3/8"</p>	<p>8 7/8" 3 7/8"</p>

—D1RECT MAIL 3Y 7HE NUM3ER5

	Monarch	Small Invitation	#10
Brochure Folded	 3 1/2" 7"	 5" 7 1/4"	 3 3/4" 8 1/2"
2 Panel	 3 1/2" 3 1/2" 7"	 5" 5" 7 1/4"	 3 3/4" 3 3/4" 8 1/2"
3 Panel	 3 1/2" 3 1/2" 3 3/8" 7"	 5" 5" 4 7/8" 7 1/4"	 3 3/4" 3 3/4" 3 1/2" 8 1/2"
4 Panel	 3 1/2" 3 1/2" 3 3/8" 3 3/8" 7"	 5" 5" 4 7/8" 4 7/8" 7 1/4"	 3 3/4" 3 3/4" 3 1/2" 3 1/2" 8 1/2"

Larger-than-letter envelopes **(44.4%)**, letter-sized envelopes **(45.2%)**, and postcards **(42.9%)** were the most likely shapes of Direct Mail pieces to be read in 1995.