



When less direct mail can be more

by **Hugh Chewning**

Early in my direct marketing career, a mentor taught me, “The fewer people you mail, the more you can mail.”

It took me a while to grasp this simple concept, but in reality, it speaks to the core principle behind successful direct mail.

Being able to target your mailing to a narrowly defined audience—and highlighting how your offer solves specific needs—has always been one of the most powerful benefits of direct mail. Yet far too often marketers fail to exploit this advantage.

You may have a product or offer that appeals to more than one market segment. But speaking to each of these groups individually—and showing how responding to your offer will benefit the prospect’s individual needs—is the key to achieving maximum response.

Consider these examples.

- As a small business, I have a need for financial software to monitor expenses, issue payments and track invoices. The software I use fulfills all these needs—and will work equally well for many larger businesses.

But unlike some companies, I don’t have a need for inventory control, tools to handle large payrolls or credit card processing and trying to sell me the product based on these benefits would be a mistake.

- For acquisition mailings, even your highest-performing mailing list will include names that are unlikely to respond to your offer.

By ranking the demographic characteristics of your best customers/donors, you can see which demographic groups have the

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highest propensity to respond. Then, by overlaying this profile onto your prospect lists, you can eliminate those segments that don't share the most-likely-to-respond characteristics.

- When mailing your customer/donor file, there's no need to mail every name every time. Some donors and customers are unlikely to respond more than once or twice each year. By identifying the customer's tendencies—they only respond to annual renewal mailings, particular seasonal offers, or certain package formats or techniques—you can limit the frequency of your mailings yet continue to benefit when the customer is most likely to respond.

Each of these three examples illustrates how mailing to a more highly defined audience can—despite any decrease in mail volume—increase net profit. And with today's technology in list selection and personalized printing, it's never been easier to customize your mailing to speak directly to the needs of individual recipients.

It's a mistake to think we can save money by rolling all the product's benefits into one mailing and sending it to a broad audience. Doing this may lower your cost per thousand but total expenditures will be unnecessarily high.

By sharpening the mailing's focus, we can use different teasers on our outer envelopes...write more-targeted lead sentences for our letters...display the product's benefits differently...offer a guarantee that addresses specific concerns of a narrow market group...and even offer unique premiums for various market segments. All of which permits a more personal conversation with the reader and lets us show how our benefits fulfill his or her needs.

Aligning our benefits more closely with the needs of the reader may reduce mail volume, but ultimately we'll enjoy a more successful and profitable mailing.

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