



How to Edit Direct Mail Copy for Greater Response

By Hugh Chewing

Just about every direct mail copywriter can benefit from a good editor. Yet many decision makers who approve copy—clients, compliance officers, board members and managers—aren't trained to edit the copywriter's work.

Here's a simple 3-step method and checklist that might help.



Step 1

When reviewing a direct mail letter for the first time, sit on your hands.

One of the biggest mistakes is to pick up your red pen before you've reviewed the complete mailing package. Checking for errors in grammar, spelling and sentence structure is essential. But when you proofread the letter before reading the entire package, you're likely to miss the big picture. It's like letting a tree block your view of the forest.

Before you pick up your pen, read the complete mailing package and then ask yourself, does this letter:

- Speak directly to the recipient?
- Convincingly show how the offer fulfills the needs of the reader?
- Clearly communicate the mailing's objective?
- Establish the creditability of the organization and/or product?
- Issue a clear call to action?

Once you're satisfied that the copy meets these initial requirements, it's

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time to move on to a more detailed review.

Step 2

A good editor knows to look for more than the writer's use of words and will ensure that the copy quickly captures the reader's attention.

- Is the letter starting with its best lead? Often, you'll find the strongest lead buried in the third or fourth paragraph.
- After reading the first few paragraphs, will the recipient know why he or she are receiving the letter?
- Within the first few paragraphs, can you recognize the audience targeted by the letter? If, for example, the letter is targeting previous donors or customers, the copy should recognize the recipient's status early in the letter. If you're writing investors, collectors or sports fans, the first few paragraphs should acknowledge the recipient's interest.

And to increase readership, the editor will check:

- Is the letter inviting to read? Does it use short sentences, wide margins and a double space between paragraphs? Are the paragraphs indented?
- Do pages break in mid-sentence so the reader must turn the page to complete the thought?
- Is the letter using a serif typestyle?
- Is the text at least 12-point type, especially for older audiences?
- Does the letter have a logical flow from paragraph to paragraph?
- Does the message unfold in a logical manner?
- Are there any "in-house words" that the average reader won't understand?
- Is the letter written as if it's from one person to one other person? Check the copy for "us" and "we" and, whenever possible, replace them with "me" and "I."
- Is the copywriter taking full advantage of the printer's capability to personalize the package? For example, if the inside address and/or

salutation are personalized, why not extend the personalization to other parts of the page?

- Can you rework any passive sentences?

And to add credibility to the package:

- Review the letter as part of the complete direct mail package. All components—the outer envelope, letter, response form, reply envelope and any inserts—need to work in harmony.

Although we're now focusing on the letter, remember that you're editing one component of a package and not a stand-alone element. For example, if the outer envelope has an official look, the letter copy needs a more formal approach. But if you're using a hand-addressed envelope, the letter's copy will be more informal. Everything needs to work together.

- Does the letter use testimonials or other documentation to support its claims?
- If the letter includes "handwritten" notes or underlines, are the same color ink and "handwriting" used for the letter-signer's signature? Remember, the person signing the letter is the person writing the notes.
- Is the letter's signature legible? (Signatures that are difficult to read promote a negative response.)

And to make the sale:

- Can you quickly identify the offer?
- Does the letter close the sale by specifically telling the reader what action to take?
- Does your P.S. restate the benefits and the call to action?

Step 3

Now, read your letter aloud. Remember, the best direct mail is written in conversational English, and this is where you'll spot clumsy phrasing, overuse of

particular words, and paragraphs that don't connect smoothly with the previous thought. Hear the written words as a conversation with the recipient.

Finally, review the letter for typos, misspellings and improper word use.

With the letter's copy on your computer screen, increase the font size to 16 or 18 points and you'll find that it's easier to spot typos, misused words or unnecessary words. You may even want to read the copy backward, as this forces you to see each word one at a time.

Regardless of how experienced the copywriter is, a good editor is worth his or her weight in gold. Rather than confrontational, the relationship between copywriter and editor is a partnership. Each respects the expertise of the other and recognizes that they share a common goal—making—the mailing more responsive and profitable.