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# A Copywriter's Thoughts on Direct Mail Lists

By Hugh Chewing

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I still remember my first direct mail letter. I reworked it to perfection. Every word was just as I wanted it to be. The benefits to the reader were clear, the offer was strong and the call to action was unmistakable.

Then we mailed the letter, and I waited. And I waited some more. But nothing happened. Not even a single response. No one even bothered to complain about the letter.

Finally, after waiting a few more days, I went to see the agency's owner and confessed my failure. I explained the letter's objectives, my approach, the offer...how I had checked and rechecked every word but failed to get even one response.



Finding the right person to mail

Without even looking up, my boss said, "Check the lists."

And I was ready for this. I'd already prepared a report on the mailing lists we were testing and started to go through the long list. But he said, "No, that's not what I mean. Go see what actually mailed."

After a short visit to our IT and production groups, I learned that the wrong lists were mailed for the job. In fact, we couldn't have mailed names more unsuitable for this appeal if we had tried.

This taught me a couple of things.

First, don't expect things to go right just because you issue the right instructions. Mistakes happen.

Second, it made me think that all those people who argue whether or not

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[www.cdmdirect.com](http://www.cdmdirect.com)

Phone: 949-854-5401 Email: [hchewing@cdmdirect.com](mailto:hchewing@cdmdirect.com)

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the mailing list is twice as important or 300% more important or even 600% more important than the offer, copy or format are just wasting good air.

In truth, the mailing list is infinitely more important than any other component of the mailing.

It's really simple. If you mail the world's all-time greatest package to the wrong people, you're going to fail. You're not going to sell lawnmowers to Eskimos regardless of how good your copy or offer is.

For a direct mail copywriter, good list selection—and knowing the thinking behind the list selection—is essential to success.

Writing copy to mail to people who we know nothing about is like being at a party where everyone is a stranger and trying to convince the first person you meet there to buy your product. You may be able to close the sale but, more often than not, the conversation will be clumsy, wordy and far less effective than if you knew the person's background and interests.

This leaves us two options. We can either let the list broker do his or her thing and hope for the best, or we can get involved in the process.

The most successful copywriters know which mailing lists have worked and which haven't. They'll also take the time to learn all available demographic and behavioral data, ask to be included in the broker's new list announcements and read the appropriate trade journals to discover new mailing lists.

But unfortunately—especially when we're writing as a freelancer—we don't get the opportunity to offer our input. We're hired to write copy and nothing else.

Yet we can ask questions. And with the answers, we can gain a better understanding of the people to whom we're writing. For example, a few of the questions I ask new clients are:

- What can you tell me about your average customer? What is their age, sex, and income. What do you know about their interests and behavior?
- What are your top five mailing lists?
- Historically, which types of lists have **not** worked well?
- Have the names we'll be mailing received your offer before? If so, when was the last time you mailed them?

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- What information on our readers do you have on file—age, sex, income, past purchases/contributions, items purchased and dates of purchase or contribution?

In addition, I'll ask for samples of the three most recent acquisition controls—and the packages that tested against them—to see how successful appeals have spoken to the targeted audience, and how the tone might have changed over the progression of winning packages.

Asking these questions is like talking to a stranger at that party where we don't know anyone. When we take time to ask the person a few questions, we can do a much better job of explaining why he or she needs our product.

Much has changed since I wrote my first direct mail package but one thing is as true now as it was then. Of all the components of a direct mail package, nothing is more important than good list selection.

Hugh Chewning is a direct mail specialist providing copywriting, strategies and consulting for consumer, nonprofit and business-to-business groups. Located in Irvine, California, Hugh provides tested and proven tips on how to boost your campaign's profitability in his free blog, *Direct Mail Insight*. To subscribe, and, for information on his free, no-risk package critique, visit his website, <http://www.cdmdirect.com/>

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