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# ***Successful direct mail starts—and ends—with the outer envelope***

By Hugh Chewning

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When receiving direct mail, the outer envelope is the first thing we see. Yet too often, its design is an afterthought.

But without a convincing envelope, even the strongest offer and best-written copy will have a quick, one-way trip to the trash.

When creating a new direct mail package, I try to think like a door-to-door salesperson. The outer envelope is my knock on the door and how effectively I use it, will determine the mailing's success.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE ENVELOPE**

Eye-study research reveals that recipients will spend no more than **7 seconds** deciding whether to open the outer envelope. Fortunately, we have five tools we can use to convince the recipient to look inside. These are the:

1. Address piece (label, window, personalization)
2. Teaser
3. Return address
4. Postage type
5. Color and stock of paper, and the graphics

According to Professor Siegfried Vogels' *Eye Flow Studies Provide Clues*

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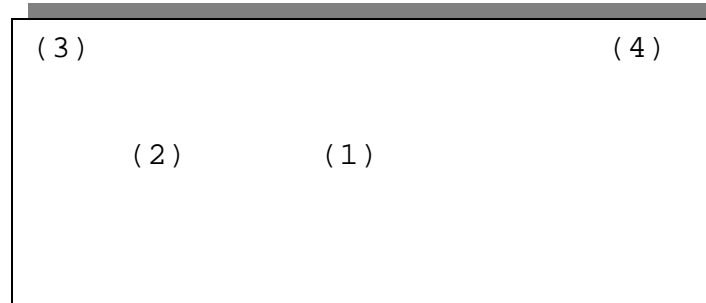
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[www.cdmdirect.com](http://www.cdmdirect.com)

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

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for *Improving Your Direct Mail*, here's how people look at an outer envelope.



First, their eye goes to the mailing address (1) and then to the left of the address (2). From there, the eye moves to the return address (3) and then to the postage (4). The package's color and paper stock are typically the last things noticed.

Here's how to make each of these four elements work for you.

1. The **mailing address** is the first place people look. They like to see their name, so get it right!
2. When you use a **teaser**, Vogel's study says it belongs to the *left* of the mailing address. But if you don't have a good teaser, don't force one. Not having a teaser can actually tease. If you have a FREE offer, go ahead and shout it, but don't feel that a teaser is required.

Use your choice of typestyles to make the teaser more effective. Sometimes big, bold type is best. Other times, a "handwritten" font works better. But recognize that you have choices, and make your choice based upon the look and feel of the entire mailing package.

3. Vogel's study shows that a **return address** on the outer envelope *is* an important factor when people are deciding whether to open your mailing. You can use a "handwritten" or Courier type for a personal look. Or you can print the return address in a formal type along with the company logo. It all depends on the look and feel of your *entire* package. For acquisition mailings—especially when you're repeatedly re-mailing the same people—you may want to test using the return address *without* the company's name. But when mailing to repeat customers, showing the company name will typically add credibility to the mailing. (If it doesn't, you have a bigger problem.)

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4. Your choice of **postage** is not a decision left to chance. When using First-Class postage, multiple stamps typically beat a commemorative stamp. A commemorative stamp will beat a regular stamp. And a stamp will beat postage-meter indicia, which will regularly beat preprinted indicia.

Even if you have to overpay postage by a penny or two—when the denomination of available stamps doesn't exactly meet the actual postage cost—live stamps typically more than pay for themselves.

However, like your teaser and return address, make sure your choice of postage type fits the image of the entire package. For example, live stamps are the most personal—especially multiple stamps—while preprinted indicia are the most impersonal. Yet, if you have official-looking outer envelopes, preprinted indicia fit the image far better than do stamps. *You have choices, so use them to your advantage.*

A final note on postage: First-Class postage adds perceived value to the correspondence. When using live stamps, pick stamps with colors that contrast with the envelope. And anytime you are mailing First Class, make sure the recipient knows you're investing extra money to deliver your message. Don't keep it a secret. In big, bold letters imprint:

### **FIRST-CLASS POSTAGE**

Don't let there be any doubt. You consider your recipients special and you're investing extra money to deliver your message to them.

5. **Stock and Color** may be two of the most over-tested components of a direct mail package but they do help convey the overall image of your package. For example, for "official" packages, I like to use a brown kraft stock. When I'm using a teaser to promote a free offer, I like yellow or white stock because of its contrast with the type. Overall, I try to stay away from cool colors when selecting paper stock.
6. Don't forget about the **back of the envelope**. Of the seven seconds the prospect might spend examining your envelope, more than half of that time will be looking at the backside as they open the envelope.
7. **Regularly test new outer envelope designs**. New envelope designs are the easiest and most cost-effective way to keep a control fresh.
8. And perhaps most important, the outer envelope is **only one part of the total package**—not an independent component. You wouldn't use an official-looking envelope with a handwritten letter inside. Likewise, you wouldn't use a live stamp with most official letters. All the envelope's

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components must work together, and the envelope must work with the entire package.

Follow these guidelines and you'll have a better chance of getting the envelope opened and your message read. The envelope is your first contact with the prospect and, when designed properly, it will make a positive first impression and lead you to greater success.

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