



How to Make Your Direct Mail More Readable and Achieve Greater Response

By Hugh Chewing

Too often, we receive direct mail that's offensive to the eye.

Big blocks of text crowd the page. Narrow left and right margins choke the life from the words. And small sans serif type makes the copy difficult to read.

Visually, these letters are uninviting.

Graphic designers may love the look of grey-colored type, but readers need text printed with high contrast. Illustrations and graphics can enhance a mailing, but when overused they pull the reader's eye in so many directions that it's virtually impossible to focus on the message.

What might appeal to someone's sense of design doesn't necessarily help the reader. And with only a few seconds to capture the reader's attention, any distraction to the eye flow can doom the mailing.



Tips to Increase Readership

Even when you mail award-winning copy with an offer that meets the recipient's every need, few people—even those who respond to your mailing—will read the entire direct mail letter. But when you follow a few proven techniques,

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you can lead more readers to the letter's most persuasive points and direct them to the call for action.

Here are some basic techniques that you'll want to see included in your next mailing. They will increase your readership and help you achieve a more profitable campaign.

Make it easy to read

1. Make the letter look like a letter. People know what to do with a letter—read it. Don't confuse them with something that looks like a brochure, a flyer or some creative hybrid approach. Most recipients will recognize your letter as being part of a mass mailing, but providing the perception of a personal letter will typically increase results.
2. Provide lots of space for your left and right margins and only justify the left margin—flush left, ragged to the right.
3. Use a serif type for your letter copy. (Serif type has little “feet” at the bottom—Courier, Times New Roman and Georgia are examples.) Virtually every newspaper, magazine and published book uses serif type because has proven to enhance reading flow and reduce eyestrain. If you want it read, use a serif type.
4. Always indent your paragraphs. Studies show that indented paragraphs “catch” the eye moving down the page and make the letter more readable.
5. Single space the letter and put a double space between paragraphs.
6. Don't end a page with a complete sentence. Look at your newspaper. To finish practically any article, you have to turn the page and that's exactly what you want the reader to do with your letter—keep them turning pages until they reach your call to action.
7. When using “handwritten” notes in the margin and/or underlining, be sure the letter signer uses the same pen used to sign the letter. This is one letter, written by one person to one other person. Make it believable.
8. Letters printed in a faux handwriting font have their purpose but keep them short. It's a struggle to get through four pages of handwritten text.
9. Use nothing smaller than 10-point type (except for disclaimers). For

an older audience, you'll want to use a larger 12-point type.

Direct mail isn't rocket science. If you're going to persuade the reader to respond, he or she needs to read your letter—or at least its main points. No one wants to work their way through a letter they didn't even ask for so keep it simple, stay on point and make it easy to read.

Focus the reader's attention

On average, the reader takes no longer than 11 seconds to decide whether to read or trash your letter. Research by Professor Siegfried Vogele found that during this 11-second preview, the reader's eyes fix only on pictures and headlines—never on the body copy. Knowing this, you can use illustrations to draw the reader's attention to your most persuasive copy and lead them to the call to action.

1. Typically, readers follow the classic pattern of reading left-to-right, top-to-bottom, but eye flow can be redirected using “pointing devices” with a graphic element. For example, when you place a graphic of people in your letter, the reader's eyes will follow the eyes of the subjects in the picture. Use this by pointing the subject's eyes toward your copy.

You can use practically any “pointing device” to direct the reader's eyes. With an illustration showing a model wearing a man-style tie, for example, the eyes of readers will follow the tie right down to its pointed end—and to the copy below.

2. Most illustrations need a caption. To get the caption read, put it below or to the right of the illustration, not above or to the left of it.
3. With 2-page layouts—as in a brochure—you can expand what the reader sees by placing color pictures to the left and black-and-white pictures to the right. Warmer colors will draw the reader's eyes across the page revealing more of your message. When using pictures with and without people, put the people pictures to the left to encourage the reader's eyes to go across the page.

How your copy style affects readership

People love a good story especially when it's about them. To increase readership, you want to:

1. Include a salutation. You wouldn't start a conversation without a greeting so include a salutation with your letter. And assign title codes. There is nothing more *impersonal* than using the recipient's

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full name in the salutation. (“Dear Mr. Hugh Chewning,” for example. It’s either “Dear Mr. Chewning” or “Dear Hugh.”) When you can’t assign a title code, use a default—“Dear Member,” “Dear Homeowner” and “Dear Friend” are examples—but say “hello” and welcome the reader before launching your sales pitch.

2. Have the copy written as if it’s a one-on-one conversation between the letter signer and the recipient. Direct mail is an “I” to “you” medium. Not “us” and “we.” People are more comfortable with an individual than a large, impersonal organization, so keep it personal and they’ll keep reading.
3. Personalize the copy with the reader’s name and any other pertinent information that’s available. Properly used, the cost of adding personalization to the letter will almost always pay for itself. And when you’re mailing to customers or donors, recognize the recipient as such early in the copy.
4. Give special attention to the letter’s first paragraph and the P.S. Typically, these areas get the most attention so use them to state the problem your offer will solve, how the reader will benefit by responding and to issue your call to action. If they read nothing else, they’ll know how to respond and why they should respond.
5. Don’t worry about using incomplete sentences, contractions or a preposition at the end of a sentence. Write in a conversational style as if the letter signer is speaking directly to the recipient.
6. Create an image for the reader. If the reader can see him or herself in the situation you describe, they’ll take an interest and continue to read.
7. If you can’t spell a word or need to look up its meaning, don’t use it. You want to give the reader a “warm and fuzzy” feeling not impress him or her with your vocabulary.
8. Don’t let the reader stumble on in-house abbreviations. When using the term for the first time, spell it out. For example, rather than beginning a letter with “ACLU” you would write, “American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).” You’ll lose all momentum if the reader must turn back to the start of the letter to understand your meaning.

The more you create the perception that your direct mail letter is a personal communication from the letter signer to the recipient—and make it easy

to read—the more readership you will have.

And the math is simple—greater readership equals higher response.

Getting every possible response is always worth the effort of giving added attention to the package's layout, its use of graphics and its copy style. Increase readership of your letter and you and your organization will profit.

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