

Writing for Response: Direct Mail Copywriting

In true direct marketing style, let me begin this article with a disclaimer. I can't teach you how to write. Whether writing is a talent or a skill is beyond me except to say it's likely a little of both. Beyond that, however, direct mail writing is a learnable process, and, as guitar pickers like to say, "I can't teach 'ya...but I can show 'ya."

Keep in mind, direct mail isn't the Great American Novel. It's writing for dollars. Ms. Grundy or Sister Mary Elizabeth won't be around to rap your knuckles if you split an infinitive. And if your copy reads more clearly that way, go ahead and split it! Not sure which punctuation is best after a statement? Use an "m" dash -- like that -- and the heck with it.

The point is, our writing must be crystal clear to the reader, whatever it takes. We also want it to move smoothly from the outer envelope teaser to the order form (or telephone, or web site). Any major interruption in our reader's train of thought -- a garbled sentence, a word he doesn't understand, a blatant misspelling, a confusing product description -- and chances are our message will be derailed.

Good copywriting has a rhythm that helps move the reader along. Alliterations in text, short statements and comments, use of contractions ("you'll" instead of "you will"), rising and falling inflections, all contribute to a sort of iambic pentameter for copy that makes reading more of a pleasure, and less of a chore. That aids retention, as well.

One of the driving forces behind direct response writing is the harsh fact that agreement with our proposition is failure. We have to get a response --- prompt an action -- or we're dead in the water.

The noted direct mail writer and author Robert Collier once said that we all walk around with a conversation going on in our heads, and the task of the copywriter is to break through that conversation and make himself heard. The topic of that conversation is, of course, oneself. That's why response writers use the second person almost exclusively -- to *join* the conversation already in progress. That idea is nothing new. No less a personage than Alexis de Tocqueville recognized the American obsession with self back in 1831. According to Alex, here's what you're up against.

"In democratic communities, each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object: himself. If he ever raises his looks higher, he perceives only the immense form of society at large or the still more imposing aspect of mankind. His ideas are all either extremely minute and clear or extremely general and vague; what lies between is a void. When he has been drawn out of his own sphere, therefore, he always expects that some amazing object will be offered to his attention; and it is on these terms alone that he

consents to tear himself for a moment from the petty, complicated cares that form the charm and the excitement of his life."

And if you'd like to take that idea even further back to 63 BCE (formally known as B.C.), here's how the great Roman orator, Cicero put it:

"If you wish to persuade me, you must think my thoughts, feel my feelings, and speak my words."

As we'll see in a bit, that's why we stress benefits, the language of the *buyer*, rather than features, the language of the *seller*.

At the end of the day, however, copy and creative account for roughly 10% to 20% of the success of a direct mail campaign. The list and the offer do the heavy lifting at 40% each. Well-written copy will always enhance the results of any offer, but the right offer to the right list at the right time will likely survive even mediocre copy. On the other hand, no copy can save the wrong offer to the wrong list, if you brought Claude Hopkins back from the dead.

Further, all copy and creative is a compromise with time. I've known top writers who agonize over every word and phrase and revise, revise, revise through sleepless nights and others who do a first draft, polish it, and let it go.

That said, there are a number of questions a writer must ask in order to think through the direct mail effort he or she will create.

It has been my frequent experience that business owners and company presidents have a very proprietary view of their products and their companies. Small business execs in particular. And why not? It's their baby. They likely conceived it and grew it with much hard work and pain. But that very experience tends to focus their thinking on the product and its features -- what they built -- not on the customer and the product's benefits.

Your first source of inspiration: your customer

It surprises me how often I meet with clients who have never spoken to their customers. They tend to believe they can divine their customers' views on things through the order forms and other miscellaneous types of communication that they receive. And sometimes, they feel they know what's best for their customer, by god!

I suggest you get on the phone and call a dozen or so customers and ask them, at the very least:

- (a) why they purchased the product or service (and sometimes, who bought it -- it may not have been the customer-of-record,)
- (b) how often they use it,
- (c) how they use it (lots of surprises there!),

(d) how they might improve it,
(e) what they don't like about it, and, if time permits, how they heard of you, what other media they use regularly, and what else they do that may be related.

Depending on the product or service, you'll no doubt develop special questions of your own.

Finally, if the product is sold by salespeople, you'll want to talk to the sales manager or a top salesperson about the "hot buttons" they use and the typical points of resistance they encounter.

After you've done all that, the following questionnaire will fill in the "nuts and bolts" information you must review before you begin writing. It's designed mostly for consumer products and services. (There is a similar questionnaire for lead generation in Chapter x.) You'll find it also relates to the Direct Mail Package Checklist in Chapter x.

1. Description of product or service -- in 50 words or less.
2. Purpose of the product. What does it do, how does it work, how is it used?
3. Price. How much does it cost?
4. What are the features of the product? Specs and facts about what helps it to do whatever it does. What makes it better, faster, more comfortable, more accurate, etc.?
5. What are the benefits of the product? What will it do for me? What specific problem does it solve? How will it make me "healthy, wealthy, and wise." (See discussion of benefits below. For 4 & 5, it will help to make a list of features down one side of a piece of paper and list the corresponding benefit opposite each.)
6. Other key points: What will it provide that I can't get somewhere else? How and why is it new?...superior?...exclusive? What is the competition, and why should I prefer this one?
7. What is the offer? Special introductory or limited-time savings? A premium? 2-for-1 sale? Free information? Are there basic and deluxe versions? Is this a one-step sale (directly from the ad or mailing piece) or a two-step offer? (Free information now with a telephone sales or direct mail follow-up. See the Lead Generation Checklist in Chapter 8 if this is the latter.)
8. What is the method of payment? (Cash with order only?...Bill me?...Credit cards? (Which ones)...Is a purchase order required (business)? Do you have an 800 #? Can they fax their orders? Order via e-mail?...Web site?)
9. What is the guarantee? 100% money-back anytime? 30-day no-risk trial?

10. Are there objectives other than direct sales? Image or brand building? Collecting customer information? Pass-along? Add-on or aftermarket sales?
11. Who am I mailing to; that is, what lists are being used? (You should already know this from your pre-questionnaire research. It isn't "everybody," trust me. Read the List Data Sheets to determine not only who these people are, but how they got on the list. If they are mostly sweepstakes entrants, for example, that will influence your thinking.)
12. If not previously determined, What is my prospect's title and responsibility (for B-T-B), or (for consumer) What is his/her age, sex, marital status, economic class, etc. You should have already determined the full spectrum of demographics and psychographics that apply to your prospect from company surveys, sales experience, customer correspondence, phone calls, List Data Sheets, etc.

In addition, you should have, from your own experience or that of others, insights into your prospect's day-to-day home or daily business life. In business environments, how will your product help him or her get ahead? Get the promotion and the raise? Be a more successful team leader? Be more self-confident or popular with co-workers? In home environments, how will your product help save money and/or reduce worry and hassle? How will it make the buyer a better mother?... father?...spouse?...friend to others? For younger people, how will it help them fit in and be popular with their peers? Will brighter teeth (feature) lead to a great relationship (benefit)?

13. What is the budget for this project? (Budgeting should be a regular part of a marketing plan, based on sales or projected sales, not "whatever it costs.") This may tell you whether you can plan an ink-jet personalized, four-color, 9x12 package or a two-color self-mailer, although that should be determined by other factors.
14. What is the timeline? When must the piece be mailed? Why? (Allow up to 12 weeks for detailed direct mail planning and execution from scratch. Printing and mailing will take about two weeks each. For most products, January and September are key mailing months, unless this is a seasonal product. Testing in September and rolling out in January is a viable strategy.)
15. Are there any tests planned? Copy?...Price?...Offer? (If not, why not?)
16. Are there any key copy points or phrases that must be included?...that must be avoided?
17. Is there any special information regarding the company and

its place in the industry or stories of key people in the company that might play a role? (This should be something specific and dramatic, not a CEO bio or company history.)

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All about Benefits

As students of direct marketing -- as all practitioners are -- we are told constantly to stress the benefits of our product or service and "turn features into benefits." So it's worthwhile, I think, to spend some time asking just what is a benefit anyway?... Why must we stress benefits rather than features... and what are the differences, if any, between benefits in consumer direct marketing versus business-to-business?

It's not as obvious as one might think. Just recently, I listened as a team of telesales trainees struggled to define the benefits of a newsletter they would soon be marketing to business executives by phone. They reminded me of a session I used to conduct as part of a full-day seminar on book marketing at the *Folio* Magazine Publishers' Conference.

It began with an admonition I had once received on a copy test I took for my first job at *Esquire* Magazine. "Tell me about my lawn, not your grass seed," was Sheldon Sachs' advice to aspiring writers. Twenty years later I adapted Shel's Synthesis for my seminar and presented attendees with "Dunc's Ever-Gro Grass Seed" and a list of five key features that the class was asked to convert into corresponding benefits. It was always a lively session, and there was always a significant number of individuals who were clearly "getting it" for the first time.

For example, the first feature was a grass blade 1/16" wider than that produced by ordinary seed. Most folks promptly declared that would make the grass greener since the wider leaf would reflect more light. True enough, but "green-ness" is an attribute of the grass, not in itself a benefit to the user of the grass seed. We must take one more step -- one that an experienced copywriter might present as, "gives your lawn a bright emerald green that will be the envy of the neighborhood." It's not the green that's the benefit, but the compliments and envy that will accrue from others for this sparkling lawn.

In short, "a feature becomes a benefit when it intersects the life of a human being, with favorable results." It's the favorable results we want to present to prospects as a benefit.

Dunc's Ever-Gro Seed also contained nitrogen. Since nitrogen is a fertilizer, the user needn't otherwise fertilize the lawn. Thus he or she can "Save time, save money, save work and hassle" with Dunc's Ever-Gro on the job! Those are fairly common benefits for almost any product sold by mail.

Another feature was the seed's resistance to cold. It survived at temperatures as low as 45° Fahrenheit. What does that mean to the user? That he or she will have a luscious lawn to enjoy longer than anyone else in the neighborhood -- "all the way to Halloween!" (For those of us in Northern latitudes).

One more feature that may be less apparent: Dunc's Seed also produced a grass plant with roots that ran 6" to 8" deeper into the ground. (Hey, it's my seed!) The result is a lawn that's much sturdier than the average. The grass won't pull out as easily. Is that the benefit? Not yet. What does it mean to the lives of the people? It means "the whole family can walk on it, lie on it, play on it, and your lawn will look as good on Labor Day as it did on the Fourth of July."

To repeat: **features relate to the product and are presented in the language of the seller. Benefits relate to the buyer and are presented in the language of the user.** Remember Cicero.

Why Benefits?

So what's the big deal with benefits anyway? What's wrong with features?

Glad you asked. Depending on which study you read, you and I are bombarded by anywhere from 900 to 2000 commercial messages every day. If we didn't have some sort of filtering mechanism for all those messages, we'd explode or maybe just go nuts before we reached our 12th birthday.

To help us stay sane, therefore, the Creator gave us the ability to filter things out based on their relevance to us. We tune in station WIFM -- "What's In It For Me?" Benefits are far more significant to us than dry features that may or may not be relevant. How something improves my life, personally or professionally, is of greater interest to me than the technical nuts and bolts that drive the process. And I'm the sole judge of what's relevant and how something improves my life. You may be able to prove up one side and down the other that "it's cool to own" a Buick Regal. That it will provide me with reliable, upscale transportation at an acceptable cost, but gol-darn-it, everyone on my block drives a 10-ton sports utility vehicle, so I want one, too!

Benefits get past the mind's gatekeepers with greater reliability than do features and all the other image flotsam and message jetsam that bombard us every day.

Emotion vs. Reason

Madison Avenue's motivational gurus have long held that most purchase decisions are emotionally based, but that the justifications are rational. No one is going to admit that he or she is buying a product in order to be better than the next person. Rather, they justify the purchase with such rational benefits as saving money, saving time, saving work.

When translating these dynamics to a direct mail package, the emotional benefits are usually too subtle and complex to use up front -- as an envelope teaser, for example, or the headline on a letter, or even in a brochure that is intended to show the product in use.

Those are best left to the short, rational benefits. The emotional benefits can be either carefully suggested or baldly stated in the letter, depending on the setting. This may be why the letter in a direct mail package is widely accepted as the selling document. It sells because it taps that emotional component of the purchase decision.

For the most part, rational consumer benefits are short term, while the emotional appeal is longer term. Both are based on principles of personal security and social acceptance.

Some years ago I came across psychologist Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs and Information." [See Figure 7-A]

In his diagram, Maslow set up a progression of human needs and related each category to the type of information that best responds to that need. At the bottom are the basic biological/physiological needs of food, water, shelter, air -- those elements that allow us to thrive as humans. In most cases, the "coping information" that addresses those needs is provided free in the form of editorial matter by such media as newspapers and magazines, radio and TV programs, and the like.

There are also free clinics and various kinds of medical and mental helping professionals that provide the coping information free or nearly free, or with third-party compensation. Not a big business here, except maybe for the HMOs.

Security needs begin to stir the revenue pot with all the products and services that provide secure shelter and physical, mental, and economic security (housing and real estate, home repair, auto repair and services, financial and insurance services, communications, education, entertainment, etc.).

The sources of this information include various professionals from real estate agents to lawyers to accountants and the cable guy. The economics run the gamut from high gross margin/low volume (almost any house in Greenwich, CT), to high volume with paper-thin margins (Windows or IBM-compatible PCs).

For the most part, we consider these the necessities of life, not luxuries, including Bill Gates' \$50 million home because, as he will tell you, he "needs" that house for the business and social roles he must play in life. (That's what's relevant to him.) We buy according to our ability to pay (or charge), give or take a bit, and products and services are priced and marketed within various demographic ranges. (Mr. Gates *is* a range.) The big financial bounce is when one moves between ranges, with less dramatic profit margins within any given range.

Marketers need to remember that the basic benefit in all of this is, as Maslow tells us, security. You can slice it and dice it any way you like, but at bottom, your appeal should be to security, expressed in whatever terms are appropriate for the category and the market. Bill Gates may define security a little differently than you or I, but it will still be there.

Social needs mean belongingness and love. Another form of security, really, but we think of it differently. The economics range from a Hallmark card for \$1.50 (high volume, low margin) to any of those baubles Tiffany features on page 3 of the *Times* (low volume, high margin). Social needs also drive most of the stuff we buy to make our breath sweet, our bodies odorless, our teeth white, and our hair manageable.

The rational benefits here range from concepts of personal hygiene to concepts of stylishness and modernity (aka "cool"). But here again, the longer-term emotional benefits center around acceptance by others. However we position the product, we need to keep in mind that the benefits are love and belonging, and we need to work that into our presentation, in whatever configuration works best.

Ego needs are where the rubber meets the road. While it's true that ego is boosted by love and belongingness as well as by social affirmation, there's a whole other world of products and services that serve ego.

A few years back, a nationally known direct mail copywriter called to chat and mentioned that he had just spent some time at several corporations. "All these guys want," he had decided, "is to beat out the guy in the next cubicle." Bingo. Just like the guy with the emerald green lawn that's "the envy of the neighborhood," everyone wants to look good in front of his or her boss and colleagues, wants to get the promotion, the bonus, the kudos, the "Employee of the Month" parking spot -- anything that singles him or her out above the crowd.

As Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, puts it, "Everyone has a sign hanging around his or her neck that says 'make me feel important.' If you can do that, you'll be a success not only in business, but in life as well." Maslow simply quantified it in psychological terms.

Note in the illustration the kind of information that feeds the ego -- "empowering" information. Information that builds self-esteem and promises fulfillment and self-actualization. Those are the promises, regardless of the product!

Denny Hatch, copywriter/consultant and past editor of *Target Marketing* magazine, singles out seven benefits he feels are indispensable to any direct mail letter. "Your sales pitch must employ AT LEAST one of the following Seven Key Copy Drivers," he says. "And preferably all seven. If not, tear it up and start over." He lists:

Fear
Guilt
Flattery
Exclusivity
Greed
Anger
Salvation

Business-to-Business Benefits

If you're selling to plant superintendents, maybe your chemical cleaner will save money, time, and work, but the final payoff is a maintenance department (and a plant superintendent) that got the job done! Draw that distinction, and you'll tap the emotional component of the decision-making process.

If you're marketing a newsletter, the subscriber is going to know more than the guy in the next office, and look better, sound better, etc., in front of his or her boss and colleagues. He or she is empowered by special knowledge to "make a more meaningful contribution" in the workplace or will enjoy "sharper, more timely, and on-target decision-making."

Maybe an individual manager or supervisor can think in terms of improving corporate or company profits, but most of us know that's pretty remote from our particular cubicle. Nonetheless, it may be the rationale for a purchase of a newsletter or a book, or to attend a seminar. Productivity is a sacred cow in America, and whatever will serve it is considered desirable.

Also, at certain levels, reducing "time to market," another metric of productivity, is equally compelling to many CEOs. It's a strong case for improved competitiveness, which is the end purpose of productivity, after all. It then becomes a question of whose software, or which newsletter, or whatever, will do the job most cost-effectively. (Reducing time-to-market has been a prime appeal for the sale of billions of dollars of enterprise resource management (ERP) software and systems.)

Following the emotion vs. reason dichotomy outlined above, showing how the product relates to individual productivity...how it keeps one ahead of the curve...how it boosts personal and professional performance while it saves time, saves money, improves accuracy, or whatever, is where the appeal becomes emotional even as the justifications remain rational.

This dual impact can be especially useful in lead generation. In order to get a suspect to raise his or her hand and become a prospect, we usually offer a free document of some sort -- information related to the product or industry that will benefit the reader immediately by bringing him or her up

to speed on some aspect of the business. The material is altruistic in nature with a value that transcends the company and the product. The prospect, in short, can take the information and run, and he or she will have something worthwhile, whether or not they ever contact you again.

A Special Report, a series of Case Studies, an industry survey, a White Paper, etc. Each provides instant gratification, plus valuable 'inside' information that promises to enhance personal knowledge, while the product behind the document promises various long range competitive advantages for the team, the division, or the enterprise. The further out we get from the individual, the less emotional and more rational the benefits become.

In a direct mail program I've described previously, a "Guide to Software Development" promised prospects immediate knowledge on a subject of interest and value, while the software development team itself promised the software development project manager a way to a superior product out the door on time and on budget. (What a good boy is he!) That same highly successful package included a brochure with "Seven Ways to Keep Your Software Project on Time and on Budget." Instant gratification in the envelope, plus a quick burst of valuable information...even if the "Seven Ways" only serve to confirm what the project manager already knows. That's the emotional tug we want to employ, and that's empowerment, especially if one of the Seven really is a new idea!

While consumer benefits are typically short term and most often located in the social and security categories, business-to-business benefits tend to be longer term and aim straight at the ego with some self-improvement products even promising a degree of self-actualization.

Healthy, Wealthy and Wise.

A little rhyme I have used in seminars to help dramatize key benefits is, "Early to bed and early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise." One way or another, we all want to be healthy (physically, mentally, spiritually, and socially); wealthy (make money, save money, project wealth); and, most of all, wise (smarter; more productive; more professional; a better leader, mother, father, lover, bowler, etc.).

"Tell me about my lawn, not your grass seed," is about as succinct a way to remember the differences between features and benefits as I know.

There's also a well-known direct mail quatrain from our good friend Anon.:

Tell me quick and tell me true,
or else, dear friend, the heck with you,
Not how this product came to be --
But what the damn thing does for me!

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Starting to Write:

Each writer has his or her own method of beginning. I usually begin with the envelope teaser, because that synthesizes the major benefit and often flags the offer in a single phrase. The length and tone of the teaser (or the headline on a self-mailer) determines the look and feel of the piece from that point forward. I then rough out the headline on the letter and on the brochure, so that those key messages are coordinated to project a common theme, but not in the same words.

Then I write the first one or two paragraphs of the letter, up to the first mention of the offer, and let it all marinate for a while. If, when I get back to it, I can still stand it, I finish the letter.

It's a good idea to write the order form immediately, because that spells out, succinctly, what you'll be asking the prospect to do when you've convinced him or her that he or she can't live another minute (happily and successfully) without your product.

(sidebar):

Remember, you're writing to one person, not to "markets" or to thousands. Pick out a typical customer from those you have met and keep that person in your mind's eye as you begin to write.

Finally, wisdom offered by famed direct mail writer Tom Collins in a seminar I attended about 30 years ago: *"Give yourself permission to write a bad first draft."*

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Determining Your Package Format

Clearly, there are many different envelope sizes and shapes, large brochures and small brochures, two-page letters and four-page letters, and "much, much more." So how do you decide what combination of elements will work best for your product, your market, and your offer?

The following insights will help you get started on developing a package format. Only testing, of course, will answer the ultimate questions of which combinations of elements and which formats are best for you, but here are some guidelines for determining those first packages when the page is blank.

1. Self-Mailer or Envelope Package?

Many small business newcomers to direct marketing would prefer to use self-mailers simply because they're usually less costly to produce and mail. Remember, however, that if they're cheaper for you to produce, they're likely to be perceived as cheaper by your prospect or customer as well, an image you don't necessarily want to project.

The term "self-mailer" denotes any format that doesn't require an outer envelope. An oversized postcard is a self-mailer. So is a double postcard. Beyond that, self-mailers can be designed in any format that, when it's in its final folded form, is legally mailable. An 11" x 17" flat folded in half to 8 1/2 x 11 is a common format. Another is to take that piece and fold it in half again to 5 1/2 x 8 1/2. The USPS requires self-mailers to be wafer-sealed at least once, and other specifications apply to addressing areas, etc.

Self-mailers are "look-at" pieces, not "read carefully" pieces, so if your product pitch and information is at all detailed or complex, you'll need to support it with the more robust real estate of a direct mail package.

Also, keep in mind that direct mail works as a selling medium precisely because it is "mail!"

It is essentially a letter. And it borrows from the letter all the personal attention and meaning, the business importance, and/or official significance that letters hold in our culture. (This is a U.S. and U.K. tradition. On speaking trips to South America and Asia, I found that this is not necessarily the case everywhere.)

The further away we get from the look and feel of the letter, the more we reduce the impact of the piece. Self-mailers, of course, don't have letters -- except for one you might try to simulate on one of the panels. (I've also seen a single-page letter folded inside a self-mailer, but I have no idea whether that works as well as a regular letter package. Like everything else in this process, it depends on the product/offer/market mix.)

Because of their "throwaway" and impersonal look and feel, self-mailers generally have a credibility problem. You wouldn't want to use them for fund raising, for example. They can't carry the depth of feeling and sincerity that successful fund raising requires and that is achievable with a letter. Likewise financial services, which are considered too personal. All other factors being equal, a self-mailer typically pulls in the tenths-of-a-percent response, while envelope packages pull between 1 and 5 percent. The self-mailer will likely be more cost-effective, however, and naturally, there are always exceptions.

I wrote a solo self-mailer that pulled 3 percent for a professional book, primarily because it was a very selected market.

On another occasion I wrote a series of oversized double postcards (5 1/2 x 8 1/2) for a software system marketed to plumbers, electricians and other service dispatch type businesses. It worked extremely well because (a) it was a series of mailers, not a solo effort, (b) because the folks who run this type of business tend not to sit at desks and open mail, so a sharp headline on a self-mailer is immediately visible. No envelope to

open. (c) The main appeal came from other plumbers in the form of user testimonials. (d) We didn't need payment, just a phone call.

Since there is no reply envelope with a self-mailer as noted above, any offer requiring payment will be significantly more difficult to achieve with a self-mailer than with an envelope package.

So what can you use self-mailers for? Lots of things. Impulse buys, like books, especially with a 30-day Free Trial offer, sell well with self-mailers. Seminars and conferences can be impulse buys as well, particularly for attendees, and they sell well through self-mailers. Newsletters, where a Free Trial issue is offered, can be marketed effectively to middle management, but not to top management. Several other factors favor self-mailers as well, including:

- Some surprisingly pricey software products have used self-mailers successfully, but mostly for lead generation (per the example above).
- Try self-mailers for products and events where your lists are not well-targeted...where others in the company might be equally good prospects and might see the self-mailer around the office.
- You can also leverage the visibility of self-mailers by planning them as a campaign of three or five pieces or more. Monthly mailings, if they can be made consistently compelling, can be most effective. The repetition can offset the credibility problem I mentioned above.
- A self-mailer can work to a customer list, to cross-sell, upsell, or for aftermarket sales where the same offer to a cold list would bomb.
- In certain circumstances, you can also use a self-mailer to test lists cost-effectively, in advance of a more expensive direct mail campaign. The self-mailer “stalking horse” can help you get the package targeted right, especially where the list universe is large and uncertain.

2. One-Step or Two?

If you've decided the envelope package is the way to go, the next consideration is whether your product (including “service” as a product) will require a one-step or two-step process.

Will you sell the item directly from the direct mail piece, or will you use your direct mail to obtain leads or inquiries to be followed up by phone, sales force, or more direct mail (or all three)?

If the offer is the product itself, and it's under \$100, you'll want to keep it to a one-step process. Using a two-step or lead-generating process for a low-cost product simply costs too much to be profitable. Remember that, especially in lead generation, we sell the offer, not the product -- so the decision to go two-step will determine the makeup of the package.

A pure product sell may dictate a "full" package: four-page letter; four-page, four-color brochure (or larger); lift letter; and order form. A business-to-business lead-generation offer may not need a brochure at all, or may be kept to two-color. Often a letter and reply form are all that's required.

3. Consumer or B-T-B?

Consumer packages tend to be larger and flashier, with more "push," and therefore are more expensive than business-to-business packages. Consumer packages range from slightly oversized #12 and #13 envelopes to 6" x 9" and 9"x12". Business-to-business packages tend to be #10 "business" sized or, on occasion, a 9" x 12" First Class business-type envelope.

In business-to-business, your level of push will depend on what part of the food chain you're aiming at. The higher up the chain, the more conservative your look and feel should be, and usually, the less costly the package. The vice is also versa.

4. How Much Push?

Another rule of thumb I've basically followed over the years is, the greater the commitment or involvement or purchase I'm expecting from the recipient, the more "format" I have to deliver to him or her to help the person decide. A \$5,000 direct purchase is going to require a series of mailings, and unless I'm basically augmenting a salesperson's efforts, I'll need to put into the package much of what a salesperson would deliver face-to-face.

I'll have to show the product with a full-color brochure, sell the product with a four-page letter, and support both with testimonials or other proofs (maybe in a lift letter). I'll need a response device and a reply envelope to make ordering easy.

But what if I am augmenting a salesperson's efforts between sales calls? Then I want him or her to do the heavy lifting (and he or she does as well). I'm going to keep my mailings quick and to the point with one-page letters, maybe no brochure at all, and at most a fax-back form or reply card in case of a response. Remember, the salesperson is doing the selling and will issue the call to action when he or she thinks the time is right.

What might I send the prospect in the case of a long sales cycle?

- A white paper (a description of a technical process)

- Updates of product data sheets
- Press releases related to the product/process environment
- A related article reprint w/ a short note
- A reprint of the new ad campaign
- A special, limited-time price or bonus offer

These would be treated lightly with a single-page letter or note attached.

5. Sell the Offer

In direct mail, we sell the offer, not the product. The free trial, the no-risk 30-day preview with money-back guarantee, the free in-house consultation or survey, the limited-time 2-for-1 deal, whatever.

We support the offer basically with benefits, product information, and "reason why" persuasions urging the prospect to act now! We support that with testimonials, research, and/or test results, then wrap it all in a credible guarantee and a call for action (i.e. ASK FOR THE ORDER!).

For most products, that's going to require what we call a "full" package; outer envelope, letter, brochure, order form, perhaps a lift letter, and reply envelope. The size of each of those components will depend on how much real estate you need to get the job done. In many cases, you won't know the answer to that going in, so you should plan some tests.

- Do you need a brochure? Maybe, maybe not. Test it.
- Two-page letter or four-page letter? Test it.
- Lift letter? Test it!

But be sure you test the two key elements first: lists and offer.

If for some reason you can't test all those components, then you need to give yourself the best shot out of the gate and include all the components in your early mailings. What you don't want is to spend \$x to launch a product (or to try direct mail for the first time) and end up with more questions than answers. (Would it have worked if we'd included a color brochure?)

6. Hot or Cold Lists?

Another important consideration is the list you're using. If you're mailing house lists, you may not need as much "push" as you would for cold lists. House names know you and, presumably, trust you to some degree.

I once sold a software program add-on to a house list with a two-color, four-page letter/brochure. The two-page letter was on pages 1 & 4, and brochure copy with screen illustrations were in the center spread, pages 2 & 3. I knew the recipients were already

using the main product -- an accounting package -- and could easily understand how the add-on would enhance their capabilities.

But I'd never try that to a cold list. For a cold mailing, I'd want a separate color brochure and a four-page letter, if I'm selling it out of the package, or a two-page letter if I'm getting qualified leads. The offer in that case might be a white paper or Q&A sheet if the software is complex, and a no-risk trial.

7. Complex or Simple?

If your product needs to be demonstrated via photos with callouts, etc., naturally you'll need a brochure, probably four-color. The function of the brochure is to "show the product in use," which is often essential to robust sales. If you're selling a directory -- something everyone understands -- you may need only show a typical listing. You still may want a brochure (8 1/2 x 11, two folds to #10) to give the company some presence, and to show the listing with appropriate callouts.

(A "callout" is a line drawn from a product element out from the illustration to a brief blurb describing that element. Many examples of callouts are in the margins of this book, plus the List Data Sheet illustration in Chapter 6, Figure 6-A.)

Industrial products can usually benefit from "how-it-works" or "how it's-made" illustrations. Also performance charts, test results, and maybe a case history or at least a testimonial, all of which indicates a brochure, and hopefully something more interactive than the usual deadly dull data sheet.

As you can see, there are no hard and fast rules for these decisions, just general guidelines, and lots of exceptions. Test as many options and variables as you can, and continue testing your package's elements going forward.

When you've tested your way to a profitable list, offer, and format, you'll have, in effect, a business-in-an-envelope. It's a business that will take care of you for as long as there's a market for your product. And remember, direct mail is a back-end business. However successful you may be, you'll be building a list of responsive customers. Be sure you have something else to sell them.

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Anatomy of a Direct Mail Letter

Direct mail letters are not correspondence, although they may borrow some of its elements. Mainly the salutation and the signature.

The rest of a direct mail letter is quite different, as we'll see in this brief tour of a typical letter. Not every letter will have every feature (And these apply to sales letters only. Lead generation letters, especially to top management, follow some different dynamics.), but you should have most of these elements if your letter is to sell -- not just convey information.

The Headline

The first thing to consider in your letter is the headline. Yes, Virginia, there is a headline. Usually. (Not always in lead generation letters.) Right away you can see that this isn't your normal business correspondence. If at all possible, the headline should pick up logically or psychologically where the teaser, if you have one, leaves off. In some cases, you may even want to repeat the teaser at the top of the letter lest it be lost as a springboard for your copy/offer strategy.

The headline focuses the reader's attention on one quick benefit or promise (or two). It gives him or her a reason to spend his or her valuable time reading this letter. It also helps close out other random thoughts and provides a context for what is about to follow.

If your company letterhead is heavily designed or attention-getting, you may want to consider putting it at the end of the letter, instead of the usual position at the top of page one. (Now you know it isn't correspondence!) That way, your logo isn't fighting for attention with the headline. You're not selling your logo.

I try to make a promise or allude to a key benefit, and refer in some way to the offer, perhaps in a subordinate line. The offer, remember, is what the reader will eventually act upon. Avoid negatives in copy, especially in headlines. Don't say "don't." ;-)

Try a "headline group." A headline, subhead, and one, two, or three short bulleted phrases that extend and expand on the headline message. It provides more information and takes fuller advantage of that high readership location. It promotes greater involvement than a headline alone.

The Opening

The opening is the first sentence or first two sentences following the salutation. "I am writing to you about..." or "I want you to know about..." are not openings. The reader, frankly, doesn't care what you want. He cares about himself. Direct mail is almost universally written in the second person with "I" and "we" used as sparingly as possible..

This is a key place to say something about him or his needs, which your product will gratify. Here again, you may want to pick up on the envelope teaser and carry it forward. A documentary film on advertising titled, "The Ad and The Ego" makes the point that the purpose of all advertising is "the production of discontent" in the reader or prospect -- that it seeks to "develop an inner sense of conflict" in people that the product promises to resolve. We do much the same in direct mail, but we address ourselves to one person, not multitudes. Your opening should, therefore, start with "you," and should seek out the reader's "hot button" or major problem and begin immediately to show how your product or service can solve it.

(sidebar):

Most letters are won or lost in the first sentence. The surest way to lose is to begin talking about yourself and your organization.

Offer Preview

After the opening, I like to make a brief reference to the offer. "...and you can discover it, (prove it, enjoy it) FREE, without obligation, with the certificate enclosed."

Now the reader knows I'm not going to be asking her for money. Maybe. So she can relax. And my early reference to the response device begins to set up the response behavior.

It's also helpful to "merchandise" the offer by referring to it at several points throughout the letter. "When you send for your free demo (free trial issue, 30-day no-risk trial, etc.) you'll quickly see..."

Sell Copy

From the offer preview, get right into the benefits your reader will realize when she tests, previews, examines your product. Stay in second person throughout your letter. You're talking to her (one person, not a market) about her, not you, and you're talking about yourself and your product only in terms of what it will do for her.

Remember you're selling the offer, not the product. It's much easier to sell a 30-day trial or a free examination than it is to sell the product itself. You'll discuss payment terms later.

Try to lead off sentences and phrases with benefits. "In just two sort days you'll make first-hand contact with hundreds of the most active, most involved sales prospects in the industry." (For a conference.)

"As one of America's elite "Million-Plus" pharmacies, you are in a unique position to increase sales, slash operating costs, and grow your business rapidly with xyz software tracking your inventory."

Use Subheads to Introduce New Thoughts

You want to avoid eye-glazing, mind-numbing, wall-to-wall copy, so use subheads to introduce new thoughts and to move from one part of the letter to the next.

Write in short sentences.

Short paragraphs.

Present a list of benefits or features in list form,

- Each item
- Preceded by
- A bullet

instead of in a linear paragraph.

Use words of one syllable as much as possible. Don't assume that the person you're writing to is as literate as you are. Even if he is, he's distracted, and he's trying to quickly extract the key information he needs, often by just scanning your letter.

Which is another good reason to use subheads...bulleted lists...and...ellipses.

Be ruthless in editing out unnecessary words and phrases and "write like you talk," assuming you can talk like a successful salesperson. In direct mail, clarity is more important than literary merit, and the ability to sell is more important than the ability to write.

The Offer

When you've fully described the many ways your product will benefit the reader, show how he or she can acquire this fabulous program/product/service. Or, rather, how he/she can realize these benefits right now.

Spell out your offer in detail. What the reader gets. If you're offering a premium, this is the place to sell that a bit, too. You may also feature it in the brochure if you have one, or better yet, in a separate premium flyer.

If at all possible, and if appropriate, date your offer. An expiration date helps to keep your package from going up between the lamp and the tape dispenser for further

consideration. Remember, agreement with your proposition doesn't do it. Only acting on that agreement *right now* results in sales. Six to eight weeks from arrival of the package is a good deadline window. Just be sure you meet your mail date. If you're late in the mail and you run up against your deadline, response will drop like a stone.

The Guarantee

No one wants to make a mistake. Especially not an expensive mistake. Not a highly visible, expensive mistake. Relieve that fear with your guarantee. Mitigating risk is an essential function of successful direct mail. By law you must refund legitimate requests up to 30 days anyway, so why not make it a virtue? Some worry that a guarantee might somehow shed doubt on the product. The guarantee speaks not to your product, but to you as an honest and fair businessperson your prospects can trust.

But try to avoid the rather abrupt "Money Back Guarantee" or "Full Refund If Not Satisfied" kind of thing. That's negative. A Free (or Risk-Free or No-Risk) 30-day Trial is the same thing, expressed in positive terms. "Examine it, try it, use it for a full 30 days without risk." That's an invitation, not a warning.

(Note that under FTC rules governing the use of the word "free," an offer is not "free" if the prospect must pay something to receive it. Then it may be called "risk-free" if you guarantee a refund.)

If you can extend the guarantee to 60 or even 90 days, so much the better. Longer trial periods allow prospects to become acclimated to the product. They also get inertia working for you, instead of against you. People forget.

The Call to Action

Even after all that, you can't assume the reader will do what you want her to do, right now. But that's what she must do. So spell it out. Ask for the order! Does she detach and complete a reply card, call a toll-free number, complete a questionnaire, check a box, punch out a token? What? Is there a postpaid or self-addressed reply envelope to use?

Ask her to do all that right now because that expiration date will be here before she knows it. Because she really wants to try this, but if she lets it go till "later," she'll forget.

The P.S.

Punctuate the call to action with the signature, then add a P.S. After the headline and first sentence, the P.S. commands the highest readership in the letter. Use that important space to

repeat a key benefit, or add a twist or an another idea to something you've already said. Also repeat your call to action here, in slightly different words.

The mnemonic for the basic function of all direct marketing, but especially for letters, is AIDA. Get Attention. Arouse Interest. Stimulate Desire. Prompt Action. And it ain't over until the fat lady mails the order form.

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(Sidebar):

Additional Keys to Copy Success

Ten Copy Do's and Don'ts

Don't "introduce" yourself or your company. Begin immediately writing about the reader and her problem, and how your product will benefit her.

Don't expound on the state of the industry/world, etc. It may come across as preaching, especially to the converted. (If he doesn't already know what you're telling him, he may be too removed from the process to be a good prospect.)

Don't use puns. They rarely translate to the reader's context.

Don't ask questions in teasers and headlines that can be answered yes or no (especially no). That gives control of the communication to your reader.

Don't use your product name as a headline by itself (clever as it may be), without appending benefit or offer copy to it.

Do build your teaser/headline around a major benefit.

Do "preview" the offer up front and "merchandise" it throughout your letter.

Do test teasers to target your market.

Do use the product name in the corner card and letterhead rather than the company name. (IBM, AT&T, and such excepted.)

Do quantify claims as much as possible. Percentages of performance, number of dollars saved or earned, minutes and seconds of time, etc., lend credibility and odd numbers are more credible than even numbers.

(sidebar, other side):

But wait, there's more!

As with all good direct marketing offers, here's a Bonus Summary!

Sales Letter Copy Tips:

1. Tease, don't "tell" it all in lead-generation letters (leave out critical information so the prospect has something to ask for). Tell it all, don't "tease" in the fulfillment or follow-up package.

2. Sell the *offer*, not the *product*.

3. Talk the *buyer's* language (benefits), not the *seller's* (features).

4. Back up claims with proofs: survey, reports, case studies, test results, testimonials.

5. Always guarantee your offer, and express it positively: "Examine it for 30 days without obligation" is more positive than "money back if not satisfied."

6. Keep words short and simple. 75 percent of your document should be words of one syllable.

7. Use Courier or equivalent serified typeface for letters.

8. Use **subheads to flag new ideas**,

- bullets to list
- benefits &
- features
-

Use ellipses...to set off phrases...and underlines for emphasis.

9. Tell the reader in clear terms what you want him/her to do upon reading the letter (call to action) and **ASK FOR THE ORDER**.

10. P.S. Always use a P.S. to repeat a key point, offer, or benefit with a secondary call to action.

Interactive Copy

In direct mail we want to use words that invite the prospect into our scenario. Words that help her imagine herself using the product or that project the results of using the product in

her business or personal life.

Ultimately, we want her to act in some way on our offer, so we use words that help set up an action.

- **Learn, discover, try, explore, test, find.** These are words that invite the reader into our proposition and set the stage for action.
- **Free, new, now, announcing.** These are words that promise something new. Why is every packaged product on the market "new and improved?" Because people are drawn to the latest and newest.
- **In addition...furthermore...what's more.** These are phrases, sometimes called the "bucket brigade," that help move the reader smoothly from paragraph to paragraph to order form.

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Power Words

These are words that relate to action, that communicate newness and promote urgency.

YOU -- All direct mail is written in second person -- "you" -- with the pronouns "I" and "we" kept to an absolute minimum. Why? Because your prospects and readers are interested primarily in themselves, not in you. Surprising as it may seem, converting "I" and "me" copy written by clients to "you" copy has been one of the primary missions of my 30-plus-years copywriting career.

FREE -- Maybe some people want something for nothing, but I believe "FREE" is one of the most powerful words in direct marketing because it minimizes risk. Whatever the case, "Free" is where it's at. Use it liberally. (Couldn't say freely.)

NOW -- connotes immediacy. You want your prospect to read your package right now, and respond, right now. So using the word "now" throughout your letter and brochure helps to focus the reader's attention and sets up an atmosphere for action...now.

(sidebar): A helpful exercise is to write the words "Now you can _____" on a piece of paper and then fill in the blank with a concise description of what the prospect can do now with your product or service.

NEW -- Why is every product in the supermarket "new and improved?" Because people always want to be in on the newest of everything.

ANNOUNCING -- is a variation on the "new" theme. It's a way of alerting the reader that something new is coming.

INTRODUCING -- Same as Announcing.

EASY -- Making life's processes easy is one of the primary benefits of any product. Easy to use, easy to order, easy to try.

SUCCESS -- Success on the job, success in life and love, financial success, social success, successful children, and more are among the pinnacles of life. Use the word *success* to communicate success.

PROVEN -- Proven techniques, proven methods, and yes, proven success all add credibility to your proposition. Like the proven methods in this book.

GUARANTEE(D) -- You absolutely must guarantee your offer. Note I said "offer," not product, although it may amount to the same thing. The point is, you are not diminishing your product's credibility in any way by offering a guarantee. You are, rather, adding credibility to yourself, your company, and the manner in which you do business by offering a guarantee. And don't just offer it, flaunt it in big type, surrounded by certificate borders (in the brochure), on the order form, several times in the letter, etc. Fact is, you are required by law to refund any product you sell by mail or phone within 30 days, so why not make it a virtue instead of a vice?

AT LAST! -- Also alerts the reader to something new. "At last, what?" the mind wonders.

The inference is that here -- at last -- is **THE ANSWER!**

POWER(FUL) -- Everyone wants power in their lives. Power over illness and death, power over failure, power to exert his or her will over life's situations. So give it to them, in your copy. Show how your product has the power to satisfy the reader's wants and needs.

HOW TO -- Mail order has always had strong appeal to people who want to learn techniques and strategies across any spectrum of activities you care to mention. Self-empowerment (there's that word again!) and self-improvement, from better sex to better relations with God to building a deck on the house, have been the stuff of direct mail since forever. You can leverage that appeal by proving that your product shows the prospect "how-to" speak better, look better, be better informed, and/or work and live better in one way or another.

A neat little book that can help with finding the right words is *Words That Sell* by Richard Bayan (Caddylak Publishing, Westbury, New York). For direct mail writing, it's better than Strunk and White.

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[**Web Tip**]:

Writing for the Web

As mentioned in the Introduction, learning the dynamics of direct mail is the best training for success on the Internet. You'll be pleased to know that most of the principles we espouse for effective direct mail also apply to writing on the Web.

People don't read online, they scan. Sound familiar? Direct mail writers have written for scanners since forever. Headlines, subheads, short bursts of copy, key words, bulleted lists -- they all work well on the Web. Then add navigation. Make sure every page links forward and backward with its adjacent pages. Avoid the doublespeak, avoid the fluff, cut to the chase, anticipate questions and answer them -- all old stuff to dm writers.

For more on writing for the Web:

www.useit.com/papers/webwriting

www.contentious.com

www.cluetrain.com

<http://edvl.com/Internet/Writing>