

george duncan



George Duncan is an award-winning direct mail writer and consultant in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He is frequently numbered among the top direct mail copywriters in the country.

Planning Your Direct Mail Letter

Part I: Anatomy of a Direct Mail Letter

Direct mail letters are not correspondence, though 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 this article applies to sales letters only. Lead generation letters, especially to top management, follow some different dynamics.) and e-mail letters are a whole other matter, but for print direct mail 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.

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George began his career as promotion manager for Esquire magazine and for the next sixteen years held creative management positions with such leading direct marketers as Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, Columbia House (CBS), Grolier Enterprises and Xerox Education Publications.

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 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." ;)

Create a "headline group."

A headline group consists of a headline, subhead, and one, two or three short bulleted phrases that extend and expand on the headline message. It provides more information – a stronger hook – in that critical space 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. This is a key place to say something about him or his needs which your product will gratify. The documentary film, *The Ad and The Ego*, makes

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George started his own freelance copy and consulting business in 1976 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

He later relocated to Peterborough where he provides a full range of direct marketing services to a national roster of publishers, software developers, and marketers of business-to-business and consumer products and services.

the point that the purpose of all advertising is "the production of discontent" in the reader or prospect. That advertising seeks to "develop an inner sense of conflict" in people which the product, of course, promises to resolve. We do much the same in direct mail, but we address ourselves to one person, not multitudes. Your opening should, therefore, seek out the reader's "hot button" or major problem and begin immediately to show how your product or service can solve it.

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

The phrase I use to keep my head straight on this is, "Talk about my lawn, not your grass seed!"

Another famous ditty that speaks to this situation is –

*Tell me quick
and tell me true
Or else, my friend
to hell with you.*

*Not how this product
came to be,
But what the damn thing
does for me.*

Preview the Offer

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."

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Now the reader knows I'm not going to be asking him/her for money. Maybe. So he/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.) and get it up and running, you'll quickly see..."

George's work has been recognized nationally by DMA's Echo Leader Award, the John Caples Award (twice), the Folio Circulation Direct Mail Award, The Circulation Management Award, and MASA's John Howie Wright Cup, plus regional awards by the New England Direct Marketing Association (NEDMA) and New Hampshire Ad Club.

Sell Copy

From the offer preview, get right into the benefits your reader will realize when he/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. Avoid the first person pronoun (I, we) except when to do so would create an awkward phrase. 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.

(For a trade show):

"You'll increase sales and boost your career through first hand contact with hundreds of the most active, most involved sales prospects in the industry in just two short days..."

(For a pharmaceutical management software product):

"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..."

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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.

A graduate of Fordham University, George Duncan is a founder and past president of The Vermont-New Hampshire Direct Marketing Group. He is a member of The New England Direct Marketing Association (NEDMA), and was a founding member of the Software Association of New Hampshire (SWANH). He is a past Director of The New Hampshire High Technology Council and chaired the council's Marketing Forum.

Write in short sentences.

Short paragraphs.

Help your benefits or features stand out by presenting them in list form,

- Each item
- Preceded by
- A bullet

instead of closed up within 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 extract the key information he needs, often by just scanning your letter. Which is another good reason to use subheads...bulleted listings...and... ellipses.

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

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Articulate the Offer

When you've fully described the many ways your product will benefit the reader, show him/her how he/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 the place to sell that a bit, too. You may also feature it in the brochure if you have one, or in a separate premium flyer.

If at all possible, and if appropriate otherwise, date your offer. An expiration date helps to keep your package from going up between the lamp and the tape dispenser for further consideration. Again, agreement doesn't do it. Only acting on that agreement right now results in sales.

The Guarantee

No one wants to make a mistake. Especially not an 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? Don't worry that your guarantee might somehow shed doubt on your product. The guarantee speaks not to your product, but to you as an honest and fair businessperson they can trust.

But don't hawk it as a "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.

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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. 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 him/her to do, right now. But that's what he/she must do. So spell it out. Does he 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 him/her to do all that right now because that expiration date will be here before he/she knows it. Because he really wants to try this, but if he lets it go till "later," he'll forget. (that's inertia working against you.)

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.

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The mnemonic for the basic function of all direct marketing, but especially for letters, is **AIDA**. Get **A**ttention. Arouse **I**nterest. Stimulate **D**esire. Prompt **A**ction. And it ain't over until the fat lady mails the order form.

Part II: Determining Your Package Format

As important as the letter is – if forced to choose, a letter alone will usually outpull a brochure alone – it isn't the only component in a direct mail package. Following are some additional considerations you'll want to include in your creative planning.

1. Self-Mailer or Envelope Package?

Many small business owners and 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 which, 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.

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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. (On speaking trips to South America and Asia, I found that this is not necessarily the case elsewhere.) The further away one gets 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, like Rodney Dangerfield, "don't get no respect." Or at least, not as much as a letter package. 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 which 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 one and five percent. The self-mailer will likely be more cost-effective, however, and naturally, there are always exceptions. I had a self-mailer pull three percent for a professional book.

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

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The Anthrax Exception

With the *arrival in the mailroom* stream of letters laced with Anthrax following the September 11th attacks, self-mailers quickly became the way to go for many offers that might otherwise have been sent in envelopes. Suddenly, LARGE return addresses and BIG teasers became the way to distinguish legit direct mail from the bio-terrorist's efforts. However, for all the reasons offered here, this is a blip that's likely to have bloomed by the time you read this.

Effective Self-Mailer Uses

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 less successfully to top management.

Some pricey software products have used self-mailers successfully, mostly for lead generation.

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 impact of self-mailers by planning them as a campaign of 3 or 5 pieces. The repetition can help 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.

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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!). Or to put it another way, what's the offer?

If the offer is the product itself, and it's under \$100, you'll likely 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 inform 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 2-color. Often a letter and reply form is all that's required.

3. Consumer or B2B?

Consumer packages tend to be larger and flashier, with more "push" and therefore are more expensive than business-to-business packages.

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Consumer package 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.

A 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 them 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 much of what a salesperson would deliver face-to-face into the package.

I'll have to show the product with a full-color brochure, sell the product with a 4-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.

Give Your Recipient the Tools

One key reason is that purchases of this sort are rarely made in isolation. The recipient must get buy-in from his or her boss, probably, or from a team leader or supervisor, or from an evaluation or selection committee if it's a big enough deal. So I try to provide the tools he or she will need to make the case – in effect, providing the materials he or she can use for presentation purposes.

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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 does as well). I'm going to keep my mailings quick and to the point with 1-page letters, maybe no brochure at all and at most a fax-back form or reply card in case of a response. 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
- Updates of product data sheets
- Press releases related to the product/process environment
- An article reprint with 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.

4. Sell the Offer

As noted earlier, 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 consult 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, wrap it all in a credible guarantee and punctuate it with a call for action.

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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.

2-page letter or 4-page letter? **Test it.**

Lift letter? **Test it!**

But be sure you test the 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?)

5. 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 2-color, four-page letter/brochure. The 2-page letter was on pages 1 & 4, and brochure copy with screen illustrations were in the center spread, pages 2 & 3.

But I'd never try that to a cold list.

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For a cold mailing, I'd want a separate color brochure and a 4-page letter, if I'm selling it out of the package, or a 2-page letter if I'm getting qualified leads. The offer in that case might be a white paper, if the software is pricey, or a no-risk trial if it's under \$200.

6. Complex or Simple?

If your product needs to be demonstrated via photos with callouts, etc., naturally you'll need a brochure, probably 4-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", 2 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.)

Industrial products can usually benefit from "how-it-works" or "how it's-made" illustrations. Also performance charts and test results, 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.

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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 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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WHY THIS ARTICLE WAS SO EFFECTIVE

George,

"Your "Anatomy of a Direct Mail Letter" is one of the most cogent and immediately useful articles on the subject I have ever read."

Kelly Dueck

Circulation Manager ,

Farm Business Communications

Winnipeg, Canada

Hi George:

Your articles are easily the most rigorous, well-reasoned and intelligent available on the Internet on the subject of direct marketing. It's clear that you write from ample experience on the front lines. In fact, I get the sense that you've probably forgotten more about direct marketing than your competitors will ever know. Thanks again for your help with our campaign!

Brandon Toropov

Senior Writer

DEI Management Group

New York, NY

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Thank you George Duncan!

"Just a short note to let you know:

- (1) I read several articles of yours on the Internet about direct mail and tried to follow your directions as closely as possible.*
- (2) I wrote a 4-page "self-mailer" targeted to professional massage therapists.*
- (3) We tested several different versions.*
- (4) We rolled it out gradually: 1,000 pieces ... 2,000 ... 5,000 ... 7,000.*
- (5) We sent a color version of the best performing letter to 50,000 (a big commitment for us) and the results are coming in just like the earlier tests: a response rate of approx. 3%.*
- (6) We're thrilled! And I want to thank you for sharing your good knowledge on the Web."*

Sincerely,

Richard Gelb

Looking Glass Home Video