

Tips for Effective Direct Mail for Non-Profits

by [Ann Marie Amico](#)

While many organizations have begun to rely more heavily on online marketing, traditional direct mail is still an important part of a successful marketing mix. A combination of both creates an effective campaign that grabs attention and allows you to contact your target audience more than once through different channels to promote a campaign or event. Any direct mail that you send out should encourage your target to go to your website for more information, where you have the opportunity to provide in-depth, updated content. This could be as simple as a postcard with your web site and Facebook information included on it.

What key factors contribute to a successful direct mail campaign? There are several, including the quality of your mailing list, the offer you make in your communication, strong design, effective copy, the timing of the campaign, and mailing specifications. Additionally, the lead-time you give your designer, the time you build into your schedule for printing and mailing, the type of printing you choose and USPS mailing specifications and costs have a huge impact on the success of your project.

Whether you are new to developing direct mail campaigns or a veteran testing your existing knowledge, the following tips will guide you as you develop your next project.

1. The quality of the mailing list you use has an impact on success.

Whether your organization has compiled a database or you purchase lists from other organizations or list services, the more carefully your mailing list is matched with your target, the more successful your campaign will be. These purchased mailing lists can be compiled with names that conform to detailed specifications—age, income, number of children, interests, professions and more. The more detailed and precise the list, the more expensive it is. There may be a positive trade-off if that more expensive list results in a well-matched target audience. Your mailing house or printer can provide more information if you are interested in purchasing a list.

2. Your offer is a very important part of selling your campaign.

What are you offering to help induce your target to act? Whether you're appealing to their charitable nature or offering an interesting fund raising event, an offer can encourage a quicker or more generous response. If you are looking for sponsors, will they receive

premier seating, tables or tickets to the event or special recognition? If you are soliciting donations, is there a thank you gift that donors will receive?

Consider offering special recognition. Create an opportunity for exclusive membership with a donation—a *Council of Advisors* or *Executive Circle* and send a certificate, preferably framed. Make sure the certificate expires. The year should be prominently displayed on the certificate so an awareness is developed that the opportunity to renew the honor will present itself again.

Mention the offer three times throughout your communication and repeat it in a PS. Studies show that the P.S. is the first thing many readers will read, making it a critical part of your content. Don't forget to tell your reader exactly what you want them to do to take advantage of your offer—visit the website to register and pay, return the registration card with a check—make it clear and easy to complete that action.

3. Design should support the message, not be the message.

Remember that the design and copy need to support your message, not overwhelm it. The piece needs to break through the clutter of everyday mail and distractions, interrupt what your target is doing and win their attention for a few moments. Does your reader understand your offer immediately or are they distracted by unrelated visuals that detract from your message? Stories abound about the clever Super Bowl commercials that entertain but don't inform. Avoid cleverness for the sake of cleverness.

It might not be a "pretty" piece that gets the job done—pay attention to the direct mail pieces that come through your door. Some effective pieces make use of bold and italic type, underlining and jarring color combinations.

Make sure your reader can easily navigate your content. Would a short, to-the-point piece be right for your project or would a multi-piece packet be more effective?

Consider readability for the visually impaired—make sure your type is large enough to be easily read. Avoid color combinations that are difficult to read—red or orange on blue, black on darker colors and type reversed out of complicated backgrounds.

Remember that people react strongly to pictures of other people. From studies we know a face is the first thing people notice on a page. If you have an effective photograph that is obviously related to your theme—and you have a signed release from the person/people in the photo and own the rights to it, consider using it for greater impact. If you use a digital photo from an online vendor, make sure you have secured usage rights.

Use your envelopes for more than stamps and addresses. Begin to entice your reader before they open the envelope. Copy on the outside of the envelope can set the tone—something that looks official, like “Your exclusive invitation is enclosed...” or something guileless and handwritten like, “Please listen!” or “Help!”.

On the envelope, a handwritten message shouldn’t be longer than a very few words; a printed message shouldn’t exceed two very brief lines and a typewritten lead-in message can be as long as necessary to draw the recipient into your offer. **When doing anything different than a standard mailing, including using the outside of the envelope for copy, it’s a good idea to clear the design with the mail piece design consultant at the US Post Office.** You can fax your layout or send a mock-up and talk to the mail piece consultant on the phone.

Postal regulations have changed significantly over the last couple of years, with more changes anticipated in the future. Envelope color and labeling are now more strictly regulated by the post office, along with size, weight and flexibility. Include this information, along with your design, when you have it reviewed by your local mail piece design consultant. Remember that this very important step can add two or three days to your production time, but it is time well spent to avoid the expense and embarrassment of having your mail returned because it doesn’t comply with postal regulations.

A note about graphics for your mail pieces

Pay attention to that old printer’s expression, “garbage in/garbage out.” It sounds harsh, but it’s true. If you give your designer or printer a poor quality image to work with, whether it’s your logo or a photograph or any other graphic you’d like to have included in your piece, they may not be able to help you project the quality and professionalism your organization desires. Art for print needs to be between 300 and 600 dpi (dots per inch). That’s high resolution. A graphic for the screen or Web is low resolution and a 72 dpi image is sufficient. But that low resolution graphic cannot maintain its integrity when printed. The resolution cannot be increased to print quality without resizing the image to a size too small to be used. Enlarging the low resolution file results in a fuzzy, pixilated printed image. That’s why your designer can’t just go to your web site and download the logo (or picture) you have there. If an image needs to be increased in size for the finished piece, then it needs to be 600 dpi or higher, depending on the required finished size.

Working with a designer

If your organization decides to develop the piece using an outside designer, it's very important to build enough time into your project schedule to allow the designer to do good work. That person is juggling several other projects at any given time. Be specific in what you are requesting of the designer so you receive an accurate estimate of the cost for their services. Would you like multiple concepts? Will the designer be supplying the copy? Is this a rush job? Will they be writing the print specs and obtaining bids from printers? If so, be clear on the quantity you require. Will they contact the mail house, if one is required?

If you want a high quality project completed on time, it is important to have all the components of your project ready at the beginning. This includes high resolutions logos for the organization and sponsors, high resolution photographs, complete copy and any lists of names to be included on the piece. If you are not able to supply those things when you initiate the project, make sure the designer is aware of that factor. While last minute edits and additions can be worked into the project, they should be the exception rather than the rule.

Keep in mind that designers and other creatives are approached by many organizations every year requesting discounted or free services. They may not be able to accommodate one more pro-bono or discount client. If you are unable to pay for services, you may need to contact several designers to find one with available time or consider working with a design student. Again, allowing time in your schedule for those complications will give you the most successful outcome.

4. Copy—make your best pitch

The copy should be written with words that resonate with your target audience. Your piece should reflect your knowledge of the frame of reference of your target. Should you consider using other languages in addition to English?

In fundraising copy, appeal to status or guilt. Make sure your reader knows that they were especially chosen. Paint a clear, emotional picture of the needs of your constituents or organization. Replace intellectual words with emotional words and you'll get a better response.

Some examples:

- help instead of aid
- good for instead of beneficial

- write you instead of contact you
- hope instead of desire

Develop a list of key words or phrases that describe your organization and target the specific goals of your group. This can be done by reviewing your mission or vision, brainstorming, analyzing past projects, checking out other non-profit collateral or simply using a dictionary and thesaurus. Narrow down your choices to the most descriptive and accurate. Test your future messages and projects against this list to be sure they continue to build your brand and strengthen your message.

5. Timing is critical—it's not just an expression

The mail is especially cluttered at the end of the fourth quarter. Unless your communication offers an opportunity for a year-end tax break or a unique holiday function, that may not be the time to compete for attention. Depending on your target audience, April tax-time might be a difficult time to be noticed. The month of August when people are finishing vacation and getting children ready for school is also not the best time of the year to grab people's attention. Finally, during election years, in the days and weeks running up to an election, the flood of campaign collateral headed to printers, mail houses and the postal service intended for businesses and homes can delay every step of your project and impact its impression on your target audience.

6. Your budget is your friend

Being familiar with the budget your organization has established for a particular project makes all the decisions associated with it easier and the production process much smoother. You can quickly determine if you can afford professional design services. You will know if you can swing an elaborate print job or need to find a simple solution. (That information will save design time and prevent rework, too.) If your mailing list is ready when the project begins, you can send it to a mail house to determine what your postage cost will be and savings you might incur by having your mailing labeled and barcoded. (More information about mail house services is included in the Mail section of this article.) By establishing a realistic budget for your project, you will avoid frustration, delays and disappointment on the part of your organization and your vendors. Providing that information to your designer at the beginning of the project will avoid a design that you can't afford to print or mail.

7. Great printing will let your project shine

It's important to remember to get multiple quotes on a project. If the printer knows you've put the project out to bid to several people, you'll be sure to get a price that they feel is

competitive. Every printer isn't right for every job. Some specialize in small offset jobs, like stationery, business cards, and small brochures in smaller quantities. Others are more competitive in big print runs or in large format pieces like booklets or maps. Ask other organizations which printers they've used successfully. Ask the printer directly about the areas in which they are most competitive. It's normal to fall into a comfortable relationship with vendors, but you do need to make sure you're aware of market prices and whether or not your job and a particular printer are a good match.

Make sure your ink and paper choices support your goal and fall within your budget. As consumers, we get so used to seeing full-color mailers that we sometimes forget that a well-designed one- or two-color project can stand out in the sea of junk we sort through every day. Talk to your printer and designer about the best approach. Is there an attractive way to design the piece in one or two colors? Is there a paper that's less expensive but will do a quality job? Don't be afraid to ask questions until you're satisfied that you've found the best combination of creative, cost and quality. One- and two-color print work also reflects a commitment to good stewardship of the funds you solicit, although there are times when a full color job is completely appropriate.

There are times when finding a print provider on the Web is a good choice. One that I've used successfully many times is www.gotprint.com. There are many other similar sites. The positives are great prices and high quality full color work. The negatives are the need to order in quantities of 1000 or more, the lack of proximity if problems do arise, the need to fit your piece to the format offered by the print company, and the length of time from submission to delivery. With enough advance planning and consideration to the offered formats, you may be able to find great prices for your projects.

8. Mailing can make or break your project

Talk to the printer or mail house early in your process about postage costs so there aren't any surprises. You may need to create a mock up of your final piece, using the chosen paper and envelope size, to take to the post office or mail piece consultant to determine your final per piece mailing cost. Unusual sizes, heavy paper, inserts and color envelopes are all complicating factors that can add and processing time and mailing expense to your project.

Using a mail house to inkjet and barcode addresses on your envelopes can save postage. It qualifies your mail for a lower postage rate. You can also hire the mail house or printer to do special folding or insertions if required for your project. Compare their prices for that work and be clear with the designer, printer and mail house on which duties will be

completed by each vendor. As mentioned before, providing the mail house with an accurate list early in the project will help you gauge your mailing costs and avoid unnecessary expense. You usually need to provide that list in Excel or Word format, but check with your mail house for confirmation. You will also need to pay the postage amount to the mail house prior to beginning the job. If that detail is overlooked, there will be a delay in your mailing. Your printer can recommend one or more mail houses or you can find them in the yellow pages.

9. Testing and Return on Investment (ROI) leads to future success

Testing the effectiveness of your direct mail campaigns is very important. Unfortunately, a true testing process (sending out variations of a message and tracking their effectiveness) isn't usually in the budget for small organizations. But you can be sure that the largest organizations and businesses have done serious testing. So pay attention to what they are sending out and learn from them. Don't plagiarize, just notice how and what they say and the creative that supports the message/offer. And use the techniques you see to guide your own choices. Start a collection of pieces that come from the big guys in the non-profit world and large businesses.

Tracking your return on investment is easier. Keep detailed notes on what you spent for every phase of development in the project, including the man-hours within your organization. Then, track the donations and sponsorships that are directly related to the direct mail campaign. Having clear goals for each project/campaign and determining whether donations and sponsorships met your goals and exceeded your expenses is critical. Tracking this information for each project over time will help you determine the best processes, effectiveness and your return on investment and help guide you in future projects.

Direct mail campaigns are an important part of any non-profit's communication strategy. By developing clear goals, realistic budgets and allowing ample time for research, development and trouble shooting, you greatly increase the odds for a successful campaign. And you can enjoy the process!

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