

10 direct-mail mistakes

The effectiveness of a direct-mail campaign can be wiped out by one simple mistake in the process. So before you venture along this track, make sure you know how to steer clear of the pitfalls.

STORY JULIAN YOUNG

So, it's settled. You've decided that direct mail is the way to go. You've heard about the benefits and you're ready to pull the campaign together.

In principle, it sounds pretty straightforward – take your message, get your hands on a contact list, create a mail piece and off you go.

It's certainly true that the beauty of direct mail lies in its simplicity. At the end of the day, consumers just love receiving something real in the mail that speaks to them and appeals to their interests. However, getting a direct-mail campaign to deliver the kind of response rate and return on investment that marketers dream about means avoiding some common mistakes; mistakes that trip up both rookie and experienced direct marketers alike.

Priority asked two of Australia's leading direct marketers about some of the key mistakes they see made time and time again – and their advice on how to avoid them to deliver a winning campaign.



Linda Loose is principal of direct and digital marketing agency Linda Loose Marketing & Communications. She was formerly general manager at JWT Direct New York and JWT Direct Australia and is an inductee in the Australian Direct Marketing Association Hall of Fame.



1 TARGETING YOUR AUDIENCE

According to Loose, the difference in response rates generated by the best contact list versus the worst for any particular offering can be two, five or even 10 times! With this in mind, she says that deciding who to mail is the single most important decision to make.

“Sometimes you have smart data to guide you; sometimes you don’t and you have to make informed guesses. The most common mistake I’ve seen clients make over the years – apart from simply not giving the issue top priority – is ignoring or throwing out past data and learnings and starting again, making the same targeting blunders over and over.”

2 UNDER-COOKING THE OFFER

What specifically do I get for what you’re asking me to do? Why should I respond now versus later or never?

Loose says that the best direct marketers know that the more specific, urgent, relevant and irresistible the offer, the stronger the response. Certainly, such an offer tends to have more response-differentiating power than the creative.

“The best direct marketers spend time painstakingly crafting offers to generate both the quantity and quality of response desired. The less experienced offer bland ‘more information’ or ‘call today’ offers without a compelling and specific reason, or bury the offer in a secondary position in the mail pack and don’t give it a chance to work its magic.”

3 TALKING TO YOURSELF INSTEAD OF YOUR AUDIENCE

Loose believes there is still too much corporate speak and the use of “we” in direct mail – basically, the marketer saying what they

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want to say rather than what the customer wants to hear and is likely to respond to.

“Then you have creators revelling in the cleverness of their copy rather than the clarity of their communication,” she says. “Some of this is a result of process – language compromised into meaninglessness by 15 layers of approval. But a lot of it simply comes from not thinking hard enough about who you’re talking with and what they care about.”

According to Loose, a good exercise to help avoid this is to always ask yourself: why wouldn’t someone read, want, believe or do something about this? She encourages marketers to prick their own corporate bubble of self-belief and try to understand what matters to their target audience.

4 FAILING TO LEVERAGE THE UNIQUE POWER OF MAIL

“By that I don’t mean not spending heaps on it or making it fancy enough,” says Loose.

“What I’m referring to is not understanding the dynamics of how a mail pack and its components work, and not sweating every detail to make sure it works its hardest. From what you do or don’t say on the outside to the choice of response mechanisms and how they are structured, the strategic use of inserts and involvement devices, how the letter leads and flows, and more.”

Loose says that perhaps the biggest mistake you can make in this regard is leaving out a letter – in most cases, mailings still work better when a letter is included.

5 FINDING AN EXCUSE NOT TO TEST

Loose says this is the oldest rant in the direct marketing book ... and the most ignored.

“If you’re not testing the various elements of your campaign, comparing one tactic with another head-on and learning what works better or worse, you will:

- a) repeat the same mistakes over and over, and
- b) never know how much more successful you could have been.

“This is [a mistake] that too often falls in that too-hard basket. ‘We don’t have time to test’ is something I hear all the time, along with ‘We don’t have budget to test’ and ‘It’s too complicated – keep it simple for me’.

“Rest assured: if you don’t devote time and budget and hard work to testing, you will be immeasurably poorer in the long term.”

HELP IS AT HAND

Fortunately, there are many great resources available in Australia for anyone interested in developing a direct-mail campaign. Whether you’re an SME or a marketer working in a large company, they can steer you in the right direction and help ensure that you avoid the mistakes described in this feature. We’ve listed a few below.

- **Australia Post’s direct-mail resource:** auspost.com.au/mailmarketing
- **Open Up To Mail:** www.openuptomail.com.au
- **Australian Direct Marketing Association (ADMA):** www.adma.com.au



Rebecca Pountney is Manager Channel Communications, Mail Marketing – Letters Group, Australia Post. She has previously held marketing communication roles with companies such as BankWest, Deacons Lawyers and RAC WA, and is an active member of the ADMA Mail Council.



Shining lights

The best Australian direct marketing campaigns are rewarded each year by the Australian Direct Marketing Association (ADMA) at their annual awards night. We've included here some previous ADMA award winners that are great examples of the power of a well-executed direct-mail campaign.

CASE STUDY 1

Client Lexus

Agency Saatchi & Saatchi

Campaign IS 250X

Lexus was facing threats from luxury car competitors and needed to invigorate interest among prospective customers. While they had achieved success with the IS 250 range, they decided to bolster the range with a limited-edition IS 250X series that was put together just for the Australian market. The challenge was to engage an audience regularly targeted by luxury car manufacturers. A mail pack was sent to existing Lexus owners due for an update; prospective customers who had requested information on the IS 250; and a purchased cold list fitting their target profile. The highly targeted mailing saw Lexus achieve a new record, with the series selling out within three months.



1 NOT GETTING OTHER OPINIONS

It's hard to believe in this day and age but, according to Pountney, typos and other basic errors are still fairly common in direct mail.

"There's just no excuse for spelling or grammar mistakes in a direct-mail piece – or any other marketing communication, for that matter," she says.

"It's easy to get too close to your own campaign, so give it a reality check by having someone else proofread the mail pack before you sign it off. Some of these people might just check spelling for you, while others can give you feedback on how easy it is to read, understand and take action on. Don't be afraid of some constructive feedback!"

2 A MUDDLED CALL TO ACTION

Have you ever reached the end of a letter and been unclear on what you're meant to do next?

CASE STUDY 2

Client Fuji Xerox Document Supplies Division

Agency MercerBell

Campaign Swear Jar

The print industry is largely based on personal relationships, something Fuji didn't have with its target audience. The challenge was to sell its premium paper for colour printing to SME print business managers and owners at a higher price than its competitors. The strategy centred around shifting the focus away from the greater unit cost of the product and promoting the long-term benefits it could deliver in terms of production efficiency. The creative tapped into the insight that it's "B*!#!#Y!" frustrating when a paper jam occurs, regardless of the size of the print run. They used this to highlight Fuji's Colotech paper, which is scientifically formulated to reduce printer jams.

Pountney says that when direct-mail pieces don't have a clear call to action, the chances are that, no matter what the offer, the consumer's next move will be to put the pack straight into the recycling bin.

"Make sure you're very clear on what you want the reader to do – do you want them to call you? go into your retail outlet? mail back a reply-paid form? visit their personalised URL? Whatever the call to action is – and remember that it doesn't necessarily have to be 'buy now' – make sure it's clearly articulated multiple times throughout the mail pack."

3 IGNORING THE WHIMS OF YOUR AUDIENCE

"The great thing about people is we're all different," says Pountney.

"Some of us like lots of Vegemite on our toast, some like just a smidge; some of us open an envelope from the top, others to the left, others to the right. If the order of the contents in your mail pack is important, make sure you test some live samples before the mailing is lodged to see how people open the envelope and go through the various elements."

Pountney argues that, while it seems like a minor consideration, ensuring that you get the order of your contents right may save 90 per cent of the target audience from seeing the back of the letter first instead of the front, which you've likely spent a great deal of time slaving over.

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4 LACK OF INTERNAL PREPAREDNESS

There's nothing worse than getting a relevant, compelling direct-mail pack that inspires you to respond immediately – only to find that the retail sales person or call centre operator has absolutely no idea about the offer you've received.

According to Pountney, setting up the right internal processes is definitely not the most glamorous part of a direct mail campaign but it is critical and can ultimately be the difference between the campaign's success or failure.

"If your call to action directs the target audience to a personalised URL, make sure it works. If it's pushing consumers to your retail outlets, make sure the staff are briefed on

the offer and who received it. If it's directing enquiries to a call centre, make sure you track the calls coming in and not just the sales that come out at the end, and that the operators fully understand the campaign. If it's using multiple response mechanisms – which it should be to ensure the best chance of success – then do all of those things."

5 NOT LEARNING FROM THE CAMPAIGN

Following on from the adage "test, test and test again" is an equally important step: "measure, measure and measure again".

"After all, what's the point in setting up a complicated test matrix if you're not actually able to measure the different outcomes?" asks Pountney.

"Also, don't just be limited to basic measurement, though anything is better than nothing. If you're running a large number of direct-mail campaigns to a large proportion of existing or prospective customers on a regular basis, why not include a measure of direct-mail recall in your advertising tracking research? On a more basic level, you should at least be looking at:

- which offers pulled both a greater initial response and conversion
- which channels were more effective
- which customers responded and, just as importantly, which didn't – and why
- what your best overall-performing mail pack looked like." ■

CASE STUDY 3 ►

Client Commonwealth Bank

Agency BMF

Campaign Asset Finance

Asset Finance is used by businesses for purchasing equipment and vehicles. In 2008, Commonwealth Bank was not seen as a primary player in this market and had a stagnant market share. The strategy was to create a campaign that was personal and relevant to the target audience. Commonwealth Bank recognised that personalisation is a great way to lift response and works especially well with direct mail and eDMs. The creative concepts used the line: "Asset Finance. Most bankers can talk the talk, but do they know their <X> from their <Y>?". The message varied according to the industry being targeted. Overall, the bank produced more than 140 variations of the main line.

