



25 Tried and True Direct Marketing Rules

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Direct marketing is one of the oldest forms of marketing. It predates the Internet, email, and social media. One of our founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, helped pioneer the concept of direct marketing with his mail-order catalog in 1744. Even the title, “A Catalog of Choice and Valuable Books,” would still generate response today.

Early direct marketers dedicated their lives to studying the strategies that drive response. Many of the fundamental direct marketing principles are still successful today. Below, we’ve highlighted 25 tried and true direct response marketing rules to help you create a winning strategy.

1. Don’t treat envelope teasers as an afterthought.

Envelope and self-mailer teasers are critical to getting a response. Just like an email subject line, nothing happens until the envelope gets opened. Make your teasers provide a strong reason to open the envelope.

2. Invoke the power of testing.

The success of all direct response marketing hinges on testing for continuous improvement. Simple changes can sometimes mean big increases in response. Example: Your direct mail largely depends on your envelope getting opened. When you see the response for a direct mail control start to dip, test changing the color of the envelope. We’ve seen response increase 5-20% over the control mail package simply by doing this.

3. Avoid reverse type.

Your copy must get read to get a response in direct. While designers love reverse copy, years of testing show that reverse type usually doesn’t perform well – especially if it is a large block of copy.

4. Avoid red copy in a black box.

Red copy in a black box is almost impossible to read – especially for seniors. As people get older, the eye begins to see the two colors as the same.

5. Never assume that long copy never works.

Audience and strategy should determine the length of your copy.

For example, a lead generation letter will normally be shorter than one selling a service.

6. Never try to sell two things in one communication.

Years of direct response testing proved that you should avoid selling two things at once.

Keep it focused on one product or service or you end up diluting both and selling nothing.

(Note: this is true for online marketing as well.)

7. Use both emotional and rational appeals.

Including both emotional and rational appeals works better than just using one. Research shows that most people use both thought processes to make a buying decision.

8. Include phone numbers for your response.

While prospects will often go to the web to do research, your best leads still often come from inbound calls. Include a phone number and make it easy for prospects to reach you.

9. Make letters look like letters.

Designers love to add graphics and use fancy type fonts. Letters work because they seem personal. The minute you add lots of graphics, your letter starts to look too promotional.

10. Begin with the end in mind.

When writing for a direct response campaign, always begin with the end in mind. Example: The great direct response copywriters always started with the response form. After all, if you don't know what you want the prospect to do, how can you know how to motivate them to take action?

11. Create multiple touches.

One touch is not enough for lead generation. Consider a minimum of three. If you can only afford one mailing, don't waste your money trying to do lead generation. It will not be successful. Note: B2B takes a minimum of five touches, including email.

12. Focus on the offer in lead generation.

Many copywriters make the mistake of trying to sell a product or service in lead generation. You need to sell the offer (guides, eBooks, or other information prospects find valuable), not how great the company is. Customers are always wondering, "What's in it for me?" and "What's the next step?"

13. Use the power of P.S.

Sometimes, the secret to direct mail success starts at the end. P.S. is the second most read part of a letter. A simple P.S. tacked on at the end of your message can grab the customer's attention. Use it to highlight benefits or reinforce calls-to-action.

14. Format your content for scanning.

Direct marketing pros know the importance of making your copy easy to scan. Formatting the copy is critical to make this happen. Direct marketers use techniques like bolding, bullets, indenting and underline to help readers scan for the most important points.

15. Know your readability score.

The best copywriters make sure their copy is easy to read. In most cases, it's written for eighth-grade level or below. The more three-plus syllable words you use, the harder copy is to read. Sentences should not be more than 13 words. Paragraphs should not contain more than three to four sentences. (Pro Tip: Select "Show readability statistics" in Microsoft Word.)

16. Always include POWER words in your copy.

Years of testing uncovered consistent patterns in words that appeal to the human brain. Use these power words to increase response rates.

Examples of power words are: "you," "free," "results," "money," "save," "easy," and "now."

17. Use real testimonials.

Wherever possible, use testimonials that include a person's name, photo and location. They have so much more credibility and relevance than initials or quotes with no photo. The more you can include about the person giving the testimonial the more the prospect can relate.

18. Avoid all CAPS.

Avoid all upper case type if you want your copy read. This approach makes your copy harder to read. Eye studies show that people read uppercase text up to 10 percent slower. Use a combination of upper and lower case, or all lower case type. If you want to emphasize text, consider alternatives like bullet points, subheads and bold type.

19. Choose your formats wisely.

Choose the appropriate format for your direct marketing packages. For example, letter packages and snap packs usually work best for lead generation. Postcards and self-mailers work well as reminders or when there is a sense of urgency. Postcards work well for driving traffic into stores or online.

20. Leverage email testing.

Take advantage of the fast and inexpensive benefits of email testing prior to sending out thousands of direct mail packages. Test your envelope teaser ideas as email subject lines. The direct mail teaser line serves a similar purpose to the email subject line – to get a recipient to open the message. If you're able to reach a similar audience with email as direct mail, you can also test the direct mail offers in email. Apply your email findings to your direct mail efforts to create a winning package.

21. Test Brochures.

Test the ROI of including a brochure or an extra insert beyond the letter and response form in your mail package. We recently tested the value of including a brochure for one of our clients doing lead generation. We found that the brochure did not produce enough lift in response to justify the cost. It was eliminated.

22. Know the power of location.

Geography can impact response, so test more than one direct mail package or approach across multiple markets. We have a client that mails to 10 states. What works well in one market does not always work as well in another. You can never assume.

23. Space out multiple mail drops to the same audience.

Direct marketing strategy should determine the number of mail drops to the same audience. When mailing to the same list, it's ideal to have at least a 3 - 4 week gap between mailings. A second mail drop of consumer mail will usually get about half of the response of the first mail drop.

24. Use live read endorsements (radio).

Live read is a powerful tool for generating response from radio. Personality endorsements work because listeners tend to have a relationship of trust with their favorite radio presenters. Think about the power of a testimonial from a popular radio station personality.

25. Include multiple channels.

Direct response marketing works best when there is more than one channel used. We continue to see direct mail perform better if an email, print ad or even display digital advertising are integrated into the campaign.

Conclusion

Direct marketing rules are timeless. Even in an increasingly digital marketing space, direct marketing principles still drive results today. Use a clear and compelling design, powerful copy and multiple touch points to motivate your customers and prospects. The right offer to the right audience at the right time is still the most effective direct response marketing strategy for getting customers to take action.



If you'd like to talk about how DMN3 could help you generate more revenue from your marketing, please contact Pam Lockard at pam.lockard@dmn3.com or 832-844-2645.