



# Guide to Using Direct Mail

Social Sciences Team

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## History and Authorship

This publication was a result of a collaboration between literally scores of public and private organizations that formed an alliance in late 1991 called the Crop Residue Management (CRM) Campaign. This campaign was a successful effort to raise awareness and adoption of CRM agricultural techniques. Industry, USDA agencies, commodity groups, grower associations, and the farm media pooled resources to assist American farmers adopt practices that would provide both production and conservation benefits.

Osborne & Barr Communications, a Saint Louis, Missouri media company, and a member of the alliance, originally developed this publication, and distributed it to the participating organizations for use in marketing CRM practices. This current effort updates the information and will place it on the Internet so it is widely available to some of the same groups who participated in the original CRM campaign.

Frank Clearfield, National Sociologist, Natural Resources Conservation Service, was part of the original CRM team and is currently NRCS's Social Sciences Team leader. Any changes from the original document can be attributed to his edits.

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# Preface

**T**he following chapters are intended as an introduction to the basic principles of direct mail, especially as they apply to the mission of field offices in the NRCS. This guide is designed to serve as reference, and as a starting point. In it, we will explore the principles of direct mail marketing.

This guide is not intended to replace the important personal efforts of communications with customers. Direct mail can, however, be used to augment the field activity of staffers, serving as a valuable time-saving tool.

Used properly, direct mail can be used to identify and interact with customers who have a special need or interest in communicating with the NRCS.

As such, direct mail offers field office staff another tool for maintaining quality contact with a meaningful percentage of customers by means other than face-to-face communication. In addition, direct mail is an excellent tool for building networks of enthusiastic volunteers, either among farmers and ranchers, or among agribusiness people and others with an abiding interest in American agriculture.

# Introduction

**T**o begin with, direct mail marketing is interactive, one-on-one communication. The term direct means targeted communication, where only specific needs are contacted. In fact, what's called junk mail is mail that goes to the wrong audience. If a piece of mail reaches the person who needs to hear from you, and for whom your message is important, that piece of mail is anything but "junk." It is directed mail, and, as such, it is the least wasteful of any advertising communications.

Direct means that response is the primary objective of the transaction. Only a telephone call or a personal visit has more immediate impact than a direct mail letter – though both of these strategies are more invasive and expensive.

By contrast, the mail has the advantage of being both printed and personal, capable of being read and re-read at the customer's leisure.

This characteristic of direct mail is especially valuable in communicating with farmers, who often live in remote areas, and whose work hours and work location makes easy access difficult.

Historically, farmers were the first heavy users of mail order catalogs, and have always responded well to direct mail. This continues to be true. Farmers' lengthy work day and their comparative isolation lend well-executed direct mail extra persuasive power. Because only direct mail offers customers the means to read your personal message and then respond to it entirely at their convenience.

As such, direct mail is less a mass marketing tool than one for speaking to and hearing from your customers as individuals. Direct mail also allows you to use what you know about your customers' needs and concerns to customize the message and make it as personal as possible.

# Basic Principals

**A**s a marketing tool, direct mail works best when used for any of the following objectives:

- Customer needs identification, information gathering and database development and enhancement
- Relationship management and fulfillment
- Personalized persuasion-selling

Each of these objectives reflect the interactive character of direct mail, and the fact that it is a response-driven medium.

**If the objective is to raise customer awareness, the mail may be less effective than other media**, especially when defined in terms of the cost per contact. Articles placed in trade publications and print advertising are more effective at reaching large numbers of people in order to tell an important story, or to alert customers to issues that affect their lives and business.

However, if the objective is selective, i.e. you intend to reach just the members of a relatively small, highly targeted group, direct mail is the ideal medium. Its personal character gives it a special edge. A direct mail letter monopolizes your customer's attention as long as it is read.

General advertising – whether print or broadcast-comes to the audience through media that are, in most cases, more important to the customer than the advertising. People read magazines and newspapers and watch television for other reasons than to read your message.

By contrast, direct mail arrives all by itself to be opened, read and responded to at the customer's convenience.

# Limits of Direct Mail

**D**irect mail offers you the opportunity to measure response to your message. But response depends on how strong a reason customers have to get back to you. Hence, it may be important to have some kind of offer that motivates the recipient to act.

Keep in mind, however, that not all offers have to be tangible premiums, such as caps or buckles. Some of the most effective offers in agriculture have to do with the value of your service. Your problem then becomes how best to define that value concisely and effectively.

Getting a response also reflects a fundamental truth that all customers are not created equal. The 80/20 rule, which is based on the theory that 80 percent of one's business comes from 20 percent of its customer base, holds to some degree for field-based agencies just as it does for most businesses (except, of course the IRS). In the best of circumstances, this means that, unless compelled, the great majority

of customer-initiated transactions will always come from a committed, interested few.

Response rates – even with a strong offer to well-targeted customers with strong reasons to be committed and interested – will almost inevitably be a fraction of that active, interested 20 percent.

Getting a high rate of response from an important target population depends to a great extent on the following elements:

- Mailing list to target specific groups
- Attractive offer that initiates response
- An attractive mail format consistent with the objective

A letter with a strong selling argument relevant to your customer's needs and circumstances:

- A reply mechanism that is easy to execute
- Timely fulfillment and continuity

# Using Your Database to Plan Mailings

## Defining the Mission:

**M**ore mailings fail because of poor planning than for any other reason. In developing a successful direct mail campaign, as with any marketing effort, it is important to identify the objective and to define the mission as specifically as possible.

## Lists and field office database:

A computerized database is designed to capture and maintain key data on the customer base. Properly used, field office personnel have a substantial resource for planning and targeting communications and marketing.

A database allows field employees to create lists of target groups. A target group essentially allows planners to focus on key characteristics of a selected portion of the customer base.

Defined by such selected characteristics (e.g. farmers with wetlands on their

property, or landowners with 50% or more highly erodible land), a target group is developed to enable planners to determine the range of opportunities and needs associated with the selected population and develop a marketing strategy and a creative approach.

Using a computerized relational database, field employees can select a target group by key status criteria, including recency of interaction with the office, and ultimately generate a targeted mailing list.

After having defined a target group, focus on meeting their needs:

Knowing the characteristics of the target population is the first ingredient in any successful mailing. After this, the next most important factor to consider is the objective and action sought, ultimately how is the call to action going to satisfy their need for your service.

Your mailing should be designed around the promise you make and the means you offer of fulfilling that promise.

**C**reate the letter and the reply device so that they function as if they were the customer's sole access to the satisfaction of their need.

In light of this, it is important to determine the ability to fulfill the promise and satisfy the customer.

That's why the impact of caseloads on the marketing effort generally, and on direct mail in particular should be an integral part of the planning process for any mailing.

For example, how many customers will be needing to communicate with you over the normal course of business? And what will be the impact of inviting customers to respond? Can you improve operational efficiency by using direct mail to allow customers to self select in advance? Can you handle the responses?

Important things to consider in planning any mailing are:

- Base population of customers, which are your primary prospects
- The hierarchy of service-need among this population: i.e. how many need service right away versus those whose needs are less urgent
- Service capacity – i.e. how many face-to-face contacts can conservationists manage in a given period of time?

Consider, for example, customers needing information about wetlands could be offered a free “guide to wetlands legislation.” The idea is to offer information “pro-actively,” as a way of anticipating customer needs, and therefore, managing your caseload. Responders identify themselves as especially needy users of services.

# Targeting and Delivering Information

**T**he field office list at a minimum provides the following:

- Core database of customers: name, name of business, address and key demographics
- Customer status, and record of activities

List characteristics will vary, but any list should reflect the core customer base. Ideally, the list will include data that indicates customer needs, and characteristics that affect how they are to be served.

For example, NRCS's Field Office computers provides a tool for identifying and tracking key customer data: type of farm/ranch operation, acreage and soil types farmed, and tillage practices called for (if any) under Farm Bill programs. Other data items can be used to provide background and tickler information: farm size, part-time status, renters, contact dates, action taken and action needed are all pertinent.

**Mailing lists are only as good as their currency:**

The field office database will provide an excellent tool for managing high quality customer relations, but only if the database remains current. Periodic maintenance and list "perfection" should become a routine exercise, so as to assure that the names and addresses of resident customers remain up-to-date and valid.

Maintaining quality lists is relevant in an alliance building effort, where conservationists develop their own databases of active, interested agribusiness people and other influential people involved in agriculture.

**Perfecting the list:**

Most users of business databases assume that it will be necessary to update the list from one to four times annually. This is done by matching a compiled list (such as telephone directories)

**a**gainst the house list, by use of a post-card mailing designed to update the database, e.g. “Please update our records if there has been any change of your address or status (retired, out of farming, purchased/sold farmland, etc).”

Another important tool for list perfection is telemarketing. This is especially true for business marketers, where lists of decision-makers are subject to frequent change.

### **Defining the objective:**

Once you have selected your target list by characteristic and by need, it is important to consider what you want customers to do in responding to your mailing. For example, do you want them to call a telephone number; or to go to a web site? In certain cases, you may look for a telephone call as a first choice, and a visit to a web site from those who for whatever reasons prefer not to use the telephone.

Whatever your objective, it should be as focused as possible. Planning the objective, and keeping it simple will help you select your format and the method

of response that works best for your organization.

### **Focus on an interactive objective:**

As mentioned earlier, direct mail is ideally suited for effecting measurable response and transactions. Such objectives include gathering customer data and identifying needs, fulfilling requests, managing on-going relationships with users of your service, and, above all, personal persuasion.

Each of these key activities necessitates interaction with the customer. In many cases, a given mission may involve a combination of more than one activity, and may involve more than one step to complete. For example, enrolling farmers in a No-Till Club may require both personalized persuasion and data gathering for a needs assessment i.e., what are farmers interested in learning after joining the club?

**A rule of thumb for defining the mission with dialogue direct mail is that if you can do without customer response, you can do without direct mail. If you can't, then the mail is your medium of choice.**

# Developing an Offer

**I**n addition to identifying and focusing on a target audience, “the offer” is the single most powerful element in any direct mail package. In government-to-business marketing, in particular, the most effective offers provide a tangible benefit closely linked to the relationship you seek with the customer. Offering premiums, such as caps, buckles, and field signs are traditional to agricultural marketing. Also effective are booklets, free information, and contests.

## **The power of FREE information:**

In the case of a government agency, the target audience must want to respond because of the benefits to them. Free information, brochures and other literature, web sites, posters, tools can be useful “offers” that may motivate response to direct mail. Sources of such informational “premiums” may be found through Extension, Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC), agribusiness and the farm press. The latter, for example, are frequently eager to provide reprints of articles, at nominal cost.

Responding with non-governmental information may require networking with local and state alliances of businesses and volunteer organizations involved in agriculture.

## **Intangible offers can work just as effectively:**

The right intangible offer has tremendous potential to pull from a targeted mailing list. Send the recipient to a web site to show their energy use may prove effective enough to generate a response to the mailing. A normal response rate for direct mail is three to four percent. Creating effective intangible offers takes some knowledge of what the customer needs are and offering ways to satisfy those needs.

## Define a clear and simple call to action:

**A**s an interactive medium, direct mail invites the prospect or customer to act. By definition, this means that the direct mail piece – whether it’s a letter, postcard, self-mailer or a 3-dimensional box-mailer—offers the customer both the reason and the means to respond to the sender.

To get this response, a direct mail piece needs a **clear call to action**. This message should be easy to understand, and it should be tied to a risk-free offer or a clear benefit that can be obtained by continuing the dialogue.

Most importantly, the call to action should be easy to execute—e.g. “go to our web site” or “call the following number.” In nearly every case, the easier it is for customers to act, the better the response.

## Eliminate or reduce the perception of risk:

A sure killer of response is anything in the call to action that suggests excessive cost, inconvenience, or the possibility – no matter how remote – of future risk to the responder. Hence the importance of the word “**FREE**” on direct mail pieces.

Eliminating perceived costs or the risk of inconvenience increases the potential for inciting a “what the heck” response even in “luke-warm” prospects. Then, by making the physical mechanics of the act of responding easy, you improve the chances of getting more response to your offer.

# Direct Mail Formats

**A**lthough, budgets and mission normally dictate the direct mail format, not all formats are equal. Envelope packages generally pull better than postcards and self-mailers in initial mailings. However, self mailers and postcards – especially double postcards, which are inexpensive and have a reply mechanism – can be effective.

1. Envelope Package: defined as a separate outside or mailing envelope. An outer envelope offers the obvious benefit of allowing the sender to maximize enclosures of a letter, brochure, reply card and additional items that might improve chances of “lifting” response.

Recent automation efforts on the part of the United States Postal Service (U.S.P.S.) have encouraged mailers to select envelopes that conform to post office standards for automation. To benefit from automation-related postage discounts, envelope sizes may vary from a minimum of 3 1/2 x 5 inches to a maximum of 6 1/8 x 11 1/2 inches.

## EXHIBITS

Non-standard envelopes can range up to 10 x 13 inches, however, these envelopes will be required to pay full postage, and may be subject to limits regarding use of third class bulk mail permits, etc.

You can choose between either “window” or “close face” envelopes. The former is somewhat more commonly used as the window allows for cost savings on addressing and personalizing package elements. The reply card or the letter salutation, for example, can show through the window.

Closed face envelopes are more formal, and may be used effectively when the intention is to look like “official correspondence” or to avoid looking like “direct mail.”

2. Self-mailers and postcards: a self-mailer lacks an outer envelope. There are no design limits other than basic postal requirements; however, in general, self-mailers come off the press complete, ready to address and mail. In most cases, this means that they are cheaper to produce than envelope packages.

The latter is especially true of double postcards, which in the last year or so have become increasingly popular due to their very reasonable production costs, and because customers have become more familiar with and responsive to the format.

## **EXHIBITS**

3. A double postcard is sized to conform with postal requirements and the first-class postage break postcards enjoy. Typically a double postcard is a three or four-fold piece on light card stock with a middle panel that serves as a business reply panel, allowing the piece to be transactional, such as invitations, reminders or announcements, subscriptions, offers, etc. The double post card may be the format of choice, where costs are a factor.

### **Some rules of thumb regarding format selection:**

- The more information the customer needs in order to respond, the more likely you'll need to use an envelope with multiple insertions: e.g. pamphlets, informational materials, etc.
- The more mail customers normally receive, the more reason to select a format sized to break through "mailbox clutter." The idea is to avoid being lost in a stack of mail that is predominantly the same size. Your piece will stand out better if, for example, it's 6" x 9" instead of the standard #10 size.
- Follow-up communications, announcements, invitations (if simple), where the customer's familiarity is well developed, can make good use of self-mailers and double postcards.

## **Single step and multi-step programs:**

**F**requently users of direct mail find that they need to use more than one mailing step to achieve closure with direct mail customers.

Multi-step programs work best with a mixture of formats. Customers frequently may receive an envelope package, decide they want to respond, but procrastinate for some reason. A second, follow-up package can achieve closure with these customers.

However, it is important not to confuse customers with an identical looking package.

The best approach to a multi-step mailing is to maintain continuity in the strategy, and even in graphic treatments, but to vary package formats. A reminder or follow-up message should look like a reminder, and not like a duplicate of a piece of mail the customer has already received.

## **Needs Assessments and Information Gathering, where more than one step may be required:**

Customers are more likely to provide feedback or request assistance when they understand that they will receive some benefit or reward for their trouble. Hence, the benefit of providing a fulfillment or follow-up step to reward responders and to reinforce the relationship value of having responded to the first step of the mailing program.

## **Complexity of the mission dictates the tactics used:**

Generally speaking, the more complicated the interaction called for between customers and the agency, the greater the need for multiple mailings and dialogue marketing.

People like feedback. When they respond to surveys they like to know that someone is listening to them. They want to know what their feedback reveals. Information gathering, in fact, can be an especially effective means of building and sustaining dialogue with customers.

## **Have responders become members:**

**W**here possible, create a sense of privileged access to customers who volunteer information through information gathering activities. Privileged access need not be exclusionary, but simply well positioned benefits to those who take up the offer and respond.

Using again the example of information gathering, begin with packaging the feedback as a special report for responders only. Then, be sure to enclose with this report a means of continuing the dialogue, with bounce-back card to allow for comments and to ask for further interest in receiving assistance. In general, think in terms of every mailing as an opportunity for customers to reply and get back to you with requests for information or assistance.

## **Dialogue Marketing:**

Dialogue marketing is a form of direct mail that emphasizes an on-going relationship with responders. It is the art of establishing and maintaining dialogue with customers that assumes that information traveling to and from customers

has ongoing value to both parties in the transaction. Frequently called a “rewards” programs, dialogue marketing attempts to reinforce the “buying behavior” of customers with benefits of continuing contact.

The key to dialogue marketing is establishing sufficient fulfillment resources and materials to sustain dialogue over a number of steps, either through reports and other feedback, literature fulfillment, or through a combination of these.

In our experience, volunteer organizations or government are especially well positioned to benefit from the dialogue concept. Indeed, the dialogue methodology can support memberships, provide benefits and support a broader constituency than could be maintained solely by face-to-face contact.

# Envelope Treatments

## Getting opened, getting read:

**T**he first responsibility of any mailing is to get opened...and then get read. Getting opened is not automatic. The ingenuity of an entire industry devotes millions of hours every year just to accomplish this end alone. However, there are some simple rules of thumb which can help.

- Depending on the mission and on the source (official correspondence of the NRCS probably gets opened with relative ease), make sure your package is consistent with your objective, both short and long term.
- The more urgent your need to influence a response, the more you may need to incite the respondent to open the package with a message on the outside envelope or self-mailer. Such messages are often called “teasers.”

They invite the reader to open the package containing a key benefit, e.g., “Information on improving your bottom line...details inside!” Or: “Protect your profits this year and next...details inside” Or: “Want to win a FREE Tractor?”

## Highlight NRCS’s local benefits to get opened:

Teasers are not for every package and may not be appropriate or necessary for most NRCS correspondence. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to stress the importance of a particular message. In such cases a message on the outer envelope can be very effective, e.g. “Inside... Important Information On EQIP.”

In most cases, however, where there is a widespread recognition of your organization, and an expectation that official correspondence is important enough to be opened, teasers should be unnecessary. Indeed, the “occasion” of official correspondence can be used to reposition the organization in the minds of its customers by using offers and other dialogue stimulators.

In cases where a strong customer response is called for, the right teaser summary of a key benefit on the outside of the package can be effective.

**Postal regulations limit where you can place copy on the address side of an envelop. However, there are no limits to using the least utilized area on any mailer, which is the reverse side of the address panel.**

# The Direct Mail Letter

**O**f all the elements used in direct mail, nothing has more power to generate response than the letter. Indeed, in test after test of mail packages, those with letters nearly always outperform packages that lack a letter and the personal appeal that only a letter can deliver.

## **How people read the mail:**

Before writing a direct mail letter, it's important to think about how people receive and read mail that arrives in their own mailbox. Do a little self-testing, and consider how much time you devote to perusing the mail before you open any package. Consider, as well, how often you skim over the contents of most letters before deciding to read anything in more detail. Think, too, about how you open a letter and unfold it. Do you start reading before you've completed opening the letter?

## **Keep the following in mind when preparing to write a direct mail letter or self-mailer:**

- A direct mail piece has seven to ten seconds in which to capture a customer's attention.

- Even official correspondence needs to be clear and quick about getting its point across.
- Customers respond when they grasp the value of the offer quickly. To do this they need to perceive the call to action as pertaining to them personally with clear benefits. Because response is a behavior performed, the call to action should link directly to the act of filling out the card or dialing a telephone number.
- Everything in the letter should lead the reader to a reply.

## **Avoid complexity in the offer and in the call to action:**

A mistake mailers frequently make is to ask the customer to do more than one simple thing in responding to a mailing. Direct mail is a medium that relies on making the most of a few seconds of the reader's time to get his/her attention, read the piece and decide on whether or not to respond.

## **Layout of the direct mail letter:**

Anything that slows the reader down, interrupting the flow of attention impedes response.

**T**hat's why it's especially important to start right away with a strong lead that grabs the customer's attention and personal interest.

With most customers, and especially with farmers, straightforward simplicity is best. The layout and "topography" of the package can help you steer the customer to the act of responding to the offer. Keep the layout open. Make sure there's plenty of white space so that the reader's eye can travel down the page easily and rapidly. Underline or indent key points in the sales argument.

### **Involve the customer with the package:**

One strategy for keeping the reader's attention long enough to incite response is to involve the customer to physically handle the mailing package. Transferable mailing labels or stickers – designed to involve the customer while facilitating response – are especially useful tactics.

Multiple pieces in an envelope package, while they increase cost, have the effect of drawing attention to the key benefits you want the customer to consider. Another useful action inciter is the insertion of a supplemental "lift-letter" from a well known authority familiar to the target audience. Such devices add to the "topographical interest" of a direct mail package.

### **Use headlines, bold-face or large type to showcase the call to action and the offer:**

Bold graphics can be achieved in low cost, one and two-color packages, especially through the use of desk-top publishing. The call to action should be boldly displayed throughout the package, with envelope "teaser" copy, as a header in the body copy of the letter or self-mailer, and – very importantly – on the reply form itself.

## The “Johnson Box”:

**D**eveloped by Frank Johnson for American Heritage, a Johnson Box is a summary of the offer, usually in an indented paragraph at the top of a letter in front of the salutation. The idea is to communicate the essence of the persuasive argument to a reader even before unfolding the letter to examine its contents. Typically, a Johnson Box is designed to be the first thing a reader sees when he pulls the letter materials from the envelope. Make sure that the call to action refers to a clear-cut benefit or reward for a simple response.

Direct mail is a great medium for delivering what you promised. Make the call to action a clear declaration the promise will be kept.

## The personal message (the YOU approach):

The letter is a personal message from a “me” to a “you.” It represents the opportunity to address each segment of your targeted audience on their terms by addressing their specific concerns.

A letter should be written from person to person, as if the writer were in the room with the reader. Hence, the importance of the writer as an “I” speaking to a “you.” Avoid using the first person plural, “we.” It is too impersonal, feels institutional, and no “we” ever assisted “you” with anything.

As a writer, your task is to sell the offer – tangible or intangible. To do this effectively, the direct response writer must focus on why the customer buys. What is the value of the offer to the customer? Make the case in personal terms. Where possible, explore the common problems and experiences of the community you are addressing and tie the offer and its benefits to the solution.

Use testimonials and other concrete examples in personal terms wherever possible. Link that value to the customer’s life and work. Show how the reader will benefit from responding.

Create a benefit-oriented message with emotional appeal. Helps the reader feel confident about the value of the offer.

## **Make the letter look like a letter:**

**L**etters should feel like a personal effort on the part of the sender. Avoid sophisticated “printer” typefaces that suggest that many hands may have touched your piece and “distance” you from your customer. Typewriter faces such as Courier, or Elite are consistent with readers’ expectations of a letter. Avoid sans serif typefaces and italics – these are harder to read than serif typefaces. And when you slow the eye down you risk losing the reader altogether.

Use margins and indents, underlining and **bold-face** to accentuate key benefits and features in your message. Every letter sent should be personalized with the senders’ signature as opposed to a generic close. In addition, a letter signed by a familiar local source will influence your audience more than a letter signed by a Washington source.

## **How long should a letter be?**

The best answer to this question is to quote Dick Hodgson, one of America’s preeminent direct mail writers: “There’s no such thing as a letter that is too long – just too boring.”

Successful direct mail letters are only as long as they need to be in order to answer all the questions and objections a customer might have about your offer, or about your service and its benefits.

Remember that a letter is a stand-in for someone in-person answering the customer’s questions and allaying fears and reservations. If you can answer all these questions in a page or less, stop there. But if it takes more pages to tell the story effectively, use them. What’s the use of saving paper if you miss influencing a response.

## **Does anyone read a long letter?**

Yes! In fact, in tests over the years, long copy consistently out pulls short copy. Across the country declining literacy may be eroding this truism. However, in conservative, rural communities, it’s probably better to sin on the side of more thorough explanation and longer copy.

**T**he fact is that most people don't read a sales letter from beginning to end, word-by-word. Rather, they tend to skim the letter looking for what's important to their needs and interests, and to find the answers to their questions or objections.

That's why it's especially important in writing direct mail copy to use paragraph and sentence connectors to help the copy flow. Let the letter layout help you as well with an open, easy-to-read visual format, so that key points can be readily grasped in a quick skimming of the copy.

Judicious use of bold-face type, underlines and a second color can also help you accomplish this objective.

Those customers who have a strong interest in what you're offering will read your message much more closely than will "luke-warm" prospects.

**This is why it's important to work hard in selecting in advance who to send letters to, and knowing in detail about their needs and interests before your mailing.**

### **Some rules of thumb about writing direct mail copy:**

- Always lead with a benefit.
- Don't overestimate the knowledge of your audience...and don't underestimate their intelligence.

### **The following sequence can help you get started and stay on track:**

1. Attract the reader's attention with the strongest benefit pertaining to your reader.
2. Arouse the reader's interest in the usefulness and value of the benefit and link that benefit.
3. Define and describe the proposition in terms that appeal to customer's self-interest, needs and desires.
4. Prove that the proposition will deliver the benefit (offer a guarantee or other risk remover).
5. Ask the reader to take the action desired.

## **How to close a letter:**

**T**he close of the letter is “where the action is.” There is no one way to close a letter. But in every case, it is necessary to reinforce the fundamental offer, often with a guarantee or other announcement of your commitment to serving the customer when he or she responds.

The importance of an honest commitment to the customer cannot be emphasized enough as it relates to closure and response. Guarantees, the offer of free or special information, and the assurance of important benefits at little or no risk will help carry the day.

## **Be emphatic, but don't oversell:**

Farmers especially are skeptical of sales pitches. So don't overdo punchy or forceful copy. Better by far, to stay close to common experience. Shared experiences and anecdotes can work wonders if they're tied directly to the selling argument. Above all, let examples and facts do the arguing.

## **The Postscript:**

If you read much direct mail, you'll notice that in more cases than not, letters make use of a postscript at the end of a letter. This is a result of research that most people read the body of the letter, even if the signature is at the bottom of seven or ten pages. This is because most people want to know who a letter is from.

Postscripts are most effective if there is an offer or an important deadline for action.

# The Reply Device

**T**he reply card or order form is the salesperson's close, and good design is imperative. Here the offer is summarized and the call to action is articulated.

A good reply card is easy-to-read, with plenty of room for the customer to fill out whatever is necessary to respond. Here it's especially important to make it easy as possible for respondents to get back to you.

Many mailers spend a few extra dollars to imprint the customer's name and address on the reply card so that all customers have to do is check a box and drop the card in the mail. Others make use of "piggy-back" labels to simplify the act of responding.

Where possible, mailers print an e-mail address, web site, phone and FAX number (and a time of day to call) to incite "hotter" prospects to get back right away for "extra-fast" service. Here, of course, it is especially important that there is someone to receive the inbound communication. Do not promise it if you can not deliver.

Replies can be a request for more information from a fact sheet or a web site. Also, reply cards can provide opportunities for customers to request assistance for developing a conservation plan, identify a desire to sign up for programs, and serve as a request to evaluate environmental issues on their farm. You, someone from your office, or a person representing your office must respond quickly and effectively to any reply. Excellent customer service is the key to developing an ongoing provider-customer relationship that is built upon trust.

# Conclusion

## Direct Response & Motivation

**P**eople respond and act on an emotional level first. They have to care enough to respond. After all, most people's needs are experienced on an emotional level before they begin to plan or act to meet them. That's why direct mail works best if it appeals to emotional motivators, especially as they derive from the customer's personal experience of problems, opportunities, and benefits. The following themes have an emotional component that have been demonstrated to motivate action and buying behavior in farmers:

## In no order of priority:

- To make money
- To avoid losing money
- To save money
- To make work easier
- To save time
- To take advantage of an opportunity
- To satisfy curiosity
- To protect the family
- To get security
- To protect property or investments
- To get more comfort
- To get ahead of the neighbors
- To avoid falling behind the neighbors
- To avoid trouble
- To avoid criticism
- To gain reputation for leading
- To comply with government regulations
- To gain recognition as a good environmental steward

# Additional Reading

If you're interested in learning more about direct marketing, the following books are an excellent source of detailed information.

Successful Direct Marketing Methods, 8th Edition (2008) by Bob Stone. Perhaps the most comprehensive textbook on the subject. A pioneer direct marketer, Bob Stone is a founder of Stone & Adler, one of the most successful direct marketing agencies in history.

How To Write Powerful Fundraising Letters (1998) by Herschell Gordon Lewis. A great primer for anyone in the non-profit sector who needs to reach a wider audience and generate response.

Direct Marketing Design: The Graphics Of Direct Mail And Direct Response Marketing (1985) by the Direct Marketing Creative Guild, St. Martins Press Publisher. An invaluable, up-to-date reference guide for anyone who is involved with creating direct mail.

Newsletters From The Desktop by Roger C. Parker. A step-by-step guide to producing cost-effective, attractive newsletters, month-by-month. Go to <http://www.newentrepreneur.com/>

Looking Good in Print, 4th Edition (1998) by Roger C. Parker. A classic book about document views, including formatting, design, headings, spacing, style, and so on.

Maximarketing (1988) by Stan Rapp and Thomas Collins. The principals of Rapp/Collins examine the changing universe of marketing goods and services as well as intangibles and what they call the "New direction in advertising, promotion and marketing strategy."

# Glossary of Terms

**Action Devices:** items and techniques used to initiate the desired response.

**Address Correction Requested:** an endorsement, which when printed in the upper left-hand corner of the address portion of the mailing piece (below the return address), authorizes the post office, for a fee, to provide the known new address of a person no longer at the address on the mailing piece.

**Barcoding:** a digital coding system based on long and short lines that renders ZIP and Zip + 4 codes machine readable when printed on addressed material. Pre-barcoding mailing materials qualifies mailers for postage discounts.

**Bounce-back:** an enclosure in any mailer or fulfillment package, usually a reply card, designed for customer response.

**Bingo Card:** a reply card, usually inserted in publications, designed to allow customers to select from an array of products advertised, or publications available on products advertised, or subjects covered in the publication.

**Bulk Mail:** a category of third-class mail involving a large number of identical pieces addressed to different names, and which are specially prepared for mailing prior to deliver to the post office.

**Business or House List:** a compilation of names of individuals and/or companies based on common business needs. May include customers and prospects of a given business or industry, including members of pertinent organizations and subscribers to publications related to that business.

**Business Reply Card BRC:** reply card or order form with a preprinted return address and pre-paid postage indicia on the reverse side.

**Cheshire Label:** individual mailing labels created from an automated mailing list, and designed to be affixed to envelopes.

**Coding:** the practice of placing identifying marks on a direct mail reply care or order form to identify the mailing list or other variable in a given mailing. Frequently used in testing lists, copy, formats and other direct mail variables.

**Compiled List:** names and addresses acquired from previously compiled sources, such as telephone and professional directories and other public records.

**C.P.I. (Cost Per Inquiry):** a simple calculation of the cost of generating a customer response. Derived by dividing total cost of the mailing by the number of replies.

**C.P.O. (Cost Per Order):** similar to CPI above, only the calculation considers conversion of inquiries in to the number of orders or purchases.

**Direct Mail Advertising:** any promotional effort that makes use of the U.S. Postal Service or other direct delivery service.

**Direct Response Advertising:** advertising through any medium whose purpose is to generate measurable response by any means directly from prospects and customers.

**Field:** a predetermined area in a computer record which uniformly performs the same function in every record in the total computer life.

**Fixed Field:** a method of formatting computer records so that each field in the record has a specific, defined position relative to the other fields in the record, and where every record has the same space and length. Fixed fields enable database marketers to use computer databases for personalizing mailings efficiently based on the characteristics of the members of the computer file.

**Frequency:** the number of times a customer purchases a product or uses a service within a specified period of time.

**Guarantee:** a pledge of satisfaction made by the seller to the buyer in which the seller defines the terms in which he will assure the availability of his pledge.

**Inquiry:** a term for respondents who request information about a product or service.

**List:** the names and addresses of individuals and/or companies sharing interests, markets and characteristics.

**List Segmentation:** process of selecting members of a larger list to form a targeted mailing list by the specific, shared characteristics of a segment(s) of the original list.

**List Sequence:** the order in which names and addresses appear on a list. Most lists are prepared in ZIP code order, or carrier route or other order that enhances preparation for delivery, although some are maintained alphabetically.

**List Sort:** a process of separating and preparing list segments for targeted use.

**Match:** the process of preparing and imprinting personalizing list segmentation information onto an actual mailing. The term refers to matching list information to copy versions that match the list segmentation characteristics.

**Merge/Purge:** the process of comparing two or more lists and removing the names of duplicates.

**Package:** in direct mail terminology a general designation for all the elements of a direct mail effort.

**Personalizing:** the process of integrating individual list information such as first names and other personal information into the copy of a direct mail piece.

**Piggy-Back Label:** a self-adhesive label attached to a backing sheet affixed to a mailing piece that is designed to peel-off and be attached to the reply form.

**Premium:** usually a free or reduced-price item offered to a prospect to motivate response.

**Recency:** the most recent interaction by date conducted with a customer on a given list.

**Response Rate:** percent response of a total number of mailed pieces.

**Seeding:** the deliberate placement of dummy names in a mailing to trace usage of a mailing list. May also be used to provide copies of the mailing to management personnel involved with preparing the mailing.

**SIC:** Standard Industrial Classification, term used to classify businesses by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

**Step:** term used to designate one part of a series of mailings.

**Window Envelope:** any envelope that uses a die-cut window on the front that permits viewing the name and address of the recipient printed on an enclosure.

**Zip Code:** a five digit code used by the Postal Service to designate specific post offices, stations, branches, buildings or large company.

**Zip+4:** a recent addition to the ZIP Code system used by the Postal Service, allowing sorting sequences within Zip Codes. Use of the Zip+4 will qualify mailers for postage discounts.

## **Website:**

This publication is not copyrighted, so to print off additional copies of this publication, go to <http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/> , click on publications, and click on “Guide to Direct Mail.”

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