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Bull's-Eye Solicitations With Direct Mail

If your not-for-profit organization's direct mail solicitations aren't generating the results you'd like, it may be time for a tune-up. Experts argue on whether direct mail is an art or a science, but most agree on these essentials for success.

Here are seven considerations:

1. Don't neglect the most likely prospects -- your list of past donors. Direct mail professionals know that people who have responded to your solicitations in the past are your most likely prospects for future donations.

Of all the variables in a direct mail campaign, the most important is the mailing list itself. That's why your list of past donors is one of your organization's most valuable assets. While you don't want to overuse your list, two mailings annually is a widely accepted minimum. Some organizations do well with three.

Given the importance of your lists, you must make every effort to keep them healthy.

2. Make sure your lists are current. An average of one in five households changes addresses each year. So, a list that is untended for a year or two suffers significant deterioration in quality.

One of the easiest ways to keep your list up-to-date is to request address corrections from your post office on at least one mailing a year. There's a small charge for this service, but it's money well spent. Every undeliverable address on your list represents wasted money.

3. Keep your lists "clean." Whether your organization is large enough to use custom software or you maintain your list with over-the-counter software such as *Excel*, *Access*, or *Approach*, it's important to weed out irregularities including duplicates and misspellings.

Is list maintenance worth the trouble? Definitely. The more accurate your lists, the better will be your response rate.

4. Create your mailing package. Once you're satisfied that your mailing lists are as clean as possible, it's time to decide what type of mailing will work best for your organization. Most popular is the conventional package containing a cover letter, return coupon, return envelope, and a descriptive brochure. Of these, the most important element is the cover letter.



Picture This

Kids aren't the only ones who like pictures. Your newsletter is more likely to be opened and at least scanned if you include pictures, especially pictures of events that are made possible by charitable donations. For example, if you do an annual toy drive in order to give homeless kids some Christmas presents, snap a few photos of the festivities. People like to see concrete proof of how their donations helped.

5. Power-up your letters. When done skillfully, a cover letter - particularly a first-person letter - from the president or other official of the organization is one of direct mail's most powerful fund raising tools.

A letter written in the first person is generally the best choice for a not-for-profit solicitation. The warmth and directness of a first-person letter, as opposed to an impersonal third-person voice, greatly enhances the effectiveness of any message.

As you probably know, first-person simply means that the writer of the letter is speaking directly to the reader. A letter written in the first person contains phrases like: "As president of Willow Home, I wish you and all our supporters could share the joy of seeing the faces of our children this holiday season." In other words, write as if you were speaking to the recipient face-to-face.

Regardless of the nature of your message, always write in the first-person. This technique alone improves response. However, writing an effective solicitation letter is far more difficult than most not-for-profit executives realize. Unless you are exceptionally skillful with grammar and the subtleties of writing effective copy, you should probably hire a professional to create your messages.

If you prefer to do the job yourself, be sure to have a qualified person check over your work before it goes to the printer.

6. Don't overlook newsletters. An informative newsletter is the other powerful fundraising medium. Donors like to hear how you are using their money to further the cause they support. Expertly done, a newsletter written and released on a regular basis can help to build an emotional bond between the organization and its supporters.

Newsletters may consist of a single page printed on both sides, or they may be in the more conventional four-page format. While your local printer can provide important help with your newsletter, the services of a competent design and layout professional are a practical necessity.

7. Test – test – test. One ingredient for success agreed on by all professionals is the necessity of testing every package.

One of direct mail's most important advantages is the ability to track the exact results of every campaign. With direct mail, there is no need to waste fund raising dollars over the long term on a promotion that isn't producing satisfactory returns. By tracking on a consistent basis, you will learn exactly which of your promotions are working and which are not.

Whether direct mail is art or science, or some combination of both, is a matter of continuing debate among professionals. But most agree that the tiniest change in a direct mail package can make a big difference in the results.

Such seemingly unimportant details as the color of the paper or ink, the day of the week you mail the package, or the size and style of the type used can affect the overall results of the promotion.

At this point, you needn't be overly concerned with such minutiae. The important thing is to polish up your own direct mail promotions now. If you follow the advice here, you'll soon learn what works for your organization.

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