

Reduce Direct Marketing Costs with Postcards

By Robert W. Bly

The standard #10 direct mail package is the workhorse of direct marketing, but since 9/11 and the anthrax scare, self-mailers have seen a resurgence -- most notably the magalog for long copy and the standard postcard for short copy.

Because of limited space for graphics and copy, and lack of a response form, postcards work best when the following conditions exist:

1. The product is familiar to the reader or, if not familiar, simple in nature and easy to explain.
2. The marketing objective is to generate a lead or inquiry, rather than to generate mail orders accompanied by checks and credit card payments.
3. The offer features a premium or other free item the prospect can send for, such as a demo disk, CD, catalog, or brochure.

Why use postcards instead of a traditional DM package, tri-fold self-mailer, or other formats?

- • “Postcards offer immediate impact,” says Perry Frank of Modern Postcards. The message is immediately visible, with no envelopes to open. “Postcards stand out in the mail with a brief, to-the-point message. Even when someone is sorting incoming mail over the trash can, the postcard will get noticed and read – even if it’s on its way to get tossed.”

- • You can bypass lingering concerns about anthrax. “With the recent anthrax scare, people are leery of opening envelopes from businesses they don’t recognize,” writes Sean Lyden on Entrepreneur.com. Furthermore, he notes, the envelope is a barrier to your message because you need to convince the recipient to open it and read the letter inside.

- • Creative and printing costs for postcards are much less than for a full-blown direct mail package, because there are no envelopes, letters, brochures, buck slips, or other inserts. The cost to mail a standard size (4 1/4 by 6-inch) postcard first class is 23 cents vs. 37 cents for a 1-ounce first class letter. That's a postage savings of \$140 per thousand.

- • Ease of production. With no folding, bindery, or packaging, postcards have only two sides – the front and the back.

- • Postcards offer an affordable option for testing offers and creative prior to launching a more costly campaign. They can also be used to qualify prospects prior to mailing catalogs and other, more expensive DM packages. A postcard announcing that a new catalog will be mailing gives the recipient a chance to opt-out from future mailings, saving the marketer production and mailing costs by updating their list.

- • Many postcards wind up on the refrigerator or walls of cubicles in the office, giving them greater visibility and “shelf life” than regular DM. “Mail someone a postcard that really grabbed their attention, and chances are they’ll hang onto it, says Frank. Copywriter Roscoe Barnes adds: “Some postcards are collector’s items. They are designed to be kept and praised. To work, however, they must have a striking drawing, painting, or photograph. Using the works of a famous artist helps.”

- • Postcards are extremely versatile. They can be used for coupons, invitations, announcements, save-the-date reminders, thank-you cards, follow-ups, special offers, inserts in magazines, admission tickets, mini-newsletters, bookmarks and quick-reference guides.

- • Postcards can drive response to a Web site URL or toll-free phone number. Add a perforation with a tear-off business reply card to create a “double postcard,” and you can generate mail response as well.

- • Postcards also offer a quick, affordable way to create clever campaigns with a consistent theme. “We see many of these mailing on a regular basis to the same audience with trivia questions, creating anticipation for the next mailing,” says Frank.

What marketers have used postcards with success in recent months? Let’s look at five examples.

Case study #1: Haag Engineering Company.

Haag Engineering Company specializes in failure and damage consulting -- the analysis of why a structure, such as a bridge or building, collapsed. Clients include manufacturers, insurance companies, and law firms.

Accredited in several states to provide continuing education, Haag recently mailed 20,000 postcards to promote their seminars. Recipients of the card are driven to their Web site to view course offerings and locations.

The card can also be kept as a reminder: while visiting a client, one of Haag’s engineers saw that the client had the postcard pinned to their wall. Response rates, according to Cheryl Markstahler, marketing manager, average between 10 and 25 percent.

Case study #2: The USA Rice Federation.

The USA Rice Federation is a trade association promoting the eating of rice.

They recently mailed a postcard promoting September as National Rice Month to 6,800 food professionals. The postcard offers free brochures, posters, recipes, and other materials, driving response to a phone number or e-mail address.

Because the federation is in the business of promoting rice, they have an extensive library of beautiful food photographs in stock, allowing them to produce high-quality postcards inexpensively. With limited staff and budget, postcards are both cost-effective and time-efficient.

“Postcards work extremely well in establishing or maintaining relationships and keeping rice top-of-mind among our target audience,” says Kimberly Park, Director of National Consumer Education. The postcards generated a response rate of almost 3 percent.

Case study #3: Coopersmith List Consultants (CLC).

Coopersmith List Consultants is a “boutique” list consulting firm. They specialize in working with business-to-business marketers who use direct mail but are not “direct marketers” per se; e.g., industrial manufacturers and technology firms.

These companies often need highly specialized niche lists that are difficult to find. But they typically mail in quantities too small to command much attention and personalized service from larger list brokers.

I wrote the copy for this postcard knowing this niche intimately, having come from a background in industrial marketing. The postcard educates these “non-direct marketers” on basic facts I knew they were unaware of: (1) list brokers exist, (2) they do not charge for making list recommendations, (3) you do not pay more when you rent the list from a broker vs. from the owner directly.

This is common knowledge to readers of *Inside Direct Mail*, but a revelation to recipients of the CLC postcard, which told them all these facts and encouraged them to call or go online for free list recommendations.

A previous mailing of 1,000 pieces had pulled only 2 inquiries with no new clients -- a 0.2 percent response rate. The new “educational” postcard pulled 250 inquiries from a mailing of 10,000 pieces -- 2.5 percent response, more than 10 times the previous effort. And more important, many of the inquiries converted into new clients.

“The postcard as a format is, by its very nature, short and to the point,” says Gail Coopersmith, president of CLC. “It is terrific at uncovering an initial requirement.”

Case study #4: Peter Miserendino.

Peter Miserendino is an acoustic guitarist who wanted to promote his critically acclaimed CD, “Well Strung & Solo.” He believed that sales would most likely come at live performances.

To get quality bookings, Peter, who is also a professional illustrator and designer, designed his own postcard and sent it to high-end clubs. Recipients are asked to phone or e-mail for information on booking Peter as a performer.

Peter mailed this postcard three times, with three weeks between mail drops.

Only three days after the first drop, calls came in inquiring about dates. The same held true for the second drop, and the third, even though the club managers had received the exact same postcard each time.

“This confirms that consistency and frequency are a major component of direct mail strategy,” says Miserendino. He also attributes his good response rates to the right design, succinct copy, and four-color printing.

Case study #5: Apogee Rockets.

Apogee makes model rocket kits for hobbyists and enthusiasts. They did a small test mailing of 500 postcards to sell a Saturn V rocket kit.

Postcards were printed on a digital press. The back shows a four-color photo of the rocket. On the front, the digital press allowed each card to be personalized.

“I wanted to make each postcard look like it was handwritten,” says Tim Van Milligan of Apogee. “That’s why I selected the font used. I also changed the line spacing on each paragraph, and skewed paragraphs because it would look less perfect.”

For the short run of 500 cards, the digital printing cost \$1 per card. The kits cost \$200 each. Of the 500 recipients, 25 people ordered the product -- a 5 percent response.

“Would I do this again? Yes,” says Tim. “From the response I got, it appeared that the recipients did think the postcards were handwritten.”

About the author:

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