

IT'S IN THE MAIL



By Spencer Fleury

In May, we talked about low-cost, one-to-one marketing efforts and how you can start building awareness for your business by shaking hands and meeting people. This month's article is about expanding your reach by exploiting one of the most tried-and-true marketing methods there is—direct mail.

Why would any business waste their money on sending out junk mail? Junk mail—or

direct mail, as it is called in the marketing business—is incessant. It's an annoyance. But despite all that, it can still be an incredibly effective way for a business to reach new customers, and to communicate with existing customers.

"There is a reason that we get so many pieces of unsolicited commercial mail each day," says Matthew Anderson, founder and president of the Sarasota-based firm Milestone Marketing Associates. "And that's because it works. Savvy businesses have recognized and relied upon the power of the mail in getting the word out to customers and prospects alike."

Wait a minute—direct mail actually works? That doesn't seem right. If that's true, then why do we end up throwing most of it in the trash?

"Just because businesses understand that direct mail can generate results doesn't necessarily mean that most businesses actually know how to make it work for them," Anderson continues. "Simply putting a stamp and an address label on something is not the same as conducting a well-conceived, effective direct mail marketing campaign."

DIRECTION

The first thing to know about direct mail: while it's certainly effective when done properly, it's always

expensive even if done badly. The process has to make every dollar count.

When considering a direct mail campaign, the first step is to ask:

what is the goal? Are you trying to generate leads, or are you trying to close the deal and convince the recipient to sign on the dotted line? It's a critical question, because the answer will determine the best way to approach the entire project.

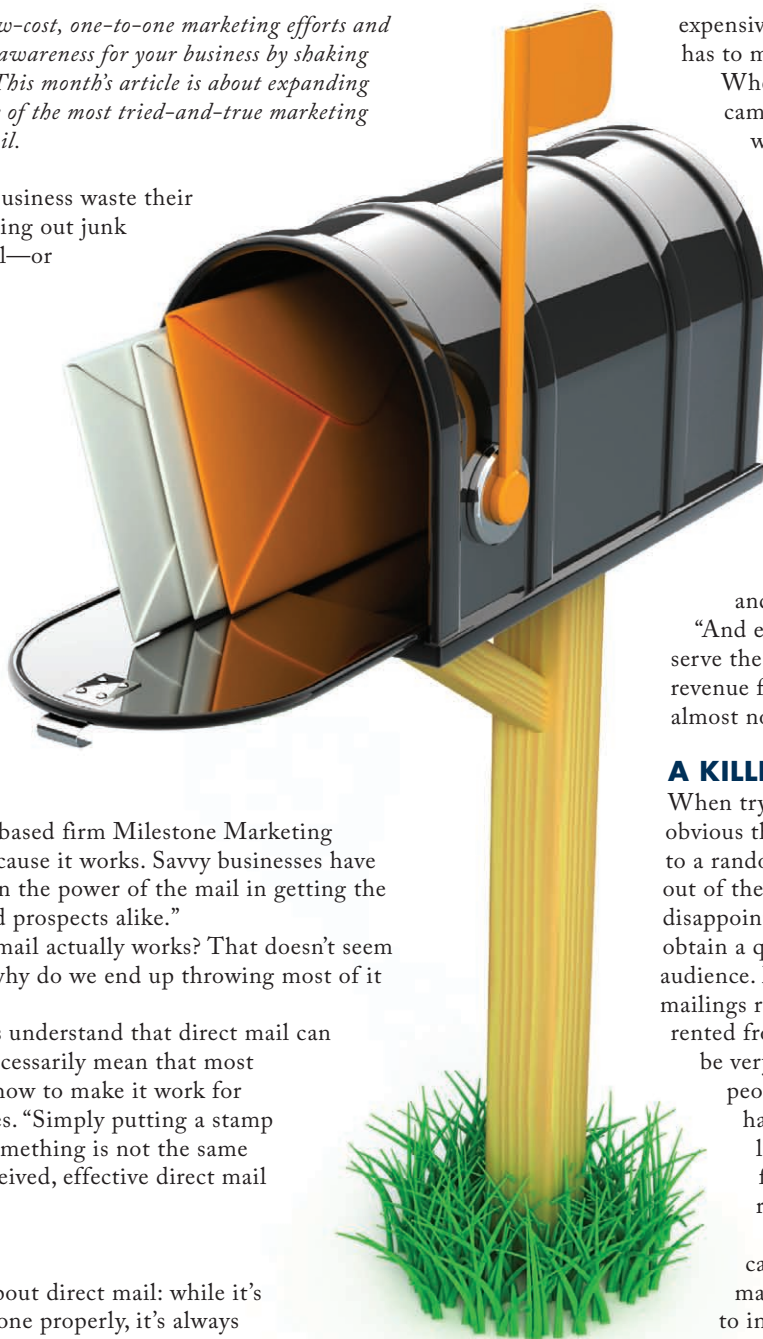
"Broadly speaking, there are two different types of direct mail campaigns—generating new leads for future follow-up, or trying to sell to leads you've already collected and verified," Anderson explains.

"And even though they both ultimately serve the same goal, which is creating revenue for your business, they have almost nothing else in common."

A KILLER LIST

When trying to generate new leads, it's obvious that just sending out solicitations to a random sample of addresses pulled out of the phone book is likely to produce disappointing results. It's important to obtain a qualified list to reach the intended audience. Most of the time, lead generation mailings rely on a mailing list that has been rented from a list broker. These lists can be very broad—for example, targeting people in a certain age range or who have a certain minimum income level—or they can be much more focused, accounting for a wide range of traits and characteristics.

A lead generation campaign can be a significant line item in a marketing budget, because it tends to involve a lot of pieces and because



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the list itself can be costly. So cost justification becomes an issue, making it that much more important to get the most effective and productive list possible.

“There’s a lot of variety between list vendors, in terms of list quality,” Anderson warns. “Really, the only ways to know which brokers have the best lists are through trial and error, or by asking around and talking to your contacts in the industry.”

With a sales campaign, people the business knows are targeted—existing leads, prospects, and perhaps existing customers as well. It’s a list that is generated by the business itself.

AN IRRESISTIBLE OFFER

Regardless of whether a business is planning a lead generation campaign or a sales campaign, it all starts with the list. The quality of the list is the most important factor in the success of the mailing—more important than the offer being made, more important than the engaging, forceful copy, more important than the packaging seen by prospects when they open the mailbox. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that these other aspects can be overlooked or skimped on. They can’t.

“When your goal is to generate a sale from a mailing, you simply must have a compelling message and an offer that captures your reader’s interest,” Anderson says. “Remember, you’re asking these people to spend real money on your product or service, based solely on something they got in the mail. Even with a compelling message, that’s a lot to ask. Without one, you’ve got no chance.”

What qualifies as a compelling message? That depends on the target audience, which is why it’s so important to know who

the message is being addressed to. One message that (almost) never fails to capture attention is a discount—maybe a straight-up price cut, or perhaps an offer of something else of value the reader will receive if they decide to buy. Get creative—after all, no one knows the business’s customers and products better than the business itself.

A LOOMING DEADLINE

Another near-universal feature of successful direct mail sales campaigns is the deadline. No matter what is decided as the campaign offering, it’s absolutely vital that a specific time limit is set for the reader to take advantage of it.

“A deadline creates a sense of urgency for your project by telling the reader that he must act now, right now, or he will miss out on this incredible deal that may never come his way again,” Anderson says. “This is obviously important, but a deadline also can be beneficial within your own company as well: it gives the sales staff a specific, short-term goal to focus on, which can be very motivating.”

“One of Quest Solutions’ most successful promotions ever was a carefully-designed mailer that offered a free laptop with every software suite. Giving away a computer amounted to a 10 percent discount, but it resonated with our prospects who might have wanted a Quest system but hadn’t gotten around to getting a computer for the office. The first time we ran that promotion, we brought in about a million dollars in new sales. In fact, it was so effective that we ran it every year for the next decade; 10 years later, we were still generating about 20 percent of the revenue we brought in with it that first year.”

So I guess some people read their junk mail after all. ■

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