

Five Ways of Doubling Direct Mail Response Rates by Being Different

By Tony Attwood C.Ed., B.A., M.Phil, F.Inst.A.M,
chairman, Hamilton House Mailings plc

If you only have a moment, just read this.

This paper is quite long. You might not have expected that and you might need something you can read quickly and then put into action.

So here is one idea taken from the whole article. If you only have a moment just read this.

Next time you work on a piece of direct mail, think of the people who are going to receive it as your readership. Think of yourself as an established correspondent of a national magazine or newspaper, whose comments are read with interest by the readers.

You can't fob them off with trivia – they look to you to say something helpful or interesting or entertaining or amusing. Let them down and they'll let you know, for this is a critical audience.

Write your piece, and then take the result and compare it with that written by a columnist in a magazine or paper whom you occasionally read.

Did your work grip you as much as the work of the columnist or were you simply telling them that you had great pleasure in enclosing the new catalogue?

If you are satisfied, go on and write two more. The test of this process is that by the time the third one is sent out your readership should be so taken by what you write that they:

- a) keep the mailshots
- b) pass them around the office
- c) take them home to show their partner.

Within this piece I'll show how I've solved the problem of addressing my audience and getting them so excited by what I write that they then complain if I take them off our mailing list.

I hope you find this interesting and, in the light of my comment here, that you decide to read on.

But please remember, whether you read the whole thing, or stop after a few pages, if you would like to tell me what you think, or ask me questions, please either email me at Tony@hamilton-house.com or phone me on 01536 399 000.



Tony Attwood

Part 1: The 3000 a day habit.

According to research at Bangor University we all see about 3000 advertisements a day. That might seem a bit of an over-estimate, until you realise that this includes notices on the sides of lorries, above shop doorways, on buses, on packets, in supermarkets (about half the products in my local Morrisons seem to be on some sort of special offer each day I go in there) and so on. And that's before we think about magazines, newspapers, TV, direct mail and the internet.

3000 a day is quite a lot, and obviously our brains screen most of these out. In fact the estimate is that only about 10% actually get through to our consciousness – and most of these are already pre-programmed.

By pre-programming I mean that we are all of us more likely to read adverts about issues in which we are deeply interested, rather than those that relate to less central bits of our lives. So, for example, if the advertisement mentions tickets for a Bob Dylan concert or relates to a new book about the history of Arsenal FC I will take a look, because Dylan and Arsenal are high on my personal agenda.

Given that we have all got personal agendas, the fact is that the amount of space available for giving attention to advertisements which are outside that pre-defined world of preference is tiny when compared with the number of adverts on show. Out of the 3000 a day that hit us, only half a dozen or so from outside our own special list of interests will get through each day.

Now in direct advertising it is tempting to say, “my advert will get through because all the people I am writing to / phoning / emailing have been selected very carefully”. But really it doesn't work like that.

I am interested in direct mail – that's my job, and it has been part of my life for over 25 years, since I founded Hamilton House. And I get loads of adverts each day about direct mail issues in terms of letters and brochures, ads in marketing-oriented magazines, emails and the selections that pop onto my screen as Google Alerts. But I reject almost all of them within a millisecond as being irrelevant. Yes, they are about direct mail. But are they interesting? No. Mostly because they start off in a way that makes me think – “I haven't got time to wade through this rubbish.”

Part 2: Why difference is now valued

This bit of my theory comes from Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs motivational model which was developed in 1940-50's USA and reached its summit with the book “Motivation and Personality”, published in 1954.

The Hierarchy of Needs model a five-stage affair which at its simplest says that we work to satisfy the most basic needs (food, drink, shelter, warmth), before we move on to our second level of personal safety.

The third level relates to love and affection – the love of our family, and the recognition by those at work that we are ok in our job, and good people to work with, and you can see where this is going – clearly we are not going to worry about being accepted at work if we don't have enough to eat (level 1) or we live in a house that is likely to be broken into each night (level 2).

But once level three is sorted out we start to think of our self-esteem (level 4) in terms of our status, the respect others give us, recognition for our achievements and so on. Put in personal

terms, because I earn enough to buy the food and drink I need, because I have a nice house which is fairly secure, and because I've got a decent circle of friends and my children seem to think I am an OK sort of dad, then I move on up the scale and feel I would like people to recognise that I've written a number of books and adverts, some of which have been rather successful.

When Level 4 is complete, and I am fully secure in the knowledge that I have the sort of status and recognition I want, I come to Level 5, self-actualisation. This can be interpreted as growth and fulfilment, but it can also be seen as being different and individual.

Of course I have simplified what is a complex analysis, but for the sake of this paper this simple version of Maslow will do, because it allows us to see what happens to people's view of themselves as material wealth grows. As more of us get used to lives in which the first four levels of Maslow's hierarchy have been achieved, so more of us start expressing our individuality.

Today we have more and more options on offer in every aspect of our lives as ways of expressing our individuality: more music, more clothes, more foods, more restaurants, more brands of coffee, more TV channels, more internet pages. The only thing we don't have more of is time. Which means, in effect, that we give less time to each thing we do. We flip TV channels, we scan web pages and, most importantly of all, we give less and less time to each advert.

In short, we scan out most adverts before we see them, and those that do impose on us are dealt with in an ever more critical manner by an audience made up of individuals who are increasingly sure about their own individuality and self-esteem.

Part 3: So where does this leave advertising?

To try and answer this quandary, and to have a spot of fun, in 2005 I launched Bad Ad. It was a website and a news group into which everyone interested could send their ideas for the worst direct adverts that they could find.

This grabbed the attention of the direct marketing industry so much that after a couple of months we started doing monthly awards for the worst advert of the month, and we proudly announced ourselves as the advertising awards that were looked at by more people than any other advertising awards.

Of course it was all a bit of fun (until some of the people we reviewed started threatening legal action – some people just can't accept criticism), but something much deeper came out of Bad Ad, which was the analysis of what made adverts bad.

It quickly became clear where the problem was. There were, out there in the wide world of advertising, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of direct mail "gurus" who would tell us "do this, don't do that". But none of these people ever pulled their list of do's and don'ts together into some sort of unified package. In short, there was no overarching theory of direct mail that could be used to predict that advert Z would fail while advert X would make a million. There were copywriters, ideas-people, graphic designers all sitting around coming up with ideas – but there was no background – nothing that pulled everything together so that we could make predictions.

To give an example, people would ask, "should we write long copy or short copy?" and the guru would give an answer. But the answer was usually rubbish – because the real answer depended on

a load of other factors, which depended on a load of other factors – and no one had ever pulled all those factors together. And so everyone carried on “doing what the other guy does”.

As members of the Creative Direct news group worked on this problem we started to take a few direct mail topics (such as mailmerge, using colour, using coated art paper, intermingling illustrations with text) and in each case asked the questions that should have been asked years before:

“Are you sure that this effect is really making a difference, or are you just doing it because everyone else does?”

It quickly became clear that the latter was the answer. We were all using colour, mailmerge and every other feature of direct mail simply because everyone else did so.

In the industry of “sell benefits not features” everyone had become feature driven. Mailmerge (a feature) was used because it was a feature. No-one was doing any research to prove that mailmerge actually improved response rates in B2B, B2C and B2Education mailings.

What we were searching for was evidence – and we all agreed any sort of evidence would be helpful, be it academic research, 50/50 split tests, anything.

We did in fact find some (and three examples are quoted at the end of this document) and we gradually reached this conclusion:

Mostly there was no evidence for anything. Everyone was working on faith alone. Where there was evidence it generally countered daily belief – in other words what we were doing most of the time was not getting things right, but getting things wrong.

As we worked we found that mailmerge, the addition of colour, the use of illustrations could all reduce response rates.

In such a scenario we needed to do one thing: try to find the underlying factors that pulled these findings together – and that’s what makes up the heart of this paper. We found three factors that underlie direct mail. In fact they also apply to telesales, news groups, websites and blogging. So, with the background revealed, here we are at...

Part 4: The 5 methods of doubling direct mail response rates by being different

Method 1: Following the Three Basic Laws of Direct Mail

This invariably works – not just because they work, but also because most people who create advertisements don’t follow these rules. So by following these rules your advert becomes different and thus gains attention, and tends to address issues relevant to people who are at Level 5 in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The three basic laws are:

- The more your direct mail reflects the world-view of the recipient, the more successful it will be.
- You have 5 seconds to grab and hold attention - after that you have no chance, because they revert to their own life and getting on with things that are of interest.

- The mailshot must be consistent in terms of the way it addresses the reader in style and approach.

These laws come from the central fact that the perception of the reader is fundamental and controls everything that happens in response to the advert.

Each of the three points suggests and reinforces the fact that you have to talk about the recipient and the recipient's needs in a format and style that the recipient finds acceptable and interesting.

Now that seems so utterly obvious that you might well be about to turn this sheet of paper (assuming you are not reading on the screen) into a paper dart. But I put this challenge to you: collect all the direct mail that comes to your home and your office during the next week and see how much of it puts you at the centre of the universe, and how much of it puts the writer or the product at the centre of the universe.

What the theory demands is that the recipient is at the centre. Not the product, not the writer, not the company, but the individual person you are writing to.

This opens everything up to a scientific basis for your direct mail, because the view of the recipient can be discussed in terms of:

- the psychology of the individual (the personality, hobbies, outlook, style)
- the social psychology of the setting in which the pack is opened (the crowded school staffroom, the calm elegance of the chairman's office, the foreman's little room in the warehouse, the marketing director's over-crowded desk)
- the unchanging psychology of perception - (the way in which all of us view the sheet of A4 paper when we first glance at it, the way our brains handle text as opposed to how we handle pictures, the way we are all of us subject to the elaboration likelihood theory etc – some examples of which appear at the end of this paper.)

These are huge and complex issues – and indeed there is a substantial website (www.theory.bz) which covers them in detail. But to put it at its simplest: to make your mailshot work you need to write in a matter that is acceptable to the personality of the individual to whom you are writing, you need to think about the moment the direct mail piece is opened, and you need to work with, rather than against, the way the reader's brain works.

Method 2: Stop being simplistic

As direct mailers have got the idea that most direct mail is opened, but is then only looked at for a few seconds before being thrown away, so the notion has crept in that the advert should be simple.

This has led writers of direct mail to think that:

- a) we have to be careful not to offend anyone
- b) we don't know too much about what the recipient wants, so we should be general and tell them we can do everything
- c) we are spending money on postage, so we'd better tell them everything we can do.

As a result of all this, most direct is simple, bland, general and boring. Which is strange, because most adverts in other media have become complex, demanding, specific and exciting. Any direct mail that achieves this end instantly stands out and in direct mail terms is different.

But it is dead easy to write a bland, middle of the road mailshot. You can do it in your sleep. No one will possibly get put off by anything you say. But you won't get many sales either.

This doesn't mean you have to set out to be annoying or rude – far from it. But you should certainly try to step outside the norm in what you send to people.

For example, consider the brochure that starts...

What would your colleagues say if you told them they could complete their work in half the time it currently takes?

Would they:

- a) Suggest you had been on the G&T again
 - b) Look bored and walk away, because they've heard this sort of management clap-trap before
 - c) Ask you how, and start planning what they are going to do with the extra time you have just created.
-

Put that approach to a committee and they might well say, "oh I don't think we want to say that." But it is different, it attracts the reader, it neatly puts forward the notion that it is possible to do the job in less time and, above all, it keeps the reader reading.

Direct mail adverts should be so interesting and exciting that people keep them. Your recipients should look forward to getting your mailshots; they should want to read them. (This might seem a bit over the top for what the newspapers like to call junk mail, but I can tell you that when my firm writes to people to say "sorry, you haven't bought from us for the past year, so we are taking you off our mailing list" they write back and say, "please don't remove me – I love your mail shots, I have a full collection." Others tell us that when we write to them they photocopy the mailshot and pass it around the office.

If you would like to see one or two examples of these items take a look at www.topped.info and click on the link (one from the bottom) that says "The Topped Bollard Stories". Yes, it is true. People are so keen to see our sales letters that we've had to put the collection up on the internet.

Now the absolute opposite of this approach is the one that says it is ok to start a sales letter by saying, "I am delighted to enclose a copy of our new brochure". No one in the world would ever think of keeping that and giving it to friends (unless they were extremely perverse or having a laugh.)

If you've looked at the Topped website or you have seen Hamilton House promotions you will know that we use humour as our method of getting noticed. Many people have looked at our style and then said, "oh that wouldn't work for us", and of course, if your company does not exhibit any humour in its style or approach, that will be true.

The issue here isn't humour, but rather that we use a methodology that works both because most people have a sense of humour and second because very few people use it in direct mail.

Humour is not the only approach to doing well in direct mail by being different. It is in fact just one of five approaches that work. Here they are:

a) Price

Selling on price is commonplace, and so hardly contributes to our debate on being different. But for some people it works – although most people selling on price forget to work out the cost. For example, imagine you have a product selling at £10 and making you £5 profit on each sale. You decide to cut the price to £9. As a result you now have to increase your sales by 20% in order to maintain the same profits. So unless that drop of £1 in price increases your sales by around 30% it has not been worth it. And 30% is a big increase to get.

b) Benefit

The oldest advice in the world – sell benefits not features. Except most people still sell features – even though they claim that they are selling benefits. Benefits are things like

- Higher profits
- Higher response rates in direct mail
- Feeling a lot better in yourself
- Getting more children to a grade C or above in their GCSE exams
- Having a computer that runs without crashing, freezing, slowing down or getting a virus
- A car that does more miles per litre.

c) Asking interesting questions

I like this approach and use it a lot, because it is highly successful and very few people ever use it. When I am not using humour, most of the time I use this.

Here's how it goes.

The headline asks an interesting question. This interesting question is interesting because it does not have an immediate answer, but is nevertheless really relevant to the reader. As an example it might say

What is the simplest way for your bookshop to increase its profit?

or

What is the most cost effective way of running an on-line selling operation?

As an example of something that is not an interesting question, try this:

Would you like to make more money?

or

Are you fed up when your best staff leave the business?

Interesting questions stimulate debate – they cannot be answered yes or no. The point about them is that, even when the reader thinks he/she knows the answer, the reader will be induced to continue reading just to prove that he/she knows more than the writer. If the headline rings true in terms of your business or your interest, you must read it. To go back to the loves of my life, if someone wrote and said:

What is the simplest way of getting front row tickets at all Bob Dylan concerts?

You can be absolutely certain that I will be reading – even if I think that I already know everything there is to know about good seats at Dylan concerts.

d) Humour

Humour works, humour sells. But not all humour. Stories work – especially when they are related to the topic in hand. I sell direct mail services, so many of my silly stories for Hamilton House are about direct mail. I have also written a series of pieces for school administrators set in a school office. Throughout, the heroes are the administrators. The stupid idiots who get everything wrong are (in these stories) the teachers. The administrators loved it – they'd never seen anything like it before.

Simple jokes don't work – so you can't get away with rerunning stories from the internet. You still need to be engaging the reader – ideally talking about the world the reader understands.

The problem is that writing humour is fairly time consuming – it takes me three times as long to compose a humorous page as it takes to write a page around an interesting question.

But, as we've noted, some people don't like risking humour in their sales, and if you use it in a big way you have to make sure that you are willing to keep going (no point in doing one silly piece, and then backtracking into dead straight and serious – it confuses the readership).

e) Emotion

We normally use emotion in advertising with jewellery, cars, homes, and the like – in terms of “buy this and you will feel great”. But there's nothing to say that you can't use emotion in other ways too. I've done it when selling computers (in terms of “do you believe in love at first sight?” in relation to a new machine) and it worked well. It can be done.

Method 3: Combine PR with direct mail

I'm amazed at how few firms seriously do PR, month after month. I guess they just don't get around to it, or think it is too expensive, or think it is clever to say, “If I can't see a profit I'm not spending the money.”

But combining PR and direct mail with the same message can really work well. Let's imagine that your firm is not the market leader, and that when people think of your line of business they think of the big player, not you.

You know that you can't become the biggest player in the market. (Sometimes you see little firms claim to be the leaders in some way, perhaps having just introduced some new variant or whatever, but it always looks false, and everyone knows exactly who's who anyway).

In such a situation all you can do is re-define the market to your advantage. You do this through articles and press releases which gently stress your new approach, and which suggest that this is really where things are moving to. These are press releases that are a million miles from the traditional, "XYZ Ltd are proud to announce the launch of version 6.2 of their AlphaBeta Web Software" which really are pointless. They might get a few column inches in the specialist trade press, but hardly count as news stories. The press releases re-define the debate.

So you work with magazines and journals, getting your news – the world as you see it – into print, and thus giving it credibility. And each time you develop one of these press releases or articles you then re-write it as a mailshot, and send it out a month later.

The best thing to do in fact is to send out a modest number of the mailshots, testing the market and checking the response rate. To give a specific example, let's imagine that the cost of sending out mailshots is £40 for 100. To recover your £40 and make a bit of profit you need two sales. So you rewrite the press release, send out say 200 (total cost to you of £80) and see what you get. If it is 2.5% then you go on and mail everyone else in your universe. You are making money from this, simultaneously re-doubling the message that you have been placing in the press.

I've only ever come across two firms that are really doing this, month by month. Others tell me that they are, but when we look closely they are just knocking out standard type press releases from time to time and unrelated mailshots every now and then.

My research suggests that only 10% of firms are sending out regular press releases which means that in any market, as soon as you start placing your work in the relevant media, you are being different, which is bound to give you some success.

Method 4: Combine direct marketing with new media

You can't move in the world of marketing without bumping into people who talk endlessly about blogs and the like. And yet, when it comes down to it, very few firms have any sort of integrated strategy in terms of this approach.

I'm going to set out below one such strategy. It isn't the only one, but it is one that I hardly ever see, and yet I find that it is stunningly effective every time I set it up for a client.

What you set up is a blog, or an email news or information service, which contains something that people want to read.

Let us imagine you are selling to accountants. There are obviously a lot of news sources in relation to accountancy, but because this is your market you ought to be able to work with others to find some sort of news, background and information that your clients and potential clients might be interested in reading. Obviously the slant will be towards items of interest to you, but if you can do this without making it a set of overt sales pitches, then you will be able to gain and retain readership, and that means your name will reach a higher profile, and your company will gain greater recognition and respect in the market.

As you are doing this with some sort of feedback (either through the blog or through people emailing you back) you will soon get a feel as to what sort of information is welcomed, and that allows you to develop your news service and commentary further.

Ultimately you can slip in your sales pitches and no one will mind because they realise they are getting information and ideas that they value, absolutely free of charge.

If you'd like to see how this works in terms of direct mail, you might care to send an email to direct-mail-secrets-subscribe@yahoogleroups.com DMS sends out one or two emails a day, covering news and thoughts about direct mail. This ranges from (in the couple of days prior to my writing this) news that the Israel postal system is on strike to a discussion of silly names for people working in the personnel department. (The former story got no correspondence from readers, while about 30 readers sent in silly names of staff). Recently we've discussed whether a specific ad works or not, and why, and looked at the way people using direct mail could use the proposed Zonal Charging system to their advantage.

DMS was set up six and a half years ago in a market where there was already a multitude of marketing email services and a couple of direct mail magazines. But over time it has managed to find its niche, and has over 1000 subscribers in the UK – quite a high number. For the owners of the service it is a significant resource – DMS helps to define what's what in the field of direct mail and allows Hamilton House to reach 1000+ potential customers with an email that will be read just at the cost of running the service.

News services and blogs are time consuming and need a regular commitment (no one wants a news service that runs six stories one week and then nothing for two months). But the reward can be enormous – not least in terms of finding out what your customers and potential customers really think.

It is from this aspect that the news and the blog can be integrated with the mailshot, with each service feeding information into the other. A regular reader of the blog sends back a comment, which makes you realise that you could achieve some sales by emphasising a slightly different aspect of your service. You write a new promotion, which brings in more correspondence, which leads you to write about the topic in a different way, again on the blog, which then....

Of course what you are doing here is starting to define the world – and that definition is obviously always to your advantage. Thus if you have a product which has attribute X, and your competitors have a near identical product which has attribute Y, then you have to work hard to ensure that potential customers value X over Y. You can do this through telling people overtly that X is more important than Y, and indeed that can work. But if you add in quasi-news stories through the blog which add to this fact by defining the underlying reality that determines decisions relating to purchases, then you are really getting somewhere.

All at once not only do sales go up, but also people start to look for you to make the judgements on what is important. You combine your new thinking with your advertising, your PR, your news groups and your blog.

Method 5: Redefine the rules

Most direct mail is written in terms of a set of “rules” that are completely inaccurate, misleading, and wrong, the result of which is that they lead to direct mail that does not work.

You can read a complete review of these on the www.theory.bz site, but for now here are just three of these misapprehensions, written in brief summary. The first is colour:

"It appears that under certain conditions, advertisers may realise double benefits by employing less costly black and white rather than colour advertising and simultaneously achieve enhanced ad effectiveness."

Journal of Consumer Research. Vol 22 page 135.

The general belief is that colour is good - use full colour in an advert and the response rate goes up.

The general belief is wrong - it is much more complex than that. Colour can help, but it also can destroy response rates. It all depends on what else is going on at the same time.

The definitive academic study on this is the article by Joan Meyers-Levy and Laura A Peracchio (from the universities of Chicago and Wisconsin respectively) which appeared in Journal of Consumer Research Volume 22 and show that when readers of an advert have little motivation to read it, their attitude to the product will tend to be influenced by simple things such as the colour and the physical attractiveness of the presentation. So initially the unmotivated reader becomes more positive about the piece, and there is a more positive response from two or four colour than from single colour.

This is, of course, what designers and printers who push colour in all circumstances instinctively feel - the colour makes the advert more attractive. And indeed, if the reader is unmotivated, then feels the advert is attractive because of colour, and then places an order, the colour should be enhancing the response rates.

But in most cases the sale process in direct mail does not work remotely like this. Firstly, we are not sitting in an unmotivated state, just waiting for something to happen. We are engaged in other things - our brain power is being used up elsewhere. Secondly, even if we are sitting there with nothing much happening in our brains, for most of us purchases are made only after we look more critically and extensively at the advertisement and its claims.

The Meyers-Levy article says, when we are "motivated to process an ad critically and extensively with an eye toward substantiating the ad's assertions, it appears that colour may have one or two effects." On the one hand colour can use up lots of brain power and that can once again make us feel good about the advert. "Alternatively, colour may undermine ad claim substantiation by usurping resources that would otherwise have been devoted to processing substantiating information."

In other words, at the moment we are looking to substantiate the claims of the advert so that we can move to a purchase, the colour uses up so much of the resources in the brain we are willing to give to the processing of this issue, that we feel too much is asked of us, and we simply stop and turn away.

In simple terms, if distractions are low and the reader feels a real need and desire to look at the advert, colour is a great boon - providing that we are willing to give the brain the resources needed to decode the advert, and provided also we are not going to want to consider in any depth the claims made by the advert. The travel brochure is a perfect example - I want to go on holiday, I have gone out and got a brochure from the travel agent, and I sit down at home

without distraction, totally focussed on finding the holiday of my dreams, and fairly sure that this is the country I want to go to. Colour then helps - as long as all this holds to the good.

But if I am of a disbelieving mind - if I have been on holidays before where the promise of the brochure is not substantiated - then the colour pictures can be a distraction, and I might turn to the Lonely Planet for a pure text discussion of the resort, without the unwanted distractions.

Example 2: The Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model is one of the best theoretical bases that we have for the argument that direct mail to your existing customers should be different from direct mail to people who have never bought from you before and who may have negative views on your company or your product.

In essence the model suggests that there are two ways in which a person is persuaded to take a particular course of action through an advert: the central path and the peripheral path - one suitable for the motivated reader (i.e. the past customer) and one for the unmotivated or negative recipient of your message.

If you have read the article on colour you will know that advertising works in different ways according to whether the person getting the message is motivated or not - this theory takes that awareness in a new direction.

Elaboration theory says that the "central path" is the path to use when the recipient of the advertisement is motivated to think about the message. If I care about the issue - and assuming always that there is not too much distraction around when I get the message - then I will myself elaborate on the message by thinking more about it.

If I think positively about the issue raised in the message, and churn the matter over and over in my head, then I elaborate on the message I have received in a positive way. So in this way all that has to be presented to me are the opportunities - the possibilities - and my mind does the rest.

But a boomerang effect can occur if I think unfavourable thoughts about the message - so if you try to put this central path approach to a person who has negative feelings about your product or service, all that happens is those negative feelings are enhanced..

Of course, not all messages are straightforward - even if as advertisers we want them to be. If the message is slightly ambiguous but still in line with my dominant attitudes then persuasion is likely - although the thoughts and ideas engendered might not quite be those that were intended by the advertiser.

But if I am not that motivated to take note of the core message that the advertiser is putting across then I might start looking for what are known as "peripheral cues" which leads us to the peripheral pathway. In looking at the peripheral cues my brain might try to link the advertising message with things I already have a positive idea about - the obvious examples being chocolate, my hobbies, sex, money, food, drink, having fun, having the company of good friends, being popular, feeling secure, and so on.

So, the argument here is if the reader is already motivated and will elaborate on the message then the central route is best. But if the person getting the advertisement is unlikely to elaborate

the message, or if the available arguments are weak, then the peripheral route to persuasion should be used.

Example 3: Grabby Image Theory

Grabby Image Theory is invaluable to all direct mailers, not just because it helps us all get higher response rates, but because it emphasises once again just how strong and accurate the three Fundamental Laws of direct mail are – which is a good place to end this paper.

The essence of those laws is that the true area of understanding of what happens in direct mail is the psychological, not the sociological, and Grabby Image Theory is nothing if not psychological.

You will recall that early on in this paper I mentioned researchers at the University of Wales in Bangor released findings that show that each of us experiences around 3000 adverts a day – which is around one every 15 seconds. One of the key points from this research was that under 1% of all the adverts and announcements seen can be recalled without prompting by the next day.

It is quite clear from these figures that if you want your advert to make an impact you have to start by catching attention. If you don't catch attention, nothing much happens. But it is also clear that we are all so used to handling the overload that we are already past masters at screening out that which we don't want to see.

Also in 2005 researchers at University College London added an extra dimension to the debate by showing that once the brain has started to focus on something (an advert, a road sign, a teletext page, this article), it has a greatly reduced ability to focus elsewhere for a short time afterwards. In other words, when you turn away from this page your brain will struggle to take in the very next thing you see or hear. It takes a moment for the brain to re-tune. This is known as “attentional blink”.

This part of the research has been ignored by many advertisers - but when it is considered it makes rather frightening reading, because it suggests that most advertising fails either because we have been overloaded on adverts (overload theory) or because most of us are still thinking about something else when the advert hits (emotional blink).

Traditionally, the way around this problem has been to grab the recipient's attention with something exciting (what New Scientist has called “a Grabby Image”) and then intersperse your advertising material between such images. The idea is that the Grabby Image will grab your attention, take you through the emotional blink, and then ensure that this image - and hence this advertisement - will be the one that gets added into the tiny list of adverts that you remember. The Grabby Image can be a sexy young lady, an entrancing vision of a holiday location, the picture of a famous person, or even (in the minds of many publishers) the front cover of a book.

But unfortunately the Grabby Image itself brings forth more problems. For although the Grabby Image can overcome the problem of taking our attention away from whatever we were looking at before, we now give ourselves the same problem within the advert as we faced when starting the whole process of trying to grab attention. The brain has got excited by the Grabby Image and so tends to take no notice of the advertising message that immediately follows it. If we remember anything afterwards we remember the image, not the product or service.

Now that might be all right if we are trying simply to drop a seed into the mind, such that the next time we think "I want a new car" the Grabby Image that is associated with the car manufactured by this advertiser, springs to mind. But it doesn't quite work like that.

In fact, according to the UCL team, the whole traditional approach of advertising (grab attention, then sell the product) falls apart before it even starts.

But this is not the half of it. The research team at Bangor also showed that the way we pay attention to adverts is related not only to what we have just seen or heard, it also relates to our emotional response to the situation. They found that if you are doing something intellectually demanding (like reading this paper, or trying to work out who is related to whom in an episode of Midsomer Murders) and then you get interrupted (for example by an advert), the emotional blink can lead to a strong emotional dislike of whatever interrupted you.

In other words when you are trying to resolve a conundrum you don't want me popping up in the middle shouting, "Buy your mailing lists on line at www.hamilton-house.com". In fact, not only is the advert likely to fail, it is also likely to create an adverse reaction to Hamilton House Mailings such that you will reject the notion of using that company in the future, even though you have by then forgotten this advert.

It is not really the Emotional Blink that leads to an antipathy to the brand itself – it is our attempt to overcome the emotional blink through the Grabby Image that has led us to dislike this advertiser for interrupting us in such a rude way.

Conclusion

If you have read through those three pieces on common mistakes you will realise that a lot of the work in direct mail that is currently undertaken is more likely to reduce response rates rather than raise them.

Only by rejecting the false premises on which so much direct mail is written (in short by being different) are we likely to make much progress in raising response rates.

I hope you found this paper interesting.

Tony Attwood