

The Hamilton House guide to making a profit from shared mailing to schools

Hamilton House has been at the forefront of testing the effectiveness of shared mailings since the concept was first introduced in the 1970s.

What is very interesting is that while some firms are quite clear that they get a higher return on investment with shared mailings than with any other form of mailings, not every company that has used shared mailings has had success. As a result we have been able to study both the successes and failures of shared mailings over a long period and have derived information which will help you to ensure your campaign is as profitable as you wish it to be.

1. Does it have to be shared?

Some companies choose shared mail not because it is the right medium for them, but because it is perceived as cheaper than solo and without the “spam” image that email has. If you have chosen shared simply because of cost, we urge you to take care and ensure that your campaign really does fit into shared mail’s requirements. The most successful shared campaigns use shared mail because it is the right medium for that campaign – as explained below.

2. How will the teacher get more information, and get in touch?

Most successful shared mail campaigns aim to sell the product or service off the page. Thus the piece normally ends with an order form and details of phone and fax. Although it is not impossible, it is much harder to use a shared mailing to get the teacher to visit a website in order to discover more about your product. Thus, if selling a book, the shared mailing should include the details of the book and the opportunity to buy it by returning the order form – as simple as that.

Shared mailings have been used to sell courses – but generally by getting people to apply there and then from the information given or by getting them to phone for further details. This is not to say that you should not give information about your website, but you should not make that the prime route (or worse the only route) for people who want to find out more. The phone, fax and email address are the most important means of communication to give.

3. To whom are you promoting?

All leaflets in a shared pack should have a clear notice top right which says who the leaflet is for. The school administrator will use this in order to ensure that the leaflet is forwarded to the right person.

It is sometimes tempting to try to get the leaflet forwarded to several people – for example by saying “Attn: Head of History / PSHE / English”. Sadly this not only does not work, it also reduces your response rate - almost certainly for the

reason that where several people could take ownership no one does. Teachers, like most people, respond best to promotions that are aimed at their specialism, not at the school at large.

4. The layout

There's nothing to stop you using both sides of a leaflet – although it is helpful to have a big “more overleaf” notice. You can also send two leaflets at once (and get a sizeable discount on the second leaflet) but do remember to put the “Attention” notice on each leaflet – they might well get separated in the sorting.

5. The headline

Headlines are vital in shared mailings. From the teacher's point of view the leaflet will simply turn up in the pigeon-hole without an envelope or covering letter. It is simply there, with no indication of how it got there.

Somehow you have to open the proceedings, and the best way to do that is with a headline that so grabs the reader that he or she cannot put the piece down. It has to be a really clear statement of intent – do not expect the teacher to read on just because you have sent this message. You have to win the teacher over by giving a reason to read on.

6. The text

If you are advertising several products – for example a series of books – you can separate the books out into different boxes with a clear line around each one. In such cases you won't have much space so you will need to get to the point fairly quickly – but no matter how little space you have the point should be the benefit.

If you are focused on just one product, you can take your time getting to the point of the advert – don't just announce your product. If selling on price, make sure you are the cheapest – remember anyone can put out an email advert a week later and be cheaper! Don't change fonts, don't use colour text except for headings (and then only use one colour), and do write in perfect English. **DON'T USE CAPITALS or lots of bold.** Write to an intelligent individual who is interested in teaching and learning. And don't use lots of exclamation marks either !!!

7. Colour and design

Don't. That's it – don't. No pictures, no logo, no illustrations - unless you absolutely have to in order that reader understands what you are selling. If you want to put in your logo, make sure it is tucked away at the top (in the first 10% of the page) where no one will see it. The reason for this ban on illustration and design is that teachers look at individual leaflets very quickly, and if you put in pictures and the like they will need more brainpower to look at the pictures. That will take more time – and they will probably get bored and throw the leaflet away.

Shared mailing is for the selling of products that can be described in text, off the page. Remember, to sell a book or a piece of software, you don't need a picture of the box or the cover. You need to tell the teacher why he/she should buy it.

You will see many leaflets in shared mailings that have full colour illustrations in them. Perhaps the people who prepare these leaflets know something that I don't know, but I have never managed to improve a shared mailing's response rate by going into colour. Indeed when I tested using a coated art (i.e. glossy) paper against the cheaper bond, the bond came out on top.

8. Response rate

The best response we have had is the sale of over 100 products (costing around £15 to £20 each) from a mailing to 5000 schools. Sales of 30 or 40 such items are more common.

9. How to choose email, solo or shared

Many companies that traditionally used shared mailing because it was cheaper than solo, now use email because it is cheaper than shared. The problem is that each type of mailing has its own approach. Shared mailings are ideal for selling a product off the page direct to the teacher, where you need a low cost form of mailing. Email works better when the website is necessary for the purchase.

Perhaps the biggest problem with shared mailing is the variability in the price. With Hamilton House you can get significantly lower prices on leaflets and brochures either by booking in a series of mailings or by booking in your mailing a long way in advance. If you are willing to commit to a specific date for your mailing several months ahead the price for a one-off mailing can drop from £449 to £299 – which is not much more than an email mailing.

One particular benefit that goes with a shared mailing is the fact that it is equally good at reaching all school managers. While email is best at reaching those with their own email address (and thus poor at reaching, for example, The Head of History, who in many schools will not have a unique email address) shared mailing is good at reaching everyone.

10. Does it matter which shared service I use?

The way a shared mailing is packed and despatched will affect response rate. Hamilton House puts the weekly message from the School of Educational Administration on the front of each pack, and we believe that this results in more administrators opening the pack and passing the leaflets on. We further believe that the extra sales this can give you will be of far greater benefit than any discount that might be given you by a company wishing to appear to be offering the cheapest service.

Tony Attwood