

## **The Hamilton House Guide to making a profit from solo mailing to schools**

Solo mailing is the classic system of direct mail. Your mail travels through the conventional post on its own. It is where we all started.

It is the most costly approach to mailing schools: whereas an email mailing might cost 5p per school to transmit, and a shared mailing might cost between 5p and 10p, the solo mailing will cost 40p per school including postage and packing – perhaps more.

With such a cost difference one might assume that solo has now been displaced by shared mail and email. But in fact it can often give the best return on investment of all approaches to teachers. In a series of experiments between 2001 and 2005, we promoted reports aimed at headteachers which cost £25 to £49 each. Solo mailing consistently gave a much better return on investment than either email or shared mailings in every test. In the best result of all, we mailed 10,000 nursery schools with a single leaflet (cost approximately £4000) and sold 1150 copies of the book at £25 each bringing in a total profit of £16,000 – far in excess of the best we could achieve using a shared mailing.

### **1. Does it have to be solo?**

Some companies choose solo mail because, they argue, “we would never want to be seen sharing an envelope with another company”. Others suggest that solo mail is read, while shared mail goes in the bin and email gets deleted. These arguments are normally false – there are good reasons for choosing solo mail against email and shared, but they don’t have much to do with these arguments.

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

The classic solo mailing consists of two items – a letter plus a brochure, catalogue or other advertising leaflet. Each has its own function. The letter grabs attention, while the brochure sells the product.

Solo mail letters grab attention by focussing on one of the five standard methods of selling – by announcing low prices, by stressing a benefit, by asking an interesting question, through the use of humour or through the use of emotion. The last two methods are only occasionally used when selling to schools.

Brochures and catalogues should include information about benefits of the products sold, although sadly most focus on the features. The order form is usually found in the brochure, although it can appear as a separate item within the mailing.

Solo mailings are not particularly suited to directing a teacher to a website –

the fact is that there is space in the mailing to describe the products or services for sale, so one might as well do it in the mailing. The reader is reading – sending the reader off to a website can only reduce the effectiveness of the mailing.

Where solo mailing does have a huge advantage is in terms of testing. Because one is often looking for a response rate of 2% or more, it is possible to mail just 250 addresses as a trial, to see what response one gets. You can't do this easily with shared and email mailings because response rates are usually too low. But where testing is possible with just a few hundred mail shots it is possible to try out a whole series of pieces to find the best way forward. I have on occasion mailed three different versions of the same advert to two different teachers (i.e. a total of six trial mailings) and gained response rates varying from zero to 5%. Overall the trial mailings broke even – but the subsequent mailshot using the 5% response letter made a huge profit. Had there been no testing, we could easily have missed it.

### **3. To whom are you promoting?**

Solo mailings go in envelopes addressed to the relevant teacher. We have spent years testing mailings to named teachers against mailings to teachers designated by their generic title (“The Head of Maths” etc). With the Headteacher you can get a higher response rate using the name, but with everyone else you get a higher response rate using the generic title. (It is beyond the bounds of this short paper to explain why, but if you would like the background, do call me).

Apart from subject heads, you can also mail job titles that may or may not exist, knowing that someone might pick up the mail. For example you might try, “The Teacher i/c Behaviour and Discipline”. It might be the Deputy Head or it might be someone else – but the administrator will know. You can even be amusing and put “The Teacher in charge of Wet Playtimes” or some other invented title, and be sure that everyone will be intrigued as to what is inside the envelope.

One word of warning, however. The headteacher gets 17 times as much mail as anyone else and normally has a PA filtering the mail, so if you can avoid the head, so much the better. Also, avoid putting two or more titles on the envelope – it really doesn't work.

### **4. The layout**

The letter should be a letter, with a big headline 25% of the way down the page and a PS that drives you back in. No colour except in the logo or heading, and the signature (in black or blue). The colour and design can all go into your brochure.

### **5. The headline**

Headlines are vital in solo mailing letters – they define the basis of your sale (that this product will offer this benefit, that these are the lowest prices ever,

etc). It is the headline and the PS of the letter that will determine whether the teacher keeps the brochure and reads it or not. The headline must be so powerful that it grabs the reader in such a way 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 – but don't assume advertising more is better. There is evidence that the addition of extra products can reduce the overall response rate in some cases. Some people can simply give up when they see a huge choice of product

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!!!

One final warning – do not say, "I am pleased to enclose our new catalogue." That will ensure that people will throw the letter out – and that means the job of ensuring the reader is ready to give you a lot of attention is lost. The reader will instead arrive at the brochure without preparation, flip through it and throw it out.

## **7. Colour and design**

Save all the colour and design features for the catalogue. Complex design and colour forces the reader to use much more brain power than they need to read text. So you need to ensure that you have the reader's attention and enthusiasm first – which is why the letter is so important.

## **8. Response rate**

If you are selling an on-line teaching system you might require 0.1% response rate. If you are selling books you might want 2%. Always do your calculations before you begin so you know what sort of response rate will generate a profit. If the answer is above 3% take care. 3% is possible – but is not common.

## **9. How to choose email, solo or shared**

Because you can trial solo mailings so easily you should always trial a solo mailing as long as your calculations show you can make a profit at the 3% level or less. If you can make solo mailings work there is every chance you will get a much better return on your investment than with any other form of

mailing. If you can't make a trial mailing work, or if you need too high a response rate, move on to shared mailings and email.

## **10. Summary**

To make solo mailing work you normally need to attract attention through a letter, and then sell the product in a leaflet or brochure. Always check that you can make money at the 3% level or less, and if so, undertake a few trials to see if you can achieve that.

For more information please call 01536 399 000. If you wish you can send your proposed solo mail advertisement to [Sales@hamilton-house.com](mailto:Sales@hamilton-house.com) and we'll call you back with our thoughts. We'll also take a look at your website if you wish. We'll make our recommendation at the end – no charge and no obligation.

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