

Why do some mail shots get fewer sales than expected?

The five reasons why some mail shots flop – and what to do when it happens.

1. You didn't grab the reader's attention

Think about going to the cinema. You get your ticket. You buy the popcorn. You buy a drink. You take your seat. And then the cinema operator shows you lots of adverts.

You watch these adverts. Of course you do because you have just spent £15 on your ticket food and drink. You are a captive audience. You are not going to get up and walk out when you have just paid.

Direct mail is the exact opposite of this. The audience is not captive at all. The audience doesn't even have to open the envelope, let alone read the enclosures. Which means you have to fight hard to get the reader's attention.

Unfortunately, some direct mail is written in a way that does not take into account this important fact. The biggest single reason for a mailshot failing is that the mailshot failed to grab the reader by the throat and force the reader to read. If your big selling point turns up in paragraph three you may find that the majority of people getting your mailshot never actually get to paragraph three, because you did not grab them strongly enough with the headline.

In fact, a sizeable percentage of people who get mailshots tend to look at them – for about five seconds – and then decide whether to:

- a) Throw them away
- b) Read them through
- c) Save for later
- d) Pass to someone else.

The actual figures for business to business direct mail are

47% is looked at and thrown away
*33% is thrown away without being looked at
9% is looked at and filed
6% is passed elsewhere
5% is responded to, or held for consideration of responding to.

* This 33% includes catalogues and free magazines sent in polythene envelopes – think for example of the average office supply catalogues. These have a high level of throw away because they are sent out regularly and the lists are often not validated to see if the people on the list actually buy at all. If we take this category out of the equation then the percentage of throw-away without being looked at goes down dramatically.

Certainly if you send out your mailshot in a plain envelope the chances are it will be opened – although this in itself won't help unless you then grab the reader. Simply putting an advert inside a paper envelope instead of a polythene envelope does nothing other than move the moment that the advert hits the bin.

This may seem obvious, but many people to whom I speak tell me that their mailing must work because the product is so good. My answer is that it does not matter how good the product is, if you do not grab people's attention with the material you are sending them, then the promotion will not work.

Grabbing attention is an art and a science. There is no definitive list of ways of grabbing attention that will always work for everyone. But there are some ways that tend to work a lot of the time. These include:

- a) Headlines that are so unusual that the reader thinks "What?????" and is forced to read on to resolve the dilemma.
- b) Headlines that offer a clear benefit to the customer – for example, offering something free or something very unusual which the customer wants.
- c) Headlines that address a particular concern of the customer. When I wanted to promote this little report I wrote the headline "Why do some mail shots get fewer sales than expected?" Under this was the sub-heading "The way you answer this question will directly affect the number of sales your next direct mail campaign will get". The aim here is to address a concern of many companies that use direct mail by touching on a subject that will be of direct concern.

You can also sell on price, and if you want to do that, you might as well go straight to the main issue in your campaign. For example:

Chart CDs for just £6.99

That headline might not mean a lot to most people, but to people who buy chart CDs it will mean a lot – because the price is very attractive. Here is another:

Money back from your bank. What could be easier?

That one works because lots of us feel that we are being overcharged by our bank and could do with some money back. We also have the perception that getting money back from the bank is tough – but here is someone who says it is easy. Even if you think it is a scam you are tempted to read on.

Mailshots that don't have a headline at all or which have a headline that in itself does not make people excited tend not to work. Just announcing a product or just saying something that isn't really of much interest to anyone does not get a sale.

However, it must be remembered that grabbing attention and then not following up is just as bad as not grabbing attention in the first place. Putting in a bizarre headline and then saying "right - now I have got your attention I want to tell you about..." usually flops because the reader feels cheated. Fancy packaging often flops because it has no connection with the ultimate product being sold. The packaging gets the pack opened, the reader remembers the packaging but not the product and so sales stay just where they were.

To put it clearly, the method of grabbing attention that you use must make the reader feel positive towards you and/or your product, at the same time as grabbing his/her attention.

It should be clear that what we are talking about here is not printing on envelopes. Printing on envelopes can work where it intrigues or interests the reader. Rather than encourage more people to open the envelope it tends to get those who open the envelope interested and intrigued. Their level of focus increases greatly, and they become more ready to receive your headline – providing of course that the style of headline matches the style of your envelope slogan.

Interestingly, many people that I have talked to on this subject admit that they often write the text of a mailshot themselves, but then pay a designer a fair sum of money to “do the design”. I believe this is an issue of seeing everything back to front. Of course good design is better than bad design, but the text of the letter and brochure is much more important than the design.

If you are using an outside designer you must make sure you are using a designer who is familiar with the art of raising response rates. Actually that sounds about the most obvious piece of advice anyone could ever give, but it is probably the most ignored piece of advice in direct mail.

Some designers of direct mail are awfully good at making leaflets look great, but they don't know too much about the psychology of perception – which tells us exactly where we should put each element in the leaflet. They often don't know much about selling either. We frequently quote the incident which happened in part of the Hamilton House group, where ordinary A4 leaflets printed one sided in one colour on 80gsm bond were replaced by lovely two colour jobs, complete with perforated tear off forms, beautiful design work, clever graphics and neat folding. The cost of the design and print shot up four fold, but the response rate collapsed to under one quarter of the previous response rate.

Even more interesting is the fact that these findings are predicted completely by the psychology of perception – and indeed there are clear reasons why we should actually expect this sort of result. If you are interested please do go to the specialist website www.theory.bz - the whole site might be of interest, but for colour, go to “Factors”, and then find Factor 9 which will tell you why some colour work reduces response rates.

This doesn't mean that the leaflet always has to be simple, but rather that looking good on the page does not automatically equal higher sales. If you have any doubt, say to your designer – “why are you doing this – what information do you have that this particular design effect will work and generate better sales?” If your designer simply talks about the artistry of his work and the fact that looking good always helps, then she or he probably knows little or nothing about response rates. In that case you might want to try someone else. If your designer tells you she or he won an award last year then it might be a good idea to walk away. There is nothing wrong with awards as long as they are awards for high response rates. Awards for looking good have nothing to do with getting sales.

Ask questions such as “Why are some words in bigger print than others? Why is that text sideways on? Why is there a design behind the text?” Ask, ask, ask. Ask if they know anything about “grabby images” (Factor 31 on the www.theory.bz site). And demand proper answers.

Most people find that adding a covering letter to a sales brochure, leaflet or catalogue enhances response rates – although one that says, “I am delighted to enclose the new catalogue” will have no effect at all, aside from costing you for extra printing. Adding a zappy, fun, lively, jolly and invigorating covering letter, however, enhances sales rates even more.

The problem for most firms is that they are still caught up in the notion of paying a professional to do the design while letting the chairman write the letter. That is never a good idea. This is not to say that chairmen can't write letters – it is just that writing really good sales letters requires practice, and it requires time. Most people who write their own advert text write it very quickly (“something I just dashed off”) and write only two or three such items a year. A professional might write 100 a year – and will be looking at the response rate of each one. If you don't want to pay a professional at least you could try and emulate one, by taking your time, and writing a lot. (When I started writing sales letters for Hamilton House it used to take me several days to get one right. I can do them much faster now but that is just a result of practice –and it still normally takes me several hours. Letters written in 15 minutes usually look like letters that have been dashed off without much thought.)

So to summarise so far, the best sales letters have headlines which attract the reader. They can be direct and to the point (“free sample materials – just call”) or they can be funny and irreverent (“why sending your regional sales team half way up a mountain and letting them freeze for several hours while you eat their turkey at Christmas is good for them”). They can sell the product, direct the reader to the catalogue, or be totally off topic. But no matter what they are, they need to be there and they need to be eye-catching. In an ideal scenario the reader is so impressed that he or she photocopies the letter and passes it round the office.

Experiment with your covering letter. Send a third of your mailing list the catalogue or brochure with no covering letter. Send a third letter A and a third letter B and monitor the response rate. Try writing things that are totally different. It is the only way to learn.

(This issue of testing is one of the main reasons why most firms never make the breakthroughs that we have been able to make with some of our clients. I have, on occasion, undertaken 10 different test mailings for one product simultaneously. The results ranged from a zero response rate to 5% - and 5% represented a lot of profit for our client. As they said to me, “when you said we should try 10 different approaches we nearly cancelled the project – but none of us would have guessed which approach was going to generate the 5%.”)

Here are some more tips...

Boring opening sentences are also killers. After the headline this is the first thing people read. Does the first sentence grab attention? If not, forget it because you won't be selling. Ask yourself, am I actually selling anything in this first sentence? If not, am I seriously grabbing the reader's attention? If the answer to both is no, then take a cold shower and lie down for a while. It won't help, but it is a good punishment and will remind you to get it right next time.

You must put in a PS. The PS is the most read bit of a letter after the headline and the opening sentence. Add a new reason for the customer to act now. Or if writing a funny sales letter, give a twist to the joke. Better still, do both. Make sure you send the reader back into the letter – so that anyone who has skimmed down and just read the PS has to go back to find out more. And whatever you do, don't say, “PS: If you would like to know more about our service please call 01536 399000”. If you want to say that, put it in the last sentence before the signature. Don't put it in the PS, because on its own it sells nothing.

You must include a call to action. No matter which direction the letter takes it must encourage the reader to do something. Now. This moment. Without delay. And this must be easy – put the details in clearly – phone, fax, email, post, web.

Please stop telling the reader what she or he already knows. What a silly thing to do – and yet it is always there. “As you know, we are the biggest...” “As you will have seen in the trade press, we are launching...” “Everyone knows that...” Yuk.

Talking about the writer.... This is fine if it is funny, original, or in some way different. But "I want to introduce myself as your new sales rep" is as pointless as the "courtesy calls" that bored telephone sales people do. If you want to talk about yourself make yourself different. "Last year, having won 'Mastermind'..." is a good opening, because most of us don't know any Brains of Britain. So is, "The invasion of Peckham by troops from the planet Zorg last week affected me personally..." On the other hand "I've just joined XYZ Ltd and wanted to tell you about..." does not work. Unless your aim is to bring the company into bankruptcy! Equally bad is, "The reason for my writing to you today is..."

For years I have written self-deprecating pieces about my inability to get customers to sign up with Hamilton House and my equal inability to give a seminar that does not end in a riot. Some people quite enjoy these because, although I am breaking the rule by writing about me, I am making myself look an idiot. It's a style that people like. It's not the only style under the sun, but it works, largely because it is different. It's gets people to phone up and say, "I read all your letters, and I love the stories about the Toppled Bollard..." Now they might not actually like those silly tales, but the fact is that they remember the name of the mythical public house (The Toppled Bollard) that is at the centre of most of the stories.

Just pause for a moment and think on this. We are talking here about junk mail – the sort of thing people phone up and complain about, the stuff that of which people say, "I never read it.", the marketing format that people write about to the Daily Mail and complain that it is destroying the planet. And yet, people who are not my customers phone up and quote the name of the public house in the stories. That suggests that an additional level of communication is happening.

Going over the top. "This is the greatest offer this year" is just unbelievable, so no one will believe it. If you must go over the top, make it so utterly unbelievable people will believe it on the grounds that no one could be that stupid. "The best second hand car shop in the Galaxy" is better than claiming to be the best in town.

Avoid catch phrases. We live in a world in which the habit is to reduce everything to a few words. We speak of "September 11", "the Dunkirk spirit", and "Thatcherism". These words and phrases signify huge concepts, but the existence of the word or phrase means we don't have to think. They have become symbols, road signs to the complex world and they rarely help. You need people to think. You don't need to stop people thinking. The phrase "slash and burn economics" is a dramatic phrase that made me think when I first heard it although it then got overused and I stopped noticing it. So, if you want to use a symbolic phrase make sure it is powerful and has not already been done to death.

In summary – the first reason why a mailshot might flop is that it simply doesn't grab and then hold attention.

2. Sell Benefits

Vast amounts of direct mail fall into one of two traps:

Type A direct mail is a statement. It says "I have this for sale at this price" and that's that. Publishers are particularly bad at doing this – telling us in detail about the ISBN, the writer, the date of publication, the number of pages and the title of each chapter. Software companies tell us that version 3.3.1 of their program has just come out, as if we might care.

Type B advertising tells us features. Computer sales people also do this quite often, writing to tell us about "an amazing 1mb of RAM". What's RAM? Why is it good for me?

These types of advertising fail because they don't address the needs and interests of the reader – they don't say “hello reader – this is the benefit that will accrue to you if you buy my product.” (Of course I know that experts in the field of computing will know what RAM is and they might be impressed – so if you are selling to them, that's fine. I'm talking here about selling to ordinary people who are not already experts.)

What you need to do is think of your reader and then think – how am I going to make this reader's life better?

Here is an example. A company sells sun cream. It has all sorts of technical jargon that it can say on the subject of what harmful rays it cuts out and how it only needs one application a day. That's fine – but until it actually spells out why using this cream is good for you, the sales never really take off. But a piece which says, “When in the sun the last thing you want to do is fiddle around with sun cream again, and again, and again...” can work because it starts focussing on the benefit. No more fiddling around. Just put the cream on once, and you are set for the day.

Here's another example. Many years ago I wrote a book on study skills. When it was first published the advert said that it was a new book on study skills. The assumption was that teachers knew that study skills were a good thing, and so might well buy the book. Sales were modest. Then the book was re-launched under the title “Raising Grades through Study Skills” and the advert made the link between the grades students get in their exams and the amount of time they spend doing study skills. Suddenly schools were given a benefit – and they went for it. Over 50% of the secondary schools in the UK have now bought the book.

So the second reason that a mailshot can fail is because it fails to tell the reader of the benefits that will accrue from using this product or service.

3. Be unique

For most of us benefits are not enough. We have rivals. There is more about dealing with rivals in the next section, but here I consider the implication of having rivals in terms of your unique selling point. Assuming you are not selling something utterly unique this means that your rival might well be offering similar benefits to the ones you offer. Somehow you have to be unique even though the product is replicated elsewhere.

Most firms try to be unique in terms of being the cheapest or being the fastest. The trouble is that if both you and your rival claim to be the cheapest, the reader won't know who to believe and so won't believe anyone. Other approaches are:

- The most comprehensive – the widest choice of products even if you only deal in a very specific arena.
- The nicest people to deal with
- Offering a free add-on which no one else gives.

One way of combining a unique selling point with the benefit is to go for a benefit which no one else has noticed. This occurred recently with the selling of children's playground equipment. Lots of firms were doing this – all giving nice pictures of their materials with children playing happily in playgrounds. Everyone attempted to be unique through price or range – but it got more and more difficult to do this.

More difficult that is until one firm came along and stopped selling playground equipment, but instead said, “Cut bullying at playtime by up to 95%”. The company argued that playtime bullying at school was a result of children not having things to do. Give them some equipment

and they could then occupy themselves. So they sold an end to bullying by having playground equipment, rather than selling playground equipment as an end in itself. They gave people a reason to buy.

In this case the equipment stayed the same – but the benefit moved from being similar to everyone else to being unique.

Another reason for a failure is that your product or service might appear to the reader to be similar to other people's. It might not be – but if it appears to the reader to be similar, the sale is lost.

Thus the issue is not whether or not your product or service is unique– it is whether the reader does or does not perceive it as unique.

4. *Beating your rivals*

Tom Peters has famously said, “if it ain't broke, break it,” and I totally agree in the sense that if you are mailing with success, you should continue to do what you are doing, but simultaneously do a few experiments. If you do them now you get the following benefits:

- a) You prove that you are right, because the experiments get a poor response. Tell your colleagues and let them know how utterly brilliant you are for getting it right in the first place.
- b) You prove that your current line of selling could be improved because the experimental approach got a higher response rate. Tell everyone, let them know how utterly brilliant you are for taking the trouble to check, and coming up with a better campaign.
- c) You prove that, although some people like the current line of selling, other people can be attracted by a different approach. This means you can take all the people who don't buy with your current mainstream approach and mail them the new approach – and so you get A type customers and B type customers. You have just got a load of new customers. Tell everyone, let them know how utterly brilliant you are for finding all these new customers.

But that's not all. The biggest benefit of all of exploring different methods of mailing is that next week, when one of your rivals launches an all out attack on you with a brilliant line of marketing that utterly undermines your current approach, you have a new approach all lined up ready to go.

The fact is that we all have rivals in business, and there is no doubt that the best way to beat them is to differentiate yourself from them.

In an ideal world you find a unique selling point – something that marks out your product as different from everyone else's. In addition you will wish to be known for something – being the cheapest, the biggest, the fastest, the one with the greatest choice, the one with the fastest application... Whatever that is, make sure every advertisement spells it out, over and over again.

Remember to use your sales letter creatively, as a way of distinguishing yourself from your rivals. When your catalogue comes up for redesign, have the same thoughts there. (This is one of the great advantages of the sales letter though – you can usually change the covering letter

whenever you want, whereas the catalogue may have to run for six months and go through six committees before it can be changed.)

This doesn't mean that you copy your rivals. Rather it means that you do the opposite – distinguish yourself from them. If they are the cheapest you might want to go for being reassuringly expensive. If they offer a no frills service, you might go for unconditional guarantees.

This is an area where I get more objections than any other. People keep saying, “yes, I can see how that is good for some lines of business but it won't work with us.”

I have never found a case where this is so – so if you want to challenge me on this, please do email me or call me. But before you do, let me give you two examples.

Example 1: A few years back a company that supplies hot drinks machines to offices asked for some thoughts on how we could market the product. We noticed that most of their rivals were simply phoning offices and offering a free trial service of the machine. When told, “we already have a hot drinks machine” the answer given was, for the most part, that this company would supply the service cheaper than anyone else.

So we came up with a different approach. We found a spot of research that showed that where people in an office had a complete break from work for five minutes every hour their overall productivity increased. So we wrote a piece pointing out that installing a hot drinks machine can increase productivity because it gives people a reason to have regular breaks. The advert attracted attention and worked – probably in part because it was so different from the advertising of other firms. Indeed most customers stopped asking the price question when approached in this new way, and so the supplier was able to put prices up.

Example 2: When Hamilton House Mailings started over 30 years ago we began by selling mailings lists of schools. At that time there were already two firms doing this – one a huge multi-national, the other a UK firm that had the reputation that “if you want to know about schools, go to xxx”. The problem we had was that the list of schools was not hard to get, and our list of schools was not obviously better than, or different from, that of existing firms. In other words we were selling a product that was almost identical to our rivals, at a very similar price to our rivals (there was no room to go cheaper), and we were facing two big companies that were highly established. And all around me people said, you can't make this work, because you can't differentiate yourself and your product from your well-established rivals.

So to survive we had to make ourselves different. And after thinking about it for a month or two we came up with one very simple idea: we emphasised the fact that I had been a teacher and lecturer for 10 years, and so knew what teachers wanted. We didn't change the product, we changed the background.

Later we started a second company which used the mailing lists to sell products to schools. We experimented like mad and learned a lot about what sort of adverts worked and what didn't. Then we made the information about what worked in schools marketing available to our customers – free of charge. By this time our product was still similar to that of our competitors, but their product didn't have the bolt-ons that we had.

If you get your unique campaign right you might end up not only giving your sales a boost, but also hurting the sales of your rivals. In 2001 we were asked by a nursery school if there was anything we could do for them in terms of the increasing number of children attending. The school was already successful, in that it had a large number of children on the roll – but it wanted more. The argument was that marketing could not work because children came to the school because:

- a) the school was in the right place for the parents – they took their children in because it was near home or en route for work;
- b) most parents heard about the school from other parents – not least because parents of small children know other parents of small children.

We worked out a campaign in which the school wrote to parents and told them that the school wanted to conduct an experiment. The school would stop giving children squash to drink at 4pm and replace this with chilled water or milk. This, the school believed, would reduce hyperactivity, and so enhance the experience the children gained if they stayed after 4pm. The school would also deliver the children back to their parents after 4pm in a more convivial mood.

The school asked the parents to monitor the situation and let the school know if they noticed any sort of improvement in the behaviour of the children.

Then, having excited everyone with the fact that this is a school that really is at the forefront of improving the experience and well-being of nursery school children, we produced another letter to go to parents around the area, reminding them that although there were a lot of nurseries to choose from, only one was involved in the additive experiment. It cast doubt in the minds of parents with children at other nurseries (“oh my God what are they giving my child?”) and gave the nursery we worked for a major profile as a school at the forefront of nursery education.

In short, we beat the rivals.

5. Mail the right people at the right time

Mailing at different times of the year brings in different response rates – but it is not the same for everyone. For example, generally speaking many companies find that mailing in December does not work – but some organisations have had great success with such mailings. The same is true in August.

In fact many companies always promote at the same time, because they believe this to be the best time. But the world changes and it is often worth experimenting to ensure that long held beliefs are still true. One of the great advantages of direct mail is that it is perfectly possible to experiment with quite small numbers. Try a short run promotion at a time of year when you don't normally mail, and see what happens.

Also think about changing the flyer, catalogue or sales letter in accordance with the season – but for goodness sake don't be simplistic or obvious. Remember other people have thought of this too. So if mailing in December, don't just say, “Christmas is nearly upon us.” I got a dozen promotions like this at the start of December and threw them all out. Why couldn't someone say, “It's time to think of swimming costumes and beach towels,” which would at least have made me read the promotion.

(There is a fundamental here – which we have touched on before. Whatever you write, remember that people will be receiving loads of other promotions at the same time. If the mailing is similar to that of everyone else it is much less likely to get a good response.)

So.... don't be obvious. Think of what the opposition is up to. Think of what else your customers and potential customers are receiving today. Avoid doing what everyone else does.

Now think of the list you are using. Having bought a list and found that it gives you a good response, consider buying it for re-use. Put it on your computer (or have a reliable agency do it) and then mail the list in full a couple of times.

Next, record everyone who replies, removing the “gone aways” at the same time. With those who have replied you will have information about how they see you and your product and you can tailor future promotions accordingly. With those who have not replied you can mail them again with special offers, first time user discounts, questionnaires, cards inviting them to be removed from your list, freebies, etc, etc, refining it all the time, until eventually you can say, if they haven’t replied by now, it is time to give them up as a bad job.

Database marketing – that is building up your own list of customers or interested parties can get response rates up to 40% on a mailing, especially where you are selling upgrades and new but related products etc to people who have purchased before.

It is amazing how many companies still don’t stay in touch with previous purchasers, and yet these are for most of us the people most likely to buy next time around.

But amidst all this you need to consider the leaflet. Some leaflets work just once, then they die. Some work twice and die. Some work three times. Some die suddenly – you get 5% one time, and then you get 0.5% the next time. Some gradually decline.

Thus what we have here are two variable issues when selling to the same group of people – how quickly the list becomes non-respondent, and how quickly the leaflet becomes non-respondent. There is no general rule as to how this happens – but there really is no point saying “my leaflet to this list should work this time because it worked last time.”

At the same time it is important to take a good look at the people or organisations to whom you sell because the chances are you won’t be selling equally to all your potential market. If selling to businesses, for example, you might find yourself selling more product into larger businesses – or you might find you do better selling to smaller firms. You might have a better response from companies in Essex than Cumbria – but this can be broken down still further. For example, you might find that you don’t sell very well to urban areas, but you do sell well to rural – but with a bias towards the south, and towards larger companies. Maybe it is the public sector that responds well...

In essence if you can undertake an analysis of this type and then say, “7% of the companies I reach are in Dorset, but 20% of my sales come from Dorset” you can then start slanting your mailing – and save yourself a lot of money. You might still want to mail every possible company once a year or once a quarter, but the rest of the time you can save money by being much more targeted. So if 20% of your mailing goes to companies with under 10 staff, but only 1% of sales comes from that group, you can increase your profits by NOT mailing companies with under 10 staff.

Now we can see another reason why a mailshot might fail – overall your list might be responsive but it might have high points of great response and low points of low response. It is always possible that you have just mailed a low response area. If you have not done a profile analysis you won’t know.

Mail the right person

Some people say, “I only go to the top person.” Whenever I ask why, they say something about always going to the top – which is simply circular.

Of course sometimes you do want to mail the person at the top. But don't forget the value of reaching a person slightly lower down, who thinks, "hey we could do with this," and who then goes to the boss and says, "If I had an XZ98 generator in my office I could double my output."

Some managers will ignore adverts on the basis that it is not for the likes of them to make a suggestion. But many others are much more pro-active and will take ideas to their bosses.

It means you can mail the finance director, the marketing director, the sales director, etc, etc, all of whom get less mail than the MD. If you can convince the employee or director that by purchasing this item his or her productivity will increase, you are basically saying, "buy this and get a pay rise."

This desire to reach the person at the top of an organisation has now got into telephone sales people. Time and again we get calls from companies selling internet site building, cheap power, cheap telephones, photocopiers, computers and goodness knows what, and they all ask for the top man in the company. Some of them get to me, as chairman, some get to Steve Mister, the MD of Hamilton House. Either way it is silly, because when they say, "what sort of photocopier do you have now?" or "how much do you spend each month on electricity?" we haven't got a clue and so end the call.

There is a further problem with names. If you are mailing people who have bought from you before you will have a named list. If not, you might well find yourself faced with a situation in which you are looking at a list of 10,000 companies that meet your criteria, with 9500 having a named MD but only 3400 have a named Personnel Director.

Many people react to this by only mailing the named personnel director. Others just mail the named MD. Fewer mail the personnel manager or director by title.

The outcome of this is that the named people are getting massive amounts of mail. The people whose name do not appear on the lists get much smaller amounts.

The point is that many companies don't fill in questionnaires and don't answer phone enquiries as to the names of directors or managers. Ever. So these names never appear on a list. There might be four different lists of personnel managers, but the chances are that most of the names appear on most of the lists.

Thus another reason for the failure of a mailshot can be that you are focussing only on named people who are either inappropriate, or are people who are mailed over and over again. You might just be ignoring the majority.

It is even worth thinking of mailing people who don't exist. For example, try the generic title, "The Director in charge of increasing profits". You would be surprised how well such promotions can work. Try an experiment with just 500 promotions to non-existent people, and 500 existing people.

And now...

That's it for the things that make mailshots go wrong: the text might not grab attention; there might be no benefits in the headline; there might be no unique selling point; your rivals might be outwitting you in terms of advertising if not in terms of product; your list or your leaflet might have been mailed once too often; or you could be mailing the wrong people – even if it looks like you are mailing the right list.

What to do to make each mailshot work?

Here are some simple ideas.

1. Have an outside reader look at everything you write. It is very common for people within the business become so used to the way a brochure or advertisement looks, that they cannot see how it might be changed. Likewise they become so familiar with the product or service itself, they can't see that the promotion might assume too much for the uninitiated to be able to read it and understand it.

If you would like us to take a look, we can do that. Just email your advert to Sales@hamilton-house.com or fax your advert to 01536 399 012. Give us your phone number and write on the piece FOR REVIEW. Add your name and phone number, and details of who the mailing piece was sent to. No charge – I'll be pleased to chat with you.

2. Experiment. We live in a world in which change is now moving faster than ever before. This means that just because something worked this time last year, it does not mean it will work again this year.

3. Consider who you mail – look at mailing list options. If you would like you can call the Hamilton House sales line and ask for advice. Call 01536 399 000.

4. Subscribe to our free newsgroups through which people share information on direct mail. Just send an email to direct-mail-secrets-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

You will get a confirmation request. Reply to that straight away, and your subscription starts. When you join, just wait for a while and read the messages that come in. You will then get the flavour of the exchanges. You can't use this service to advertise, but you can reply to anyone who comes up with a question – which can result in an immediate sale. There is also an email newsgroup which specifically deals with education – email education-marketing-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

5. If you are writing your own mailshots, prepare to give yourself lots and lots of time, and practise like mad. If you really do just have a few hours to write a mailshot and you have had only limited experience at doing this, you are likely to get this wrong. You can ask my team to write for you – we charge £300 for a single letter.

It is interesting that some people “my goodness that is cheap” and others say “I couldn't possibly pay that.” What makes for such differing reactions?

The answer is that people who know just how much time and effort and practice goes into writing a good sales letter will understand that price. What's more, they will have seen just what a difference a good sales letter can make to a response rate.

Consider this. On a mailing you might break even at 1% response rate. A good sales letter could double your response rate. Suddenly you are into profit. On a mailing of 10,000 addresses that could mean another 100 replies, each making £50 profit – a nice £5000 extra – making the cost look rather trivial.

Of course the right sales letter doesn't work every time – sometimes the people being mailed have just had enough, no matter what you say. There are no guarantees – and I would never say that we are the only people who can write. But I would say that if you do it yourself, the biggest single reason I see for failure is the fact that the person writing the sales letters has not

practised. When you bring in a professional you bring in someone who has written thousands of sales letters. Somehow you have to get up to that level of experience.

In conclusion...

I hope you found this helpful. Email me on Tony@hamilton-house.com Phone me on 01536 399 013. Fax me on 01536 399 012.

And if you feel so inclined why not pass this file on to a friend or colleague?

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