

10 Things You Should Know

TO AVOID DIRECT RESPONSE DISASTER



1215 4th Avenue Suite 2100
Seattle, Washington 98161-1018
t 206.805.1500 f 206.805.1599
<http://www.hackergroup.com>

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1 KEEP PROGRAM OBJECTIVES SIMPLE AND FOCUSED

Working toward a single objective will typically generate the highest response. If the objective is to generate a lead, for example, concentrate on that singular objective. If the objective is to get people to register on your Web site, then focus on that objective and move all subsequent requests and sell-through offers to later communications. Ask recipients to do too many things, and they'll do none of them. When you give them too many options, they get confused and become afraid of making a mistake, so they do nothing. **Rule of thumb:** *Every time you pile on one more objective, your response rates will fall by 50% or more.*

2 ALL COPY PLATFORMS AND OFFERS SHOULD SUPPORT YOUR SINGLE, CLEARLY DEFINED OBJECTIVE

In direct marketing, good copy and offer structures are essentially arguments to convince your prospect to do what you want them to do. If your objective is to generate a lead, your offer should reward them for responding. If your primary objective is to get them to register on your Web site, then reward them for registering, not for doing something else. There should always be a 100% connection between what you want them to do and what you're going to give them when they do it.

3 SELL-THROUGH OFFERS CAN BE DANGEROUS

Is "Save 20%" a good offer? Not always. If you have been selling software for \$100, for example, and you're now willing to sell it for \$80, offering "Save 20%" might be worth testing. In the mind of the buyer, saving 20% by spending \$80 on an impulse sale is a smart, justifiable decision. Now let's look at "Save 20%" in another context. Assume you're selling an integrated solution into the enterprise — total budget \$10 million. Buy now, save \$2 million? In this case, the purchase is consultative and considered, not an impulse buy, and a big team will make the decision. That team will work at their own pace and make the decision based on the internal policies of their company. Discounting signals desperation on your part. And desperation tells them that you will push them to go faster than they want to go. So, they protect themselves by not responding. Be careful with sell-through offers; you might scare your best prospects away.

4 YOU'VE GOT 12–20 SECONDS TO WIN THEIR HEARTS

Every program you do — direct mail, print, email or Web — has only 12–20 seconds from initial appearance in front of your target to the trash can or delete key. You don't have time for a long wind up. You don't have time to build up to a great finish. Hit them hard with the offer and tell them what they have to do to get it. The offer and how to get it must be the first and last thing they see. If you're not going to make a hard-hitting offer, save your money.

5 DIRECT MARKETING IS NOT A COMMUNICATIONS BRANDING OPPORTUNITY

Making strong offers is what makes direct work. Brand messaging often gets in the way. If your programs aren't working as well as they should be, improve your offers and strip away as much brand messaging as you can. Your response rates will improve dramatically.

6 MAKE YOUR COPY EASY TO UNDERSTAND AND RELEVANT TO THE RECIPIENT

Talk to them in their language, not yours. Talk to them about what they care about, not what you care about. Don't use jargon and techno-babble unless you know that your gibberish is exactly the same as their gibberish. If you can't explain your product or service in two or three crisp sentences, don't even try. When your product or service is hard to understand, they won't work at getting comprehension, they'll just stop reading. (Some of the most successful programs we do for complicated products never even mention the product; we just talk about what the product will do for them. Try it, it works.)

A camel is a horse designed by a committee. What has this got to do with direct marketing? Frankly, a lot, as the next two items will demonstrate.

7 REDUCE THE SIZE OF PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT TEAMS

And if you can't reduce the size of the team, change the roles and responsibilities of the team members. When everybody gets input and veto power, it's impossible to create a racehorse; you'll always get a camel. One person must take ultimate responsibility for program performance; the rest should support that individual with resources and information.

8 SIMPLIFY THE APPROVAL PROCESS

This is a second surefire way to turn racehorses into camels. We recently did a research project that showed a .87 correlation (1.0 would be perfect) between the number of people who approve a program and the response rate. Quite simply, the more people in the loop, the worse program performance gets. Why? Great programs are created by a writer and designer who have unique insights into how to manipulate strangers at long distance. They know, for example, that changing a word or two, or making a specific emotional appeal, can lift response rates by 2X, 3X or more. The greater the number of people who review and approve the program, the greater the chance that edits will take away that 2X or 3X advantage. If you can't cut down the number of people in the approval process, change their responsibilities. Let the Product Manager, for example, comment on product descriptions, but not on offer structure. You owe it to people to keep them away from their areas of incompetence.

9 KEEP DETAILED PROGRAM PERFORMANCE RECORDS

I've talked to 32 prospective clients in the past eight months. Of those, 30 had done direct marketing before, 2 hadn't. Of the 30, only 4 could show me historical performance of past programs in detail. All the money and time their companies invested had been wasted. And 26 out of those 30 — or 87% — are doomed to repeat the failures of the past. There's an 87% chance you and your company are not keeping detailed records. Do it for your company. Do it for yourself. The information you collect can make you a true direct marketing expert.

10 YOU DON'T TEST ENOUGH

Last year I spoke at Direct Marketing Day – New York. There were about 240 people in the room. I asked the group, "How many of you have active, ongoing direct marketing test programs in place?" Only four people raised their hands. Don't ever forget that in direct marketing the recipient makes the rules. They tell you what they'll respond to and how they want to buy. The only way you'll find out what they want is to give them a chance to tell you. Test, test, test. Again, this is the best way to make you a true expert in direct marketing and give you the ammunition you need to defend yourself from the ignorant, yet powerful.