

Why I Still Love Direct Mail

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Certainly there is more than enough direct mail being sent out by charities. Just ask the individuals receiving it. There also seems to be a wholesale embracing of the discipline by many charities and their fundraisers.

What then provokes the arguments, limits the funds received in the meantime, and causes some donors to either limit or stop their giving to charities as a result of the fundraising appeals they receive?

Much of the difficulty comes from a poor understanding of how direct mail works. Many fundraisers view it simply as an intrusive vehicle, providing an unwanted, adversarial message to recipients. Others look instead at its flexibility and its ability to allow a charity to compete with those bigger than itself in the fundraising world.

The reasons for the growth of direct mail seem obvious: first, there is simply it is easy for people to shop or give online in a way that fits their schedules. In addition, there is a perceived ease by many in entering the field to write direct mail. Subsequently, many charities have found it a helpful medium 'to cry wolf' in. And, direct mail start-up costs do not break the bank. They are controllable.

Personally, I think a contributing factor to the growth in the field is the multiplicity of direct mail 'experts' who now give advice. Unfortunately, many charities have been hurt by some of these individuals whose advice is often less than tactful.

Direct mail offers a staggering array of options over other media in delivering a personal message and obtaining funds for a cause. It is very flexible with tremendous opportunities in the selection of formats and in allowing you to personalise your message to pre-determined specifications.

However, direct mail can not replace a personal call to a major donor - it can support it, and in some cases, deliver its own critical message. It reminds individuals of those aspects of life they would like to change or initiatives they would like to support.

In all of this, its greatest strength is its ability to measure its returns and through database selection and mining, to deliver a targeted message.

To not take advantage of these features is to simply relinquish the medium from a manageable, measurable advertising medium to the domain of 'top of one's head' hunches.

However, in talking with hundreds of fundraisers they tend to cite three concerns for their direct mail programmes:

1. First of all, they want to make a "profit" from each mailing.
2. These fundraisers also want to keep their donors "active."
3. Finally, they want to avoid complaints from those receiving their mail.

The 'keeping donors active' – or the retention of donors – is the most pressing issue to me personally. In my 35 years of writing copy two things strike me about today's fundraising culture. The first is how many good and worthy options there are for donors to be involved with. And the second is how very competitive it is today for the average charity.

Today it is becoming much harder to retain donors over longer periods of time. Because most organizations cannot see all their donors face-to-face on a routine basis, direct mail serves as an excellent "engaging" function with constituents and assists with retention. This is especially true if the copy reflects the prior and current interests of the recipient.

Unfortunately, much of today's direct mail packages are sent by charities in a 'shotgun blast' strategy, hoping in the process to attract some individuals to give. It is embedded within an organisational strategy like this that complaints are often incepted by those receiving the mail. Direct mail becomes a nuisance when it is 'selling things to me that I am not interested in'.

Alternately it is a valuable medium when it is reminding me of those issues I care deeply about or those issues that define who I am as a person.

The prevalence of the 'shotgun approach' to direct mail has had the net effect of making the avoidance of complaints the chief criterion that dominates most direct mail strategies. Rather than responding to this problem in a way that narrows the target area of the medium while simultaneously strengthening its message to those who want to hear it, many fundraisers have adopted an almost paranoid concern over complaints. Consequently we have lots of mail going out with innocuous messages where you have to pore over the copy with a microscope to find the subject matter and the "ask."

Nevertheless, direct mail is a wonderful medium to those who try to maximize its strengths. By firmly remembering that you have a very short time in which to engage the reader, copywriters can begin to think holistically the necessary

stages most readers go through in looking at the direct mail packages sent to them.

This is why a powerful message in the carrier envelope is so important in order to ensure to the reader that the package warrants opening. Correctly done, the reader looks for the offer and the benefits they'll receive by taking the desired action. Then if they're really interested, the reader looks deeper at the copy before responding. Few advertising media in direct mail's price range can command the 15 to 20 seconds a reader will often spend with a package.

There are three areas where direct mail 'shines' in my book:

- Most are acquainted with direct mail as a prospecting tool for external lists; fewer fundraisers use direct mail as part of a programme to recapture past donors that were once active by prospecting these once active participants.
- Direct mail also can do a wonderful job of increasing the frequency of giving by a donor by simply asking the donor to either give more frequently than they are (for example, giving monthly) or asking them to contribute to another part of the charity's work that needs to be funded.

Second gift packages are also wonderful additions to a direct mail strategy. Both are wonderful ways to increase frequency.

- Finally, and I think least used, direct mail affords a wonderful system whereby a charity can upgrade a donor's giving simply by asking them. Of course, getting a donor to give more frequently is the best way to upgrade a donor's involvement, but I also favour asking a donor to consider upgrading their gift, particularly to those who are regular or monthly contributors.

Barry McLeish has provided invaluable counsel to numerous Christian charities dealing with change in the face of turbulent marketing environments.

Barry's new book, *Yours, Mine and Ours: Creating a Compelling Donor Experience*, available from our bookshop can help you create better direct mail packages designed with donors in mind.