

Is Direct Mail Dead?

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In an age of exciting, interactive websites, social networking, e-mail, instant messaging, smart phones, audio casts and video streaming – how’s a slow, increasingly expensive media like direct mail supposed to compete?

A long time ago - in a very different world - direct mail was easily the most efficient, cost-effective method for reaching a large group of people with a compelling message. Those days are already long gone.

But, is direct mail actually dying? Perhaps not!

After all, there is something satisfyingly *tangible* about holding a letter in your hand, a feeling that the “virtual” world just can’t deliver. Some things just seem more real when they’re on paper – and there are some people who like that feeling. Then, there are those people (*and some of them are your donors*) who are not yet online or, who prefer to avoid the online world altogether.

The good news is that the sloppy, clumsy, one-size-fits-all, just plain ugly mail that earned the nickname “junk mail” is definitely on the way out. The direct mail that will survive in the days to come won’t be at all like your Great Aunt Mildred’s direct mail.

Except that – in some ways – it will. Because the factors that made direct mail effective for many years still apply – not just to paper and ink, but to the newer avenues of electronic mass communication. The difference isn’t so much between an envelope and stamp versus the Internet as it between old and new ways of approaching direct response communications.

We used to think in terms of the charity controlling the message and inspiring response from supporters. Today, it’s the donors and stakeholders who have the control. **Thanks to the variety of media available, they can now choose both how they receive information and how they respond to it.**

This means that you still have to master the details of delivering your message and managing the response for each of the various media channels your donors use.

But competent execution is no longer enough. To be successful, you need to understand the foundational elements that have always been at the core of effective direct response communication:

- **Know your audience** – Preferences, demographics, giving history, and interests all give you help in getting your message to your stakeholders. Yes, you may need to segment your appeals carefully and personalise your messages.
- **Tell your story** – Who are you and what do you do? How are you changing the world? The local community? What are these gifts going to accomplish? Why are they needed now?
- **Ask! – Be specific.** Tell them what to do: write a cheque, click on the "donate now" button. Tell them how you'll use their gift.
- **Make it easy for the donor to respond** – Sometimes this comes down to making sure the response card fits in the envelope, or that the link to the web site actually works. Find the hurdles and remove them.
- **Measure and adapt your approach** – Supporters will tell you what they like – and dislike – by their response or lack of it. Really look at your response rates and compare responses from different donor segments.
- **Compare different appeals.** What works for multi-year committed donors may not work as well for donors who have not given in a while or for new donors.
- **Figure out where your "point of no return" is** (when lapsed donors no longer respond) and stop spending money on people who are no longer interested.
- **Map out the unique characteristics of your stakeholders.** Hey, that sounds a little like number 1...

These principles go hand in hand with solid execution. Whether the media is paper or electronic, it is crucial to take full advantage of the strengths and mitigate the weakness of each media channel. This includes coordinating your message across multiple media channels and providing multiple response avenues. This type of integrated interaction is already possible – and appreciated by today's donors. And, it will be expected by tomorrow's donors too.

In my opinion direct mail isn't dead yet – but, for it to be an effective fundraising tool it's going to take focused effort, more personalisation and segmentation and definitely more creative thought.