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Target Marketing

Five Ways to Improve Outer Envelope Language

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Format, the cover letter, the reply form, the premiums and/or freemiums ... all key components of a direct mail package. But the most key component of all, most likely? The outer envelope. Here are six ways to make the language on that outer even more effective at achieving its end goal: getting the prospect to open the package.

1. Focus on the Outside

“Mailers may say differently, but they tend to focus on what goes inside [the envelope]. But if you don’t get them past the outer envelope, it doesn’t matter how great your cover letter is,” asserts Pat Friesen, copywriter and owner of Pat Friesen & Co. in Kansas City, Kan.

Friesen is one of many copywriters who consider the outer envelope message, or lack thereof, the make-or-break point of a package. She mentions the first three seconds that a prospect will look at and feel an envelope and how fundamental that experience is to the package’s success—how it looks, feels and reads. “All those things need to work together, even the postage and the addressing,” comments Friesen, who says effective outer envelopes are tailored to the audience and the offer inside, as well as seek to stand out from the competition in the mailbox.

2. Master the Process

The language used on the outer envelope begins with the product and the audience, says Friesen, because you must know the product and the benefits to the audience you’re talking to. “I tend to write my outer envelope last because I usually find something in the brochure or letter that is going to be the ‘A ha!’ that drives the message on the outside, if I’m going to put one out there,” she explains.

For Ruth K. Sheldon, copywriter and president of Ruth K. Sheldon & Associates in New York, it’s a similar gathering process until the moment of outer inspiration strikes. “I dig to find the hook or the irresistible [unique selling position] that can be alluded to on the outer and used in the entire package,” she reveals. Along the way, she makes sure to factor emotion into the outer equation, such as appealing to the big emotions (i.e., greed, fear, envy). “These powerful hooks have got to fit in with the objective of the mailing, the positioning of the product and the overall objectives you’re trying to achieve,” she says.

3. Use the Whole Package

Often, you may be well served by using the entire outer, including its back. Friesen describes a package for bison meat that was mailed to gourmet food and

beef eaters. When she spoke with her client about why its current buyers were buying bison, the answer was health reasons (it's lower in cholesterol).

“So I did something I rarely do; I pretty much covered the envelope. I put a steak on the front because this audience buys meat through the mail, so they see that, and it will stop them. Above that, I said, ‘Bison, better for you than beef’ and the way the type ran was that ‘for you’ was smaller. Meanwhile, the back of the outer had a comparison chart. So we gave them a lot of information on the outside,” describes Friesen, who reminds that when you tease on the outside, you have to make sure to deliver on the inside or prospects will be disappointed.

4. Employ Teasers That Target

Of course, teasers that don't relate to the audience or name a specific concern of that audience are less effective. “In the alternative health field, I'm seeing that very specific headlines are pulling better than a strong, general promise,” says Carline Cole, copywriter and owner of Cole Marketing Solutions in Lawrenceville, Ga. She mentions a package selling a COQ10 product whose teaser, “The shocking truth about cholesterol-lowering drugs,” significantly beat “Bye bye bypass.”

Sometimes it's simply a matter of pushing the right button. “I keep trying to boil down my theme into a sentence ... phrase ... or just one word. I'm also thinking of key buttons to push to get them to open the letter. Usually a bribe of free, valuable gifts works,” comments Cole.

5. Make It Official

Then there is the anti-teaser outer, which is gaining in popularity. “Today, packages are more official-looking. There's lots of bar coding and official sounding language. The [outer envelope] trend seems to be ‘less is more,’” says Sheldon, who points to packages that look official and spark curiosity.

Accordingly, Sheldon uses fewer words on the outer these days. “I try to keep it lean and mean,” she admits. Copy such as “Dated material enclosed” or the use of expiration dates are ways to do just that.

With the average prospect more discerning and/or savvy about the mail that gets into her mailbox, many mailers are moving away from hype-based mail. “Prospects are more sophisticated than ever and can smell an ad a mile away. You DON'T want them to think: ‘This is another AD!’ and get ready for the toss,” relates Sheldon, who also is seeing more and more outer envelope backs without copy that reinforce the non-promotional, official aspect of the package.

The “official” theme explains why more and more mail comes from the president of such and such company, or from the desk of a celebrity. “I think the official theme connotes that something slightly undesirable might happen if you don't open the envelope: You might miss out on important information. You might miss a payment and be dunned. You might miss a deadline,” says Sheldon.

Todd Lerner, copywriter and owner of Todd Lerner Advertising in Farmington Hills, Mich., is in firm agreement. “We favor teaserless outer envelopes. They look more like a communication from a company with whom the prospect already has

a relationship,” he concludes.

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