

Special Report

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Secrets OF SUCCESSFUL LEAD GENERATION

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Secrets of Successful Lead Generation

by Robert W. Bly

The Silver Rule of Marketing

I know for a fact that cold calling can work.

How? Because I've tested it.

Not in my freelance copywriting...

But for another venture – with pretty good results.

Also, I personally know a number of people who are very successful with cold calling.

Despite this, I dislike cold calling – and I virtually never recommend it for my readers.

One drawback of cold calling is that it's labor-intensive.

Unless you can outsource your cold calling – a viable option, by the way, then it requires you to spend hours dialing the phone.

And for every hour you're cold calling, you're losing an hour of billable time.

A second drawback of cold calling is that it's not exactly fun.

You are calling perfect strangers – interrupting busy people.

If you get a 10% response, then for every 10 calls you make, 9 people will reject you – right over the phone.

Some will be nice about it. A few may be downright mean or abusive.

And because YOU called THEM – and bothered them – you have to take it.

Politely.

But in addition to these drawbacks, there are two bigger problems with cold calling as a business-building method.

First, it violates the “Busy Doctor Syndrome.”

This term was coined by the late Howard Shenson, who wrote many books on consulting and seminar promotion.

The Busy Doctor Syndrome says that people would rather hire those they perceive as busy and successful.

They do not want to hire those who seem desperate and in need of work.

Well, if you are sitting at a phone cold calling potential clients, how busy and successful do you think you seem to them?

Not very, of course.

The second reason I dislike cold calling is that it puts you in a weak position for negotiating anything about your service – terms, scope of work, fee, payments, delivery dates.

The reasons prospects agree to pay premium prices are:

1. They want or need what you are selling.
2. They perceive it as exclusive and difficult to get.

3. They believe that if they do not act quickly, it will be snapped up by others and therefore not available.

When you cold call, reasons #2 and #3 disappear.

After all, when you call strangers on the telephone to sell them, then obviously you have a surplus of what you are selling.

Therefore, I urge you to practice what I call the “Silver Rule” of marketing and selling.

I call it the Silver Rule because I first heard it from my old friend, marketing consultant Pete Silver – although I don’t think he actually called it the “Silver Rule.”

Peter said: “It is better to get THEM (prospects) to come to YOU, than to have YOU go to THEM.”

Cold calling doesn’t do this.

So what type of marketing DOES follow the Silver Rule?

Most of the things we teach at ETR:

Advertising, direct mail, e-newsletters, and e-mail marketing.

So do things like establishing yourself as a recognized expert by giving seminars and speeches – or writing articles for publications read by your potential clients – or writing books.

When you get an inquiry from someone who subscribes to your e-newsletter, you are negotiating the sale from a position of strength – because THEY came to YOU, rather than YOU calling THEM.

When someone approaches you at a conference, says they loved your speech, and asks about engaging your firm’s services, you are in a position of strength.

After all, they see you as the expert – and THEY came to YOU, rather than you coming to them.

Why does Tom Peters get \$30,000 or so to give a one-hour speech on business – and have more business than he can handle – while other speakers struggle to get bookings for \$3,000 or less for a talk?

It is largely because, as a best-selling author, he is perceived as an expert.

And so prospects come to him, rather than him going to them.

He has become a wealthy entrepreneur simply by practicing the Silver Rule.

And so can you.

31-derfully Simple Ways to Make Your Ads Generate More Inquiries

A client recently phoned with a problem I'd encountered many times before.

“Our new ad campaign’s main goal is to create awareness and build image, not generate sales leads,” the ad manager explained. “But my management still tends to judge ads by counting the number of inquiries they bring in. Is there some way I can increase my ad’s pulling power without destroying the basic campaign concept?”

Fortunately, the answer is yes.

There are proven techniques you can use to increase any ad’s pulling power, whether your main goal is inquiries or image. Here are 31 techniques that can work for you:

1. Ask for action. Tell the reader to phone, write, contact his sales rep, request technical literature or place an order.
2. Offer free information, such as a color brochure or catalog.
3. Describe your brochure or catalog. Tell about its special features, such as a selection chart, planning guide, installation tips or other useful information it contains.
4. Show a picture of your brochure or catalog.
5. Give your literature a title that implies value. "Product Guide" is better than "catalog." "Planning Kit" is better than "sales brochure."
6. Include your address in the last paragraph of copy and beneath your logo, in type that is easy to read. (Also place it inside the coupon, if you use one).
7. Include a toll free number in your ad.
8. Print the toll-free number in extra-large type.
9. Put a small sketch of a telephone next to the phone number. Also use the phrase, "Call toll-free."
10. Create a hot line. For example, a filter manufacturer might have a toll-free hot line with the phone number 1-800-FILTERS. Customers can call the hot line to place an order or to get more information on the manufacturer's products.
11. For a full-page ad, use a coupon. It will increase response 25% to 100%.
12. Make the coupon large enough that readers have plenty of room to write in their name and address.
13. Give the coupon a headline that affirms positive action – "Yes, I'd like to cut my energy costs by 50% or more."

14. Give the reader multiple response options – “I’d like to see a demonstration,” “Have a salesperson call,” “Send me a free planning kit by return mail.”

15. For a fractional ad – one-half page or less – put a heavy dashed border around the ad. This creates the feel and appearance of a coupon, which in turn stimulates response.

16. In the closing copy for your fractional ad, say, “To receive more information, clip this ad and mail it to us with your business card.”

17. A bound-in- business reply card, appearing opposite your ad, can increase response by a factor of two or more.

18. Use a direct headline – one that promises a benefit or stresses the offer of free information – rather than a headline that is cute or clever.

19. Put your offer of a free booklet, report, selection guide or other publication in the headline of your ad.

20. Offer a free gift, such a slide rule, metric conversion table, pocket ruler, etc.

21. Offer a free product sample.

22. Offer a free consultation, analysis, recommendation, study, cost estimate, computer printout, etc.

23. Talk about the value and benefits of your free offer. The more you stress the offer, the better your response.

24. Highlight the free offer in a copy subhead. The last subhead of your ad could read, “Get the facts – Free.”

25. In a two-page ad, run copy describing your offer in a separate sidebar.

26. Be sure the magazine includes a reader service number in your ad.

27. Use copy and graphics that specifically point the reader toward using the reader service number. For example, an arrow pointing to the number and copy that says, "For more information call the reader service number below."

28. Consider using more than one reader service number. For example, one number for people who want literature, another for immediate response from a salesperson.

29. In a full-page ad for multiple products, have a separate reader service number for each product or piece of literature featured in the ad.

30. Test different ads. Keep track of how many inquiries each ad pulls. Then run only those ads that pull the best.

31. Look for a sales appeal, key benefit, or theme that may be common to all of your best-pulling ads. Highlight that theme in subsequent ads.

Yours Free: 4 Steps to Selecting a Winning Premium

If you've been in direct marketing for more than a few weeks, you know that offering a premium can significantly increase response rates.

Well, in my opinion, the four most important factors to consider when choosing a premium are: value, novelty, relevance, and desirability.

1. Perceived value. A good premium either (a) has a high perceived value or (b) has a value that the reader cannot determine.

The worst premium is an item that the prospect sees as having a low value.

Example: a well-known financial newsletter publisher did a series of blanket renewals with each offering a different premium for early renewal.

One of the best-performing premiums was a video of the editor giving financial advice. The promotion positioned it as a free financial consultation with the editor in the privacy of your own home.

One of the worst-performing premiums was a pack of playing cards with the editor's picture on each card.

Why didn't playing cards work well as a premium?

One reason is low perceived value.

You can buy a deck of playing cards in any drug store or stationery store for a dollar or so.

Therefore, the perceived value of the playing card deck premium was about a dollar.

The video, by comparison, has a much higher perceived value: videos can sell for anywhere from \$19 to \$79 or even higher.

And since the editor was a highly paid investment advisor, positioning the video as a free one-hour "consultation" with him boosted the perceived value even higher.

Readers knew such a consultation would cost several thousand dollars, if the editor would even agree to it.

2. Novelty. As a rule of thumb, unique premiums generally – but not always – pull better than "me-too" or commodity premiums.

Newsletter and magazine publishers know that an exclusive special report, written by the editor on a topic of interest, is an effective premium because it is a unique item: the reader can't get it anywhere else.

On the other hand, offering best-selling books as subscription premiums has generally not worked well, because the item is so readily available: if the premium is a best-seller, there is an excellent chance the reader already has it – and if not, he can just pop into a bookstore and pick one up, without subscribing to your publication.

One subscription premium that did extremely well was a coffee mug for Advertising Age. Of course, coffee mugs are about as ordinary an item as you can get.

But here was the gimmick: the artwork on the mug looked like a faux front page of Advertising Age. Each mug was laser-imprinted with the subscriber's name incorporated into a headline, e.g., "Jane Smith wins Advertising Age's 'Advertising Genius' award."

3. Relevance. Many consumer marketers have found that premiums having little or no relationship to the product have worked extremely well. Examples include free telephones, tote bags, and solar calculators.

On the other hand, many other consumer marketers, and a large number of business-to-business marketers, have found that they get a better lead or customer when they offer a premium that's relevant to the product.

Years ago, Weka Publishing mailed a package offering a loose-leaf service on managing Novell networks. When they tested the control against a version offering a disk with 5 free utility and shareware programs for Novell, orders doubled.

4. Desirability. The more desirable the free gift, the greater the number of prospects who will respond to your promotion to get it.

One of the best premiums I've ever seen was for the Sovereign Society, a financial newsletter focusing on offshore asset protection.

The premium? If you subscribed to the newsletter, the publisher would open a Swiss bank account for you!

Offering the Swiss bank account as a premium meets all four criteria with flying colors:

* Perceived value. How much should it cost to open a Swiss bank account? I have no idea, and probably, neither did the subscriber. But prospects knew that Swiss bank accounts were something rich people generally had – “NOT just for millionaires anymore” the headline exclaimed – and so the perceived value by logical extension was probably high.

* Novelty. Most financial newsletters offer special reports as premiums. The idea of offering a free Swiss bank account was clever and unique.

* Relevant. Offering a free Swiss bank account as the premium is directly relevant to the newsletter’s core proposition of helping readers protect their assets offshore.

* Desirability. High. Even if you don’t have a lot of assets you need to hide offshore, it’s a status thing: casually mentioning your “Swiss bank account” to neighbors impresses the heck out of them – giving the customer immense pleasure and satisfying the need for exclusivity.

The Motivating Sequence

“Amateurs may talk about creativity, but professionals insist on structure,” copywriter Martin Chorich recently said to me.

In direct marketing, structure is key: if your copy does not follow the formula for persuasion, it won’t work ... no matter how creative you get.

There have been numerous formulas for writing persuasive copy throughout the years. The most famous of these is probably AIDA, which stands for attention, interest, desire, and action.

In copywriting seminars I've taught a variation on AIDA known as the "motivating sequence."

The five steps of the motivating sequence are as follows:

Step 1: Get attention.

Before your promotion can do anything else, it has to get your prospect's attention. It must get the prospect to stop, open the envelope, and start reading the materials inside instead of tossing your mailing in the trash.

You already know many methods of getting attention, and see dozens of examples of them in action every day. In TV and magazine advertising, sex is often used to gain attention for products ranging from soft drinks and cars to diets and exercise programs.

Or, you can make a bold statement ... cite a startling statistic ... ask a curiosity-arousing question ... put a bulky object in the envelope ... or use a pop-up graphic. You get the idea.

Step 2: Identify the problem or need.

Most products fill a need or solve a problem that a group of prospects are facing.

But what are the chances that the prospect is thinking about this problem when she gets your promotion? Probably not great.

So the first thing you have to do is to focus the prospect's attention on the need or problem your product addresses. Only then can you talk to them about a solution.

For instance, if you are selling an economical office telephone system, instead of starting off by talking about your system, you might say, "Are you sick and tired of skyrocketing long-distance phone bills?"

Step 3: Position your product as the solution to the problem.

Once you get the prospect to focus on the problem, the next step is to position your product or service as the solution to that problem.

This can be a quick transition; here's an example from a fundraising letter from the Red Cross:

Dear Mr. Bly:

Some day, you may need the Red Cross.

But right now, the Red Cross needs you.

Step 4: Proof.

As Mark Joyner points out in his new book *The Irresistible Offer* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005), one of the questions at the tip of your prospect's tongue upon receiving your promotion is, "Why should I believe you?"

You answer that question by offering proof. That proof is of two sorts.

The first type of proof goes to credibility. It convinces the prospect that you, the seller, are a reputable firm or individual, and therefore someone to be trusted. A diploma from a prestigious medical school displayed prominently on a doctor's office wall is an example of proof of credibility.

The second type of proof has to do with the product, and convinces the buyer that your product can do what you say it can do. Testimonials, case histories,

reviews, performance graphs, and test results are examples of proof in this category.

Step 5: Action.

The final step is to ask for action. Your goal is usually to generate either an inquiry or an order.

To ask for action in direct marketing, we make an “offer.” I define the offer as “what the reader gets when she responds to your promotion, combined with what she has to do to get it.”

In a lead-generating direct mail package, the offer might be as simple as “mail back the enclosed reply card for our free catalog.”

In a mail order online promotion, the offer might be “click here, enter your credit card information, and purchase our product on a 30-day money back trial basis for \$49.95 plus \$4.95 shipping and handling.”

I am willing to wager that every successful piece of copy you have ever mailed or e-mailed follows, to some extent, the steps in the motivating sequence ... even if you’ve never heard of it before.

That’s because you have an instinct for how to sell, and that instinct leads you to organize your selling arguments according to the motivating sequence.

So, if you can sell instinctively, then what use is knowing AIDA, the motivating sequence, or other persuasion formulas?

The answer is this: when you have the steps written out in front of you, you can more consciously make sure that you’ve handled all five steps fully and in correct sequence ... and make sure no step is short-changed or left out ... increasing your odds of writing a winner.

50 Lead-Generating Tips

What should you know when planning a lead-generating direct mail program? Here are a few pointers to guide you in the right direction:

1. How many steps are there in the buying process for this product? Where in this process does my mailing fit?
2. What can I tell my prospect that will get him to take the next step in the buying process?
3. Can I reduce selling costs by creating a mailing designed to produce a direct sale (a mail order) instead of an inquiry?
4. How many leads do I want to generate? Do we want a large quantity of “soft” leads? Or are we better off getting a smaller number of more highly qualified leads?
5. What happens if the mailing produces too many leads? Too few?
6. Is there a geographic region that my sales force does not cover? How can I respond to inquiries from this region?
7. What is the primary market for my product or service? (Which industry needs it most?)
8. Are there any secondary markets for the product large enough to justify a custom-tailored version of the mailing?
9. Who is my primary prospect within the target industry? What is his or her job title? Function?
10. Who are the other people (by job title) involved in the purchase decision for this product? What are their roles? (Who recommends the product? Who specifies it? Who has authority to approve the purchase?)

11. Must we reach all of these prospects? Or can we generate the desired sales result by targeting only one or two key decision makers at each prospect organization?

12. If we don't know who we should be mailing to, how can we find out? From our sales representatives? Market research? Direct mail?

13. If we don't know what we should be telling our potential customers about our product, how can we find out?

14. Should we tailor versions of our sales letter either to vertical markets or various job titles – or both?

15. Should we tailor our brochure to specific markets or job titles?

16. What offer are we using in our current mailing? Is there a way to make the offer stronger or better?

17. Is the prospect in need of information about our product or the problem it solves? Can we package this information in a booklet or report and offer it as a response piece in our mailing?

18. Does our sales process involve a face-to-face meeting with the prospect? Can we legitimately call this sales meeting a “free consultation” and feature it as the offer in our mailing?

19. Do we allow the user to sample our product on a free trial basis? Should we be stressing this free trial offer in our mailing?

20. Do we offer our mail customers a free gift, price discount, free shipping and handling, or other money-saving incentive for responding to our mailing? If not, why not?

21. What reason or incentive can we give the reader to respond NOW and not later?
22. Can we use telemarketing to qualify sales leads generated by our direct mail program?
23. Can we use telemarketing to turn non-responders into responders?
24. Can we use telemarketing to identify and presell prospects before we send them our mailing package?
25. What format is best for our mailing? Full-blown direct mail package (letter, brochure, reply card)? Or sales letter only?
26. Is there any benefit to personalizing the mailing?
27. What graphic treatment is appropriate for our audience? Should it be businesslike or bright and loud? Should it be “disguised” as personal correspondence or clearly marked (by use of teaser and graphics) as direct mail?
28. What copy approach should I use? Serious or breezy? Educational and informative vs. hard sell?
29. Does my reader want or need a lot of information?
30. Can I use a self-mailer format?
31. Is postcard-deck advertising appropriate for my offer?
32. Should I use a single mailing or a series of mailings?
33. How many mailings should I send to my list before giving up on people who do not respond?
34. In a series of mailings, am I using a variety of different sizes and formats to gain attention for my message?

35. Are request for more information fulfilled within 48 hours?
36. Are hot sales leads separated for immediate follow up by sales representatives or telephone salespeople?
37. What is the conversion ratio (the percentage of mail-generated inquiries that result in a sale)?
38. Are our salespeople competent? If not, what can we do to ensure better handling of sales leads?
39. Do salespeople follow up on all leads provided? If not, why not?
40. Do salespeople welcome direct mail leads or do they grumble about them? Why?
41. Are there qualifying questions we can add to our reply form to help salespeople separate genuine prospects from “brochure collectors”?
42. Can we afford to send a brochure to everyone who requests it?
43. Do we have a sufficient quantity of sales brochures on hand to fulfill all requests for more information – assuming we get a 10 percent response to our mailing?
44. Do we get a better quality lead by requiring the prospect to put a stamp on the reply card rather than offering a postage-paid business reply card?
45. Do we get better sales results from prospects who respond by telephone versus those who mail in reply cards?
46. Does our fulfillment package or sales brochure provide the prospect with the information he asked for? And does it do a good job of selling our product or service?

47. Do we include a cover letter with the brochures and data sheets we send in response to mail-generated inquiries?

48. Do we include a questionnaire, spec sheet, or some other type of reply form with our inquiry fulfillment package?

49. Do we automatically send follow-up mailings to prospects who don't respond to the inquiry fulfillment package?

50. Should we be more vigorous in our program of follow-up mailings and phone calls?

What My Dad Taught Me About Yellow Pages Advertising

Here's one Yellow Pages advertising technique that may work for you. Ironically, I learned it from my dad.

I say "ironically" because my father had no interest in advertising or marketing. His expertise was insurance – he was an insurance agent, and he knew the technical aspects of insurance inside and out.

He ran a one-man insurance agency in downtown Paterson using his own name – "F.W. 'Dave' Bly Insurance."

F stood for Fabian, which he hated. Most people who hate their first names go by their middle name – but the "W" in "F.W." stood for "Wolf," which he equally despised.

He told me that when he was a kid and he met new kids who asked him his name, he would mumble "Fabe" – short for Fabian – and hope they couldn't hear him clearly.

One day, another kid replied, "Did you say 'Dave'?"

"Yeah," said dad, and from then on he went by Dave – for the rest of his life.

His major means of advertising his agency was an ad in the Yellow Pages.

As a small independent agent in the rather downscale city of Paterson, NJ, where we lived, Dave Bly couldn't afford the biggest ad on the page – other, larger agencies could always outspend him.

So one year he decided to try something new.

In his small display ad (I can't remember the exact size), he made the headline "INSURANCE" in large, bold type.

Underneath, he had two columns of bullets – a laundry list of all the types of items he could insure for you.

In the list, he focused on items that people frequently asked about but that other insurance agents did not actively pursue: snowmobiles, I recall, were one of the items in his bullet list.

Underneath he had the name of his agency and the phone number.

Well, that bullet list ad was far more successful than any other ad he ever ran, getting him at least one phone call a day from people needing insurance.

They told him they were trying to find insurance for a particular item (like a snow mobile).

So they opened the Yellow Pages to "insurance," and his ad was the ONLY insurance ad in the book with the word "snowmobiles" in it. So of course they called him first.

Other agents, of course, could also insure snowmobiles and the other items in his bullet list.

But if you want to buy a kiwi fruit, which ad will you respond to – the one that says “fruits” or the one that says “kiwis”?

Consumer Reports used this technique in a recent mailing to sell subscriptions to their magazine.

The magazine rates consumer products in a wide variety of categories for quality. Many people, however, think of Consumer Reports primarily for their new car ratings.

A recent mailing used an oversize envelope. Printed on the outer envelope were the names of dozens of consumer products covered by Consumer Reports – everything from loudspeakers and soy milk, to treadmills and microwave ovens. Literally dozens of different products were listed.

Dad never made a fortune as an insurance agent, but he took himself out of poverty (he was a child during the Great Depression) and supported a family of four – and his Yellow Pages ads always paid back their cost many times over.

He was a patriotic American, but not a rabid capitalist – he felt insurance costs were getting out of control and that the only way to make it affordable to the masses would eventually be to socialize insurance.

He was also old-fashioned: computers came into insurance offices, but by then, he was near the end of his career and refused to learn them, never even touching a PC.

He left the PC work to his assistant, which by that time was my mother – who now has a computer in her office as well as at home.

10 Ways to Improve Your Trade Show Direct Mail

Direct mail, in the hands of a knowledgeable pro, can be a powerful promotion that builds traffic, targets key prospects, generates sales leads, fills conference rooms, creates an awareness of an event and your participation in it. It also gets the word out about your products and services.

Unfortunately, most trade-show direct mail I see violates the fundamentals of successful direct marketing. For this reason, few of these mailings generate anywhere near the desired response. (How many of your mailings produce the results you want or expect?)

Here are 10 proven techniques for creating direct mail that works. Try them in your next letter or invitation and watch your response rate soar.

1. The importance of the list. Even the most brilliant package will flop if it is mailed to the wrong list. Selecting the right mailing list is the most important step in ensuring direct mail success. According to Freeman Gosden, Jr., author of *Direct Marketing Success*, list selection is twice as important as copy, graphics, and printing combined.

For a trade show invitation, the best list is key prospects and current customers within a 100-mile radius of the exhibit hall. Invite only those people who are genuine prospects for the products you are featuring in your display. One good source of names might be a list of people who have responded to ads about the product within the last six months.

2. Executive seminars. An even more select list of key prospects can be targeted to receive special invitations to hospitality suites, executive briefings, presentations of papers, seminars, and other special events held in conjunction with your exhibit. If the event is relatively minor, a notice about it can be included in the invitation to

the exhibit. But, if the event is major (such as the opportunity to see a new product introduction) you can play it up in a separate mailing.

3. Carry cards. A carry card, mailed with the invitation, is a printed card the prospect can present at your booth to receive a small gift, or perhaps to enter a sweepstakes or drawing. I call it a “carry card” because the prospect must carry it with him to receive whatever is offered in the mailing.

By printing your booth number on the card, you remind the prospect to visit you; the offer of the gift provides the incentive to do so. The gift need not be expensive or elaborate; perhaps you offer free information, such as a special report, or an inexpensive item such as a pen or tie clip.

4. Be personal. The more personal a mailing piece, the greater the response.

One effective technique is to personalize each mailing with the prospect’s name. A form letter, for example, can be made to look personal if produced on a word processor using a program that inserts the prospect’s name and address.

There are other ways of individualizing the mailings. Carry cards or invitations can be numbered in sequence; therefore, each person receives a unique number, which may be used to qualify him or her to receive a prize or other gift.

Another technique is for salespeople to write brief handwritten notes to each prospect. The note, written in the margin of a preprinted form letter or on the flap of a formal invitation, adds a human touch to the communication.

5. Urgency. Direct mail is a medium designed to generate an immediate response. Therefore, your mailing must give the reader reason to read and act now.

A “teaser” – a short message written on the outer envelope – is often used to urge the reader to open the mailing right away. For example, it can tell the reader that the envelope contains dated materials. It can stress the importance of

attending the show or emphasize benefits. Or, it can tell the recipient to take action – for example, the teaser copy could read, “Urgent: open by November 15.” Such a letter should be mailed so that it arrives a few days before the 15th.

If you want the reader to RSVP your invitation, you should create a sense of urgency for this too. The close of an invitation to a seminar might say, “But hurry. Attendance is limited. Reserve your seat at this important briefing today.”

6. Give them a choice. Years ago, direct marketers discovered that they received greater response when the reader was given a choice. And this holds true in trade show promotion.

For example, many of the people you invite will be unable to attend, even though they may have genuine interest in the products being displayed. Why not have your mailing do double duty by offering information or further action to those people who can’t come to the show? You could offer to send them a brochure or a newsletter or to call on them in person and tell them what they missed. One exhibitor even offered to send a videotape of his exhibit! This technique can dramatically boost response.

Always include a business reply card or business reply envelope in mailings designed to elicit a response. Without these devices, response drops to near zero.

7. Create an event. Although it is difficult for our egos to accept, the truth is, your next trade show is not a major event in the lives of your customers. Your challenge, then, is to change their reaction from one of boredom to one of excitement.

How? There are many possibilities. One exhibitor featured the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders in his booth. Another had an exciting multimedia presentation on a revolutionary new type of technology. An instrumentation manufacturer

employed a magician to perform at his display. A major defense manufacturer hired a quick-draw fighter to teach people how to use a six-shooter (with blanks, of course!).

Once you've invented an event (one that generates real excitement but also ties in with your product or theme), make this the feature subject of your mailer. Just as publishers win subscribers by featuring a free gift or a price discount, a successful trade show mailing features the "gimmick" rather than the exhibit itself. For example, a mailing designed to draw people to the gun-fighter exhibit might read, "MEET THE WEST'S FASTEST GUN-FIGHTER AT HIGH NOON AT THE AMCOM AIR SHOW – AND WIN A GENUINE, OLD WEST TEN-GALLON HAT." Here we are selling the sizzle rather than the steak.

8. Exclusivity. A powerful appeal of direct-mail – and of trade shows – is exclusivity. One study released by the Trade Show Bureau reported that half the people who attend trade shows go specifically to see new products and services that have not been shown before.

If you're introducing a new technology, a new product, or an improved version of an old product, play this up in your mailing. Emphasize both the importance of the product as well as the fact that the reader is having an opportunity to see it first – an opportunity not extended to other people in the business. This sense of being exclusive, of being first, is flattering, and it can do wonders for your response rate.

9. Completing the set. A classic trade show mailing is one in which the prospect is mailed an invitation along with a single cufflink. The cufflink is a free gift, the letter explains, and the reader will be given the other cufflink (to complete the set) when he visit the manufacturer's booth at the show.

This is a powerful technique, and if you can think of an appropriate variation that is relevant to your sales pitch, use it. An automobile manufacturer, for

example, could mail key chains to important customers and enroll them in a drawing for a brand new car. But to win the car, they must bring the key chain to the drawing. The mailing stresses how you can add a key to your chain (and the car that goes with it) by visiting the show.

In another variation on this theme, Omron Electronics mailed a box containing a fortune cookie. The fortune inside the cookie predicted “A fortune in your future!” at the ISA show in Philadelphia. Copy on a carry card enclosed with the cookie reinforces the message: “bring this ticket to Omron’s Booth #R631 to collect a fortune.”

Note that the nature of the “fortune” is never specified. In direct mail, you can often boost response by leaving a part of your story untold. This creates a sense of mystery, and many people respond simply to satisfy their curiosity.

10. Use a series of mailings. A series of mailings can generate more response than just a single mailing. So it may pay to mail more than once to the same list of people.

Many exhibitors have used the following three-part mailing format with success.

The first mailing is a simple postcard that “previews” the show. It is used to tweak the reader’s curiosity and interest, but demands no response.

The second mailing is the full invitation package. It can consist of a letter, an invitation, a carry card, a reply card, a booklet or brochure, or any combination of these elements. The theory is that more people will read the full invitation if they are “warmed-up” with the postcard first.

The third mailing can be either a follow-up reminder or, if the reader has responded to the invitation, it can be a letter confirming the time, date, and location of the event.

Telemarketing – the use of telephone calls to follow-up direct mail – can dramatically raise response levels. But, it is expensive: A phone call generally costs about 10 times more than a mailing piece.

You might want to save the telephone for targeting a small, exclusive list – say, your top 20 or 30 clients or customers. They would receive calls after the second or third mailing; the caller would repeat the offer of the mailings and urge prospects to attend your display.

Bonus tip: Here's one thing to keep in mind. Even if you design your own invitation, it's a good idea to include an official show pass or registration form in the envelope, as well. Having a show pass gives your prospect the comfort and security of knowing he has the necessary paperwork to get him into the exhibit hall.

You should imprint your company name and booth number on the show pass, so the prospect will be reminded to visit you even if he throws away the rest of your mailing.

The Key to Great Inquiry Fulfillment

Suppose you had responded to an advertisement from a manufacturer of forged steel valves and requested more information. How would you react to this reply?

Dear Sir:

Chemical Equipment magazine has informed us of your interest in our line of valves for the chemical process industry.

Enclosed please find the literature you requested. We will await with interest your specific inquiry.

Sincerely,

Joe Jones, Sales Manger
XYZ Valve Corporation

That letter doesn't call for action, build trust in the letter writer or tell the reader why he should want to buy valves from XYZ. There's no salesmanship in it, just a blunt acknowledgment that an inquiry has been made. This is a fulfillment package that should help move the sale along but will not.

The tragedy is that most letters mailed to fulfill business/industrial inquiries are just about as bad. Too many marketers treat a cover letter as an afterthought, once the pros at the ad agency have written the "important" elements of the communications program – ads, brochures, and catalogues.

That's a big mistake. As creative consultant Sig Rosenblum aptly puts it, "Ads go through a long process of rough, comps, and finished art. But those are just devices to put ideas into the reader's mind. Your simple letters can carry powerful ideas just as easily as your complex ads."

Do they? Circle some bingo card numbers and see for yourself. The responses you receive will include weak, dreary cover letters that rely on hackneyed expressions like “enclose please find,” “pursuant to your request,” and the ever-boring “as per your inquiry.” That’s not selling. Which clichés substitute for copy that expresses a company’s desire to help prospects solve problems, hot leads can quickly turn cold.

Part of the problem is that nonwriters such as product managers and engineers often write cover letters. Management reasons that the copywriter’s time is better spent on ads and collateral. Yet the letter provides the toughest writing challenge. It must sell on words alone, without the embellishment of color, photos, or artwork.

Seven Letters Tips

The key to successful cover letters? Be friendly, courteous, and helpful. Tell the reader how you will help him solve his problem better, faster, or cheaper than the competition. Here are seven letter writing tips:

1. Thank the prospect for the lead. “Thanks for your interest” is a common opener. It may be becoming a cliché. But it’s still a necessary courtesy.

2. Highlight key sales points. Don’t try to summarize your sales literature, but instead pick one or two of the important sales points and emphasize them in your letter. Letters are handy supplements to literature because they can include any recent developments that a color brochure, with its longer life, may not reflect. Your letter can focus on a recent case history, a new application, a product improvement, or an addition to your manufacturing facility.

If you must include more than two or three sales points, you can use “bullets” or numbers to set them apart (as this article does). Here’s a sample from the Spartan Co.:

Dear Mr. Guterl:

Thanks for your interest in our Dry SO₂ Scrubbing Systems for industrial and utility air pollution control.

Unlike conventional “wet” scrubbing, Dry Scrubbing removes chemical and particulate waste products as a free-flowing dry powder that is easy to handle and safe to dispose of. The system produces no sludge – so you don’t need expensive thickeners, clarifiers, or other wastewater treatment equipment.

In addition to eliminating the sludge problem, Dry Scrubbing give you these advantages:

- Less energy consumption
- Lower operating and capital costs
- High system reliability; less maintenance
- No reheat required

The enclosed brochure provides a fairly complete description of how the system works. Our representative in your area, listed on the “Spartan Reps” sheet, will be happy to answer your questions.

Sincerely,

Gary Blake, Product Manger

Dry Scrubbing Systems

Notice how the writer structured the letter to give one feature (“no sludge”) top billing, while still touching lightly upon other important advantages of the system. The letter makes some sales points and whets the reader’s interest in the literature he requested.

3. Tell the reader about the next step in the buying process. Make it easy for him or her. A portion of a good cover letter illustrates the point. The writer

suggests a course of action (sending in a material sample for evaluation) that can solve the customer's problem and result in the sale of a mineral pelletizer:

“The key question, of course, is the cost of equipment to handle the volume required at your plant. Because the capacity of our Pelletizers will vary slightly with the particulates involved, we'll be glad to take a look at a random five gallon sample of your material. We'll evaluate it and get back to you with our equipment recommendation. If you will note with your sample the size pellets you prefer and the volume you wish to handle, we can give you an estimate of the cost involved.

From this point on we can do an exploratory pelletizing test, a full day's test run or rent you a production machine with an option to purchase. You can see for yourself how efficiently it works and how easy it is to use. Of course the equipment can be purchased outright too.”

4. Write in a conversational tone. Your sales letter is communication from one human being to another – not from one corporate entity to the next. Warmth, humor, understanding, and an eagerness to be helpful are what make you the super salesperson you are.

Why not endow your letters with those same positive qualities?

Note how the letter above uses a casual, almost folksy tone to win the reader's confidence and attention.

Clumsy Favorites

One way to achieve an easy, natural style is to eliminate “whiskers” from your writing – those hackneyed expressions that drain the life and personality from sales letters. Antiquated phrases from the vocabulary of the bureaucrat make a person (and his company) come across as a stuffed shirt.

Here are 10 hackneyed expressions to avoid:

- Enclosed please find...

The reader can find it on his own. Just say “I’m enclosing” or “Here is.”

- When time permits...

Poetic, but inaccurate. Time doesn’t permit; people do.

- Please don’t hesitate to call.

You really mean “feel free to call.”

- We are this date in receipt of...

Say instead, “Today we received.”

- As per your request...
- Of even date...

Translation: “today.”

- Pursuant to your orders...

That’s too formal. Just say, “As you requested,” or “Following your instructions.”

- Whereas...

Use “where” or “while.”

- Kindly advise...

As opposed to “unkindly”? It’s unnecessary.

- Hitherto, whereby, thereby, herein, therein, thereof, heretofore...

Avoid those archaic, stilted words.

5. Have a “you orientation.” Good letters writers know that the word “you” may well be the most important word in their vocabulary. A “you” orientation means thinking about what the reader needs, wants, and desires. It means not tooting your own horn. It means translating the technical features of a product into

benefits that help the reader do his job, serve his customers, and please his boss. And, it means addressing the reader directly as “you.” Remember, a sales letter is a personal communication, not a cold recitation of scientific technicalities.

6. Be concise. Use small words and short sentences. And break the writing up into many short paragraphs. Brevity makes writing easy to read. Run-on sentences and long chunks of unbroken text bore and intimidate readers.

It’s best to get to the point in the fewest words possible. Here’s how the Acme Slide Rule Co. gets its message across in just two tightly written paragraphs:

Dear Ms. Sherman:

Thanks for your interest in the Acme Slide Rule. It has been used by thousands of scientists, technicians, and engineers throughout the world. We feel that you, too, will find it a handy reference tool in your work.

The Slide Rules are \$10.00 each in quantities of under 100, or \$8.00 in lots of 100 or more. If you’d like to obtain one or more of the Slide Rules, just send your check or money order for the number you desire. We will see to it that your order is handled promptly.

Cordially,

S.D. Jameson

Customer Service Representative

7. Make it look professional. Type the letter on a good electric typewriter. Proofread to eliminate errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and content. Or reproduce the letter on your stationery using a high-quality offset press.

A Word on Bounce-Back

In addition to the literature and cover letter, a fulfillment package should contain a reply element. It can be a specification sheet, an order form or a questionnaire known as the bounce-back card.

Bounce-backs are postage-paid postcards addressed to the advertiser. They ask the prospect to qualify himself by answering a few questions. Typically, a bounce-back questionnaire asks the prospect's phone number, name, and address, the name and size of his company, whether he specifies or recommends a particular type of product, current buying plans, applications, the names of others in the company involved in the buying decision, whether the prospect currently uses the advertiser's products or those of a competitor, whether the prospect wants a salesperson to call and whether the inquiry is for an immediate need, a future need, or reference information only.

Bounce-back postcards may be separate from the rest of the package, or they may be printed as tear-out inserts in brochures and catalogs. Some companies combine the bounce-back questionnaire, cover letter copy and catalog information on a single sheet.

Most industrial marketing experts agree that the bounce-back is an integral part of the fulfillment package. "If you're not contacting the respondent personally, you should have a bounce-back card," says Robert L. Sieghardt, president of Professional Sales Support, a company that screens sales leads by telephone. Mr. Sieghardt says the 55% of prospects will respond with a bounce-back card after a series of three mailings in addition to the initial mailing.

Some advertisers respond to inquiries by mailing a bounce-back card without an accompanying piece of literature. They hope to avoid sending expensive sales brochures to students, competitors, brochure collectors, and other nonprospects.

But other firms criticize the practice because it delays getting information to respondents by creating an additional and unnecessary step in the sales sequence.

“I think you’re trying to kill response by not sending a brochure,” says Larry Whisehant, advertising manger of Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of chemical equipment. “The proper literature – what the respondent is asking for – is the most important of the package.”

Mr. Sieghardt agrees: “By trying to screen leads with the bounce-back, manufacturers are asking prospects to do some of their work for them.”

No two marketers agree on what makes the perfect fulfillment package. But one thing is clear: the advertiser who casually tosses a brochure in the mail with a hastily dictated cover note is wasting sales opportunities.

The entire package must be designed to generate action that leads to a sale. And to accomplish that, you need three things: a clear, crisp cover letter that motivates prospects; a brochure that informs them; and a bounce-back or other reply element that makes it easy for them to respond.

Increase Your Flow of Sales Leads With a “Bait Piece”

Never do a lead-generating promotion – a postcard, ad, banner ad, e-mail, direct mail package – without a “bait piece.”

The “bait piece” is an informative booklet, white paper, or special report addressing some aspect of the problem your product or service helps the reader solve. You offer a free copy of your booklet or report to any prospect who inquires about your product or service.

Example: Fala Direct Marketing, a letter shop specializing in producing personalized direct mailings, offers a free booklet, "Should I Personalize?"

It helps clients decide whether and how to personalize their mailings.

Studebaker-Worthington, a company that provides financing services for computer resellers, offers a free sales training video that shows resellers how to close more sales by giving their customers the option to lease instead of buy.

You will greatly increase response to your direct mail and other promotions with the offer of a strong bait piece, e.g., "Call or write us today for a copy of our FREE booklet, '7 Ways to Reduce Energy Costs.'"

Conversely, not having a bait piece will significantly lower the response rate to lead-generating direct response promotions, whether business or consumer.

To avoid only attracting people who want free booklets, have both a "hard" and "soft" offer in every lead generation promotion.

The soft offer is the offer of the free bait piece, e.g., "Click on this link to download a copy of our free White Paper on Internet Security."

The hard offer is: "Call us now to arrange an appointment so we can discuss your Internet security needs in detail."

Prospects with an immediate need will take you up on the hard offer, while those who don't have an immediate need but might require your help in the future will respond to the soft offer.

Years ago I used direct mail to generate leads for business writing seminars I marketed to corporations. The main offer was "mail this card for more information on my seminar, Effective Technical Writing."

Then I got smart and added a P.S. that said, "Be sure to ask for our FREE tip sheet, '10 Ways to Improve Your Business Writing'" – which was a reprint of an article I published in a trade magazine. As soon as I added this soft offer, response rates doubled, and so did sales.

The Power of FREE

YOURS FREE – ETR HAS A FREE GIFT FOR YOU!

Did the above headline catch your attention?

I wrote it to demonstrate this issue's marketing lesson: The word "FREE" is the most powerful word in direct marketing.

Always has been. Still is today. Will still be 10 years from now, in my opinion.

"I saw someone use FREE effectively on Ebay recently," ETR's Editor Charlie Byrne told me in an e-mail the other day.

"Rocker Jimmy Buffett is coming to town. His fans love to party – especially with Corona beer, the one you squeeze limes into."

There are MANY tickets for the concert on sale on Ebay. If you look at the listings, you'll see:

"Buffett Tickets for sale!"

"Jimmy Buffett – Good seats."

"Buffett Tix for sale."

...ad infinitum...

But one clever person wrote:

“Buffett Tickets – Free Corona and Limes!!!”

If you buy the tickets, he throws in a \$10 gift certificate for the local Florida supermarket chain.

Charlie adds: “I noticed his ad got MANY more ‘hits’ than all the others – another demonstration of the power of a FREE offer.”

In his new book, “How to Turn Words Into Money,” millionaire entrepreneur and master direct marketer Ted Nicholas devotes quite a bit of space to discussing the power of FREE.

“I’ve never sold anything that didn’t sell better after offering free bonuses and gifts,” says Ted. “Free is the most powerful word in the English language. If you’re not using gifts and bonuses in your marketing operations now, your sales in many cases will go up 2, 3, and 4 times.”

One of my friends worked in a medical ad agency. The clients were large pharmaceutical manufacturers targeting doctors with promotions about new drugs.

The agency used direct mail to invite doctors to free seminars (called “symposia”) – educational programs about the diseases the drugs treated, designed to get the doctors to prescribe the drug as treatment for the diseases.

The agency split-tested a straightforward invitation vs. a version that offered a free gift – a pocket day planner – as an incentive to attend the event. The wholesale cost of the pocket calendar, including imprint of the client’s logo, was about \$1 each.

The invitations offering doctors the free \$1 pocket calendar generated 6 times the response from doctors (all of whom back then were making handsome six-figure annual incomes) than the invitation that didn't offer the free gift.

That's 6 times the results – just because of the offer of a little free gift ... something the doctor might very well toss in the trash if it arrived unsolicited in the mail.

I get asked at least once a week the following question: "Bob, hasn't free lost its power?"

The person asking the question is concerned that, because of overuse and the increasing sophistication of readers, FREE is not effective any more.

My answer is always this: FREE alone is not enough today to make a promotion profitable. In the early days of direct marketing, perhaps it was.

But now there are so many people advertising FREE, that simply saying FREE does not make you stand out. You need something more, like a powerful benefit or unique selling proposition – or a masterfully written promotion.

But once you have those things, combine them with a FREE offer. Saying "free" still, even today, increases response significantly vs. the same copy without stressing a free offer.

Bottom line: FREE still works. Use FREE for yourself and see!

Visibility From PR is Nice, But Orders Are Better

Too many businesspeople engage in public relations activities for the wrong reason: to stroke their egos.

Sure, most of us like being on the local news or having our picture in the newspaper. But if it doesn't get the cash register ringing, then it's a waste of time and money – at least as far as your business is concerned.

Janice is a good example.

A freelance writer, Janice had self-published a book on eating out, and was trying to promote it with little success.

Then out of the blue, she hit the jackpot: Oprah's people called and asked her to be a guest on the show that week.

Janice was on cloud nine – and already counting the money from the huge numbers of book sales she figured her appearance on the show would generate.

But when I spoke to her a week later, she was in a down mood. "What happened?" I asked. "How many copies did you sell?"

The shocking answer: not a single one.

Reason: The book was not available in bookstores (many self-publishers have difficulty getting bookstore distribution). You could buy it only from the author, Janice.

Well, in all the excitement about being on television, Janice neglected to see whether Oprah's people would mention her toll-free 800 number for ordering the book.

They didn't. And so anyone desiring to buy the book had no way to order (Oprah didn't give Janice's address, either).

Result: an exciting event in Janice's life. But a total waste as far as her self-publishing business is concerned.

Lesson: Whenever you send out a press release, always include (a) a specific offer and (b) complete contact information for the reader – address, phone number, fax number, Web site, e-mail address.

When I started doing this years ago, pre-Internet, some editors would publish my offer and contact information.

When those editors ran articles about me and my business, we would get anywhere from a few leads or orders to several hundred per article – depending on the publication and the size of the article they ran.

Others editors refused, feeling that publishing my contact information interfered with their journalistic integrity.

This made it impossible for their readers to contact me, and as far as I could see, I never gained any benefit from having such articles published.

The Internet has eliminated the editorial objection to publishing contact information with articles, and editors routinely include Web site addresses in the articles they write.

Why? Because including the Web address is actually a service, enabling the reader to obtain a greater depth of information than can be included in the article.

For this reason, every press release or article you write should end by sending the reader to your Web site for more information.

For turning those Web visits into leads, you need some kind of mechanism on your Web site for capturing the reader's e-mail address and other contact

information – for example, a box where they can sign up for a free e-zine by giving you their e-mail address.

Let's compare Janice's unproductive Oprah appearance with the appearance of my friend Jeffrey, another self-publisher, on a financial cable TV show hosted by Ken and Daria Dolan.

When Jeffrey was invited to appear on the show, he told the producer that they had to periodically display a "super" – a line or two of text showing his name and toll-free phone number (this was pre-Internet).

The producer indicated he wasn't sure if he could do it. Jeffrey told him, "I will not do the show unless you agree to it."

They did, and he received thousands of dollars in orders as a result of his appearance.

I wasn't as sure I would have been as tough about this as Jeffrey. "Weren't you afraid you would turn them off and lose the opportunity?" I asked Jeffrey.

A clear-headed marketer, Jeffrey replied that, unless viewers had a way to order his products, there was no opportunity for his business – and therefore no point in spending his valuable time doing the show.

It's a valuable lesson I've never forgotten: the only measurable, profitable PR is direct response. If you can measure a positive ROI, you know it's worthwhile. All other PR is questionable and immeasurable.

Do not ignore direct-response PR in your direct marketing plan. It's almost always profitable, and sometimes the results can be spectacular, generating a huge volume of sales at little or no cost.

For instance, an expert from Trillium Health Products, a maker of juicers, was the guest on a 20-minute segment of a radio talk show on WBZ in Boston, where he talked about juicing.

Callers were invited to call Trillium's toll-free 800 number for a free information booklet on juicing, which contained juicing information but was also a promotional piece for the machine.

Approximately 50,000 listeners called for the free booklet. Of those, ten percent, which is 5,000, bought a \$350 juicing machine. That comes to gross sales of \$1.75 million for a single 20-minute radio appearance.

Without the mention of the free booklet and 800 number, sales would likely have been a tiny fraction of that amount.

The Takeaway Close

One of the best leads I have ever read was that in a small brochure created by SW to promote his consulting practice.

The brochure was written in Q&A format, and began with this unforgettable lead:

Q: Why should I hire SW?

A: Perhaps you should not.

Whoa! What chutzpah! "Perhaps you should not"?

The nerve of this guy! Who sells anything by telling you not to buy it?

Plenty of smart marketers, it turns out.

Human psychology is funny: the more you tell somebody they can't or shouldn't have something, the more they want it.

The technique of applying this psychological principle to sales and marketing is called "the takeaway close."

In sales, it works this way: if the prospect is hesitant, and you are not getting anywhere, start to pack up your sample case, papers, or whatever, while telling the prospect in a serious, sincere, even somber voice: "Maybe this isn't right for you."

As soon as you do, most prospects immediately say – "Wait, hold on a minute!" – and ask you to continue your presentation, much more interested than they were only seconds ago.

That's because as soon as you tell people they can't or shouldn't have something, they want it.

Seaman's, a local retailer near my office in northern NJ, runs radio commercials to announce sales using a variation of the takeaway close.

The radio announcer begins by thundering a command to the listener: "DON'T buy furniture today ..."

It catches your attention, because you expect to be told to buy ... not to be told, "DON'T buy."

He then finishes the sentence: "DON'T buy furniture today ... wait until Saturday for Seaman's big half-price sale!"

Applying the takeaway closing technique to your marketing is easy. Often simply adding the words "order today – supplies limited" is enough to get the phone ringing off the hook.

Or, in a lead generation campaign, change the phrase on your reply element from “for more information” to “to find out how you can qualify” – implying that receiving what you are offering is not a sure thing, but only granted if they pass your criteria.

Another variation is ads for home study courses which offer a free booklet with a test to judge your writing or artistic talent ... implying that you can’t take the course unless you pass the test.

Remember, people want what they can’t – or think they can’t – have or get.

Even in relationships, singles who date know that one way to attract the interest and attention of members of the opposite sex that they like is to play “hard to get” – to make them call you, rather than you call them.

Conversely, when in pursuit of your soul mate, the worst strategy is to leave 48 messages on his or her answering machine. It demonstrates you are eager and needy, and actually makes the other person less interested.

Time-limited offers are yet another variation on the takeaway close.

In the case of time-limited offers, the product or service is available, but only if you buy now. Later, it won’t be.

Direct marketers know that, almost without exception, adding a time limit or expiration date to a promotion lifts response rates.

In service industries, telling prospects you can squeeze them in a week from Thursday makes you seem desirable.

On the other hand, if you tell prospects, “I can see you now,” they worry: who wants to go to a professional who isn’t in demand?

The late Howard Shenson, a consultant and author, called this the Busy Dr. Syndrome, noting that people want to do business with those they consider busy and successful, not those who seem desperate and in need of the work.

Why does the takeaway close work? Why do people, upon hearing they can't have something, want it more?

Perhaps the motivator is scarcity, an imbalance in the supply and demand equation: the shorter the supply of something, the more it is valued.

That is why gold has a much higher price than copper, even though copper has many more practical uses.

Whatever the reason, the takeaway close often works like gangbusters.

To test this, tell half your inbound sales leads that your product or service is available right away.

Tell the other half that it's not available until December, but you MIGHT be able to slip them into the schedule earlier.

Then measure the closing rate between the two groups, and let me know the results of your experiment. You can e-mail me at rwby@bly.com.

Estimating Response to Business-to-Business Direct Mail

What kind of response can I expect from my lead-generating mailing and what percentage is considered good for business-to-business direct mail?"

This is one of the most frequently asked questions in business-to-business marketing. Let's see if we can shed some light on the topic.

Percentage Response

The number of inquiries produced per thousand pieces mailed varies dramatically depending on a number of factors, some of which we'll discuss shortly. However, based on recent results, we can make the following generalizations:

If your mailing has a hard offer, you can expect a response rate in the range of 1 percent to 1.5 percent. I define a hard offer as any response choice that forces the prospect to try the product or have direct contact with a salesperson. These include meetings, demonstrations, presentations, so-called "free consultations" (sales meetings in disguise), demo diskettes selling for nominal fees, and 30-day trial offers.

On the other hand, if you have a soft offer – such as the offer of a booklet, gift, or special report – you can expect a response from 1 percent to 4 percent; some mailers with good offers and highly targeted lists even get 5 percent or more.

Sales

Some practitioners object that percentages are irrelevant and that sales results are the only true measure of direct mail success.

The problem is, sales are more difficult to tally in lead-generating programs than in mail order. One reason is that the direct mail piece does not do the whole job of selling; many other factors contribute. What's more, many companies do not have an adequate system for tracking leads through to sales and reporting on the results.

Still, if you are able to track sales, then percentage response may not be as important to you. One client, for example, sells a product so highly specialized that his percent response is miniscule – a small fraction of 1 percent. Yet the large dollar

amount of each sale more than pays for the cost of mailing large quantities to get those few hot leads.

Establishing a Baseline

I often tell new clients that I don't know what a good response is until we do our first mailing.

The first mailing gives us a "baseline" which we can measure future efforts against. If we are pleased with the level of response generated by mailing #1, then we consider that a good response for our product in our marketplace. If mailing #2 equals or exceeds that level of response, we consider it a winner; if not, it's a loser.

This baseline concept is especially important if your product is one not widely promoted through the mail. Magazine publishers and fund raisers can cite "typical" response rates of 2 percent and 1 percent because millions of such solicitations are mailed every month, so the response rates are pretty well known. But if you are the pioneer in your field ... the first to use direct mail promotion to sell your type of product ... then there is no known "typical" response rate you can anticipate and you will be setting the standards. Good luck!

Products

The nature of the product itself has a dramatic effect on response rates. If your product is used by a large number of the prospects you mail to, response will be higher (an example might be a mailing selling bandages to hospital purchasing agents). On the other hand, if your product is highly specialized and of interest to only a small portion of the market, the response will be significantly lower (an example might be a specialized type of heart monitor of interest to only one hospital in 100).

Format can make a big difference in how well your mailing pulls. As a rule, sales letters mailed in business envelopes pull better than self-mailers. But sometimes this is not the case.

Format

I like to use letters when I have to make an appeal to the prospect's rational mind or emotional side in order to build his interest in the product.

But, if he is already predisposed to buy the product ... if it's something he's familiar with, and he doesn't have to be sold on its merits, then, a self-mailer, featuring a photograph that readily identifies the product being sold, may do as well or better.

Offer

As stated earlier, the specific offer being made in the mailing can make a big difference in response rates.

One area of indecision among mailers is whether to use the popular "free booklet strategy." In this type of mailing, the reader is offered an incentive – a free booklet, report, or other helpful information he will receive by return mail for responding.

Usually the booklet or report offers helpful how-to or technical information the reader can use on the job. For example.: "How to Improve Direct Mail Results" – from a firm offering direct mail services.

These offers can boost response and are especially effective in markets where prospects are flooded with direct mail offers or are not excited about services and products and need an extra incentive to take action.

The key is to know how to introduce the booklet offer without overstressing it. If the whole mailing is based around the booklet offer, you will get a high volume of low quality leads – people who just want a free booklet but do not want to hear about your product.

A better approach is to talk about the reader's problems and how your company, service, or product can solve these problems. Then bring in the booklet offer: it's an extra sales incentive, without putting total emphasis on it. Experiment with copy approaches until you achieve the right balance between quality and quantity in your response.

5 Ways to Capture E-mail Addresses of Landing Page Visitors

Most Internet marketers I know who use landing pages to make direct sales online focus on conversion: getting the maximum number of visitors to the landing page to place an order for the product being advertised.

Other Internet marketers, when writing landing page copy, focus not only on conversion, but also on search engine optimization: key word selection and meta tag creation that can increase traffic by raising the site's search engine rankings.

But in addition to conversions and unique visits, savvy Internet marketers are also concerned with a third performance metric: e-mail address capture.

If you have a two percent conversion rate, then for every 100 visitors to the landing page, only two buy – and of course, during these transactions, you capture the e-mail addresses of those buyers.

What happens to the other 98 visitors – those who do not buy? You will not be able to add their e-mail address to your list unless you incorporate a deliberate methodology into your landing page to capture it.

Here are four different methodologies for capturing the e-mail addresses of landing page visitors who do not purchase. Every landing page you operate should use at least one of these methods:

1. E-zine sign-up box. This is a box where the visitor can get a free e-newsletter subscription just by entering his name and e-mail address. You can see an example of a simple e-zine sign-up box at www.bly.com and countless other Web sites.

The e-zine sign-up box placed prominently on the first screen is a widely used method of e-mail capture for Web sites. But it is less commonly used for micro-sites and landing pages.

The reason is that, if your headline and lead properly engage the reader's attention, he won't bother to sign up for the e-newsletter – instead, he'll start reading.

Then, if he loses interest or reaches the end but does not order, and instead clicks away, you haven't captured his e-mail address.

2. Squeeze pages. Also known as preview pages, these are short landing pages that require the visitor to register – by giving his name and e-mail address – before he is allowed to go on and read the long-copy landing page. To see a squeeze page at work, visit: www.squeezepagegenerator.com.

In some cases, the long-copy landing page itself is positioned as a “report” which the visitor can read only if he submits his name and e-mail address first. For this to work, your landing page should be written in an informative, educational style.

Many squeeze pages offer a content premium, such as a free report, just for submitting your e-mail address. Those seeking to capture snail mail as well as e-mail addresses make the premium a physical object that must be shipped, such as a free CD.

Squeeze pages work well when your primary source of traffic is organic and paid search. Reason: search visitors clicking to your site are only mildly qualified, because they are making a decision to visit based on only a few words in a search engine description or paid Google ad.

Therefore, they may not be inclined to read long copy from a source they are not familiar with. A squeeze page lets them absorb the gist of your proposition in a few concise paragraphs. The main advantage of the squeeze page is that it ensures capture of an e-mail address from every visitor who reads the full landing page. In addition, these prospects have been pre-qualified, in terms of their interest in the subject, and so are more likely to stick with long copy.

3. E-mail capture sidebars. These are forms built into the main landing page as sidebars, again making a free offer. In a long-copy landing page, the e-mail capture sidebar usually appears early, typically in the second or third screen, and may be repeated one or more times throughout the page. Example: www.rocketfrench.com.

The drawback of the e-mail capture sidebar is that the prospect sees it before he gets too far in the sales letter, and therefore before you've sold him and asked for the order.

Therefore, the risk is that if your product teaches, say, how to speak French, and the e-mail capture sidebar offers free French lessons, the visitor will just take the free offer and feel no need to spend money on the paid offer.

4. Pop-under. When you attempt to click away from the landing page without making a purchase, a window appears that says something like, “Wait! Don’t leave yet!” – and makes a free offer. To see how this works, go to one of my sites, www.becomeaninstantguru.com.

The big advantage of the pop-under is that the visitor sees it only after he has read to the point where he is leaving without ordering. Therefore, the free content offer doesn’t compete with or distract visitors from the paid product offer.

The disadvantage is that about half of Internet users run pop-up blockers on their PCs, and these blockers will prevent your pop-under from showing.

5. Floaters. A floater looks and functions much like a pop-up window, but it’s actually part of the landing page’s HTML code, and therefore won’t be blocked by a pop-up blocker. You can see a floater at <http://bhg.com/>.

The floater blocks a portion of the landing page when you click onto the site. You can enter your e-mail or click it away without doing so. Either action removes the floater and allows you to see the complete landing page.

As you can see, all of these e-mail capture methods offer some sort of free content – typically a downloadable PDF report, e-course delivered via auto-responder, or e-zine subscription – in exchange for your e-mail address.

Why bother to maximize capture of visitor e-mail addresses on your landing pages and other Web sites?

There are two primary benefits. First, by sending an online conversion series – a sequence of e-mails delivered by auto-responder – to these visitors, you have another opportunity to convince them to buy and increase your overall conversion rate.

Second, the best names for your e-mail marketing efforts, far better than rented opt-in lists, are in your house e-list. So the faster you can build a large e-list, the more profitable your Internet marketing ventures will become.

How much more profitable? Internet marketing expert Fred Gleeck estimates that, for information product marketers, each name on your e-list is worth between ten cents and a dollar or more per name per month.

Therefore, a 50,000-name e-list could generate annual online revenues of \$600,000 a year or higher. In other businesses, the sales could be significantly higher. Hewlett-Packard has 4.5 million e-zine subscribers, from whom they generate \$60 million in monthly sales.*

* B-to-B, 4/4/05.

About the author:

BOB BLY is an independent copywriter and consultant with more than 20 years of experience in business-to-business, high tech, industrial, and direct marketing.

Bob has written copy for over 100 clients including Network Solutions, ITT Fluid Technology, Medical Economics, Intuit, Business & Legal Reports, and Brooklyn Union Gas. Awards include a Gold Echo from the Direct Marketing Association, an IMMY from the Information Industry Association, two Southstar Awards, an American Corporate Identity Award of Excellence, and the Standard of Excellence award from the Web Marketing Association.

He is the author of more than 50 books including *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Direct Marketing* (Alpha Books) and *The Copywriter's Handbook* (Henry Holt & Co.). His articles have appeared in numerous publications such as *DM News*, *Writer's Digest*, *Amtrak Express*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Inside Direct Mail*, and *Bits & Pieces for Salespeople*.

Bob has presented marketing, sales, and writing seminars for such groups as the U.S. Army, Independent Laboratory Distributors Association, American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and the American Marketing Association.

He also taught business-to-business copywriting and technical writing at New York University.

Bob writes sales letters, direct mail packages, ads, e-mail marketing campaigns, brochures, articles, press releases, white papers, Web sites, newsletters, scripts, and other marketing materials clients need to sell their products and services to businesses. He also consults with clients on marketing strategy, mail order selling, and lead generation programs.

Prior to becoming an independent copywriter and consultant, Bob was advertising manager for Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of process equipment. He has also worked as a marketing communications writer for Westinghouse Defense. Bob Bly holds a B.S. in chemical engineering from the University of Rochester and has been trained as a Certified Novell Administrator (CNA).

He is a member of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and the Business Marketing Association.

Bob has appeared as a guest on dozens of TV and radio shows including MoneyTalk 1350, The Advertising Show, Bernard Meltzer, Bill Bresnan, CNBC, Winning in Business, The Small Business Advocate and CBS Hard Copy. He has been featured in major media ranging from the LA Times and Nation's Business to the New York Post and the National Enquirer.

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