

5 Rules for Effective Direct Mail Design

by Automatic-Mail.com

While it's true that "Copy is King," design also plays an important role in communicating your sales message to customers and prospects. Your words are the message, but your design is the voice used to convey those words. It's not necessary to create award-winning design to be successful. It's only necessary for your design to be readable and functional.

Here are a few tips for how to make sure that your design is helping rather than hurting your sales message.

1. **Always read the copy before you start designing.** Good design and good copy work together. So it is vital for the designer to understand the product or service, the offer, and the action you want prospects to take when they receive your direct mail piece.

Ideally, the writer and designer should get together so they can discuss the direct mail piece. A top designer may even want to read through background materials used by the copywriter in order to fully understand the project. At minimum, the designer should read the copy several times before making any decisions about the layout or look of the piece.

A good copywriter will often provide "thumbnail" sketches to show what he or she had in mind when writing the copy. But it's sometimes a good idea for the writer to consult with the designer before writing copy in case the designer has some ideas. This way the copy and design stand a better chance of working together.

Our copywriters and designers always work closely to make sure that the message is clear and the impact of the offer is maximized for every direct mail piece we produce.

2. **Make everything reader-friendly.** Direct mail is all about reading. So absolutely everything you do with design should be focused on making your mail easier to read and more engaging. If your prospects don't read it, they won't respond to it.

You should use easy-to-read fonts that are large enough for a normal person to read at arm's length. Black type on white paper is ideal, but you can certainly use colors effectively as long as there is sufficient contrast to make the type clear.

For brochures, two or more columns are easier to read than long lines of type stretching across a wide page. Try to break headlines into logical thought units rather than using random breaks. Make phone numbers big and bold enough so they call attention to themselves.

There are literally hundreds of small things that make design readable, and a good designer should know them all. Unfortunately, many designers are more concerned with being impressive than with communicating clearly.

So be sure whoever is handing design is thoroughly familiar with direct mail and has an appreciation for the importance of reading and the ultimate goal: response. Direct mail designers are specialists.

3. **Design your letters to look like letters.** Too many direct mail letters are over-designed, with justified margins and type that is more appropriate for modern art than simple letters. Perhaps more than anything else, this prevents your letter from looking personal.

A letter should look like a normal letter. It should appear to come from one person who is writing to another person. Think about how you write an ordinary letter. Do you “design” it? Or do you just type a letter and print it on letterhead? This is how most direct mail letters should look. They should be a one-to-one communication with nothing that appears to be from a designer.

Specifically, this means you should use a normal 10 to 12-point typeface, such as Courier or Times Roman. Single space your letter with a double space between each paragraph. Indent the first line of every paragraph.

Also, you should keep the paragraphs short, about three to five lines each and no more than seven. Set your margins for at least one inch on each side. Don’t justify your right margin; let the type be ragged on the right side just like you do in a normal letter.

One little trick designers use to keep people reading is to break the last sentence on the first page in the middle so the reader has to turn the page to finish the thought. Another trick is to print your signature in blue ink as if you’ve actually signed the letter.

4. **Make reply forms easy to use.** This is another element that needs to be functional rather than pretty. And there are a variety of things you can do to make sure it’s easy to use. Remember that by the time someone gets to the reply form, they’re ready to say, “yes.” This is not the time to allow anything to get in the way of someone filling out and returning the form to you.

The form must stand out in some way. You can use a bright color or a certificate border to provide a visual cue that this is the reply piece. Be sure all the fill-in lines provide plenty of space to write—don’t guess, have people try it.

Also make sure the reply fits into the return envelope if you’re using one. Or if you’re encouraging a fax response, try faxing it to be sure it’s legible when it comes through. A background color or pattern can sometimes turn into a mess when faxed.

5. **Design brochures to be read, not framed.** Brochures are a trap for inexperienced direct mail designers. The letter and reply form may not be artistic challenges, so it's tempting to pull out all the stops on the brochure. That's a mistake.

In a direct mail package, each piece has a specific purpose. The envelope is meant to be opened. The letter presents the offer. The reply piece encourages response. And the brochure? That's a support piece. It should provide features, benefits, proofs, comparisons, technical details, and other information to back up the rest of the package.

It can include photos, illustrations, diagrams, charts, tables, and other visual aids. So while it should be exciting, it must also be readable. It should be interesting rather than impressive.

There are other pieces that can go into a direct mail package, such as lift letters or inserts. But they all follow the same basic guidelines—all must be readable and clear. Also, other formats, including flyers, self-mailers, and postcards, must abide by similar rules of readability and simplicity.

As always, the best way to assure you're getting good design is to allow a specialist to handle it. Our designers are direct mail specialists with experience that ordinary designers often don't have. Most designers *think* they can do direct mail, but the reality is that most cannot. Choosing the right designer can mean the difference between success and failure.

Direct Mail Success is brought to you by **Automatic Mail Services** — direct mail processing, printing, data processing, and fulfillment since 1971. Automatic Mail Services thrives on providing you with the leadership you need to achieve the greatest possible response to your direct mail campaigns at the lowest postage rates. For additional information about "Effective Direct Mail Design," call us at 1-800-474-9109.

About Automatic Mail Service, Inc.

Your 360° Direct Marketing Success

We drive sales! Since 1971, Automatic Mail has served its customers with A+ service:

- Ensuring your success
- Freeing you to focus on your business
- Making your marketing efforts more effective and your direct dollars go further

Automatic Automated Marketing integrates your direct print marketing and lead generation with your Website, email marketing, and a master customer data management system. Increases response, ROI, your bottom line.

Keeping up with your clients' needs is overwhelming. Managing your sales pipeline is a challenge.

Automatic Automated Marketing delivers sophisticated, easy-to-use marketing integration tools.

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- Track who is doing what with your print mail, emails, Website.
- Accurately target print, broadcast, online messages.
- Nurture leads and deliver the information they want.
- Cross-sell & up-sell more effectively.
- Manage your clients and your prospects easily, successfully.

Automatic Automated Marketing delivers sales ready leads plus the tools to manage them throughout the entire customer lifecycle.

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