

What Makes an Appeal Mailing Work?

Is it the **message**? – how well you articulate the cause, the need, the impact your organization has. Is it the **people**? – the database, the names, the accuracy and targeting of the recipients. Is it the **look**? – the graphic design, the appearance of the piece, the quality of the printing. Or is it something else?

We've been tracking appeal mailing response rates for hundreds of clients since 1998 – and here's what that research shows:

The letter contributes about 30% to the success of an appeal mailing, and the list another 30%. The look is not as important, relatively speaking, contributing only 10% to the mailing's success. The other 30% – and the one which continues to surprise – is the **rhythm**.

There's a cyclical nature to how we live as human beings on this planet, and it manifests itself in the magic of consistency and repetition.

To borrow an example from the for-profit world: if you run a lawnmower shop, and send out postcards every month advertising your lawnmowers... you soon come to realize that Mr. Jones does not buy a lawnmower when he receives your postcard. Rather, he buys a lawnmower when he needs a lawnmower – and the question is, when he needs one, will he think of your shop first, or your competitor's? The reason you mail the postcards is to create "top of mind" recognition, so that Mr. Jones will come to you when he has that need.

Something similar goes on in the non-profit world with appeal mailings; but it's not top-of-mind recognition, it's trust. Dr. Smith does not write you a check for \$500 the first time he gets your letter; but if he gets your letters twice a year, in the same season and following the same basic pattern, the repetition builds trust – and by year three he's much more likely to write that check.

It's like diet or exercise: doing it once or twice won't do you much good. To be effective, you've got to follow a plan with regular consistency. In exercise, it's not how fast or how far you run that matters – it's how regularly and consistently. Same with appeal mailings: mailing to 1000 people twice a year for three years in a row is much better than mailing once to 100,000 people.

A nonprofit executive called our office the other day, looking for some help with fundraising, but claiming that appeal mailings were not effective for his organization: "We tried an appeal mailing last year, and it just didn't work." To which I replied, "I tried dieting one day last year, and that didn't work either!"

Earlier this year we had a client who wanted to do a city-wide mailing to raise money for a new after-school program. They needed another \$100,000 to complete the new center, and wanted to send a fancy color brochure to every resident, asking for donations. We advised against this: a one-time shot to 60,000 residents is unlikely to generate much return. Far better to target that appeal to the 12,000 families with school-age kids or grandkids, and to mail a series of simple appeal letters over the course of three years. In terms of postage and printing costs, both approaches were about the same; but our client wanted instant results (they had spent a lot of time and money on this fancy brochure), so they insisted on the big splash. Needless to say, it did not work.



Contrast this to a free clinic in our region that mails twice a year to a targeted list based on key demographics of age, education level, and household income. The message is clear and compelling, focusing on the impact they have in the community. The two mailings hit in May and November, year in and year out. And the results are outstanding.

The right message to the right people with the right rhythm – that's what works.

~ Bill Gilmer

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