THE B2B DIRECT MARKETING HANDBOOK

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Introduction

One of the things that makes direct marketing and demand generation such powerful tools for today's B2B marketers is the ability to measure outcomes. With the right measurement tools and metrics in place, the results of one campaign should enable you to refine your strategy and generate a higher response from your next program.

This handbook is a compilation of tips, techniques and strategies for today's B2B marketer. It includes recommendations to help you:

- develop a more effective campaign strategy
- choose media most likely to match your ideal audience
- create a powerful, compelling offer
- build creative that gets the reader to act now

Whether you're a start-up embarking on your first demand generation initiative, or an industry giant launching a new suite of products, we hope you'll find these tips helpful. If we can be of further assistance, don't hesitate to call or email.

Good luck on your next campaign!

Greg Anderson
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3 Questions to Ask When Planning Your Next Campaign

The pace of today's business world, particularly in the high-tech sector, often requires reacting instantly to market opportunities, competitive claims, sales targets, and a hundred other short-term factors. But while quick, "fire drill" campaigns can help address short-term objectives, the inevitable lack of planning is often reflected in the overall success of the program. Here are three questions to ask when planning your next campaign, regardless of how much (or little) time you're given.

1. Who's My Audience?

You've heard it before: targeting the right audience is the #1 success factor for any campaign. Asking this question early in the planning process, however, does more than ensure you choose the right list, publication, or Web site. If your media research and creative development launch concurrently, having an early consensus as to your audience means that copy and design will be on target also. (Hint: don't always assume the best audience is the individual that buys your product. Often, end users and other key influencers can be more responsive because they're the ones actually "feeling the pain". So test.)

2. What's My Objective?

Having a precise objective for your campaign accomplishes many things: it focuses the creative on a particular call to action (see "offer", below), it helps you make more intelligent media decisions, and it gives you a benchmark against which to measure your campaign's success.

A campaign objective isn't just about numbers. It's also about determining a more qualitative measure of success. For example, is your campaign designed to drive sales, generate qualified leads, or simply fill the database? Each option demands a very different creative, offer, and media strategy.

3. What's My Offer?

When campaigns are rushed, too often the offer is the first casualty. Either the offer is whatever the copywriter could come up with, or there's no offer whatsoever -- just some vague call to action ("call us for more information".)

Next to audience, offer is the most critical factor in a successful campaign. To be most effective, an offer has to 1) appeal to your specific audience, and 2) reflect a precise objective. (If your objective is to drive leads, not sales, don't make the offer "buy now and save 30 percent.")

5 Direct Marketing "To-Do's"

Determined to increase direct marketing success? Here's a list of changes to put at the top of your "to do" list:

1. Plan better.

Campaigns that lack sufficient time to properly plan and design are often short on detail, bereft of a compelling offer, and prone to dull creative that fails to motivate even the ideal prospect. Make the time to think through the underlying strategic decisions - offer, audience, media - that can spell success or failure.

2. Balance your efforts.

Constant demand for last-minute, tactical programs ("we're short of quota; quick - more email!") can be lessened by programs designed to generate a consistent stream of inquiries or inbound traffic. Balance your strategy between targeted, broadcast programs like direct mail and email, with "always on" programs like paid search, content syndication, and online sponsorships. These more passive programs can help maintain a steady flow of leads for the sales force, and also are easier to project, meaning it's less likely you'll be making up the difference at the end of the quarter.

3. Put offer first.

Offer is the second most important ingredient in a successful campaign (the first being audience), yet selecting an offer is too often an afterthought. Have offer drive strategy: instead of planning an entire campaign around your upcoming Version 8.3.4.1 launch, plan a campaign around the new white paper or the case study that's in the works.

4. Don't be short-sighted about offline.

Sure, direct mail is more expensive. For high-level, non-technical, "line of business" prospects, however, particularly within large companies, that investment could well be worth it.

5. Measure success.

Measuring a campaign's success by how well your boss liked the creative, or even by raw inquiries, just doesn't cut it. At the very least, measure response subjectively. Even a sky-high response rate doesn't mean anything if the leads are rubbish. Determine simple, quantifiable criteria for what makes a "good" lead, and then measure each campaign or list or online venue by how cheaply it generates those quality inquiries.

Direct Marketing & the Sales Process

Choosing the right audience and the right message are two of the three most important factors (the other being a compelling offer) in the success of your direct marketing campaigns.

For some companies, particularly in B2C markets, these choices are more intuitive. For others, particularly high-tech companies in emerging B2B categories, the audience decision in particular is a difficult one. For example, if you're marketing a new breed of enterprise software, is the best target:

- The IT manager who approves technology choices?
- The relevant line of business (LOB) VP?
- The finance director looking for savings and ROI?
- The end user most likely to be "feeling the pain?"

In the absence of hard data or test results from past campaigns, marketers often make these decisions based on the sales process. They examine 1) where the sales force is having the greatest success penetrating accounts and/or closing sales, and 2) what messages are achieving the greatest traction with this audience - and then construct their campaign accordingly. However, sales success doesn't always translate into direct marketing success, for two reasons:

1. The individual that buys your product, or the person who has primary influence on the selection of your company, isn't always the person most likely to respond. Your most likely respondent is someone who feels the pain that your product can solve. That could be the decision-maker, but more likely it's someone further down the food chain.
2. "Reasons to buy" and "reasons to respond" are very different animals. Example: how your product or service differs from the competition may help you win sales – but is unlikely to cause someone to respond to your campaign, unless that person is in the process of actively evaluating vendors.

By all means listen to your sales force – their input can often help optimize your marketing strategy. But unless you're in the mail order business, the goal of your campaigns (generate a response) is not the same as that of your sales reps (close deals), so be wary of attempting to duplicate a winning sales strategy in its entirety.

Instead, test your assumptions. Pit key benefits against each other in competing subject lines or headlines or envelope copy. Split lists based on company size, job title, gender, age group, etc. to find out precisely the group that responds best to your message.

Do We Have a Brochure for You!

A seminar invitation arrived at our office this week from a company selling marketing automation software. The 9 x 12 envelope contained a cover letter and a gorgeous, 4-color, gatefold product brochure. In one package, this company broke two cardinal rules of high-tech direct marketing:

1. Sell the offer, not the product.
2. Don't send information; make people ask for it.

Let's explore Rule #2. It's always a great temptation to make marketing materials do double-duty. However, product brochures are designed primarily to fulfill a request for information. Direct marketing campaigns, on the other hand, are designed to elicit a response. That fundamental difference makes nearly all product brochures unfit for direct mail duty. Case in point: the brochure I received said absolutely nothing about the seminar.

Secondly, if you use a product brochure as part of any campaign, you undermine your program by eliminating the prime motivation for response: a request for more information. (Don't expect prospects to line up for more information if you've already told them everything they need to know.)

Ironically, had our software friends designed a custom invitation, besides creating a more effective campaign, they also could have saved money. In addition to the decrease in print cost, a simple, tri-fold insert would have eliminated the need for a 9 x 12 envelope, and also cut their postage cost in half.

Getting Resellers to Respond

Recruiting resellers, VARs, dealers, distributors, and consultants is a vital part of the sales strategy for many companies. With the explosion of new online media venues, there are now a multitude of cost-effective ways to get your message in front of potential new sales partners. Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

1. **Don't use copy "warmed over" from your last end user campaign, no matter how successful.**

   Take the time to craft a message specific to the channel audience. Most importantly, remember that resellers and dealers are more likely to respond to what they perceive to be a compelling business opportunity, so focus your copy on benefits like increased income, co-marketing, and attractive commissions, rather than the latest feature set.

2. **Don't ask your campaign to do too much.**

   Partnering with a company is a considered decision, so avoid the temptation to communicate everything there is to know about you and your products in your ad or splash page, and then expect the reseller to complete a detailed application on the spot.

   Use a "two step" strategy by offering a comprehensive "partner information kit" that includes product literature as well as details on your reseller program. You'll generate a larger pool of potential partners and your channel reps will be able to follow up in person and talk through any questions and objections via telephone.

3. **Resellers are human too (really!) and respond to personal enticements as much as anybody.**

   "Special offers" designed to close the deal (such as discounts off a first purchase) often work less well than free gifts (for example, a gadget to the first 100 who respond) that are designed to simply elicit a response.

   Exclusivity also works well. One of the most successful channel campaigns we ever produced started with the words: "You're invited to become one of only 100 resellers nationwide ..."

Hand Grenades & Other 3-D Mailers

Here's a wacky idea sure to attract the attention of your top prospects — send them a fake hand grenade!

One assumes this was the thinking behind a campaign dreamed up by an L.A. law firm and their Silicon Valley marketing consultant, who last month mailed 100 packages containing plastic replicas of hand grenades to executives at top Northern California companies (tag line: "we go to war for our clients"). The result? Several calls to the bomb squad, a building evacuation, complaints to postal authorities and a federal investigation.

Dimensional mailers are all the rage. But do they work?

If you judge by response rate only, the answer is a qualified yes. A well-crafted, eye-catching dimensional mailer can often draw response rates of 25 or 50 percent and higher. Where dimensional mailers fall flat (if you'll pardon the pun) is on two counts: cost and lead quality.

A response rate can be anything you want it to be if cost is no object. Dimensional mailers generate phenomenal response, but usually at a staggeringly high cost per lead. If your target audience is all of 100 executives, and you're not so interested in cost per lead as much as achieving the highest possible penetration of that finite audience, then a 3-D mailer is for you. Otherwise, you can almost certainly develop leads at a much lower cost through more traditional (albeit, less interesting) means.

Secondly, what kind of leads are you really generating? Most dimensionals aren't really direct marketing campaigns at all; they're just bribes dressed up in a fancy package.

If an executive agrees to meet with you because you sent him or her a Callaway driver, is that person expressing a genuine interest in your product? Or are you just buying that person's time in the hope that her company will be a fit for your solution? Before you embark on a dimensional campaign, ask yourself these questions:

- Is my goal maximum response at any price, or is it minimum cost per lead?
- How much is a lead really worth to our company?
- What qualifies a prospect as being a genuine lead, and will this campaign generate those kinds of prospects?
- Is what we're sending the prospect likely to evacuate his or her building?

How to Decide Which Questions to Include on Your Landing Page

The right survey questions on a reply device – business reply card (BRC), registration form, landing page, etc. – can provide your sales force or channel partners valuable information on a prospect. Just as easily, however, the wrong questions (or more commonly, too many questions) can inhibit people from responding in the first place. Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind when designing your next reply device:

1. #1 rule: the fewer questions the better. A reply form should take just seconds to fill out. Anything longer, and you run the risk of dissuading an otherwise qualified prospect from responding because they perceive it as "too much work." We usually recommend 2-3 questions maximum.
2. The only questions to include on your reply card, form, or landing page are those that supply information CRITICAL for your reps to know before making a follow-up phone call. If it's information that the rep is likely to uncover up as part of that follow up call anyway, and if it doesn't help prioritize one lead as more important than another, don't include it.
3. You'll get a much higher percentage of your questions answered (and your form will take much less time to fill out) if you make each question a multiple choice option. For example, don't ask someone to write in their company's annual revenues — instead, give them a choice: $0-100,000, $100,000-250,000, etc. — and ask them to check the appropriate box.

How to Get a Meeting

It pays, in the long run, to expand the reach of your campaign to include not only those prospects ready to buy, but also anyone else that might be facing the specific issue or problem that your product or service can solve. Occasionally, however, other factors demand a more targeted, aggressive approach.

For example, your company may want to target a competitor's installed base. Perhaps you want to leverage a recent sales win by targeting other executives within that same vertical. Or some other time-sensitive factor requires that you "get in front of" prospects as early as possible.

In these scenarios, one way to accelerate the sales cycle is to get the prospect to request a face-to-face meeting as the initial call to action. Such a strategy should be approached with caution, however. Success in using direct marketing to generate meetings often requires expensive, high-impact creative (to ensure you reach the executive's desk), and carefully crafted, highly compelling copy that convinces the executive that your company is worth his or her valuable time. Here are three other tips to consider:

1. Don't call it a "meeting."

For most executives, meeting with a salesperson ranks near the bottom on a list of how they like to spend their time at the office. So don't call it a meeting. Describe your offer in terms that imply a benefit to the prospect: an "in-person ROI analysis", "network performance audit", "benchmark survey", etc.

2. Be specific.

A meeting is no different from any other offer. People want to know what they're getting. As a description, therefore, "meet with our representative" won't cut it. Be specific. Specify exactly how long you expect the session to last (and don't say "one hour" because it sounds arbitrary.) Instead, try something like "45 minutes, or shorter than the average lunch hour".

Secondly, treat the meeting as if you were promoting an event, like a seminar. Make sure the reader understands exactly how you plan to use his or her time. Construct two or three bullet points that detail the steps you'll take to make the meeting as efficient as possible.

3. Include both personal and business motivators.

There are two reasons why people accept meetings. One, because they think it can benefit their business. And secondly, because they think there's something in it for them personally. Make sure your invitation addresses both. An example of a business benefit could be a report prepared specifically for the executive and his or her company based on the information collected in the meeting. The personal benefit could be a free gift of some sort - a golf club, cell phone, etc.

In Praise of Microsites

Critical to the success of any paid search effort is conversion rate - the percentage of clicks from ads that "convert" to actual, measurable leads, and that generate a dialog between the prospect and the advertiser's sales force.

Too often, corporate Web sites do a poor job converting traffic from search venues such as Google into actionable leads. Even if the search ad points to some kind of request form (a white paper download, or a generic "information request"), the mere fact that these forms reside on the corporate Web site presents issues.

The key problem is that these pages typically include the standard nav bar - About Us, Company, Contact Us, etc. - and, as a result, the prospect can easily be distracted and be tempted to explore elsewhere without filling out the form.

For many search campaigns, particularly those promoting complex products or promoting free trials, a custom Web microsite— designed exclusively to capture leads from paid search — can be an effective way to maximize conversion rates.

Microsites vary in design, but common attributes include the following:

- action-oriented language that drives the prospect to complete the action
- focus on the offer (rather than the client's product) to encourage response
- a response form that is clearly visible, with clear, intuitive instructions
- peripheral pages that offer the prospect the option to learn more about the advertiser, or the offer, without "escaping" the microsite
- a complete absence of links to anywhere on the corporate Web site

Microsites can be easily leveraged for other programs. They provide an effective destination for online advertising. By adding a button or text link to your home page, the same microsite can also provide a simple, cost-effective way to convert more generic Web traffic to measurable leads, without the need to redesign your entire site.

Make Your Prospects Ask for Information

A large computer company once approached us about a direct mail campaign in which they wanted to mail 25,000 prospects a CD-ROM, a white paper, and a press release about a new product.

The expense involved would be enough to dissuade most companies from mailing such a package, but here, budget wasn't an issue. Still, we reasoned that the campaign as proposed would do more than cost too much - it was also destined to generate much lower response than expected.

This is an extreme example of a fairly common (and misguided) direct mail strategy — campaigns designed to provide the reader every nugget of available information about a particular product in the hope that he or she will then be somehow compelled to respond.

Sometimes, as with the example above, companies send out product literature. More often, the package is a brochure posing as a direct mail campaign. Either way, when you tell the prospect too much about your product, you defeat the purpose of your mailing — namely, getting someone to respond. (You may interest someone in your technology by sending that person a brochure, but chances are you'll never know it.)

Don't send product information; make your prospects ask for it. You'll not only save money (by only mailing expensive brochures only to those who request them), but more importantly, you'll identify prospects that are actively interested in your solution in a way that enables a dialogue between them and your sales force.

Don't ask your campaign to do too much. Sending product information (or a mailer that provides an excess of information about your product) is to pretend that the mailer is going to sell your product for you. (True, if your product costs $59, but otherwise, it simply won't work.) Much better to simply tempt the reader with just enough information to pique his or her interest, and then offer white papers, case studies, and other content as the reason to respond.

The Perils of Program-Centric Planning

In high-tech, everything moves at warp speed, even in marketing. Even the most forward-thinking marketers can find themselves in a vicious 3-month cycle of budget approvals and rapid-fire executions of whatever programs can be rushed out the door before quarter end.

When it comes time to "plan" for the new quarter, many conversations, somewhat inevitably, revolve around programs. Some of this is a matter of servicing different constituencies, for example: field marketing needs a seminar series, the product group needs a launch campaign, and so on.

The most successful companies, in our experience, leave programs outside the planning process and start with numbers. More specifically: objectives. What are our sales goals for the quarter? How many raw inquiries do we need to fill the pipeline? How many sales leads can inside sales follow up on effectively?

If programs drive the planning process, marketing plans often get written on the basis of either a) which group within the company lobbies most effectively, and/or b) which programs can be most easily re-purposed from prior quarters. Not, I hasten to add, those programs that are most likely to achieve the company's objectives in the most cost-effective manner possible.

Next time it gets time to plan another quarter's marketing activity, start with a clean slate. Ignore (to the extent you're in a position to do so) the hue and cry from your internal clients for their own particular pet projects. Determine the true, quantitative objective for the next three months. And then design your program strategy around reaching that number most efficiently.

Maybe the Eastern region needs that executive breakfast series. Maybe they don't. Maybe what they really need is 50 really qualified leads. And maybe – just maybe – there's a better, cheaper way to go about getting them what they really need.

How to Improve Lead Quality

If you're generating plenty of leads, but the sales force doesn't think those leads are good enough, what's the best way to address the issue?

1. Change your offer.

The one factor that most impacts lead quality is the offer. Offer a free book, and you'll generate a high response but a lot of junk leads. Offer a free trial, and you'll generate higher quality leads but a much lower response rate.

If your leads are less qualified than they should be, think about how (or if) your offer serves to self-qualify prospects. Ideally, offers should appeal to prospects who at minimum are experiencing the pain or problem that your product solves.

2. Improve communication to your sales team.

A prospect who downloads a white paper, for example, is not necessarily expressing an explicit interest in your product. He or she may only be acknowledging a particular business problem or technical issue (coincidentally, the problem or issue your product can solve).

If that individual receives a follow-up call that begins: "I understand you're interested in our product," the prospect will deny any such interest. Alternatively, if the conversation begins: "I understand you're experiencing [insert problem] …" the lead is more likely to be deemed qualified.

3. Change the mix of programs

Broad-based, so-called "pull" campaigns such as paid search and content syndication are likely to generate more inquiries at a lower cost, but with a higher proportion of unqualified leads. Conversely, "push" campaigns such as email generate fewer leads, but more highly qualified responses on average.

If your conversion rate from raw inquiry to qualified opportunity or sale isn't what it should be, it could be that you need a better mix of programs.

4. Institute a lead nurturing program.

If you're generating a significant number of leads each month, if your sales force is "cherry picking" leads and leaving most to die a lonely death in your CRM database, or if your leads just aren't converting to sales as they should, it may be time to implement a lead nurturing system.

With such a system in place, you can send only qualified leads (leads that meet a set of pre-defined criteria) to the sales force, and for the rest, automatically trigger a series of email communications that will serve to further profile and qualify those prospects.

Keep Your Sales Reps Informed

Most high-tech companies keep their sales force informed of direct marketing programs by sending each rep a sample of the campaign. Rarely, however, do marketing managers provide information that details the objective of the campaign and more importantly, how the sales rep should approach follow-up calls.

Case in point: a client called a few months ago to relay the complaints she was fielding from her sales force that respondents to a recent campaign "weren't interested in the product — they only wanted the white paper."

Well naturally, since given the price of the product (a $100,000+ software application), the consensus strategy behind the campaign was *not* to sell the product, but rather to focus on the offer (the white paper) and use it as a means of identifying people experiencing the problem that the software could solve. It wasn't that prospects weren't interested in the product; that's just not (necessarily) the reason they responded.

Were the sales reps to have understood that strategy (and the reasoning behind it), their follow-up calls might have commenced with questions about the prospect's needs or "pain points," rather than "What else can I tell you about our product?" And they would have uncovered more genuine leads as a result.

This tip was inspired by (and with permission, borrowed from) an article in *Business to Business By Phone*, a quarterly newsletter published by Michael A. Brown, President of Redwood Training Associates, a telemarketing consulting firm based in Austin, Texas. Michael's advice:

"Make sure your reps know your marketing intent and process as well as your products and services. Write and say a compelling 'reason for my call.'"

Know Your Lettershop

Lettershop is one element of direct mail production that can have a huge impact on response but that few companies pay much attention to. It never ceases to amaze me that firms spend tens of thousands on high-powered design, expensive paper, six-color printing, etc. and then use carrier route sortation or inkjet the address block in all upper case characters.

The person who receives your next campaign will notice the way your envelope is addressed long before he or she admires the custom illustration on the brochure inside. Carrier route sortation in particular (identified by "CAR-RT SORT" above the address block), though it's the cheapest way to mail, screams out "junk mail" to most people and probably means your package is heading for the recycling bin.

Simple steps —such as (1) spending a little extra on postage (by not automatically selecting the maximum sortation possible) or (2) choosing high quality laser printing vs. inkjet — can have a dramatic effect. Case in point: as part of a recent campaign for a software client, we tested two methods of postal sortation in a 50/50 split. The difference in postage cost: about two cents. The difference in response: a whopping thirty percent.

Know your options. Ask your lettershop (or your agency) the difference in cost between inkjet and laser. Ask what fonts are available (choose something basic like courier, times roman or prestige elite). And then test. You may be surprised at the results.

Email or Direct Mail: How to Choose What's Right for You

Broadcast email is quick, it's cheap, and it can be targeted just like traditional print campaigns — but it's not the answer for everyone. Next time you're trying to decide between online and offline, consider the following:

5 reasons to use email:

1. It's quicker. An email campaign can be created and produced in half the time that a direct mail campaign requires.
2. It's cheaper. No printing and no postage mean that email campaigns often cost 50 percent less than print.
3. You get results faster. Most email campaigns generate 80% of their results within 48 hours.
4. It's easier and less expensive to test. A direct mail test typically means multiple print versions, which drives up costs. Testing with email can be just as complicated, but overall, email is a much more flexible medium.
5. The viral effect. Emails get copied and forwarded more readily than does a direct mail campaign.

5 reasons to use direct mail:

1. A larger universe. The number of quality, well-managed, opt-in email lists is dwarfed by the number of direct mail lists.
2. Better lists. The direct mail industry has been around for decades, so there's a certain consistency in the way that lists are compiled and maintained. The quality of email lists varies widely. Direct mail lists also generally offer more select criteria, allowing you to target your audience more precisely.
3. Your audience may not be online, or not online that frequently. Generally, the more technical your target audience, the easier it is to reach them using email.
4. Direct mail enables you to deliver a high volume of information in a more reader-friendly format. Just look at the number of mail-order catalogs from online vendors.
5. Direct mail is less intrusive. Sure, people get annoyed by junk mail, but it doesn't interrupt the reader, nor does it force an immediate decision on whether to read it.

The Problem With Webinars

In a few short years, Web seminars have virtually eliminated in-person field events from the B2B marketing mix. And why not? Webinars are a cost-effective, convenient way of delivering compelling presentations to a large audience of prospective customers, without regard to geography.

Unfortunately, Webinars have become so popular that they're now the marketing flavor of the month. And many companies, in our experience, are making the decision to embark on Webinar programs, or make Webinars the first step in their lead generation strategy, without thinking through the options. (We suspect that this is, in part, because Webinars are often easier to develop than alternative forms of content like white papers.)

The problem with Webinars, however, is that even though the prospective attendee no longer has to drag him or herself down to the local Holiday Inn to hear your pitch, you're still asking for 45 minutes of his or her valuable time. And that level of commitment is, in many cases, setting the proverbial bar too high.

All things being equal, we find that Webinar invitations generate half the response rate of campaigns that feature a downloadable information offer - say, an information kit. And note that I say response rates; the number of people who actually attend the Webinar may be half that number again. Plus there's the additional cost of hosting the online event.

In our view, Webinars are most effective when used as part of a lead nurturing strategy, that is, as a way to target your house list of prospects. Since those individuals are already familiar with your company on some level, the commitment required of attending a Webinar isn't so daunting. And attending an online event may be a great "next step" for the prospect who downloaded a white paper three months ago.

Vertical Campaigns: A Cautionary Tale

It's a generally accepted rule of direct marketing that the more targeted your campaign, the better the results. However, it's not so much the raw number of responses that matters as much as the cost per lead. While you can always eke out a slightly higher response by tailoring your campaign to a particular audience, the small increase may not always merit the extra expense.

A good example of this is so-called vertical campaigns — that is, programs that target a particular industry. In theory, the more your creative speaks to the particular problems or benefits relevant to a particular type of company, the more it will resonate with that audience, and the more they'll respond.

But there's a price to pay, and that trade-off comes in two categories:

Lists. If you're planning to use either direct mail or email for your campaign, it's only a subset of the total list universe that will enable you to choose names from a specific industry. Then, even if a handful of lists offer those selects, fewer still will have sufficient names in their database from that one industry to meet the minimum order (typically 4-5,000 names).

More than likely, you'll end up having to either (1) choose vertical trade publications which typically don't offer other critical selects (job function, company size, purchase authority, etc.), (2) opt for large, compiled lists that offer plenty of names from your target industry but don't perform well, or (3) give up critical selects in order to meet minimums.

Cost. If you target multiple industries simultaneously, you'll pay a premium — in creative and production — to "version" your campaign (whether print or online) for more than one audience (the cost difference is greater for direct mail than email). In practice, we find the incremental cost usually isn't matched by an equivalent increase in response.

Here are two tips to remember for making your vertical strategy a success:

- Tailor your offer along with your creative. One very successful campaign for a software client offered a custom information kit that included case studies and sample applications from clients in their target industry.
- Include a "generic" version of your creative for names that fall outside of your target industries. This avoids the trap of having to meet minimum orders by compromising on key selects, and will give you a benchmark against which to measure whether a vertical approach really pays for itself.

Things You Should Be Testing, But Aren't

It's a fact of life in the fast-paced world of marketing: there's never enough time to plan and execute your next campaign.

Under these circumstances, testing can seem like a luxury: one more level of complexity for which no-one has the time nor the inclination. One subject line? One list? One ad? Hey - it's all we had time for!

Give me a break. Testing is not only vital; it's easy. If you're doing most of your marketing online, testing adds very little complexity and at worst, nominal cost. Plus if you don't test, you increase your risk of failure substantially (more test cells means a greater chance of at least something working). You also lose the opportunity to switch horses midstream (proverbially speaking) if one message, list, audience or other variable is performing substantially better.

Furthermore, assumptions about the best message, audience, or media vehicle for your campaign are just that - assumptions - and even the most fervently held beliefs about your market are only as good as the amount of time and effort you've expended in validating them with field tests.

Testing doesn't have to mean two completely different creative platforms (those tests rarely teach us anything; the variables are too many to know why one succeeded and the other failed). But here are three simple tests you should do more often (but aren't):

1. **Message.** Change one word in your subject line or banner ad or text link and do a 50/50 split. You can test key benefits (swap "increase speed" for "decrease cost") or just semantics (whether or not to use "Free" in a subject line is a legitimate test, even today).
2. **Audience.** How sure are you that C-level contacts really care about your product? That IT will respond when it's really Finance that lies awake at night worrying about the issue? The right audience is the first step to a successful campaign. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.
3. **Offer.** Offer a free book to the first 50 responders. Give away an iPod at the Webinar. Add a free trial to "qualified companies". Just remember to test it. If you change your offer across the board, and response increases, you'll never know for certain whether your change had anything to do with it.

Can A Campaign Be Too Targeted?

It's a generally accepted tenet of direct response marketing that the more targeted your campaign, the more successful that campaign is likely to be. There are circumstances, however, when too precise a target audience can actually work against you and force you to make compromises that jeopardize the ultimate ROI from your program.

This is a common phenomenon amongst start-ups and smaller companies, those firms that have precious few dollars to invest in marketing and thus (with all good intentions) figure the best way to maximize efficiency is to target only the very select number of prospects most likely to need their particular solution.

When we ask these firms about their target audience, we often get something like the following in response:

- Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York ("the only places we have sales reps thus far")
- Financial Services industry ("we only have two customers and they're both banks")
- VP level and above ("we don't have the time to waste upselling")
- Must have [insert esoteric technical requirement here] installed ("it just makes the sales cycle a lot shorter if they already have this in place")

And so on. Of course, if we as an agency had ready access to a list of Southern California VPs of Financial Service companies with [Acme Widget Pro 2.0] installed, none of this would be an issue, but therein lies the rub: we don't.

Some of the most effective vehicles available to direct marketers today are the least targeted, search being the primary example. There are ways to target search, most notably by geography, but in the end, you don't control who clicks on your ad. Same for content syndication. Or newsletter sponsorships.

Faced with an impossibly precise audience, we usually have one option only, and that's to build a list from scratch and then market to that list, perhaps through a combination of telemarketing, email (if the names by some miracle are opted-in), and direct mail. On the plus side, we're starting with a list that is already pre-qualified, and thus one that should respond well to our message. On the minus side, such initiatives are time consuming and prohibitively expensive.

Paring your target audience down to only a tiny segment of the potential universe may seem like a worthy shortcut, but in the end it's mostly inefficient. It's typically more productive to broaden your audience to include any company, job function, industry, etc. that might feasibly have a need for your solution. Your campaign will be less targeted, it's true, but you'll have much more flexibility when it comes to media vehicles, and your Cost Per Lead will be less as a result.

Landing Pages: Who Cares Anymore?

Making even modest changes to landing pages can be the quickest and easiest way to increase online response rates and decrease cost per lead, yet in more cases than not, far more attention, scrutiny, and investment is dedicated to the front end of demand generation campaigns.

Case in point: not long ago, we were asked to design a direct mail campaign for a B2B client whose goal was driving prospects to download a free trial version of their software product. The destination page for the campaign was a free trial request form linked from the client's Web site. There were two main problems with the existing page:

1. It looked like the rest of the corporate Web site – an attractive site, to be sure – but nothing that would continue the look and feel and creative theme that we were developing for the direct mail campaign;
2. The multi-step registration process was complex and onerous, and the copy on the request page was very passive, even bureaucratic, almost as if the client assumed that anyone arriving at the form was so thoroughly motivated to complete the process that he or she needed no further encouragement.

This should be the point at which I regale you with the elegant re-design that our agency implemented, and the astonishing increase in conversion rates we achieved.

Alas, no.

Turns out the trial page was off limits. One, it was owned by the Web team, a separate fiefdom. And secondly, conversion rates were OK (see comment above re: corporate Web sites), so why incur the additional expense?

According to Marketing Sherpa, this attitude is fairly common. People just don't care about landing pages. According to Sherpa, for example, only 16% of landing pages are free of navigation bars. 43% of paid search (SEM) campaigns don't even use a landing page, instead driving prospects to the advertiser's home page. Unbelievable.

When it comes to landing pages, even simple changes can make dramatic differences. Removing those navigation bars, for example. Using design elements and copy consistent with the ad, the email, or the direct mail campaign that the prospect was reading just seconds earlier. Getting rid of those extraneous links. (Marketing Sherpa: "Every link on your landing page that doesn't result in conversion will decrease response.")

Marketing Sherpa says that the average conversion (click-to-lead) rate for a B2B paid search campaign is 4.5%. Let's say you tweak your landing page a little and increase that rate to 5.0%. Congratulations: you just increased the ROI on

5 Simple Ways to Stretch Your Google Budget

A board member was on Google last night and he emailed your boss to complain that none of your company's search ads are showing up. Your West Coast sales rep is complaining that she's getting fewer leads than her East Coast counterpart because Google ads go dark after 4:00 PM PDT.

Sound familiar? Both are symptoms of one thing: you're exceeding your Google budget. But before you pump more money into the program, consider these alternatives to get more bang for the buck from your AdWords campaign:

1. Turn off the content network.

Left unchecked, ads on Google's content network can quickly climb to a significant percentage of your overall spend. Chances are, however, that those clicks are converting to leads at a much lower rate, and that what leads do result are less qualified.

2. Use dayparting.

Dayparting gives you the capability to run your campaign only during certain times of the day, or certain times of the week. If you only run your campaign from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM on weekdays, you'll minimize consumer traffic and other unqualified clicks that cost you money for little or no return.

3. Set up separate campaigns for different sales territories.

If you divide your campaign into two duplicate programs, one that runs from 8-6 East Coast time, and one that runs from 8-6 West Coast time, each with its own separate budget, you'll ensure that no West Coast sales rep gets shortchanged because Eastern territories have already eaten up the budget by mid-afternoon.

4. Use negative keywords.

Unqualified clicks – people who click on your ad but aren't a fit for your product or service – cost money. If you utilize negative keywords, you'll help eliminate that wasted spend by minimizing the number of clearly unqualified prospects. For example, if you register "free" as a negative keyword, you'll eliminate prospects who may be interested in your product category, but who are only looking for freeware or shareware. Negative keywords are a critical tactic for B2B companies who need to minimize consumer traffic.

5. Set up conversion tracking.

The number of companies who have no idea which of their keywords, ad groups, etc. are generating the lowest cost per lead is astonishing. Only by setting up conversion tracking (utilizing either Google conversion tracking codes or Google Analytics) do you truly know how your campaign is performing, and only conversion tracking enables you to eliminate those elements of your campaign that are burning through your budget with little or no reward.

Lead Follow-up: How Soon & How Often?

I had occasion recently to answer two questions relating to lead follow-up, discussions that readers of this blog might find of interest:

First, a prospective client wanted to convince his management that there was a business case to be made for installing a process by which sales leads would reach the sales force more quickly. He wanted to know if there were any industry benchmarks that would support his contention that leads have a fixed "shelf life" and that therefore it was important to follow up on them promptly.

We found the statistics we needed in a white paper by Knowledgestorm: "The Fine Art of Lead Management and Lead Follow-up." The paper reads:

> "The best time to contact a lead (especially an online lead) is the same day you receive it. A good marketing goal: call every lead within four days … Reaching a business lead within four business days significantly increases the likelihood that this lead will become a sales prospect. After seven business days, lead responsiveness dropped twenty percent."

A few days later, on LinkedIn, I participated in a spirited and informative discussion on a similar topic, specifically how much to pursue prospects that show initial interest but then stop responding. The original question read (in part):

> "When you generate a lead … and receive a positive response, you start the first level of talks (call or email) and (then) suddenly the lead disappears! I generally try to follow-up 3-5 times either through telephone or email. If still there is no response I move on. To what extent should we pursue the prospect by telephone/emails?"

The question elicited some very informative responses, largely from people with considerable expertise in sales and sales operations. One expert recommended a minimum of 10 follow-up attempts! I chose to represent the marketing viewpoint, namely that after a fixed number of follow-up attempts, the onus (in my view) falls upon marketing, not sales:

> "I expect a sales rep to make a reasonable best effort to re-engage with an interested prospect, but after a few such calls/emails (I'll leave the sales experts to define what that number is) it should fall upon marketing to have in place an intelligent, personalized, rules-based lead nurturing program that triggers a series of automatic emails to those prospects, and then alerts the sales rep instantly when the prospect responds."

With today's marketing automation technology, it's possible to set up automated campaigns that trigger based on whatever criteria the user defines – one such criterion could be "leads that haven't been touched in 45 days." Or the sales rep can choose to manually add a lead to the lead nurturing list..

Tips for Marketing to Small Business

More and more technology companies are starting to invest serious dollars in marketing to small- and mid-sized businesses (SMB.) The steady march of technological advancement makes much of this possible: products and services that once were restricted to corporate data centers are now showing up on the desktop, or as desktop appliances, which in turn opens up new markets.

There are compelling business reasons for this trend. Small businesses may not have the IT budgets of their enterprise counterparts, but there are more of them (eight million more, by some counts). Fewer decision-makers means sales cycles can be dramatically shorter. And where some enterprise markets (think: CRM) are reaching saturation, millions of small- to mid-sized businesses are just waking up to the potential offered by the same solutions on a smaller scale.

Here are a few simple tips to consider for your next SMB campaign:

1. **Keep it simple.** The daily "pain points" of a corporate manager can be fairly provincial. As such, a campaign can resonate by touching upon issues and problems that may have minimal company-wide impact but nonetheless resonate loudly with that individual. By contrast, the concerns of a small business proprietor (take it from someone in that role) distill into something much more basic: money. If your copy doesn't show the reader how to either a) increase revenues, or b) decrease cost, you've missed the target.
2. **No FUD.** Because corporate decision-makers have the responsibility, the budget, and the fear of upper management, they try to anticipate problems well before they arrive. Small businesses tend to be more reactive. They buy things when they need them, and not before. Therefore, messages that rely on Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt (FUD) are less likely to resonate with this audience than they might with someone mired in the corporate hierarchy.
3. **Think print.** Reaching a corporate decision-maker using direct mail typically means getting your message through multiple "screens": the mail room, the department secretary, the executive assistant. In a small business, however, it's likely that only one, maybe two, people see your direct mail before the intended recipient, which means your message has a much greater chance of reaching the addressee's desk.

3 Reasons Your Email Campaign Failed

Anti-spam laws and the increasing effectiveness of spam filters mean that it's harder than ever for companies to be successful at email marketing. When campaigns fail, however, most e-marketers point the finger at the creative, though in fact copy and design are rarely the main culprits.

If results from your latest email campaign fell short of expectations, here are the top list of suspects:

1. **The List.** 60 percent or more of the success of any campaign is tied directly to the quality of the names you broadcast to. Did you choose lists based on their ability (using select criteria) to target the ideal audience profile for your product or service? Did you target the ultimate decision-maker, even though that individual may not be feeling the relevant pain, and therefore is unlikely to respond to your message?
2. **Offer.** Unless your call to action is "buy now", the reason prospects respond to your email (or not, as the case may be) is the offer, not your product. These days, information is cheap, so your offer had better be worth the effort. How enticing was the information you offered? If you were marketing an event, did that event promise to help solve a relevant business problem, or was it simply offering reasons to buy your product? What could you have done to increase the perceived value of the offer?
3. **Creative.** Did your copy sell the offer, or did you spend most of the time droning on about your product? Did the subject line offer a strong, immediate incentive to open the message? Could the reader identify the offer, key benefits, and call to action without scrolling? Were there relevant benefits (save money, increase productivity) throughout or simply a list of features? Did the design support the copy and make it easier to read, or was it simply distracting?

The only thing worse than having your campaign fail is not knowing why it failed. The answer: test. Always test subject line, even if one is simply a slight variation of the other. Test lists religiously (never, ever broadcast to just one list), and where possible, split lists into cells based on job function, company size, or other demographic criteria. (Program managers take note - test enough variables, and even if the campaign fails to meet overall response objectives, you'll still be able to point to specific success factors.)

2 Common Mistakes That Cause Content Syndication to Fail

Content syndication can be an effective, low risk way for companies to generate a consistent stream of low cost, in-profile leads. However, when we introduce the topic to potential clients we very often hear comments such as:

"We tried it, but it didn't work for us."
"We had real problems with lead quality."
"We couldn't reach half the contacts."
"People said they couldn't remember downloading the white paper."

The common thread here is lack of 1) sales satisfaction and 2) lead quality. So what is it about some content syndication programs that create leads that sales reps don't want? The reasons I believe lie in two critical areas:

1. setting proper expectations, and

2. prompt and effective lead follow up.

To the first issue: expectations, it's important to recognize when someone registers to download a white paper or podcast or case study about the business challenge that your product solves, he or she is expressing an interest in that topic, not necessarily in your product. (That individual may well be a great candidate for your product, it's just that he/she doesn't know it yet.)

If you hand off content syndication leads to your sales force without setting that expectation, the program is doomed to failure. You will immediately start to hear comments such as: "They're not interested in our product – they only wanted the white paper." And once your inside sales team or lead development group concludes that a set of leads aren't up to snuff, forget it: you'll have a very difficult time convincing them otherwise.

In contrast, if those same reps are coached or scripted to inquire after the underlying issue, challenge, or topic that the white paper addresses, then you'll be setting the stage for some very fruitful conversations.

The second key to content syndication success is lead follow-up. This is of particular importance because most content syndication leads, unlike those that arrive directly via say, a corporate Website or an email campaign, don't arrive in real time. In a typical scenario, content syndication leads are received by the media vendor hosting the registration forms, and then shipped weekly to a client in batch form. Unfortunately, this means that some leads could be as much as a week old by the time your sales reps even see them.

Prompt, efficient, and effective follow-up to these leads is therefore paramount. As a very basic guideline, every lead should receive immediate, automated email follow-up upon being imported into your CRM system.

5 Keys to Getting Started in Lead Nurturing

Congratulations. You're the proud owner of a bright and shiny marketing automation platform. Now what?

If you suddenly find yourself with the right tools at your disposal, but have no idea how to get started in crafting a lead nurturing strategy, this post is for you.

1. Have a Plan.

Even if your marketing automation system has all the necessary bells and whistles, it's only as effective as the strategy behind it. So build one. Know what your objective is, establish clear success metrics (ex: "increase the conversion rate of raw inquiries to qualified leads by 3x"), and define a strategy to meet those objectives. Whatever you do, don't just start creating emails in random fashion and figure you'll know success when you get there.

2. Start Small.

It may well be that to successfully convert users who download your free trial software to paying customers you will need to create a series of 23 emails (each with its own landing page and thank you page) in 3 separate tracks. But however much you're convinced of the wisdom of that plan, you're better off implementing it in phases – say, starting with 3 tracks of 2 emails each – and then building out the program over time.

3. Test. A Lot.

Lead nurturing is, at its essence, a repeatable process, and repeatable processes are ideal candidates for testing. So test everything: subject line, landing page, offer strategy, audience segments, etc. and adjust your strategy accordingly based on those results. Even if any individual test only increases your response rate a fraction of a point, the cumulative effect over time can be dramatic.

4. Get Sales Buy-In.

Even if one of the primary benefits of lead nurturing is to aid your sales force and make them more productive, make sure they're intimately aware of your strategy, its objectives, and the precise communications that you'll be unleashing upon their precious sales leads.

5. Be Aggressive.

A lead nurturing program is highly adjustable, so in the absence of professional advice, be aggressive. If you're offering up information of value and you treat your prospects with respect, you may find them more tolerant of frequent emails than you expected. Besides, you can always dial back if results dictate.

A Simple, No-Cost Viral Marketing Technique

How many business emails do you send in a day? Dozens? Hundreds? Now multiply that by the number of people in your company. The number of contacts that your employees correspond with every day dwarfs the number of friends or connections they may have on sites like Facebook and LinkedIn.

Fortunately, there's a simple, no cost way to leverage the power of your company's email network: it's called an email signature. The problem is, most people think of their email signature as simply a way to provide contact information. What they ignore (and 'fess up, you're probably one of them) is that an email signature is one of the most potent viral marketing tools available.

Most standard email signatures are of the name, title, phone, email, and Web address variety. Now imagine if that email signature also included a call to action – nothing promotional or over the top, mind you – but a link to a blog, a white paper, a Webinar, or trial software. Imagine implementing that email signature across your company. Suddenly, you're delivering a business offer daily to potentially hundreds of thousands of people.

Keep in mind, of course, that the typical email gets replied to, and copied, and forwarded, so the viral potential of your new signature goes well beyond the people you correspond with directly. Even if the click-through rate is miniscule, you'll be generating incremental traffic and leads at virtually no cost.

All it takes is a simple line of copy added to the end of your contact information. Here are some ideas to ponder:

- Get insightful commentary on hot ERP trends: [link to company blog]
- Try our award-winning software free for 30 days: [link to free trial]
- Gartner names [Company Name] "visionary": [link to analyst report]
- Hear live how companies cut travel costs 30 percent: [link to podcast]

Here are some guidelines for an effective, offer-oriented email signature:

1. Use information offers (e.g. white papers, blogs) that have broad appeal.
2. Use compelling benefits and avoid heavy-handed, promotional copy.
3. Set up a dedicated landing page and unique URL so you can track click-throughs, leads, and (dare I say) ROI.
4. Keep the copy short, and if you use graphics, keep them short also so as not to increase the vertical size of your email signature substantially. Nothing's worse than an enormous, space-hogging email signature repeated over and over throughout an email thread.

How Do I Use SEM if People Aren't Searching for What I Do?

This issue comes up a lot with clients whose products don't fit neatly into defined or established categories. A client writes (details changed to preserve confidentiality):

> "Our product is on demand health & wellness software for small businesses and we're promoting it as a tool for improving productivity, claims prevention, etc. I'm bidding on phrases related to those topics, for example, 'business productivity', 'small business healthcare' etc.
>
> My keyword research shows that very few people are looking for health & wellness software. Instead, they appear to be looking for software to solve problems—productivity, healthcare costs, etc. — that our software happens to solve.
>
> My question is this: Should I mention health & wellness in my PPC ads? On the one hand, I want to make sure that when they get to my site, it's not a total surprise that the site is about health & wellness."

My response:

> Think of your PPC advertising not as a way to convince people to buy your product, or even to convince them that health & wellness software is the answer to all their problems. Think of the campaign simply as a means to engage with companies that have the issues and challenges that your software can solve. I recommend you:
>
> 1. NOT mention "health & wellness" in your PPC ad (for the reasons you describe, i.e. it's not what people are searching for)
> 2. by all means mention your white paper is about health & wellness, but describe it on the landing page in the context of the business issues that you know will resonate with the reader, i.e. "Learn how a new approach to employee health & wellness can improve productivity, reduce healthcare costs, …" Consider developing multiple versions of the landing page, with different intro copy highlighting specific business issues according to ad group. This will minimize any potential disconnects between the search term and the landing page, which in turn will increase your conversion rates.
> 3. Testing ad copy is extremely simple in Google, so test multiple ads aggressively across a range of ad groups. At a minimum, run two ads head to head – one mentioning health & wellness, one without. Also, be sure to employ "phrase" and "exact" match where possible – you'll pay less per click and eliminate unqualified traffic.

How Often Should I Email My Database?

A client writes: "What's best practice in terms of how many times per month you hit each key contact in your database?"

It's a cop out, I know, but the answer is: it depends. The primary variable is the type of content being delivered. As a general rule, we're recommending that most of our clients email their database at least twice per month, but that assumes that the communications aren't all exclusively promotional in nature – i.e. that one of the two might be a blog or e-newsletter or feature other, more "informational" offers.

Think about your own, personal experience. For me, there are companies who show up in my inbox regularly, whose content is relevant, targeted, and personalized, and from whom even a daily email doesn't seem onerous. Conversely, there are others from whom even a monthly email seems invasive, mostly because I have no idea why they're communicating with me in the first place.

The best way to improve relevancy (and thus open rates and response) is to utilize list segmentation. If you're sending the same content to your entire database every time, you're greatly limited in the frequency with which you can deliver those messages since, by default, some subset of your database will find specific content completely irrelevant to their interests.

Today's email broadcast and marketing automation tools provide the ability to segment your database not only based on demographic (e.g. geography, company size, industry) but also behavioral criteria (e.g. visitors to specific Web pages, prospects who have opened past Webinar invitations). The more confident you can be that your content is relevant to a particular contact based on either profile information or past activity, the more aggressive you can be with frequency.

Content is key. If your entire lead nurturing or customer communication strategy consists of pushing offers – Webinars, white papers, case studies – to your database, that kind of constant solicitation wears out quickly. You'll establish a greater trust with your recipients, generate a greater awareness, and even build thought leadership, if not every one of your emails is an outright call to action.

For example, e-newsletters are a pain to create and manage, but in the context of an ongoing lead nurturing program they serve to mix up the communication by delivering information of value and not just another in a string of offers. A better solution than e-newsletters – and a lot less hassle – is to post what would otherwise be newsletter content to your blog, and then email those posts once a month to your database in a newsletter-type template.

5 Reasons to Include Branded Terms in Your Paid Search Campaign

A client writes: "If we include our company and product names as keywords in our PPC (paid search) campaign, won't we simply be cannibalizing our SEO effort, i.e. paying for clicks that we otherwise would have generated for free?"

Answer: It's true that you may have generated Web traffic from the same people anyway, but there are a multitude of reasons why including branded terms in your paid search campaign is a good idea. We find that including branded keywords in a PPC/SEM program can not only generate significant ROI but also improve the overall performance of a company's search initiative.

1. Delivering both paid ads and organic listings in search results has been shown to improve overall click-through rates. Studies indicate that when a term generates both a paid ad and organic listing, the result can be an increase in both clicks as well as conversions (leads). This may be because having your company appear in both organic and paid listings legitimizes your brand since it appears in multiple locations on the page.

2. If you rely on organic listings alone, both the message delivered and the destination URL are at the mercy of search engine algorithms. However, with paid ads, you can use ad copy to deliver a brand message of your choosing, and direct visitors to a specific page optimized for PPC and conversion.

3. Bidding on branded terms will help to thwart competitors bidding on your brand name (at least for now, a permitted practice in the case of Google.) Because only you can legitimately include your trademarked company name in ad copy, your higher quality score (due to ad relevance, click-though rate, and also landing page relevance) will enable you to achieve a higher position at a lower cost, pushing your competitors down the page. The same can be said for channel partners with whom you compete for product-related terms.

4. In addition to the quality score variable, branded terms generate less competition than generic keywords, and thus demand a lower bid rate and generate a lower cost per click. This lower cost per click can boost your overall campaign performance.

5. Branded terms can yield prospects at later stages in the selling cycle, at a point in the decision process when they are starting to evaluate specific brands or solutions. Here again, you'll increase your chances of actually engaging with these highly qualified prospects by using paid ads to drive them to a page designed to generate leads, rather than simply dumping them onto your corporate Website.

Lowering Cost by Paying More for Leads

Since the goal of most campaigns is to generate the highest number of qualified leads (or sales) at the lowest cost possible, any change in direct marketing strategy must accomplish one of two goals; either:

- increase the rate of response, or
- decrease the overall cost of the campaign

or both. But what if a change in strategy appears to increase the cost of a lead? Is it still worth testing?

An example: let's say you want to generate the maximum number of registered users at your Web site before a specific date. Registration is free. Could you afford to offer say, a $20 gift certificate just for registering, even though the lead generates no immediate revenue?

Recently, we played out this scenario for an e-commerce client. The offer was to register for a free service via the client's Web site, and one of a number of tests that we incorporated into the pilot program was a free $20 Amazon.com gift certificate just for registering.

The test cell with the free gift generated twice the response as the control (no free gift), resulting in a lower cost per lead, even including the cost of the gift. Lead quality wasn't an issue, since the registration process weeded out unqualified leads. For future campaigns, this means the client can generate a target number of registered users at a lower overall cost.

Assuming test cells of 10,000 names each and using hypothetical costs, the campaign might appear as follows:

	Control (No Gift)	Test (With Gift)
Campaign Cost	$15,000	$15,000
Response Rate	2%	4%
# of Leads	200	400
Gift Cost	$0	$8,000
Total Cost	$15,000	$23,000
Cost Per Lead (inc. gift)	$75	$57.50

Initially, the thought of paying $20 more for non-revenue-generating inquiries may not make sense. But this demonstrates that there are times when increasing the cost of a lead can actually make your campaign more cost-effective overall.

Why Focus Groups Don't Work for Direct Marketing

An article that appeared recently in a national direct marketing publication recounted the case study of a database solutions company that used focus groups to evaluate two different creative concepts for an upcoming lead generation mailer.

One concept took a humorous approach; the other was more straightforward and to-the-point. Every one of six different focus groups said that the humorous piece was the best. Wisely, the company decided to test both versions in the mail anyway. The results: The more straightforward mailer outpulled the humorous version by more than two to one.

The story reminded me of a similar experience we had with a client a few years ago for a campaign that targeted software developers. The client wanted brash, colorful creative to "break through the clutter." We convinced them to let us develop both a colorful self-mailer and a more sedate letter package in a plain (no teaser copy) #10 envelope.

At final layout, the client took the comps round to all the developers in their organization and asked them which they'd be most likely to respond to. To a man (this was an all-male sample), they chose the self-mailer. In the mail, the letter package outpulled the self-mailer by a factor of three to one.

Focus groups have tremendous value for many things — notably to help evaluate brand advertising and basic positioning. But for direct mail, they're notoriously unreliable.

The only way to get a true, objective evaluation of a given program is to test it in the field. After all, one of the things that makes direct marketing so valuable — whether print or online — is that it's measurable.

If you simply must get some indication of a direct mail campaign's potential merits before committing to even a limited test, then consider using online media — broadcast email or banner ads, say — to test message, audience, offer or creative. Then use those results to alter your direct mail design if necessary.

Push or Pull: How to Decide

Imagine a spectrum. On one end are products in mature categories, products for which the need is readily apparent and recognized by your target audience. On the other are products in more nascent categories, products for which the need may not be so apparent — i.e. prospects may not even recognize the relevant issue or "pain".

Where is your company on this spectrum? Is your marketing challenge simply being in the right place at the right time, available for prospects already shopping for your type of solution? Or do you need to create the need, and the awareness that your type of solution exists in the first place?

Where you are on this spectrum, between what we might call "evangelist" and "order-taker", can help guide you as to the types of demand generation programs that are likely to be most effective.

Evangelists need to invest more in push programs such as email and direct mail, broadcasting their message to a targeted audience. Order takers can rely more on pull programs such as SEM, content syndication, and social media. Their challenge is creating a sufficient presence online (and perhaps in print) so that prospects actively researching their particular category find and engage with them before the competition.

Keep in mind, "push or pull" is not strictly an either/or proposition. The ideal solution for almost any company is typically a blend of the two.

Your Brand: Friend or Foe?

Can branding and direct marketing co-exist? It depends on how religious you (or your corporate style mavens) are about enforcing brand identity in your campaigns.

Good direct marketing can support a brand, but any attempt to consciously promote a brand through direct marketing is typically doomed to failure.

Why? Direct marketing and branding are fundamentally dissimilar. Branding means different things depending who you talk to, but broadly speaking, the objective of most "branding campaigns" would include creating a positive impression of your company and product in the mind of the consumer.

Direct marketing campaigns, in stark contrast, have one goal and one goal only: getting someone to respond. Creating a positive impression of your company can help generate that response, but it's seldom the dominant reason why a prospect or customer would choose to do so.

Moreover, too much emphasis on creating that positive impression can steer your creative away from selling the offer (the *raison d'etre* of all good direct marketing) and towards copy and design that promote your company or your product. Whilst leaving a prospect with a warm and fuzzy opinion of you and your company may be laudable, if that prospect doesn't respond, you've failed.

Branding and direct marketing most often come into conflict when companies insist on slavish compliance to brand guidelines, be they positioning statements, color palettes, fonts, etc. For example, we've had some clients who require official company fonts for direct mail letters, even when we can demonstrably show that more generic type styles generate measurably higher response.

That's not to say that direct marketing needs to be set apart entirely from the rest of corporate communications. Again, direct marketing can be successful within even the most stringent brand guidelines. However, when those guidelines get in the way of your primary objective: getting the reader to respond, compromise is called for.

Why Free Trial Offers May Not Be the Best Choice

Free trials have become very popular as offers, in part because they're perceived to be the shortest route to a sale, and quick sales are the order of the day in today's economy. The conversations we have with clients on the topic often go something like this:

> "My product sells for $49 a month. I'm not going to spend a bunch of valuable sales resources chasing after people who downloaded a white paper, in the hope that they then agree to a trial and only then maybe end up buying the product."

Don't get me wrong, offering a free trial often makes a lot of sense. Many products can't really be appreciated in full until the user has experienced them first-hand. But many technology marketers are discouraged from even testing alternatives to the free trial because of the argument above – namely, that they can't afford the follow-up, and because (they fear) too few leads would ultimately convert to paying customers.

But that ignores two realities: one, that offering a free trial risks eliminating a huge subset of potential customers – people who may well have the relevant pain or problem your product solves, but aren't at a place where they feel compelled to actually evaluate the product.

This problem is particularly acute when free trials are used as the offers in search ads, a situation where many prospects are likely to be only in the initial stage of research and just aren't ready for the commitment of a free trial. In search campaigns, we often recommend free trial offers only be used for branded terms or keywords that suggest the user is actively shopping for a solution.

The second counter-argument to the "I can't afford to offer anything but a free trial" is lead nurturing. Offer something with broader appeal, generate a much larger number of leads, use automated lead management to offer the free trial as a next step, and then systematically nurture those prospects over time. No sales rep need be involved, though with a marketing automation system in place you could choose to trigger a sales call or generate a sales alert if, for example, the person met certain qualification criteria (say, company size, purchase timeframe, or named account.)

So what to test? The usual alternatives: free assessments, ROI calculators and the like can be valuable sales tools, but they're also limited in their appeal because, like free trials, they're only likely to appeal to prospects further advanced in the sales cycle. As such, they're better candidates for offers made once the prospect is engaged, as part of a systematic lead nurturing process, then they are for lead acquisition.

How to Name Your White Paper

White papers have been an effective lead generation tool for high-tech companies for over a decade. Thanks to syndication, paid search, and other forms of promotion, they're a better investment than ever.

While the right content is always important, it's often the title of the document itself that drives click-throughs, downloads, and sales leads. Case in point: recently, when one of the white papers we were promoting for a software client wasn't performing as well as expected, we renamed it from something that sounded like a doctoral thesis to a more benefit-oriented title that included the phrase "Tips & Tricks". And downloads and leads increased twenty-fold.

Here are some tips for naming your white paper based on head to head tests:

1. Imply a benefit from reading the material regardless of whether the reader eventually chooses to buy your product. The most successful white papers are not those that promise to explain why a particular product or service is the answer to the world's ills, but rather purport to offer information on how to solve a problem. For example:

   "AcmeSoft 3.0: Delivering an Integrated Suite to Monitor, Analyze and Manage Performance"

   is too self-promotional, whereas:

   "Improving Business Intelligence: A New Way of Managing Business Performance"

   appeals to those looking for information of value, not a sales pitch.

2. Include specific, tangible learning benefits in your title. For example:

   "Top 10 Secrets to ..."
   "Tips & Techniques for ..."
   "A Manager's Guide to Projecting ROI ..."
   "Best Practices for Successful ..."
   "What Spammers Know That You Don't"

   Remember, it's less important that the title communicate product functionality, and more important that the reader sees clear, concrete benefits from downloading the white paper.

3. Lastly, don't be afraid to second-guess the title of your white paper. Let's face it: people who write white papers are usually fairly technical, and aren't likely to title their document with your newsletter ad in mind. If a white paper's already posted on a particular site or network and it's not generating the response you expected, consider a new title.

Secrets to a Successful Offer

One of my all-time favorite direct mail campaigns was a mailer from Pitney Bowes, the postage meter company, promoting their line of office copiers. I've received it probably three or four times in total, which I assume can only mean it performed well.

In bold letters, the copy on the outer envelope reads: "Complete the enclosed Office Copier Downtime Survey and receive a FREE GIFT …" Putting aside my prejudice against envelope copy, this is a masterstroke of effective, lead-generation direct marketing.

What the folks at Pitney Bowes know (and their agency too, presumably) is that they're not going to sell copiers through the mail. They simply want to find people who are unhappy with their current machines. And what better way to identify those people than to give them an incentive (in this case, a free coffee mug with their name on it) just for complaining?

This is the same objective you should have for your next lead generation campaign. Simply aim to identify people with a problem, a problem that your product or service can help solve, and get those people to raise their hand and say "tell me more." After all, what's a good lead if not a person who has a problem (a problem you can solve) and who wants to do something about it?

What's the equivalent of the copier survey for your technology? A video on "How to Increase Field Sales Productivity?" A white paper on "Web Services: Development Challenges & How to Overcome Them?" A free guide on "Extending Your Enterprise to Remote Users: 6 Key Issues?"

Whatever the offer, don't worry about whether it sells your product (as Pitney Bowes does, you can always send the prospect your product information as well). Just design the offer in such a way that it will attract the people with the right problem. And then let your sales force do the selling.

Naming Your White Paper: Think "A+"

When white papers were primarily selling tools and "leave behinds," the title didn't count for much. Now that they're mostly lead generation devices, the right white paper title can mean a lot. If a prospect is browsing through the white paper library on your favorite IT site, a compelling title can mean the difference between a sales leads for you or one for your nearest competitor.

I wrote about white paper titles back in 2004, but here's something I didn't know: apparently even the first letter makes a difference. A VP of Sales for a media company confessed to me that, on his site, white paper titles starting with the letter "A" generate slightly higher download rates because they appear at the top of category and search listings. (His company doesn't publicize the fact because – heck – everyone would start naming their white papers the same way.) Now, maybe this phenomenon is specific to one particular site, but something tells me it probably works well elsewhere.

"AA+ Ideas for Network Security," anyone?

Using Free Gifts & Promotions Wisely

Sometimes a good list, sparkling creative, and a compelling offer aren't enough, and prospects need an extra inducement to get them to respond to your campaign. At times like this, offering some type of special incentive — a sweepstakes drawing or a free gift, perhaps — can make a big difference.

Promotions need to be approached with caution, however. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

1. Always test a segment of your campaign with no special offer.

By doing so, you'll establish a benchmark against which to measure what effect the promotion had (if any), and whether the increase in response outweighed the cost of the promotion.

2. Be wary of making your promotion "open ended."

In the era of Twitter, even a promotion that's time-limited ("register by April 30 …") means thousands, if not millions of people could potentially respond. If your promotion involves a free gift, no matter how small the cost, place a limit on the total quantity ("be one of the first 500 to respond …").

3. Promotions often increase response at the expense of lead quality.

As such, they're best implemented when your priority is lead volume, not quality, and when you have structured follow-up campaigns in place to maximize the value of every response.

You can minimize the negative effect that promotions have on lead quality by making the offer relevant to your product or service. Offer a discount for first-time buyers, or a free book that addresses the same issues that your product solves (for example, a book on job search strategies to promote an employment Web site).

On the Web, it's sometimes best to only introduce the special offer on the back end of the campaign, at the landing page. In this way, you'll generate only those responses attracted by your core message, and the free gift will increase your conversion rate — the percentage of people who actually fill out your response form.

Sample Outline for an Effective White Paper

White paper offers have long been a staple of high-tech lead generation campaigns. A good white paper (perhaps dressed up as an "executive brief," a "buyer's guide," or "technology primer") remains a good investment both as a direct marketing offer and as a general sales tool.

An effective white paper doesn't necessarily sell the reader on your company or your technology, but rather delivers information of value that attracts the right kind of prospect — the person with the problem or challenge that your product or service can solve. Your sales force or your Web site can do the selling.

Based on offers that have proven successful for our clients, here's an outline for an effective white paper:

1. Current industry problems/trends (highlighting, naturally, the "pain" that your product or service solves)
2. Technology considerations/options (what's old, what's new, the "new" being your product or service)
3. How the new technology or service or business model works (including a technical description, if applicable)
4. Benefits/Applications/ROI (including case studies, if possible)
5. How to choose a solution/vendor
6. Summary

Break Up Your Sales Letters

Direct marketing theory maintains that before the average person reads a sales letter, he or she takes a second or two to scan the page, looking for highlights or clues to determine whether the letter merits the time to read at greater length.

If you design your letter to take up as little space as possible (adhering to an arbitrary one-page limit, for example), almost inevitably the result is a letter that looks crowded, with large, unwieldy paragraphs that are intimidating to look at, difficult to read, and
impossible to scan.

In fact, compressing your letter onto one page is often the worst thing you can do. Instead, expand your letter by breaking up the text as much as possible. Techniques like bullets and sub-heads (short, highlighted phrases between paragraphs) may extend the length of your letter onto a second page, but they actually make the letter easier to read (and therefore, more inviting) by dividing it into smaller, more digestible pieces.

Sub-heads have another benefit also. Used to summarize key selling points, they serve as “teasers” — devices designed to grab the attention of the reader and motivate him or her to read further. To be most effective, each sub-head should deliver a concise, compelling benefit. For example:

- Eliminate up to 40 percent of the code required to build your next application.
- Deliver instant data access to remote offices — without bringing your network to a halt.
- Add powerful customer reports to your e-business site — quickly and easily.

The best way to highlight sub-heads on the page is by underlining (underlined phrases stand out on the page more effectively than bold). A second color or font is OK, but be cautious — too colorful, and your letter can look less like business correspondence and more like a flyer. Also, too many sub-heads (more than two or three per page, say) can clutter the page and make it more difficult to scan quickly.

But Wait, There’s More!

Good direct marketing copy is not like a letter to your grandma; unless, that is, you're asking Grandma to sponsor you for the 5K Fun Run at the park. Direct marketing copy isn't designed to make people feel warm and fuzzy about you, your company or your product, or generate awareness, or promote your brand. Good direct marketing copy does one thing - it generates a response.

Direct marketing writers use a myriad of copy techniques that serve that key goal, but which may seem aggressive, "salesy" or "cheesy" to the uninitiated. Below are some examples. You may read these and say to yourself: "that's not how we talk to our audience." That's your decision. The bottom line is that these techniques are proven to increase response.

"... and more."

One reason why testing is so fundamental to direct marketing is that different people respond to different offers, benefits, and creative in general. "... and more" is a classic way to end a list (of benefits, for example) because it implies yet more, albeit unnamed, reasons to respond, and increases the perceived value of whatever it is you're selling.

"Plus ..."

Hesitation is the bugbear of direct marketing success. Good direct marketing copy keeps the reader moving; any pause, hesitation, distraction or confusion, and the cause is lost. Beginning a sentence (or technically speaking, a sentence fragment) with "And" or "Plus", though poor grammar, is one way to hustle the reader through to your next compelling point.

"Act Now ..."

Even the most successful direct marketing campaigns have minimal shelf life. Success depends on not only getting people to respond, but getting them to do so immediately. Urgency is king. "Act now" implies there's a price to be paid for delay.

Creating a Better Sales Letter: The Hook

Direct marketing lore has it that in a typical direct mail letter, the two things the recipient is most likely to read are: 1) the first paragraph and 2) the P.S. It's critical therefore that the first few lines of your letter or email message grab or "hook" the reader into proceeding further. In particular, learn to avoid these two common mistakes:

#1: Asking a "Yes or No" question

Don't ask the reader whether they have the problem your product or service can solve. Just assume they have the problem, and then tell them how to solve it. Instead of "Is network performance an issue for you?", start your letter with "Now there's a way to increase your network performance by 200%!"

#2: The "so what?" sentence

Don't tell the reader something they already know. Open with a benefit, not a statement of fact. For instance, don't say "If you're a software developer, you know that being able to port applications to different platforms is critical." Instead, use something like "Discover a simple way to instantly port applications to multiple platforms — without rewriting code."

Within the first few lines of your letter, your reader should know (a) why you're writing, and (b) what's in it for him or her. If you take too long to "set the stage" for a benefit statement, the reader may not get that far, and your letter will end up in the recycling bin.

Newsletter Ad Revisited

Here's a newsletter ad that arrived in my inbox recently:

> **Real-world email security challenges; Real-world advice**
> Network IT executives face three massive messaging challenges: secure the network against external messaging threats; protect the company against employee email misuse; and ensure email meets regulatory compliance laws. Get real-world advice and concrete steps on how to tackle each challenge in this exclusive Webcast.

And here's how I'd re-write the ad:

> **Free Webcast: Top 3 Messaging Security Challenges**
> In an exclusive, on-demand Webcast, hear an IDC expert discuss concrete steps for addressing the top 3 messaging challenges facing network IT executives: securing the network against external messaging threats, protecting the company against employee email misuse, and ensuring email complies with regulatory guidelines. Available now – click here to register.

What's the difference?

- Headline highlights the offer.
- Mention the speaker (adds credibility).
- Key topics are expressed as benefits of attending, not statements of fact.
- Ad closes with a note of urgency and a strong call to action.

Note that little of the actual text has changed – rather the ad has been restructured to focus on benefits of attending the event.

Writing a Better Search Ad

Google allows a total of 105 characters in their text ads, including spaces. It's therefore pointless to waste this precious space on fluff. Many search marketers make the mistake of describing their company or product in their ad, on the erroneous assumption that keyword advertising is fundamentally about promoting a product.

The only instance where brand messaging – promoting your company or product explicitly – generally works is with branded terms (for example, the name of your company or product), and even then, most companies don't have a strong enough brand to pull it off. Using the ad copy to sing the praises of your company is usually a recipe for disastrous results, particularly in combination in search terms more related to the relevant problem than your product.

Thinking of your ad not as a billboard for your product, but rather as a tool to capture and engage with prospects suffering from the issue, problem, or challenge that your product or service can solve. Try to sell your company too soon, and you'll turn people off. In general, effective ad copy should:

- contain a specific and tangible offer (ex: a free trial, an information kit)
- state clearly why the searcher needs to take action (ex: "find out how …")
- qualify the visitor using benefits that will interest the right type of prospect

Effective, response-oriented ad copy is direct and to the point, and above all: relevant to the search term. Some of the most successful search ads don't mention the advertiser's name at all, except in the display URL.

Here's an actual Google ad (company name changed to protect the misguided):

Network Performance
83 Fortune 100 companies rely on
Acme Global Services

and the same ad re-written to be response-oriented:

Boost Network Performance 20x
Free Info Kit explains how
White papers, case studies, more.

Remember: Google allows search marketers to run multiple ads against batches of keywords or even single keywords. Your search program is a highly efficient platform for testing offers, calls to action, landing pages, etc., all of which can lead to higher efficiency and better results.

Envelope Teaser Copy

It used to be a rule of thumb in direct mail that in order to get opened, envelopes had to first "get noticed."

These days, particularly in business-to-business mail, that no longer applies. Why? Because the more your envelope looks like "junk mail," the less chance it has of making it through the mail room, executive secretary and other corporate "screens."

Can teaser copy ever work? Sure. But more often than not, because you identify the package as promotional in nature, you give the reader a reason not to open the envelope, rather than incent them to go further.

Next time you're thinking of using envelope copy, test 25% of the names with a plain envelope (just your logo and return address). More often than not, the plain envelope will outperform the flashy one.

Give Your Campaign a Reality Check

We've all been there.

The copy is winding its way through the marketing group and is now on its fourth revision. The CEO didn't like the photo at the top of the email so it's back to the drawing board, design-wise. The marcom director wants to change the headline so it conforms to the "approved company message". And you need to broadcast by the end of the week.

When you're this close to a campaign, there comes a point in the process where it's no longer easy to evaluate the creative objectively. You just want it out the door and off your desk. But it's also times like these when your campaign is most at risk.

Creative development can be an insular process. Even the best of companies tend to evaluate copy, message, and other creative elements against their own internal set of standards, usually standards based on how the "powers-that-be" have decided your product or service should be positioned in the marketplace.

It's also at the end of the creative process, with deadlines at hand, that changes can so often be made with these internal factors in mind, particularly when it comes to language. Sometimes we get so used to our own "marketing-speak" that we think everyone talks that way. Well here's news: they don't.

Take the time (and the process could take just a few minutes) to run your copy, your email, your landing page, whatever, by an independent third party. A customer, for example. Your spouse or significant other, even. (Don't laugh - sometimes the best way to evaluate technology marketing is to show it to a layperson.)

Whomever your victim is, make sure he or she is someone outside the review process, immune from office politics, brand guidelines, magic quadrants, PowerPoint presentations, and other internal factors. Call it a "reality check." It could be the one thing that saves your campaign from imminent disaster.

How Not to Write Direct Mail

This month I received a mail piece from an East Coast tech vendor (whom I won't name) that broke virtually every direct marketing rule in the book.

The mailer arrived in an oversized, 9 x 12 envelope with the teaser copy:

> "What Can You Expect from AcmeTech? High Scores from META Group. A Competitive Edge for You."

Inside was a cover letter and (you guessed it) a report from the META Group. The cover letter begins:

> "Dear Howard:
>
> In a business environment that thrives on real-time information - and lots of it - data warehousing is a real priority for most senior outsourced analytic strategists. But in a market dominated by traditional database vendors, truly innovative Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW) technology just hasn't been available. Until now."

(Yawn.) It continues:

> "The enclosed Vendor Analysis from META Group rates the AcmeTech 1000 system in drill-down detail ..."

and so on. This campaign misses the mark in many places, but here are the most glaring examples:

1. Selling the product, not the offer.

The entire campaign reads like a product brochure, not a direct mail program. Nowhere is there any suggestion of why someone should respond, other than to discover yet more superlatives about the product.

2. Assuming an immediate need.

I have no idea why my business needs Enterprise Data Warehousing – and nothing about this mailer invites me to find out. Instead it just assumes that I know data warehousing is "a real priority" for me (it isn't), and then tells me why AcmeTech is the best product.

3. Giving away the offer.

The META report might have made a good offer - at least it would have provided a specific reason to respond. Instead, the letter closes with *"For more details about this innovative solution ..."* Just how much more detail do I need?

KISS (Keep it Simple, Stupid)

If you're marketing a technology product or service, chances are your campaign is directed at some pretty smart people. But there's one area of your campaign in which it's best to pretend you're actually writing to a three year-old: the call to action.

Simply put, your campaign needs to be idiot-proof. In writing the ideal call to action, you simply cannot overestimate the intelligence of your audience. Is this because your readers are stupid? No. It's because if any one of those readers is distracted, confused, or otherwise hesitates in responding to your campaign because your instructions weren't absolutely crystal clear, you just lost a response.

An example of what I mean: number the steps on your Web landing page. As in: 1. Fill out your name and contact information here. 2. Answer these 3 simple questions. 3. Click "submit".

Sound ridiculous? Sure. But remember, you've just spent days (maybe weeks) creating that landing page so you're intimately familiar with it. Is the average lay person going to immediately and intuitively know what's expected of him or her? (A good way to test - send a sample to someone outside the company.)

The same applies to reply forms in direct mail. Or toll-free numbers (please don't expect someone to navigate your company's voice prompts). Calls to action need to be clear, specific, and simple. You need all the leads you can get. Don't make the reader's job any harder than it needs to be.

Spam Scoring & Emarketing Strategy

There's a certain hyper-sensitivity surrounding email these days, with increased suspicion about email's effectiveness as a marketing vehicle. One interesting offshoot of this uneasiness is a growing trend for companies to employ spam filters, or more precisely, the software that includes such filters, as a testing tool for their email campaigns.

The thought is that by running campaigns through these filters ahead of time, and adjusting the copy accordingly, those campaigns will be filtered less, successfully reach more inboxes, and ultimately generate a higher response.

We also use such tools as a way of gauging to what extent email content will be flagged by common filters. However, we do so cautiously, and preach this same caution to our clients. The danger, we feel, is that, used too religiously, spam filtering software can become the ultimate arbiter of what language makes it into an email campaign, sometimes at odds with what we know is otherwise effective direct marketing copy.

Two recent campaigns for technology clients bear this out. The first example was a campaign targeting customers of a leading business intelligence solution. We tested two subject lines, one more benefit-oriented ("Acmesoft 3.0 - Upgrade Made Simple") and the second promoting the offer ("Acmesoft 3.0 - Free Upgrade Guide"). The results were startling: the offer-oriented subject line generated almost twice the response as its competitor (13 percent compared to 7 percent), even though it included the word "free".

The second example was a lead generation campaign for a large enterprise software company, testing an HTML version of an email message against a plain text version. The HTML version outperformed its plainer counterpart by more than 60 percent.

Were we to have made our creative decisions based solely on spam scoring, both of these winning campaigns never would have made the cut. The reasons: filters routinely assign high spam scores to emails with 1) "free" in the subject line, and 2) HTML coding. Even though filters probably did weed out a significant number of our emails based on these factors, the benefits of "free" and HTML clearly outweighed the negatives.

It's highly likely that, as filtering software becomes more and more effective, these same tests run a year from now may yield different results. In the meantime, however, we conclude that it's premature to push aside proven direct marketing techniques simply because your email software tells you otherwise.

The Assumptive Close

Those of you who have been subjected to sales training at one point or more in your careers may remember a technique called "the assumptive close". It goes something like this:

> "Would you like the car in red or blue?"
> "Can I deliver that to you this Friday?"

In theory, asking such questions is an effective (if aggressive) method of bypassing the awkward "do you want to buy" question by, in effect, assuming the prospect has already decided to buy, and simply asking him or her to clarify that decision.

I was reminded of this technique upon receiving a sales letter recently from a leading CRM vendor that read as follows (names and other details changed to protect the misguided):

> "To get a complete picture of your company, you need an integrated business application. AcmePro 1.0 is the one. Only AcmePro ..."

In direct marketing copy, there's a fine line between assumptive and presumptuous, and this example crosses that line in leaps and bounds. Unfortunately, the "If X, then you need Y" school of writing crops up often in direct marketing, in part, one supposes, because it's a convenient though lazy way to connect a pain point with a company's product or service.

It's also horribly ineffective. Telling someone that they need your product, no matter what the argument, is a sure way to turn off that reader. No-one, not even the buyer desperate for what your product can offer, wants to be told what he or she needs.

Far better to suggest the reader can learn how to solve a particular pain by responding for more information, without explicitly suggesting you know better than the reader does what he or she needs. For example (putting aside, for the moment, whether the benefit outlined below is particularly compelling):

> "To learn how to get a complete picture of your company, call 1-800-XXX-XXXX for more information on AcmePro 1.0 ..."

or

> "Get a complete picture of your company in just seconds. Call 1-800-XXX-XXXX for more information on AcmePro 1.0 ..."

Remember, it's OK to assume that the reader has the appropriate pain or problem or issue, and wants to solve it. Just don't assume he or she already believes your product is the answer.

Call to Action: Early & Often

If the goal of good direct marketing is to generate a measurable response, you wouldn't know it judging by the way some campaigns bury their call to action.

Perhaps this sounds familiar: cover letters that drone on and on for a page or two about the benefits of the product or the free seminar or whatever, and then just before the close, almost as an afterthought, the writer slips in an 800 number to call.

Remember, the only objective of your direct marketing campaign is to get someone to respond, period. It matters not one whit what someone thinks of your product or service if they don't pick up the phone. Or send in the reply card. Or visit your web site.

So don't be shy about your call to action. Mention it early and often. In a cover letter, we usually mention the offer and the 800 number by the third paragraph if not earlier, and then again before the close, and then again in the P.S.

But surely (you say), it doesn't make sense to give someone an 800 number if you haven't "sold" them yet. Keep in mind, however, that early in your copy, a call to action serves a dual purpose — it tells the reader what you want him to do, but it also gives him a reason to read further.

Otherwise, you're asking someone to wade through an entire letter without any indication why he (or she) should bother.

The Visual Copywriter

Most marketing writers think verbally, placing great emphasis on selecting the right words and then combining them into phrases, sentences and paragraphs. To most, the art director or designer is responsible for making all of those words look pretty.

But design folks can't do the job alone. A good direct marketing writer uses both the verbal and visual parts of his or her brain to create copy that's highly "scannable": text that will communicate important points - key benefits, offer, call to action - even if it's not read completely from beginning to end.

It's a base assumption of any good direct marketing scribe that no reader is going to consume every word of his or her copy in its entirety. This has always been true of direct mail, for example, and why the classic direct mail package is made up of multiple components - letter, lift note, brochure, reply device - so that each piece can stand alone in communicating key selling benefits and a clear call to action.

Online, because readers' attention spans are dramatically shorter, scannable copy becomes even more critical. A quick scan or momentary glance is the most you can expect before the recipient determines whether your message is worth reading.

To give your copy a high degree of "scannability," follow these steps:

- Break up your copy using subheads every few paragraphs or so - this helps readers track through the copy and highlights key selling points
- Create "call-outs,” quotes or excerpts pulled from the main body copy, and run them in the margin or sidebar to help communicate important messages that may otherwise be buried.
- Keep paragraphs short (2-3 sentences at a maximum), to make the copy seem less burdensome to read at first glance
- Use captions for pictures, charts and graphs. Studies show that captions have higher readership than body copy

Art directors can't do their part to make your campaign visually compelling unless they have the tools to do so. Before you send that next draft to the designer, make sure it passes the scannability test.

Tips for Winning Subject Lines

The manner in which your promotional email gets read depends on a multitude of variables, most notably the email client the reader is using, how that software is configured (including use of filters, if any), and the volume of email he or she receives every day.

All that said, here are some of the subject line techniques that, for us, seem to be making a consistent difference in the success of email campaigns:

Use "Free", at least as a test.

Despite being one of the first words spam filters look for, our experience shows that "Free" can often increase response rates. In one recent test for a software client, the subject line using "Free" (*"Free Kit: <benefit statement>*) outperformed the alternative by over 50 percent.

Mention the offer.

You've only got 40 characters or so to work with, so it's critical your subject line contain both 1) a compelling benefit and 2) an offer. One word is sufficient, for example: *"Free Kit: Increase Application Performance by 300%."* The benefit may attract attention, but the offer is what gets the reader to open the email.

Life does not begin at 40.

Email list owners vary in their treatment of longer subject lines. Some will reject your submission and force you to come up with a shorter version; others will abbreviate for you (sadly, sometimes without consulting you first). A few will send out messages with longer subject lines, but then most email clients won't display subjects much longer than 40 characters. Don't take chances. Assume you've got 40 characters, including spaces, and work within that limit.

Be specific.

Every day, email users receive messages promising greater profits, higher income, and so on. Follow their lead, and you'll get lost in the crowd. Instead, make your benefit as specific as possible. For example:

Bad: "Maximize profits in just 3 months! Free Kit"

Better: "Free Kit: Maximize e-commerce profits"

Best: "Free Kit: How Linux boosts e-com profits"

One obvious, but often neglected, method for judging the potential effectiveness of your subject lines is to send yourself a couple of emails using them. Wait a few minutes for your inbox to collect a few more messages, then take a look. Does your subject line look frighteningly like spam? If so, fix it!

Top 5 Tips for Webinar Invitations

Here are 5 tips for increasing response from your next Webinar invitation:

1. Plan ahead.

Sounds simple, but many Webinars fail simply because they're not given the time to succeed. Without sufficient lead time, invitations tend to get developed even as the event itself is still taking shape. The result tends to be generic copy that lacks any specific, compelling reasons for the reader to respond. If you're trying to plan a Webinar program, from scratch, in less than 8 weeks, think hard about your options. With that sort of lead time, there may be more effective ways to generate leads.

2. Sell the event, not the product.

The #1 mistake the companies make in promoting any marketing event - Webinars, seminars, executive breakfasts, user conferences - is that they spend too much time on the product, and not enough on the event. The sole objective of your invitation is to get someone to register, not to convince him or her that your product is the answer to the world's ills.

3. Be specific.

When Webinar programs are rushed (see #1, above), details like a formal agenda tend to fall into place at the last minute, far too late to make it into the invitation. But the more detail you provide, the more credible, and compelling, your event. Without a clear indication of what they'll learn or gain from investing their time, your readers will be asking "where's the meat?"

4. What's in it for me?

People attend marketing events for two types of reasons: 1) business-related: to learn how to save money, increase productivity, leverage IT investments, etc. and 2) personal-related: to improve their knowledge, impress the boss, win a free iPod. An effective invitation instills motivation in both categories.

5. Test, test, test.

OK, as advice, it's not limited to Webinars, but if you don't test every time you market an event, you're wasting money. Even a small lift in response can make your next event that much more successful. Test subject line, offer (free iPod vs. no free iPod), lead time (2 weeks vs. 3 weeks) - the more you know, the more successful you'll be.

One Thing At a Time

The Web has made responding to a direct marketing campaign as easy as clicking a mouse. However, as a marketer, it's also easy to get carried away by the Web's interactive capability and in the process, give your target audience too many options.

For example, click on the average banner ad, and you'll land on a splash page that includes the standard array of links to other sections of the company's Web site ("About Us," "Products," "Support," etc.).

Not only does this invite visitors to explore the site without ever telling that company who they are (or how they got there), but it also causes people to hesitate ("Which link shall I click on next?") — and in direct marketing (as in life), he who hesitates is lost.

This raises a fundamental rule of direct marketing that merits revisiting. The rule is this: Give your reader one offer, and one offer only.

If you ask someone to register for a Webinar but add as a further option "If you can't attend, check this box to receive more information about our product," you may create more leads, but you almost certainly will generate fewer participants at your seminar (reason: prospects will always opt for the path of least commitment). Just as likely, however, you will lose people altogether, because by asking them to decide between one offer and another, you will make them hesitate.

Decide what it is you want your program to achieve and stick to it. Avoid the temptation to maximize your investment by trying to do too many things at once — for example, "come by our booth or call us for more information" or "call to upgrade now or see our Web site for more details."

Direct marketing is all about getting people to act, and to act immediately. Give people a reason to pause, and they will pause long enough to think twice about responding.

When Is a Cover Letter Too Long?

A well-crafted cover letter – or the letter-like portion of an email message – is a key component of many successful B2B campaigns. Besides giving the impression of "one-to-one" communication, the narrative tone afforded by a letter makes it easier to deliver your message in a way that's compelling to the recipient.

We routinely get asked by clients to shorten letters as much as possible. The assumption is that most managers, etc. don't have the time to read a long letter. And who hasn't heard a marketer confidently assert "no one reads long emails"?

Truth is, a successful letter, online or on paper, can be virtually any length. Pick up a book on direct marketing, and you'll find examples of successful campaigns that featured direct mail letters as long as 10 pages! If you're asking the reader to buy product (in an upgrade campaign for example), for example, then your letter or email will naturally be longer, because you need to deliver all the information that person needs to make the purchase decision.

More important than length is to first make your letter enticing, concise, compelling, easy to read, and above all, spur the reader to action. Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind:

1. Keep your paragraphs as short as possible.

Short paragraphs (1-2 sentences only) make the letter look less intimidating, and also make it easier to read. If you have to compress two or three paragraphs into one in order to fit the letter onto one page, don't bother.

2. Use bullets and visual emphasis to highlight key points.

Bullets, underlining (in printed letters), and boldface or color (in emails) all serve to break up the letter in the way described in #1 above. They can highlight your most compelling messages such that if the reader first scans the letter, he or she will be more likely to proceed further. (In direct mail letters, avoid bold type: it makes the letter look more "word-processed" and less personal.)

3. Keep it moving.

Use conjunctions (and, but) at the beginning of sentences and ellipses (...) at the end, to keep the reader moving. Don't allow your letter to bog down in information that's not critical Any length letter will succeed if it's written in a way that's keeps the reader's interest.

When It's OK to Use Bad Grammar

Is it ever acceptable to break rules of grammar in order to communicate your marketing message more effectively?

The agency that created Apple's "Think Different" campaign would seem to think so. Most direct marketing copywriters would agree. At our agency, it's rare that we'll compose a direct mail letter or an email campaign without violating a few basic principles of the English language. Here's a sampling:

Contractions.

Using phrases like "you'll learn" and "you'll receive" may annoy the purist, but they help maintain the flow of the copy since they're less choppy than the alternatives ("you will learn" and "you will receive").

Widows & Orphans.

Here's one rule to ignore completely. Never end a page with a complete paragraph, even it means stranding one line at the top or bottom of a page. By ending with an incomplete thought, you leave the reader "hanging," forcing him or her to proceed to the next page.

But wait, there's more ...

Lines that begin with "and" or "but" create a sure-fire recipe for sentence fragments. But they play a frequent role in direct marketing copy by (a) compelling the reader to proceed to the next thought, and (b) adding emphasis to an important thought or idea.

Of course, bad spelling, punctuation, and mechanics can kill your copy just as easily as poor technique. But strictly adhering to rules of grammar can also cause your copy to flow less smoothly, to lose emphasis where appropriate, and to make the reader hesitate, all of which can lower response.

When to Personalize a Letter

It surprises many new clients when they discover that for most direct mail campaigns, we don't recommend personalizing the cover letter. Instead, we typically choose to use a generic salutation such as "Dear IT Professional."

Truth is, personalizing the letter can increase response, but in direct tests for business-to-business clients, we've shown that the difference in response is often negligible, and usually not enough to offset the additional cost. In other words, a generic letter usually results in a lower cost per lead.

Letters aside, we typically recommend personalizing both the outer envelope and the reply card. A personalized, closed-face envelope raises response as much as 15 percent compared to a window envelope.

Personalizing the reply card increases response by eliminating the need for the respondent to fill in his or her name, address, etc. Plus it's a simple way to assign a keycode to each record (for tracking purposes) by printing it onto the reply card along with the address block.

One exception to this "personalization doesn't pay" rule is when targeting high-level executives (VP and above), particularly at large corporations. Or when you have a finite audience and your priority isn't so much cost per lead but rather gaining the maximum response possible from your target group.

In any situation, personalization is an easy test — simply send half your letters personalized and half "generic," code the reply cards accordingly, and gauge the results for yourself.

Why Not to Target the Decision Maker

Depending on the type of campaign you're planning, keep in mind that the decision-maker isn't always the ideal target audience for your mailer.

If you want the reader to send in $99 for a software upgrade, then absolutely, you should target the person able to make that decision. If you're generating leads for a $25,000 software development tool, however, the person who signs the check (a CIO or an MIS manager) may not be your best choice.

Why? Because the decision-maker isn't always dealing on a day-to-day basis with the problem you're offering to help solve. And if it's not a problem to them, they won't respond, period.

Target your message to the highest level at which the problem is understood. Don't worry about reaching someone who can buy your product "on the spot." Focus on generating qualified leads (a company with the problem or need you can help solve), then let your sales force take it from there.

Beware the Free List

A client came to us recently with an idea for a campaign for which they already had the “perfect” list — the membership file from an engineering organization focused exclusively on the market niche that their product served. Better yet, the list was free. We argued (successfully) that they also test three other lists — all from targeted industry publications — as part of the same campaign.

When the results were in, the membership list had performed the worst of any of the four lists — half the response of the top-performing subscription file.

The moral of this story? The list is the most important ingredient of a successful campaign. Perhaps 50% or more of your success depends on first mailing to the right people. Free lists abound — membership lists, trade show attendees, partner customer lists, free names given as advertising credit, etc.

First, the names aren’t “free” — you’re still likely to spend $2 and up per name (on copy, design, printing, postage, etc.) putting those names in the mail. Evaluate free lists the same way you evaluate any other, by asking: “does this list enable us to target precisely the audience we wish to reach?”

If you use a free list, *always* test it against other files. That way, you’ll have a benchmark to measure against if your campaign doesn't meet expectations.

Spam-free Alternatives to Email

Though email-response rates aren’t what they once were, we maintain email is still a viable medium, particularly for those companies looking to target a very specific demographic and/or a tech-savvy audience. But we've also noticed a growing trend of companies for whom email should be a part of the marketing mix, but who elect to avoid the medium entirely, for reasons having nothing to do with response rates.

These companies typically fall into two categories: 1) those whose legal departments are convinced that, the risks of email to third party lists are just too extreme, and 2) those whose product or service is seen as being at odds with the use of email to reach prospects (examples being companies who market anti-spam or other security solutions).

If email marketing is off the proverbial table at your company, what are the alternatives?

Plainly, direct mail is one, though this may require an attitude adjustment from those colleagues long convinced that actually printing hard copy material is too darned old-fashioned, not to mention expensive. To be sure, cost is an issue with direct mail, but on the other hand, email stalwarts forced to reconsider direct mail may be in for some pleasant surprises, especially when it comes to lists. Direct mail will likely offer many more lists in your category, more names per list, and many more select criteria, meaning you'll likely be able to reach more people and target your audience more precisely, albeit at a higher cost.

A further option, still in the online space, is what has come to be known as "co-branded" email. This type of program has been developed by a growing number of publishers, one suspects, in specific response to advertisers' concerns about compliance with anti-spam laws.

In essence, co-branded email is a broadcast of your message to a third party list, but under the publisher's brand, rather than your own. The format differs from one list owner to the next: with some, the email takes the form of a "newsletter" (for which the advertiser is the sole sponsor); with others, the branding consists of little more than the publisher's logo and header. In all cases, the sender ("from" field) is the publisher, not the advertiser.

Co-branded email enables advertisers to broadcast a targeted message to a custom demographic, but without the perceived risks inherent in sending such a message under their own brand. Look for a growing number of such opportunities in the coming months as response rates from "traditional" email continue to dwindle.

The Value of A/B Splits

Tracking list response is a key part of a successful, long-term direct marketing strategy. But did you know there's a way to learn more than simply which lists perform better than others?

Next time you place a list order, consider splitting individual lists into sub-groups based on criteria such as job function and company size. In direct marketing parlance, this is known as an "A/B Split."

For example, let's say for a given list you've selected job functions ranging from software developers to IT managers and CIOs. Which of these groups will generate the higher response? If they all have the same source code, you'll never know.

When you order the list, specify that you want the file to be split based on the criteria you specify (i.e., developers in Group "A" and management titles in Group "B").

For direct mail, the names can be keycoded accordingly (so your lettershop can identify which records belong to which group). Then assign a unique source code to each group (it's rather like treating one list as if it were actually two). For email campaigns, you'll need to assign a unique URL to each group. In either case, you'll be able to track response rates for each group – separately.

A/B splits are useful for testing the value of job functions, company sizes, industries, purchase authority, and more. It's a good way to evaluate basic assumptions — for example, your manager insists on targeting management titles only. Does that make sense? Here's a way to find out.

A/B splits aren't free — list managers typically charge extra to split the files. But the information you gain can pay for itself many times over.

Why Some Lists Are Better Than Others

Picking the right lists for your direct mail or email campaign is *not* about knowing which publications your target audience reads most frequently. Sometimes in fact, magazines whose editorial focus seems ideally targeted for your market can be far from the perfect mailing list. Here's why:

The first criterion to consider in choosing the right list is how well that list enables you to precisely target your audience. Paid publications, for example, that don't offer any type of "selects" (job title, company size, business type) often aren't the best choice because you'll end up taking simply a random selection of names without any idea of whether the people you're mailing to are CEOs or engineers.

On the other hand, free publications (those with "qualified" subscriber bases) typically offer a wide range of selects. Even if their editorial focus is more general, by using the right selects, you can often target precisely the right audience — for example, MIS Managers running financial applications on Windows servers at companies with more than 1,000 employees.

Don't ignore the editorial focus of a publication. Just treat it as another select, say "Interest Area." An IT Manager who subscribes to Network World, for example, is, in effect, declaring an "interest" in networking technology.

Why There's No Such Thing as a Free List

One consequence of any prolonged downturn in the economy, and of marketing spending in particular, is that publishers and list owners are often dangling free names in an attempt to secure media deals. Scarcely a campaign goes by in such times when a client doesn't have ready access to a free email or direct mail list gleaned from a recent ad buy or some other transaction.

We negotiate these deals as much as anybody, but it's important to recognize that since list strategy is the #1 success factor for any email or direct mail campaign, a free list may not in fact be the best choice for your next program. Nor should the availability of such a list drive campaign strategy.

Even though a free email list will slice a much larger chunk out of your total campaign cost than is the case for direct mail, such a campaign is rarely if ever completely free. There's still the price of creative (even if it's just the cost of your time), plus the time and expense to coordinate, manage, and track the broadcast. Response to different email lists varies widely, and so even if another list costs as much as 50 cents a name or more, it could well end up proving to be the better alternative.

Secondly, don't let a free list drive your entire campaign strategy. Selecting the ideal audience, offer, product focus and message for your next program should be a considered decision based on past performance and other metrics, not which list owner was handing out the most free names.

Lastly, test. Don't make the mistake of mailing or broadcasting exclusively to one list because it was free. We've had many occasions over the years when free lists that the client felt were "ideal" (especially customer lists from partners) turned out to be duds. Even if a certain list feels like a good match for your audience, always test at least one and preferably two other list sources at the same time. Without that benchmark, particularly if the campaign doesn't perform up to expectations, you'll never know how much those results were due to the list or other factors.

About FrontRange Solutions

Headquartered in Pleasanton, California (USA), FrontRange Solutions is a global market leader in the development and delivery of software applications tailored for the mid-market. Best known for its HEAT Service Desk and GoldMine® CRM applications, FrontRange is also the developer of IT Service Management and Infrastructure Management solutions, enabling companies to unify their external and internal customer support businesses.

GoldMine's marketing automation functionality increases revenue by targeting the right prospects for each marketing campaign. To help achieve a greater return on your marketing dollars, GoldMine Enterprise Edition allows you to track marketing activities, costs and ownership for each campaign, and unlike other CRM products it also permits marketing managers to create test campaigns before launching full-scale ones. Immediately after campaign launch, campaign managers and sales agents can use powerful tools to help qualify, maintain, and analyze the lead process.

Marketing Automation is just one part of the GoldMine Solution. Other functionality includes:

- Relationship Management
- Sales Force Automation
- Quoting
- Customer Support

For more information on GoldMine or other FrontRange solutions, contact us by phone or online.

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