

Raising response rates in shared mailings

Shared mailings have always had the reputation of delivering lower response rates than solo mailings. Our own studies using materials created for companies within the Hamilton House group have (with one interesting exception) confirmed this as true.

Finding that no one else had done any research in this area we initiated a long term study in 1999 to discover why shared mailings regularly resulted in fewer sales than solo mailings.

We found three reasons as to why shared mailings get lower response rates than solo mailings. Below are the details of our findings and after each the details of our response. Overall the result is a completely new approach to shared mailings which aims to raise response rates considerably..

The reasons why shared mailings get lower response rates than solo mailings

1. The approach of school administrators.

Most school administrators pass on all the mail that arrives at the school addressed to teachers by title. However some of these administrators do not pass on leaflets that arrive in shared mailing packs - simply because the task of handing out ten or fifteen leaflets is too daunting.

We have sought to overcome this by making the pack much more interesting for the administrator by providing a School Admin Newsletter as the front item of each pack. This does not ensure that everything is passed on, but we certainly think it has a significant effect in getting each item to the right teacher. After five years of publication the newsletter has become a part of the life of the administrator and the publishing body (The School of Educational Administration) is seen as a major force in improving the working life of administration staff.

2. The psychology of non-addressed items

There is no doubt that all of us pay far more heed to items that are in an envelope sent through the post than items that appear with neither envelope nor full address label.

Somehow we all have a feeling that a piece of paper has less validity than a piece of paper in an envelope with our address on it. We can see this with mail that is sent to consumers via the door to door delivery. Response rates are much lower than for direct mail that comes in an envelope with our details on it.

To resolve this problem we looked first at putting shared mailing items in their own inner envelopes addressed to the teacher by title. However although this does indeed up the response rate, it still does not completely overcome the problem. We wondered whether this might be because such inner envelopes only carry the generic title of the teacher (eg The Head of Maths) – not the name of the teacher - but research comparing response rates of solo mail addressed by generic title and shared mail in its own inner envelope showed that this was not the prime problem. The key issue seemed to be the lack of the full address and postal mark.

The solution to this problem was discussed in 2001 when we spent a considerable amount of time talking to administrators about what happens to direct mail in schools and offices. What we noticed and what the administrators confirmed is that although individual pieces of paper sent as direct mail were usually very quickly disposed of by teachers, brochures tended to stay on the desk, or be passed on to other teachers. The brochure and the flyer got very different treatment.

To put this into an office context, you may be familiar with the Dell computer brochures – in many companies these are kept, ready for the next time the firm wants to buy. People can be heard saying to each other, “have you got a Dell brochure?” when they want to look up prices for computers and computer peripherals. The same is true with office equipment and many other products. There might be a complete catalogue up on the shelf, but what people refer to most of all is the regularly updated brochure.

In other words we find that the flyer is thought to be relevant only for that day - if you don't want the product now, it is not worth keeping. The brochure is considered relevant and tending to be up to date. The catalogue however is seen as more liable to be out-of-date and also too cumbersome to use.

Thus the brochure – usually measuring 8 to 16 sides of print – seems to have some advantages. Not only is it perceived as more relevant and more up to date, it is also something that teachers, like many professionals, will pass on to each other.

Until August 2006 putting the brochure in a shared mailing was an expensive business – the weight charges saw to that – but from the moment the new postal regime is initiated the price of the brochure declines greatly. An A4 brochure made up to two sheets of A3 folded in half will probably weigh around 20 to 25g – and can be sent in a shared mailing for as little as 10p per school.

3. The covering letter

In the classic approach to direct mail there are two items - the brochure or catalogue, and the covering letter. The covering letter has the job of grabbing and holding the reader's attention, getting past the five second barrier. If the recipient is still reading after five seconds, there is every chance that he/she will move on to study what you have on offer.

The job of the covering letter is not to sell, but to grab hold of the reader and make sure the reader does not wander away.

This is a vital function, because brochures and catalogues can have a lot of offers in them, and there is always a temptation for the reader simply to flip through the pages, the eyes glazing over at the wealth of options, without ever seeing why a product should be purchased.

The problem in shared mailing however is that normally there is no covering letter - just one item. Although it is possible to put a second item in, the two items cannot be used so that one introduces the other, because there is no guarantee they will be kept together as the administrator processes the mail.

Which means most shared mailing offers had no opportunity to grab the reader and hold on - instead there is one piece of paper, and in we go with the offer. There is no subtle approach here - merely an announcement that we have this for sale, please buy it.

The exception

Although these three factors were all undoubtedly true, we found exceptions - two approaches to shared mailing where we could get results that approached those of a solo mailing.

This unexpected result occurred with two types of leaflets. Firstly there were leaflets that advertised five or more items. We noted this effect on two sided A4 leaflets advertising five or six books. It was replicated on A3 pages folded to A4 to make four page booklets.

The obvious explanation is that the piece - even when it was just one sheet of A4 - was complex enough to be treated as a brochure.

The second exception was found with simple leaflets that packed the punch of the best solo mailing cover letters. These were rare - and indeed as we found, hard to write - not least because one was attempting to combine two functions in one item - the grabbing of attention and the effecting of the sale. It was tough, but on occasion it could be done.

The conclusion

Our conclusion was that we ought to be able to increase shared mailing response rates dramatically if three things happened.

- First we needed to grab the administrator's attention with a lively and interesting Admin Newsletter. Tough to achieve with secondary schools getting two or three mailings a week - but possible.
- Second, the mailshot needed to have the power and punch that the very best covering letters produce.
- Third the mailshot has to have the style or approach of a brochure.

Two out of three helps the response rate. Three out of three normally does take the response rate right up.

The ideal solution

We felt the solution had to be the 8 page brochure in a shared mailing with a cover page that encouraged the administrator to work with us, rather than against us. There are copies of a few recent cover pages on www.schoolsare.us Copies of all the newsletters for the last couple of years appear on the School of Educational Administration web site www.admin.org.uk

As to the brochure, we recognised that having 8 pages to play with can be quite a challenge for anyone who previously felt him/herself restricted to one or two sides. What does one put in it? Here is our suggestion...

Page 1 (front cover). The attention grabbing sales piece with the dramatic headline - the equivalent of the covering letter. It doesn't have to be in letter form but it does need the dramatic headline.. The best sales letter grab attention by using one of the five ways of creating direct mail (selling on price, selling through benefits, selling by asking an interesting question, selling via humour and selling through emotion). That is the role of the front page - the set out the terms of this brochure in a way that does not let the teacher

get away.

Of course you still need the “Attention Head of Maths” top right, and you can include your logo and address top left, but then one third of the way down the page, in big print, you go on the attack. You don't have to sign off with your name - but you can if you want to direct calls back to you. It doesn't have to be a letter, but it can work that way.

Pages 2 to 7. Six pages to sell your products. Ideally one product a page – but if you prefer it can be two a page. These are pages of description and features. You have grabbed attention - now you have to sell.

Page 8 (back cover). Comments from teachers who have already purchased, plus your order form.

There are endless variations - and as we have noted above a single sheet of A4 written in a particular way can work very well - but certainly the brochure approach now looks particularly attractive given the opportunity to mail items up to 25g for just 10p per school.