

Writing a mailshot

Most businesses send out mailshots several times a year, whether they are large-scale mailings or batches of individualised letters to a dozen key customers at a time. If the targeting and the offer are right, you get a positive response. If you get them wrong, it is junk mail and you have wasted your time and money.

You need a good list, a proven product and a strong offer, embodied in a compelling mail pack. But writing a successful mailshot need not be difficult, if you set about it the right way.

This briefing focuses on writing a traditional mailshot, to be printed and sent out by post. It covers:

- Knowing what you are trying to achieve.
- Getting the content right.
- Essential tips on form and style.
- The keys to maximise your response.

1 Plan your approach

1.1 Know what **objectives** you want the mailshot to achieve.

- You may want it to sell a product or to generate sales leads.
- You may want to launch a new product or service or break into new markets.
- You may be test marketing, to try out new products, packaging or campaign ideas.
- You may want to enhance your service to existing customers by giving them up-to-date information.

1.2 Identify your **readers**, so you know what sort of approach is likely to work best.

- What prior knowledge do they have about your product?
- Why do they need what you are offering?
- What do they want to hear about your product?
- What are their likely objections?

1.3 Choose the right **format**. Mail, fax and email give you three distinct options. Each of them needs to be written in a different way.

- Most mailings will consist of a pack of several items that is posted second class, or first class if the timing is important.
- Fax costs money to receive. It will only be welcomed by people who are keen to hear what you have to say. Fax mailshots need powerful content and should not go beyond a single page.

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- Email is instant and almost free. HTML messages allow you to use graphics, logos and pictures to make your email messages more interesting. Consider inserting embedded links to take readers directly to your website or online shop. Copy for email mailshots needs to be brief, factual and emphatic.

Do not mail, fax or email anyone who has not already expressed a desire to hear from you.

12 ways to maximise response

- 1 Write a straightforward headline, featuring your main benefit, to start the reader off on the right track.
- 2 You have only seconds to make an impact. Get to the point immediately and avoid waffle in your opening sentence.
- 3 Explain your offer. Make sure the big benefits in the first paragraph.
- 4 Show how your product solves the customer's problem.
- 5 Be clear. Be simple. Be convincing.
- 6 Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- 7 Focus on the reader and the reader's needs. When you are writing, talk to the reader directly, as 'you'.
- 8 Use the tried and tested attention-getting words — bargain, big, bright, easy, first, free, improved, love, money, new, now, offer, safe, save, want, and, above all, you.
- 9 Avoid sounding self-important in the hope of sounding serious.
- 10 By ending a paragraph with a question, or ending a page in mid-sentence, you can tap into the cliffhanger effect and attract readers to read on.
- 11 Check through what you have written. Then ask someone who does not know the product to check through it again.
- 12 Read everything out loud. If it sounds strange or forced, it is — and you need to modify it.

2 Making a start

2.1 The first step is to write yourself a **brief**.

- The brief should be detailed and specific — who, what, when, where, why?
- Consider the needs of different audiences and different market sectors. You should plan to write separate versions of the letter for different groups in your mailing list.

2.2 Identify **one major benefit** for the customer and lead with that. Other reasons can come later, but start by backing your most likely winner.

- Forget trying to be clever. You do not need a smart idea. Finding a simple, powerful way to say what your product or service does for people will usually be the best approach.
- If your product is truly unique or exclusive, say so.

2.3 Work out how to get the reader's **attention**.

- Offer a tangible and quickly-realised benefit for an obviously reasonable price.
- Other approaches include highlighting unusual product features, emphasising low prices, launching special offers and competitions and using startling headlines.
- Send a free product sample, if you can.
- Include a small gift, a voucher or a cheap, unexpected gimmick. Good gimmickry wins attention, even from serious corporate customers.

2.4 Find **something new** to say, even if it is an old product.

- Brainstorm ideas. For example, think about new or unexpected uses or unlikely substitutes for it.
- Look at it again as if you had never seen it before.

2.5 Be aware of **topical links** to outside events and your other marketing activities. For example, exhibitions and trade or consumer advertising.

- Plan your copy to exploit seasonal factors and any known buying patterns.

2.6 **Try out** your ideas on other people.

- Ask others, especially customers, to read your draft copy and tell you what the words mean to them.

➔ If you keep contact data for mailings or email mailshots, you must comply with the Data Protection Act.

3 Making it convincing

3.1 Make your **offer** sound credible.

- Be direct, enthusiastic and honest. Do not write anything that is untrue.
- Explain all the good reasons for buying.
- Anticipate objections and counter them.
- Make all the facts and figures you quote accurate and specific.

3.2 Use **language** your potential customers will feel comfortable with.

- Tailor your wording to your audience — natural and relaxed for consumer mailings, more purposeful for business mailshots.
- Match your tone to your company's image and your industry.

3.3 Offer plausible **trade-offs**.

- 'Buy three, get one free' is attractive. Buyers can see you are trading off price against volume.
- 'Member-get-member' incentives appeal to people's taste for a deal.

Ten most common mistakes

- 1 You write the right mailshot, then send it to the wrong people.
- 2 You hedge your bets and fail to give customers one overriding reason to buy.
- 3 Your copy forgets to deal with the most obvious objection to a sale.
- 4 You fall for a witty headline that does not sell your product.
- 5 The copy makes exaggerated claims that customers do not believe.
- 6 The brief is vague, so you get vague copy that does not know who it is selling to.
- 7 Your letter annoys people by failing to explain the product clearly.
- 8 You turn people off by making them feel patronised.
- 9 Customers misunderstand your offer, are disappointed, and leave you bearing the costs of a lot of returns and refunds.
- 10 Your excellent mail pack fails to make up for a product selling at the wrong price.

3.4 Exploit **third-party material** that backs up your claims.

- Testimonials will always boost your success rate, especially a copy of an original letter.
- Reprints of press cuttings give credibility.
- Quote scientific studies that support your arguments, or else refer to the popularity established by previous sales ('A million housewives every day...' or 'Already Britain's Number One scanner').

3.5 Spell out the terms of your **guarantee**.

- This is especially important if you are targeting new customers.

4 The letter

4.1 Make the letter as **long** as it needs to be to say what you need to say.

- It is a marketing maxim that long copy outpulls short, as long as it is relevant. Research and response levels both show that even the busiest people will read on, if they get a whiff of a worthwhile benefit.

4.2 Use the **formats** that are successful for other people's direct mail.

- Formatting devices — italics, bold, underlining, indenting and subheadings — can break up slabs of text. But beware of making your letter look messy.
- The letter should look like a letter, rather than a piece of print.
- Letters should be signed. You can do it by hand, with a stamp or by laser printer.

4.3 Finish on a **call to action**.

- The letter itself, the leaflet and the order form should each end with an exhortation to act: 'To do this, do this now.'

4.4 The **PS** is vital.

- Restate your main point. Your PS will often be your most-read sentence.

4.5 When you have finished, **proof read** everything you have written.

- Spelling mistakes and glaring errors of grammar will distract from your message.

5 Making the pack work

5.1 Make the writing and design work together.

- A multi-piece mail pack should be planned as a whole, with one theme. This includes factors like the phrasing of the order form.

5.2 Personalise wherever possible, by using the recipient's name.

- Apart from the letter and envelope, you may be able to pre-print names on reply cards and order forms.
- For small mailings, make a virtue out of necessity and write names by hand.

5.3 Including several enclosures increases your response rate.

- You can enclose leaflets, price lists, case study sheets, photographs, testimonials, newspaper cuttings and order forms.
- A pack with several pieces gives you several chances to put your offer across and get the reader hooked.

5.4 Encourage immediate buying decisions.

- Offering a free gift with all orders by a certain closing date is a reliable way of boosting response.
- Be aware that business customers and government departments may disregard any offer that comes with a free gift. Contact the Copy Advice Service (020 7492 2100 or visit www.cap.org.uk) to check the rules affecting free gifts and special offers.

5.5 Make it easy to reply and find out more.

- Use a coupon with a Freepost address, or include a Business Reply envelope or reply-paid card. Call Royal Mail on 08457 950950 or visit www.royalmail.com for further information.
- Always give a telephone contact point to encourage spontaneous enquiries.
- Include your email and website addresses.

5.6 Provide an order form that is as large and attractive as possible.

- Repeat your main points, so the form can still clinch sales, even if it gets separated from the pack.
- Make the instructions clear and legible.
- Provide a faxback order form to encourage people to buy instantly by credit card.

- If possible, print the prospect's name and address on the form. This removes another barrier to response and guarantees you a complete, readable address to work with.

5.7 Offer as many payment methods as possible.

- Consider giving interest-free credit for orders placed before a fixed deadline.
- Offer existing customers their normal credit terms.

5.8 Make the most of the envelope.

- Use a short message — printed or franked — to build interest in the offer inside. You should usually repeat or build on this message as the headline for your letter.
- Handwritten envelopes are always opened. If you are a small firm, mailing a small consumer list, consider writing envelopes by hand and using stamps instead of the franking machine.

6 Using professionals

6.1 Should you go to an agency?

- Agency fees will usually be prohibitive, unless you are planning to move towards large-scale mailings.

6.2 Write the copy yourself or invest in a freelance copywriter.

- If you have a good knowledge of your product and the sort of people who buy, you can probably do it yourself.
- Do a test mailing to a small proportion of your audience to find out quickly and cheaply if you can afford to take the DIY approach. If the reaction is nil or negative, take the hint and get help from a professional.
- A good freelance should be able to work with you to write a well-thought-out letter and copy for your order forms and price lists for a few hundred pounds. Even top direct mail specialists can often be brought in for less than £1,000 for a small job.

Your local Business Link may be a useful source of independent advice (0845 600 9 006 or visit www.businesslink.gov.uk).

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