PRINtips

Direct Mail Design...
The Roles of Form & Function

"Design is a balance between form and function; it takes two."

-- seesaw

If you are like most of our customers, you have a lot of questions about designing an effective direct mail marketing piece. Should you use a post card, a self-mailer, or an envelope? Use lots of copy or lots of white space? Announce who the mail is from or build the reader's curiosity? With so many variables to consider, where does one begin to seek the right answers?
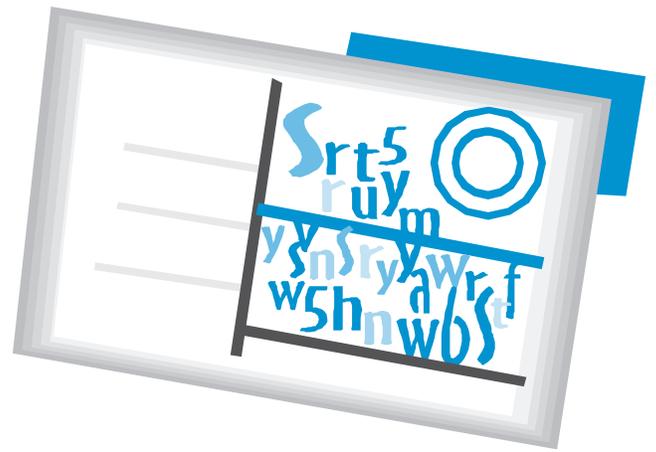
To help sort through the maze of interlocking decisions, remember that there are two ways to judge how well a direct mail piece has been designed. One set of standards comes from the discipline of good graphic design; the other comes from what makes mail move efficiently through the mail stream. We believe both are important, and that a good strategy is to thoroughly understand each set.

Form: USPS Mail Piece Design

When the USPS refers to mail piece design, it is talking about how to design a mail piece for improved delivery service and for postage discounts. It is not referring to how the copy and graphic elements are arranged on the mail piece. The USPS design standards, which also include how the address is printed on the mail piece, set minimums and maximums for size, shape, thickness, and weight of the mail piece. If the mail piece adheres to these standards, it can be handled routinely and efficiently by the USPS, increasing the likelihood of on-time delivery and earning a postage discount.

The best postage discounts are given for mail that can be sorted using a Multiline Optical Character Reader (MLOCR), a USPS mail sorting machine for letter mail that interprets machine-printed addresses, prints a POSTNET barcode in the lower right corner of the mail piece, and performs an initial sort. MLOCRs read, barcode, and sort mail at the rate of 10 pieces per second.

To read the delivery address, the MLOCR must first be able to find it. For this reason, the USPS has established an OCR read area on the front of the mail piece. After finding the address, the MLOCR must be able to see all address elements clearly. This is why the print quality of the address is important and why the USPS specifies dark ink on a light background.

To interpret the address, the MLOCR must separate the information by characters, words, and lines; thus, the importance of proper spacing between characters and lines. After reading the address, the MLOCR searches its files for the same address. When found, the MLOCR prints the delivery point barcode assigned to the address in the lower right hand corner of the mail piece. From this point forward, all sorting is done by reading the barcode rather than the printed address.

Letter mail processed by USPS automated equipment moves at very high speeds using belts and rollers to the various pieces of scanning and sorting equipment. Although the equipment can handle a variety of letter sizes, the basic shape must be rectangular, have a height of between 3 1/2 and 6 1/8 inches, a length of between 5 and 11 1/2 inches, and be between 0.007 and 1/4 inch thick.

The USPS also has recommendations for types of paper that are compatible with its equipment. For example, the thickness, stiffness, and tear strength are the most important characteristics for cards. Paper with background patterns or dark fibers, and fluorescent papers that may confuse the scanners or sorters, are not recommended. Similarly, textured

paper is not recommended if the texture may cause broken characters or smudging when the barcode is sprayed on the mail piece.

Function: Graphic Design of a Mail Piece

The challenge for a graphic designer working on a direct mail piece is to attract attention and get the message across, and to do so while cooperating with USPS design standards. This is best accomplished by ignoring individual design elements such as the copy, the headlines, the graphics or photographs, and the color, and instead concentrating on the geometric shapes represented by these elements.

A well-designed mail piece directs the reader's eyes so that the entire message is read in a particular order. When examining a mail piece, your reader will typically start in the upper left corner, move to the right, move to the lower left corner, then move right again – as if inscribing a letter "Z". The eye also moves from dark to light, from large to small, and from bright to muted. Your reader will always see things that are out of place or unusual – a red dot amidst a line of blue dots; a rectangle amidst circles; or a line surrounding a block of type.

Above all, aim to keep copy (text) and graphic elements in balance. Words can lose their impact when overpowered by graphics that are too big or too numerous. A good rule of thumb is to use one dominant central graphic that illustrates or illuminates the point of the copy. If you have a product shot, you can crop the photo or remove the background to better highlight the product itself. If you would like to remove the background from a photo but don't know how, give us a call and we'll do it for you.

Use white space to set ideas off, focus attention, or inject drama. White space separates one idea from another and makes whatever it surrounds seem very important. Imagine a single word in the middle of a sheet of paper, totally surrounded by white space. Eye-catching? Certainly. Dramatic? Positively. Likely to be read? Absolutely!

Blending Form and Function

When designing your direct mail piece, keep the USPS dimension standards in mind. Of course it is all right to violate these standards, just as long as you understand the impact it will have on postage costs and delivery times. In fact, there may be times when you specifically want to send a square envelope to attract attention.

Also remember to allow for the USPS OCR read area. We have seen more than one excellent design compromised when insufficient room was allowed for the mail panel and the address elements or a tab intruded into the design of the mail piece.

If you are not completely sure of the USPS dimension, weight, and thickness standards, or the requirements for the OCR read area, please contact us. We will be happy to explain the standards and check your mail panel for compliance.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

Aspect ratio: the dimension of a mail piece expressed as the ratio of the height to the length. Used to determine whether a mail piece fits the definition of rectangular.

Buck slip: a single sheet of paper inserted in a direct mail piece and used to deliver another offer within the package.

Delivery point barcode: A ZIP+4 barcode containing two additional digits that designate a specific delivery point.

Indicia: plural of indicium. The imprinted designation on a mail piece indicating method of postage payment and class of mail.

Lift letter or lift note: a folded sheet used as the "last chance" to deliver the message. Often written by a person other than the main writer of the letter.

Multiline Optical Character Reader (MLOCR): a machine used by the USPS to scan machine-printed address information on letter mail, determine the corresponding ZIP+4 and delivery point code information, convert the information into a POSTNET barcode, and print the barcode on the mail piece.

OCR read area: The space on a mail piece reserved for machine-printed address elements. Defined by height, width, and distance from the right and bottom of the mail piece.

Optical character reader: a computer-controlled piece of equipment that locates, reads, and interprets address information contained in the OCR read area; sprays on a barcode, and sorts the mail into a stacker.

POSTNET: an acronym for POSTal Numeric Encoding Technique. The barcode used to encode ZIP code information on letter and flat mail.

ZIP+4: a nine-digit numeric code consisting of the five-digit ZIP code, a hyphen and four additional digits. The first five digits identify the delivery post office, while the four-digit add-on identifies a specific delivery segment such as city block, floor of a building, department within a company, or a group of post office boxes.

THE idea CORNER

Oversized Post Cards

There are several benefits to using a small post card (measuring no more than 4 1/4 x 6 inches) to take advantage of the reduced USPS first class postage rate for cards. But we'd like to suggest that you try going in the other direction – an oversized post card.

The USPS standard for letter mail is a maximum height of 6 1/8 inches and a maximum width of 11 1/2 inches. This means you can construct an oversized post card in those dimensions and still mail at the letter rate. This is particularly useful for direct mail marketing since there is a lot of space available for design and graphics. An oversized post card will also protrude out in the stack of mail handed to your customer or prospect by the mailman.

Do remember that you will have to use a stock with a higher base weight to satisfy the USPS standards for thickness, stiffness, and tear strength.

Good Design Tips

Next time you find yourself staring blankly at the mail piece you are trying to design, try this technique:

1. Imagine the blocks of text, the headlines, the graphics, and the photographs as geometric shapes – squares, circles, rectangles, even a triangle.
2. Cut the shapes out of a piece of paper and arrange them on another piece of paper cut to the size of the mail piece.
3. Look to see what stands out and what gets lost.
4. Rearrange the shapes or change their size until you achieve the emphasis you are seeking.
5. Experiment with color blocks, screens, and accent color.
6. When you have a pleasing design, outline the geometric shapes, and set type to fit in the spaces.

Some say the ultimate test of a good design is how it looks when you squint your eyes and can't see the words clearly. This "word of wisdom" reflects the importance of geometry to good design.

Q. *What are the most frequently used formats for direct mail?*

A. There are four: post cards (single and double); self-mailers; booklets and catalogs; and the traditional direct mail package.

Post cards are a good choice when the message you want to deliver can be presented clearly and completed in limited space. Common uses include announcing a special event (a sale or a trade show) or driving traffic to a web site. Another advantage of post cards is that they don't have to be opened to deliver their message.

Self-mailers are larger and more elaborate than post cards. They use a single sheet of paper folded to a letter size. The folds create panels that can be used alone or in combination to deliver the message. Although some people believe that self-mailers do not produce as good a response rate as an envelope mailing, the lower cost of production makes this a viable option.

Booklets and catalogs are used primarily to sell products or impart information. This is potentially the least space-restrictive of all direct mail formats. Booklets and catalogs are usually mailed as flats rather than as letter mail and therefore incur an extra postage charge for size.

The traditional direct mail package consists of an envelope, a letter (single or multiple-page), a brochure, an order form and reply device, and perhaps some extra inserts (lift letter, sticker, buck slip). Although this form of direct mail costs the most to produce, it does provoke response. Fundraising appeals and membership campaigns often use a direct mail package.

questions and answers