Content is King...
Engage Your Customers

"Traditional marketing talks at people.

Content marketing talks with them."

~ Doug Kessler

Amid the ongoing debate about whether direct mail or e-mail or social media is the best method to market to customers and prospects, very little is being said about the one thing that is crucial to the success of each – the message. Unless the message is relevant to the audience and persuasively presented, it doesn't matter how it is delivered. So while the discussion about the delivery method continues, focus on developing good content and honing your writing skills.

Why Market with Mail?

The objective of direct marketing is to persuade a customer or prospect to take action, either now or later. When a seller consistently and regularly sends a communication such as a post card or a newsletter (either mailed or web-based), a buyer is more likely at a future time to take the action desired by the seller. In other words, marketing is less about an immediate sale than about positioning the business or organization to be top-of-mind when the potential buyer is ready to make a purchase.

This is important in business-to-business selling where the sell cycle is often long (especially when compared to business-to-consumer), and it is hard to stimulate demand. Direct mail is also important during an economic downturn when either budgetary constraints or the unwillingness of the purchaser to spend money creates a long sell cycle for both businesses and consumers.

Good Content Gives Potential Buyers What They Want

Direct mail marketers and advertisers work hard to determine what type of content motivates buyers. Research consistently uncovers four characteristics of content that score highly in buyer interest. The best content is:

- useful or entertaining.
- relevant to the buyer's interests.
- timely.
- unique to the seller, either in content or presentation.

These four characteristics apply not only to traditional direct mail, but also to opt-in e-mail subscriptions and social media. If a reader signs up for your e-newsletter or follows you on social media, the motivation isn't to do you a favor – it is because the content of the newsletter or email or site has perceived value.

For most businesses and organizations, the purpose of communicating with potential buyers is to generate new business, encourage repeat business, and promote customer loyalty. Accomplishing these goals can be done with content that:

- describes a new product or service.
- explains a new way to use an existing product or service.
- provides a case study describing a problem and how a product or service provides the solution.
- gives testimonials from satisfied customers.

Regardless of the specific content, there is one important question that all sales-related communication must answer. The question is from the perspective of the potential buyer, and is:

What's in it for me?

The benefit to the buyer must be apparent in whatever you are presenting, so be explicit. Use introductory phrases like *what this means for you is* or *this translates to* or *the results are,* then provide objective evidence to support your benefit statement.

Is Your Content Worth Reading?

If you are in the early stages of implementing a newsletter or other periodic communication with your customers or prospects, you may find yourself focusing on developing the mail list, gathering information about your company, and deciding on a layout. We agree that these are important; we also suggest that you also focus on developing content.

To do this, put yourself in the mind of your target audience. Develop a list of general topics to include on a regular basis, and think about where you can go to get good content. Are there credible sources within your company or organization who could be regular contributors? Can you subscribe to industry magazines as a source of research and statistics?

Here is a list of ideas for regular features of your newsletter:

- A column written by an industry expert (perhaps a key individual in your organization).
- Q&A column covering frequently-asked questions (FAQs) or questions submitted by readers.
- Tips and tricks on how to use a product or service, generated either by your staff or by readers.
- Focus on the industry – a synopsis of industry developments, trends, statistics, news, and upcoming events.
- "Top" lists – top ten companies, top six reasons, etc.

No matter what topics you decide to use as content, be sure you engage the reader by making the content interesting and relevant. The more information you provide, especially information that readers perceive as being educational, the more interesting the content will become and the less overt your sales message will be.

Emphasize Good Writing

Interesting, relevant, and timely content will have even more impact if well written. Good writing begins with the most important message, is organized logically, and is written in language that is easy to understand. In general, this means avoiding complicated sentence structure and keeping jargon to a minimum.

You'll also need to be a perfectionist when it comes to spelling and to following generally-accepted rules for grammar and punctuation. If there are several contributing writers in your company, consider developing a style guide that provides everyone with the same set of rules for grammar and punctuation. You also might want to appoint an editor who is responsible for proofreading and editing articles to be sure they have consistent style.

Your aim as a writer is to use language so it serves as a structural basis for your message, but is otherwise invisible. Readers are fickle and easily distracted; spelling mistakes, inconsistent punctuation and capitalization, overly complicated sentence structure, and similar writing flaws will mean that the audience pays more attention to *how* you write rather than *what* you write. It's like noticing the mechanics of how something was constructed rather than enjoying the finished product.

Use Design to Stand Apart

Once you have developed sources of good content and a communication style sheet, you are ready to make your direct mail or e-mail marketing piece stand apart from the competition by using innovative design. By consistently using standard design elements like a color palette, an underlying grid structure, and eye-catching graphics, you can create a unique look that will be easily recognized by your customers and prospects. In addition, good design will guide the reader through the content and increase comprehension.

Do remember that designing for print and designing for the web are different. Not only is the color space different (RGB versus CMYK), but fonts behave differently on a computer screen and photo resolution requirements differ.

Tap Into Our Expertise

As you can tell from the fact that we send you this monthly newsletter, we believe in the effectiveness of direct mail as a part of any marketing plan. We see e-mail and social media as a logical extension of direct mail marketing and offer you our expertise to design, print, publish, and distribute your marketing communication pieces. Call for an appointment, and we'll show you how easy direct marketing can be.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

Active voice: a sentence construction in which the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the sentence.

CAN-SPAM: an acronym for *Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing Act.* Legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in December 2003. Establishes the first national standards for sending commercial e-mail.

CMYK: the four process ink colors – cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. The CMYK color system is used for printing, but is not used in HTML.

Organic search results: listings on search engine results pages that appear because of their relevance to the search terms, as opposed to being paid advertisements (pay-per-click).

PPC: an acronym for *pay-per-click,* a bid-based advertising method made popular by Google and Yahoo!

Passive voice: a sentence construction that uses the object of an action as the subject of the sentence. In other words, whoever or whatever is performing the action is not the grammatical subject of the sentence.

RGB: red, green, and blue, the color model used for television sets, computer screens, mobile phone displays, and other digital output devices.

SEM: an acronym for *search engine marketing,* the activities associated with positioning a web site to maximize its exposure. SEM techniques include search engine optimization and pay-per-click advertising.

SEO: an acronym for *search engine optimization,* the process of promoting a web site's ranking in the search results of a search engine.

Style guide: a set of standards governing the writing and design of documents. Implementing a style guide promotes uniformity of style and formatting. Also known as a *style manual* or a *house style* (if developed for a specific organization).

Swipe file: a collection of sales, marketing, and advertising material known to be effective or of interest. Used by writers to generate ideas.

Target audience: A specified audience or demographic group for which an advertising message is designed.

THE idea CORNER

A Swipe File

A very useful tool for any writer is a swipe file, a place to collect examples of effective writing. A swipe file can contain anything you want – headlines, introductory paragraphs, body copy, guarantees, interesting phrases or slogans, display ads, direct mail marketing pieces, e-mail messages, graphics, photos – anything that might serve as a future idea starter. It is a good idea to organize your swipe file into subsections to make searching for ideas easier and to base it on hard copies rather than digital files.

Look for material for your swipe file in anything you come across that is sales-related. Instead of tossing direct mail marketing pieces unopened, take a look and see if there's anything suitable for your swipe file; likewise for e-mail advertising and social media messages. The more you view and collect, the more useful your swipe file will become.

Do keep in mind that the purpose of a swipe file is to generate ideas, not to plagiarize. Your goal is to adapt the information in your swipe file to your own needs, not to copy it outright.

Writing to Inform

Novice writers sometimes fall into the trap of writing to impress rather than to inform. It is easy to spot this style of writing, as it is full of verbs used as nouns, nouns used as verbs, multiple words when one simple word will do, and passive voice. Here are some examples:

- Verb used as noun:
  - o The *Day at the Races* program is an affordable way to *fundraise.*
  - o In the illustration, we have *dollarized* the value of the inventory.
- Noun used as verb:
  - o The swimmer *medaled* in his race.
  - o Jack and Jill *parented* the visiting children.
- Multiple words used when one is sufficient:
  - o I will *make reference to* this situation.
  - o If I can *be of assistance,* please contact me.
- Passive voice:
  - o *The story was told* repeatedly by *Robert.*
  - o *Photos were contributed* by all the *participants.*

Good editing will eliminate these bad habits.
- When the sentence calls for a noun, use one:
  - o The *Day at the Races* program is an affordable way to *raise funds.*
  - o In the illustration, we have *assigned a dollar value* to the inventory.
- When the sentence calls for a verb, use one:
  - o The swimmer *won a medal* in his race.
  - o Jack and Jill *acted as parents* to the visiting children.
- Simplify to a single word whenever possible:
  - o I will *refer* to this situation.
  - o If I can *assist,* please contact me.
- As a rule, use active voice:
  - o Robert repeatedly told the story.
  - o All the participants contributed photos.

Q. *I have a small business. If I start sending e-mail messages to prospects, will I need to worry about CAN-SPAM?*

A. The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 covers e-mail whose primary purpose is advertising or promoting a commercial product or service, known as *commercial e-mail.* The Act defined requirements for commercial e-mail senders (including penalties for spamming) and gave e-mail recipients the right to request removal from an e-mail list.

Here are some of the highlights of CAN-SPAM:
- *Deceptive subject lines are not allowed.* Be sure the subject line matches the content of the e-mail.
- *"From" lines and other internet header information must be accurate.* Send the e-mail from a real address and be consistent – always send from that address.

- *The e-mail must contain a clear and conspicuous opt-out notice.* Even if e-mail is free to send, you still don't want it going to those who don't want it.

- *An opt-out request must be honored promptly.* You have 10 days to remove someone from your e-mail list; however, we suggest acting immediately on the request.

For more detailed information, visit the Federal Trade Commission CAN-SPAM web site: https://www.ftc.gov/tips-advice/business-center/guidance/can-spam-act-compliance-guide-business