

The 3-Minute Guide to Direct Mail

Brought to you by The Mighty Copywriter and Bethesda List Center

The key ingredient: your mailing list

Rented lists. Most lists are by-products of doing business with an organization. Catalog marketers have buyers, for example. Magazine publishers have subscribers. Associations have members. Universities have alumni. Nonprofits have donors. Many organizations like these make their lists available to others who want to reach the same people.

Some rented lists are “response lists.” The people on them have bought something, subscribed to a magazine, attended a convention, made a donation or taken some other action. These actions suggest they’re more likely to respond to offers from direct marketers.

Other rented lists are “compiled lists.” These are typically derived from public sources like business directories. Compiled lists do not offer the same degree of responsiveness.

Generally speaking, lists can be rented through list brokers. Brokers, who represent the owners, negotiate pricing, coordinate sample mail pieces, place orders and ensure on-time delivery of lists. They also provide expertise in recommending lists based on response-analysis.

When you rent a list, you will be able to mail to the names on it; but your rights to the information are limited. You will not have direct access to the list you are renting. What’s more, unless your rental agreement states otherwise, you may only use the list one time. You may contact prospects who respond to your mailing again, as often as you wish, without permission or payment to the list owner.

If you’re renting a list for the first time, you’ll need to prepare some information before calling a list broker:

Mail date. Be aware that mail dates are carefully monitored, so tell your broker before you change your date for any reason, even if it’s only by a day.

Lettershop or list processing firm. You’ll need to provide contact information for where you want the owner to send the list (you cannot have direct access to it).

Sample. You’ll also need to provide a sample of the piece you plan to mail. List owners have the right to refuse your piece. An owner might, for example, decide your product or service competes too closely with its own.

Data cards. Brokers compile information about available lists and present the information on data cards. You’ll want to have these handy to discuss the broker’s recommendations for targeting your piece.

When you rent a list through a broker, allow at least 10 business days to complete the order. And be aware that list owners, to ensure renters are not reusing their lists, place “decoy” names in the list. If a decoy receives an unauthorized mailing, the owner knows the list has been misused.

House lists. “House lists” are those you own. They usually consist of your current and former customers and prospects.

Merge/purge. You may need to merge several mailing lists together to create a single list. When you merge separate lists, the names of people that appear more than once (because they were on more than one list) are identified, and the duplicates purged. Here are a few merge/purge terms you should know.

Input lists. Input lists are the lists that are being combined and that will undergo merge/purge. They may be both rented and house lists.

Duplicates. While there are well-established methods for determining duplicates during a merge/purge, different list processing firms will often use slightly different techniques.

Merge/purge reports. Merge/purge reports identify such metrics as “gross names in” (the total number of names you started with) and net names out” (the number of unique names you will send to your lettershop). Reports also identify “inter-file records” (duplicates among lists) and “intra-file records” (duplicates within lists).

The other key ingredient: your offer

Spurring prospects to act. Direct mail success demands that your offer provides prospects a motive to respond immediately. Your offer therefore needs to address several factors at once:

Product or service. Your product or service must be valuable and relatively exclusive. If your prospect can get your product or service anywhere, there's no reason to respond to your mailing.

Price. Your offer must be attractively priced.

Incentives. Closely related to price are incentives, such as "act now and shipping is free" or "buy one, get one free."

Guarantee. Also related to price is your guarantee. You can offer a limited-time guarantee or a lifetime guarantee.

Terms. When and how do you require payment? Is payment due up front? Do you offer a monthly installment plan? Do you accept credit cards? Purchase orders?

Time limit. Is your prospect required to act before a certain date?

Relevance. Your offer must solve a specific problem. Focus on prospects' urgent wants and needs.

Simplicity. Avoid complexity. Your prospect is busy and searching for a reason to toss your mailer out so she can move on to the next thing on her list. Making a claim that causes her to pause and wonder will lead to lost opportunity.

The final ingredient: your package

Formats are plentiful. You can choose from a variety of proven direct mail packages.

Letter packages. The traditional format, letter packages consist of a #10 outer envelope, sales letter, brochure or insert, and reply card.

Postcards. There are two standard postcard formats, single and double. The single postcard has only a front and back; the double includes a reply card.

Self-mailers. Similar to postcards, self-mailers include folded fliers and brochures.

Booklets and catalogs. Booklets and catalogs are multipage self-mailers. Booklets typically focus on useful information; catalogs on products.

Dimensionals. You can also send three-dimensional mail; for example, a box containing a CD.

About The Mighty Copywriter. The Mighty Copywriter, Bob James, is the Washington, DC area's go-to professional for on-demand copywriting. With more than 30 years' experience writing for associations and businesses, Bob is an experienced wordsmith and marketing advisor committed to the proven principle that clarity is the key to results. To learn more, go to www.TheMightyCopywriter.com or call 202.537.1169.

About Bethesda List Center. Headquartered in Bethesda, MD, Bethesda List Center is a direct marketing firm that specializes in postal and e-mail lists. It helps marketers target association members, information technology, medical and life science, research and development, human resources and training, construction and infrastructure, education, environment, small office/home office, and businesses and professionals. To learn more, go to www.bethesda-list.com or call 301.986.1455.