

Expert Series

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Testing your creative....

Creative – or message testing as it is sometimes called – is a critical component in developing the most cost-effective campaign. The goal, in simple terms, is to create maximum impact for minimum cost.

The creative treatment adopted plays a vital role in ensuring your message is both spotted and absorbed by the target audience. While direct mail offers the advantage of being an uncluttered channel, it is still necessary to ensure your message stands out in a readily understood and compelling way. This is largely the role of the creative treatment.

Undertaking profiles (see my “*Testing your targeting*” article) will help you obtain a better understanding of your target audience, especially in terms of factors such as age and socio-economic status. This can help you put a better creative brief together.

However good the brief however, there will always be room for testing. Simple creative tests involve such things as the headline, or long copy versus short copy. Alternatively you might test the imagery used or the size of font, attempting to achieve the optimal balance that appeals to your target audience. It can even be valid to test two completely different creative treatments against each other, especially if you feel that they both have merit. In such circumstances, you are simply letting your customers decide which is best.

Of course cost is always a consideration, and testing two completely different creative treatments can mean doubling your origination budget, which may not be possible. It is advisable therefore to keep things simple to begin with. Try testing the effect of significant factors that can be cost-effectively changed – the way the headline sums up your core proposition is a good example, or the contents of the covering letters post script, or the type of message you use on the outer envelope. Even simple devices, such as testing a real stamp against the use of a post-paid impression, are valid creative tests that can make a big difference to the response rate.

There are two important things to bear in mind with creative tests – indeed with any tests. Firstly do not attempt to test two things at once. If you’re testing the headline, don’t test the PS, as you won’t know which caused any visible uplift. Secondly, ensure you can track which treatment produces the best result, with a unique code that comes back to you with each response.

Assessing creative work inevitably requires a degree of subjectivity – and the ability to put ourselves in our customer’s shoes. While this is an essential skill to develop, it can also be helpful to have some empirical feedback from customers. Well constructed creative tests can provide this and help reduce the reliance on ‘gut’ instinct.

Getting the message across is one thing, but if it lands at the wrong time, it’s unlikely to resonate.

Testing your timings....

As well as testing your targeting, offer and creative, there is another factor which can be tested, and that is when you send the communication.

Sometimes the timing of your communication will be determined by common sense. A travel company, targeting peak season business, will have learnt exactly when best to send out its offers. However, it is worth remembering other components such as teaser or reminder mailings, as the timing of such communications can make a big difference to the overall result. This opens up significant scope for testing.

At a more micro level, the day of the week a mailing arrives in the mailbox can make a difference to response. If the product or service on offer involves the whole family, then a delivery closer to the weekend when everyone is likely to be around can make a difference. Alternatively important financial communications might receive closer attention if delivered in the middle of the working week. Only testing will tell.

The adage to remember here is that a bad idea can be a good idea at the wrong time. The closer you can get to delivering your message at a time your customer is in the market for your offer, the greater your chances of success. Profiling, mining your database and timing tests can each help you edge closer to the best possible return from your direct mail.

It may be the ‘junior partner’ in the contributory factors of success in a direct mail campaign, but getting the timing right can pay dividends, especially where incremental increases are being sought.

The next and final article in this series will how you can put the ‘Test and Roll-out’ approach at the heart of your direct marketing.

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