The Omni-Channel Campaign: Key Considerations for Success

Print pieces and direct mail have an enduring reputation for effectiveness in marketing, as one reaches groups and the other an individual. In addition, direct mail requires 21% less cognitive effort to process than digital media, fosters a sense of personal connection, and is a powerful tool to drive recipients toward websites and personalized URLs for in-depth information. In today's digital dominance, combining print with digital can bring an even bigger bang for your buck.

Designers play a crucial role in creating visually appealing and engaging pieces; however, they can be even more effective if they understand the fundamental strategies of successful print and direct mail.

Campaign Goals

The printer and the client may understand the campaign objectives, but did anyone inform the designers? Layout, color, image, and copy decisions can be more relevant if everyone on the team knows the goal. It's better to give designers this information up front than to request revisions when initial designs don't coincide with the project's overall goal. Include the company's brand guidelines and any other information that may affect the design. Design choices should consider your tracking needs to accurately gauge your designed piece's impact.

Audience Profile

The target audience will influence *all* of the designer's choices. The more designers know about the target audience, the more tailored their designs can be to the recipient's needs and preferences. For instance, the designed approach for a sixty-year-old grandfather will differ from the approach designed to attract the attention of a young first-time homebuyer, for instance. Include as much audience detail as possible in the design brief.

Consider the total number of potential recipients. Defining whether attempting to reach 5,000 or 500,000 will help determine most all production decisions impacting the budget. If targeting 500 high-value, loyal clients with engagement, maybe $15 per client is not out of the question; if acquiring new clients, the budget might be capped at $.25 per lead/prospect.

Designing for Direct Mail

Direct mail may seem disconnected from the digital era; however, in 2023, US brands will invest more than $39 billion in this channel. The primary factor underlying direct mail's resilience is it is a performance marketing channel.
Producing the best results requires creative designs and compliance with postal mail best practices. The volume and complexity of the US Postal Service's Domestic Mail Manual can be overwhelming. Luckily, creative people need to focus on only a few vital areas to ensure their designs flow smoothly through the mail. Design missteps that affect mailability can be expensive. Errors discovered at production time increase costs and put deadlines in jeopardy. A bit of knowledge is all it takes to prevent last-minute disasters and get maximum value from direct mail campaigns.

Basic Design for Direct Mail

It may seem obvious, but postal automation equipment must be able to read the addresses printed on mail pieces. The best way for designers to avoid problems in this area is to make sure the space they reserve for the mailing address is white or light-colored. Mail handling equipment requires material to be flexible as it passes over belts and rollers.

Aspect ratios are items that designers often overlook. Out-of-spec dimensions won't keep your mail from being processed, but USPS surcharges dramatically affect postage costs. Aspect ratio refers to the relationship of the height of a mail piece to its length. The ratio must fall between 1.3 and 2.5 to avoid non-machinable surcharges. Divide the length of the piece by the height to calculate the aspect ratio. The USPS defines the length of a piece as the edge parallel to the delivery address, so avoid vertically oriented address blocks. Remember, a perfectly square mail piece has an aspect ratio of 1.0, so it doesn't meet the standard necessary to qualify for the lowest postage rates.

Address Placement

Mailers must position the mailing address in a rectangular region that begins 5/8" from the bottom and ends vertically 2 ¾" from the bottom. Delivery addresses can appear anywhere within the vertical limits but cannot be closer than ½" from the left or right edge of the mail piece.

Designers must leave room for the postal barcode that postal equipment will apply in an area at the bottom right corner of the address side of the mail piece. The return address appears in the upper left corner, in the top third of the mail piece, separated by at least 1" horizontally and vertically from the delivery address. Return addresses may include artwork or logos. All permit mail must have a return address.

1   https://finelineprintinggroup.com/blog/why-your-brain-prefers-direct-mail-over-email/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20study%20sponsored,brains%20to%20process%20the%20information.

2   https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2023/09/20/2746471/0/en/New-Research-on-U-S-Direct-Mail-Underscores-Addressability-Measurability-and-Personalization-Attributes-of-This-Original-Performance-Media-Channel.html

Size and Shape

Direct mail pieces should be rectangular unless the client pays the surcharge for irregular shapes. Measurements should fall within the following dimension requirements:

- **Postcards** should be 3 ½" to 4 ¼" high and 5" to 6" long. The thickness must be between .007" and .016", or ideally 8 pt. to 10 pt. cover stock.

- **Letters** are 3 ½" to 6 1/8" high and 5" to 11 ½" long. Letters can be up to ¼" thick. Machinable letter-size mail pieces in envelopes can weigh a maximum of 3 ½ oz. They cannot be shrink-wrapped, poly-bagged, clasped, or have any closure that can damage the processing equipment.

Direct Mail Works—But Follow the Rules

Even with all its rules, direct mail is still one of the most highly effective means of engaging your audiences. This is true for all demographics. Familiarity with mailing requirements will allow marketers to realize substantial benefits from their direct mail investments.

Designers may regard mailing rules as complicated and inhibiting, but they ensure the postal service can process mail pieces quickly and keep postage prices low. Combining creative design with USPS rule compliance is the smart way to use direct mail effectively.

Connecting Print to Digital—The Omni-Channel Approach

Digital designers will be especially interested in how print can bridge the space between physically printed materials and the digital environment. Prepare some short videos or slide decks for designers that show examples of how to deploy new technologies. QR codes, augmented reality (AR), or Informed Delivery can connect printed materials with digital campaign assets.

For tracking and follow-up in direct mail jobs, suggest ways to use personal URLs (PURLs) to provide data that identifies which postal mail recipients interact with the brand. Introduce the tracking capabilities offered by the USPS Informed Visibility program that notifies mailers when the mail pieces are delivered so they can trigger supplementary email or text messages.

Designers can add these new technologies to their print projects, allowing the messaging that begins with print to continue and expand via easily accessed digital channels with which the designers are already familiar.

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Q: At what point should the designer consult with the printer?

A: Start talking with the printer as early as possible in the design phase. Good decisions early in the design process can considerably affect print production, just as poor design choices can conversely impact quality, timing, and cost. Printers can show designers how to leverage variable data and images, suggest ways to save money on finishing costs, or help design pieces that meet postal regulations and qualify for postage discounts. With print, it is often helpful to begin with the end product and work backward through steps like layout and data acquisition.

Q: What can printers do other than print my project?

A: This is a great question to ask. Don't view printers as some box that takes in designs and spits out printed pieces. Besides applying ink to a substrate, printers are skilled at coordinating steps like bindery, delivery, or mailing list acquisition. Designers are frequently unaware that printers can assist with tasks such as installing large graphics like banners or other display items and fulfilling orders for print-on-demand collateral or promotional items. Printers can help with many details critical to a successful campaign.

Q: What do I need to know about color reproduction?

A: Designers typically work with the CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, black) and RGB (red, green, blue) color gamuts. Web pages, digital ads, HTML emails, and anything intended for final use in a digital space (on a screen) all use the RGB color space. Printing presses create colors using the CMYK color space. A graphic created for a web presentation will look slightly different when printed. Designers should ensure their print files are in the CMYK gamut before sending them for printing. Exact color matching, using the Pantone Matching System (PMS) as a spot color, is possible but will increase costs. Spot colors are necessary when a brand's color must be exact every time, such as in retail and packaging.

Q: What is the best file type to send for printing?

A: It's always best to send print-ready files. When printers must manipulate or convert files, it will affect the budget. Unanticipated rework can cause delays. Check with the printer to see if they have a print-ready PDF preset that can be used with your design software. It is *recommended* to send in PDF/X-4 or PDF/X-1a if transparencies are not used. Missing fonts are a common mistake that causes production delays. Any of the PDF/X formats will embed the fonts automatically. Sending native files like InDesign is fine as long as you package them and send the entire packaged folder as a .zip file.

Q: How should I proof the work?

A: Printers recommend allotting enough time to proof the work several times *before* sending the files. Watch out for design elements like kerning, leading, and other type-related issues. Additionally, verify spelling, alignment, and text accuracy as part of your proofing process. Printers will provide digital online or printed proofs, but making type changes at this stage can be expensive. Both these proofing methods allow designers to make sure they have included all the elements, positioned them correctly, and the colors are approximately correct. For exact color matching, ask for press approval.