

Increasing the impact of direct mail with w.p.

Few executives with real buying power have the time or, (with protective secretaries) even the opportunity to read most of the direct mail that arrives addressed to them. Of course, this is even more true when mailings arrive addressed to 'The Sales Manager', 'The Chief Buyer' or 'The Managing Director'. In many cases this type of mail does not even get past the post room.

Direct mail is composed of basically two parts - the list, and the mailing package itself. Sadly this second item has long been neglected in the UK. Most people who produce in-house direct mail have an excellent mailing list made up from enquirers, past customers, and existing customers. However, much of the work involved in compiling these lists is wasted by using shoddy duplicated or photocopied mailing material.

Unfortunately it is also true to say that most commercial direct mail houses see themselves as list brokers first and producers of mailing material second. It is easy to see that compiling a series of mailing lists on different sections of industry and then renting the list at around £50.00 per thousand per mailing can be very profitable. As it happens few of these commercially available lists are kept up-to-date and, in fact, most are originally compiled from an abysmal source - such as Yellow Pages.

These problems have precluded many companies from looking at direct mail as a serious promotional medium. Of course direct mail has and will be extensively used for distributing information. If you are currently doing business with a customer and simply wish to let him know your current prices or stock situation it doesn't much matter what you send him - essential information will be read. However, if you actually want to achieve something positive - like announcing a price increase but maintaining/increasing customer loyalty - a totally different approach is necessary. Furthermore with that new approach direct mail can be used to achieve far more ambitious objectives. Direct mail can be used as a serious and extremely cost-effective medium whatever service or product you sell.

A new breed of direct mail advertising agencies is presently emerging. These companies offer a full service from design and conception, through printing and production, even to

actually receiving and administering your replies. An example of one of the most active of these organisations is Mailflow Ltd, of Leatherhead.

Mailflow has tackled the problems of getting people to take direct mail seriously in an imaginative way. All facilities are available in-house. One, two, three, or four colour printing is available at competitive rates, artwork and design is handled by experienced commercial artists. Much of the initial 'brainwork' in creating a campaign comes from Mailflow's Chairman, Peter Reynolds, who also has the knack of putting the 'gift-of-the-gab' onto paper. But it is the company's approach to lists and to production of the mailing package which is novel. The company has invested in a word-processing installation. Chairman, Peter Reynolds said 'our equipment is manufactured by DFE Electronics of West Germany and marketed in the UK by Dataword Equipment Ltd. We spent some 18 months looking at the w.p. market and even now, after some considerable time in actual use, I am convinced that we have the best hardware/software combination available. I see new items of equipment every month and the DFE units cannot be beaten in any respect for our application. Obviously we've had problems but, by keeping the UK agents on their toes, we have overcome all hiccups so far'.

This highly-praised equipment allows Mailflow to produce thousands of direct mail letters that appear to have been individually typed. Further personalisation can be embodied in the text of the letter rather like some Readers Digest mailings, although - as Peter Reynolds is quick to point out: 'If you personalise a letter willy-nilly and without some proper thought it can look awfully corny and stilted, - it's very easy to fall into the trap of showing-off how much attention you've paid to your mailing but not actually increasing response'.

The company emphasises, quite categorically, that they are not list brokers. They have access to the few good lists that are commercially available but they far prefer to custom-build a list for their clients. Undoubtedly this is an expensive exercise and can mean anything up to £1.00 per name for the initial research. This does mean however, that the customer has a list of the highest possible quality

including the name of the actual individual that you need to reach. Mailflow claim that once this initial research has been completed a relatively painless cost is involved in maintaining it and keeping it up-to-date. Obviously, it is essential to have a good list if you are going to use direct mail effectively and the investment is repaid many times over.

A fascinating aspect of direct mail is the different response rates which can be achieved from nearly identical mailings. Mailflow are able to carry out 'testing' of various different mailing ideas. For instance affixing a stamp instead of franking an envelope can sometimes produce a 100% increase in response. Mailflow has also tested the effectiveness of their 'personalised' mail over more traditional methods. In one instance the company produced a mailing that was dramatically successful using 'printing and matching-in' techniques resulting in a response in excess of 35%. However when 'personalised' using the word processor response went to more than 62%!

Types of envelopes are a subject of some controversy in the direct mail business. Peter Reynolds has some scathing criticisms to make of certain competitors who print messages or graphics on the outside of envelopes: 'If we talk about non-consumer mailing, then one can state, with confidence, that anything other than a plain envelope will reduce your response. That isn't always true of course, but as a rule-of-thumb its pretty accurate. If your direct mail agency recommends this sort of approach, question their motives. It's certainly going to increase their bill to you - but is it going to increase your response?'.

Certainly you have to pay attention to the envelope. There's not a lot of point in sending a beautiful personalised letter in an envelope with a Cheshire label or an address produced from an addressing machine.

Undoubtedly Mailflow has adopted a common-sense attitude to direct mail, an attitude that seems lacking in many of its competitors, but the installation of a word processor is as much the reason for the company's success as the abilities of the staff. But the use of word processing and creative thought is an enviable combination that in the case of Mailflow, deserves to succeed.

174 on enquiry card