

7 and 3/4 Things You Don't Ever Want to Do in Direct Mail

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My friend Ryan Phelan is an email guru who has given presentations on avoiding the kinds of mistakes that result in customers or prospects tapping their delete buttons, so I have to tip my hat to him for inspiring the title of this article. Call it stealing smart.

In my career, I've seen a lot of good-to-great direct mail. And I've also seen a lot that gets things wrong. Sometimes, it's been printing issues, strange design choices, or just a simple lack of proofreading.

Yes, direct mail can be a "magic merger of creativity and repetition," as DirectMail2.0's Brad Kugler puts it. But if you get the big stuff (or the small stuff) wrong, you'll waste money, time, and your brand reputation.

I'll be the first to admit that there are always exceptions to rules. Sometimes ugly works in driving response. But here are common mistakes that can teach you a costly lesson.

1| Too Much Copy

With few exceptions, the trend over the past 20 years has been toward cleaner, more streamlined messaging. Dense paragraphs and big walls of text stand out — badly. Today's consumers are accustomed to quick, scannable content, and too much copy overwhelms them.

Instead, use white space to guide the customer's eyes through your mailpiece. Incorporate icons to convey information quickly and visually. Break up your message into compelling headlines and subheads, short phrases, and brief paragraphs and bulleted text that can be read in less time.

2| Bad Data

Not working with the best possible data is the single-most important factor in your campaign's success or failure. Before you print anything, invest in data management tools and processes. The upfront effort to clean and validate your lists will improve your ROI, deliverability, and credibility.

Two good ways to end outdated, inaccurate, or incomplete information:

- Deduping your lists for similar or identical names at the same address
- Running National Change of Address to keep up with new movers

3| No Testing

Launching campaigns based on assumptions rather than data-driven insights is risky. Understanding basic testing principles — from proper holdback percentages to isolating variables — can mean the difference between a profitable campaign and a failure.

Test different headlines, offers, formats, and calls-to-action. Even small improvements in response rates or ROI can scale up well in larger campaigns.

4| Ignoring Omnichannel

It's 2025. The most successful campaigns integrate seamlessly with email, social media, and other marketing channels. Understanding channel propensity — which customers prefer which communication methods — allows you to create coordinated touchpoints that reinforce your message wherever they are.

Try syncing up your timing across different channels, reinforce your messaging, and give prospects multiple paths to respond. This creates additional impressions and lifts your response rates.

5| Not Understanding Your Target Audience

Unless you're mailing an Every Door Direct Mail (EDDM) campaign, "everyone" is not your audience. And these days, big postage rate increases make it essential to move away from spray-and-pray mass mailings to a more refined approach.

Build a detailed audience profile by analyzing customer demographic, behavioral, and purchase data. Use segmentation to create tailored messages for different audience groups.

6| Missing Personalization Opportunities

Consumers today expect a personalized experience, not a generic one. With the help of AI, you can uncover insights from customer behaviors, predict preferences, and create customized mailpieces.

Variable Data Printing (VDP) and the right software makes it possible to personalize offers, images, and headlines. But with all that data available to you, make sure that the experience you're creating is a relevant one that shows you understand their needs and wants.

7| Hiding the CTA

Remember the "easy" button from the Staples commercials? Your call-to-action should be unmissable and strategically placed to follow your mailer's flow.

Make your CTA highly visible with large typography, contrasting colors, and surrounding white space. Include multiple response options, such as QR codes and phone numbers, to accommodate different preferences of customers and prospects. Remember: if you confuse them, you lose them.

And ... the ¾? Not Knowing USPS Design Regulations

Maybe the most frustrating mistake is discovering that your carefully-crafted campaign violates USPS design requirements. Incorrect dimensions, improper address placement, or barcode positioning issues can delay delivery or increase postage costs significantly.

While USPS regulations can seem complex, these problems are entirely avoidable when you work with experienced printing partners who understand postal requirements. They can ensure compliance with the rules as well as optimize production of your campaign.

There are a lot of ways to make mistakes. And everyone makes them. But if you stay calm and really think through some of the basics, track your responses, and learn from your results, you'll be just fine.

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