

Dollars & Sense



ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

BARRY MCLEISH

Before joining M/J, Barry McLeish was the Director of Development & Marketing for Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship and served as a member of Inter-Varsity's senior management team. He also served as Creative Director. Barry's books include *The Personal Support Raising Handbook*, *The Donor Bond*, and *Successful Marketing Strategies for Nonprofit Organizations*. His latest book, *Yours, Mine and Ours: Creating a Compelling Donor Experience*, is available from Wiley Press.

As a member of McConkey /Johnston's executive team, he combines many years of experience as a manager of comprehensive development programs with special expertise in direct mail, advertising, public relations and brochure techniques. Barry attended the University of Wisconsin - Madison, where he received a B.A. in Advertising and a Master's Degree in Direct Marketing. He also holds an M.A. from the Fielding Institute in Human and Organization Development. Barry and his wife, Deborah, live near Madison, Wisconsin.

If there is one thing that brings out the ire in nonprofit executives it is a conversation about direct mail. Never have there been such profound, conflicting feelings over a particular fundraising medium, all usually expressed in the name of professionalism, or preserving the ethos of an organization, or my favorite, not offending donors.

WHY I STILL LOVE DIRECT MAIL

by **Barry J. McLeish**

When I was a young copywriter for a large nonprofit agency, I clearly remember an early episode that involved the outright hatred and misunderstanding of direct mail's aims when a nonprofit executive who was also in the organization I worked for, noted that my direct mail copy was responsible for causing the moral failure of thousands of young people while I was directly contributing to our culture's moral vacuum.

Why the confusion over, the dislike of, and perhaps more importantly, the lack of money coming into organizations through direct mail? Certainly there is more than enough mail being sent out by nonprofits. Just ask the individuals receiving it. There also seems to be a wholesale embracing of the discipline by many organizations and their executives. What then provokes the arguments, limits the funds received in the meantime, and causes some donors to either limit or stop their giving to non-

profit organizations as a result of the mail they receive?

Much of the difficulty comes from a poor understanding of how the medium works. Many view it simply as an intrusive vehicle, providing an unwanted, adversarial message to recipients. Others look instead at its flexibility and its ability to allow an organization to compete with those bigger than itself in the fundraising world.

The reasons for the growth of direct mail seem obvious: first, there is simply less time for men and women in their day-to-day activities. With personal sales skills declining and not increasing, it is easy for men and women to shop at home or in a way that fits their schedules. In addition there is a perceived ease by many in entering the field to write direct mail and subsequently, many, many organizations have found it a helpful medium to cry "wolf" in. And direct

mail start-up costs do not break the bank. They are controllable.

Personally, I think a contributing factor to the growth in the field is the multiplicity of direct mail “experts” who now give advice. Unfortunately, many nonprofit agencies have been hurt by some of these individuals whose advice is often less than tactful.

Direct mail offers a staggering array of options over other media in delivering a personal message and obtaining funds for a nonprofit cause. It is very flexible with tremendous opportunities in the selection of formats and in allowing you to personalize your message to specific specifications. Though it often cannot take the place of a strong personal call it can support it, and in some cases, deliver its own critical message. It reminds individuals of those aspects of life they would like to correct or initiatives they would like to support. Perhaps most significantly, it can sell a donor or a customer time and time again, without the expense of always mounting a personal sales call.

In all of this, its greatest strength is its ability to measure its returns and through database selection and mining, to deliver a targeted message. To not take advantage of these features is to simply relinquish the medium from a manageable, measurable advertising medium to the domain of “top of the mind hunches.”

However, in talking with hundreds of nonprofit executives they tend to cite

three concerns for their direct mail programs which dominate all others:

1. First of all, they want to make a “profit” from each mailing.
2. These executives also want to keep their donors “active.”
3. Finally, they want to avoid complaints from those receiving their mail.

The “keeping donors active” – or the retention of donors – is the most pressing issue to me personally. In

Direct mail is a valuable medium when it reminds me of those issues I care deeply about or those issues that define who I am as a person.

my 35 years of writing copy two things strike me about today’s fundraising culture. The first is how many good and worthy options there are for donors to be involved with. And the second is how very competitive it is today for the average nonprofit. It is becoming much harder to retain donors over longer periods of time. Because most organizations cannot see all their donors face-to-face on a routine basis, direct mail serves as an excellent “engaging”

function with constituents and assists with retention. This is especially true if the copy reflects the prior and current interests of the recipient.

Unfortunately, much of today’s copy is being sent by organizations in a “shotgun blast” strategy, hoping in the process to attract or entice some individuals to give a gift to the parent organization. It is embedded within an organizational strategy like this that complaints are often incepted by those receiving the mail. Direct mail becomes a nuisance when it is selling things to me that I am not interested in. Alternately it is a valuable medium when it is reminding me of those issues I care deeply about or those issues that define who I am as a person.

The prevalence of the shotgun approach to direct mail has had the net effect of making the avoidance of complaints the chief criterion that dominates most direct mail strategies. Rather than responding to this problem in a way that narrows the target area of the medium while simultaneously strengthening its message to those who want to hear it, many nonprofit executives have instead adopted an almost paranoid concern over complaints. Consequently we have lots of mail going out with innocuous messages where you have to pore over the copy with a microscope to find the subject matter and the “ask.”

Nevertheless, direct mail is a wonderful medium to those who try to

maximize its strengths. By firmly remembering that you have a very short time in which to engage the reader, copywriters can begin to think holistically the necessary stages most readers go through in looking at the direct mail packages sent to them. This is why maximizing the carrier envelope is so important in order to ensure to the reader that the package warrants opening. Correctly done, the reader looks for the offer and the benefits they'll receive by taking the desired action – if they're really interested, the reader looks deeper at the copy before responding. Few advertising media in direct mail's price range can command the 15 to 20 seconds a reader will often spend with a package.

There are three areas where direct mail "shines" in my book;

- ◆ Most are acquainted with direct mail as a prospecting tool for external lists; fewer nonprofit executives use direct mail as part of a program to recapture past donors that were once active by prospecting these once active participants.
- ◆ Direct mail also can do a wonderful of increasing the frequency of giving by a donor by simply asking the donor to either give more frequently than they are (for example, giving monthly) or asking them to contribute to another part of the organization that needs to be funded. Second gift programs are also wonderful additions to a direct

mail strategy. Both are wonderful ways to increase frequency.

- ◆ Finally, and I think least used, direct mail affords a wonderful system whereby an organization can upgrade a donor's giving simply by asking them. Of course, getting a donor to give more frequently is the best way to upgrade a donor's involvement, but I also favor asking a donor to consider upgrading their gift, particularly to those who are regular or monthly contributors.

Barry McLeish has provided invaluable counsel to numerous organizations dealing with change in the face of turbulent marketing environments. Be sure to read Barry's new book, *Yours, Mine and Ours: Creating a Compelling Donor Experience*, available from Wiley Press. Contact Barry or any M/J consultant by visiting our website at mconkey-johnston.com.