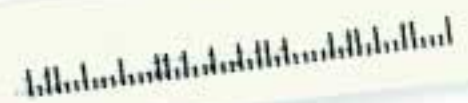


**H**ere's a quiz: You want to invite your most loyal clientele to a customer appreciation party. How do you get the message out? • A display ad is not the answer as it addresses too broad an audience, but how about a postcard mailed to your top 100 customers, ranked by total rental contracts over the past year? • Postcards should be part of your advertising arsenal for this very reason: They reach targeted audiences more effectively— and less expensively— than costly flyers or lengthy sales letters.

**CREATING A MESSAGE  
THAT DELIVERS  
BY PHILLIP M. PERRY**



**“P**ostcards are especially effective when your rentals are flat or falling and you need a way to perk things up,” says Sarah White, a consultant at Third Wave Research, a marketing and survey firm in Madison, WI (www.thirdwaveresearch.com). • Postcards also reinforce the message you are communicating through other media such as display ads or Web sites. They create an “echo effect” that resonates in the customer’s mind. • O.K., so you want to mail some postcards. How to do it well? Here are some tips from marketing pro’s.

### 1. KEEP IT SIMPLE

“Postcards are perfect if you have a fairly simple message to convey,” says David Ehrlich, president of Track Marketing Group in Alexandria, VA. Bear in mind that you have room for only a short headline and perhaps 100 words of text. That’s enough to throw a spotlight on a simple theme—but no more.

- Examples of simple messages are:
- Save money by taking action now
  - Come to our evening party or seminar
  - See our newly arrived line of merchandise
  - We’re extending our store hours
  - Here’s a special deal for previous customers only
  - Bring this card to enter our free drawing

While a simple message is vital, it’s also true that postcards can be used as part of a larger effort to communicate

more complex information. “Many times the postcard will be the first step in a sales process,” says Ehrlich. “Don’t try to complete the sale with just the card. Instead, invite the recipient to call for free information or visit your store or Web site.”

*Bonus tip:* To see if your message is simple enough, ask a friend to scan your card for 10 seconds and then tell you what the sales statement is.

### 2. MAKE IT COMPELLING

Your message must be simple, but it also must stop the show. “Your message needs to have an ‘attention compeller’ element,” says Burton M. Nudelman, president of Nudelman + Associates, a retail management consultancy in Portland, OR. “It could be a photo, a headline or some strong wording in the title. But without one, you are wasting your time.” Half of your recipients will not look at the postcard at all, says Nudelman. You need to worry about the 50 percent who do. “Your message needs to hit them on the head.”

Here are some examples of messages that are compelling:

- Save money
- Get more out of life
- Obtain better quality merchandise that lasts longer
- Enjoy service from an experienced store staff
- Benefit from being a loyal customer
- Act right away to take advantage of the offer

As the last entry suggests, deadlines can further compel the recipient to take action. Phrases such as “This week only” encourage the recipient to bring the card to your store right away rather

than post it on the refrigerator to take action “some time.”

Use headline words that catch the eye and lead the recipient into your compelling message. Powerful words and phrases include “Free,” “New,” “For Loyal Customers Only” and “Not Available to the Public.”

*Bonus tip:* Try reverse engineering on your sales message. If you want to hold a sale on overstock items, for example, run an ironic “This is old!” headline that plays off the usual bid for novelty.

### 3. TIME YOUR MAILINGS

Your mailings will be more effective if you give some thought to timing. The postcards should reinforce some larger marketing effort underway. “Take a look at your calendar and decide which promotions you want to reinforce with a postcard,” says Sara Johnson-Bewley, owner of Hill Shepherd Design in Killbuck, OH. “Then plan six weeks back from that time to get the postcard designed and into the mail.”

*Bonus tip:* Make your message more compelling by celebrating a change of season.

### 4. CALL FOR ACTION

You want the customer to do something or you wouldn’t be mailing the postcards. Make sure you state that “to-do” in a simple sentence and then include it as a tag line on your postcard.

“Every postcard should contain a call to action,” says Ehrlich. “What do you want the recipients to do? Don’t be subtle about the next step.”

Here are some sample actions:

- Visit the store
- Participate in a survey
- Send an e-mail
- Place a phone call
- Play a game
- Bring a friend

*Bonus tip:* Want to convey a simple, compelling message and call the customer to action all in one fell swoop? Here’s how: Design your postcard as a coupon. “Postcards make great coupons,” says Ehrlich. “They promote action and bring customers into your

store to buy. This shows you don’t need a long sales letter to create a great direct mail piece.”

### 5. SPRUCE IT UP

Your recipients get lots of mail. Make your postcard stand out against the herd with great graphics. “Your card needs to be attractive physically and emotionally,” says Ehrlich. “You need something that grabs the recipients or they will throw it out.”

One great eye-grabber is color. “Color almost always outperforms black-and-white in terms of attention,” says Ehrlich. “That’s not to say that black-and-white won’t work, but the fact is that it has to be very well done to grab attention.”

Pretty pictures help, too. You might have a beautiful image on the main side of the card, along with a selling headline that ties in to the more complete message on the other side. Remember that many people look at the address side of the card first. So have some eye-grabbing graphic, perhaps a black-and-white cartoon that reinforces the message and somehow

echoes the color graphic on the front. And include your logo.

Finally, use the largest size card that you can, within postal guidelines. While the postal service sells cards measuring 3½ x 5½, larger 4 x 6 cards can be mailed at the same rate. “A bigger card will give your mailing more impact,” says White.

*Bonus tip:* Don’t overlook the stock color photos that are now available from so many printers. (See the sidebar, “Finding a Printer.”) These can add a measure of professionalism to even short run mailings.

### 6. MAIL TO THE RIGHT LIST

The best message won’t pull its weight in sales if you mail to a poor list. “Using the right list is critical to getting the best response,” says Ehrlich. Since postcards are great vehicles for getting more business from current customers, most advertising experts advise looking to your house list first. If you take the time and effort to build a detailed database, you will be able to customize your mailings to customer wants. “We are seeing more retailers move toward personalization of their

mailings,” says White. “Each piece comes out customized with slightly different messages and pictures, depending on what customers have purchased in the past.” While such customization has long been prohibitively expensive, today’s low-cost laser printers allow you to customize your printings even for short runs.

Other lists are available. If you want to increase the number of repeat customers, consider regular mailings to everyone who resides or works within a mile or two of your store. You can obtain such lists, filtered by zip code, from your local chamber of commerce, newspaper or list broker. You can also order lists that are filtered by age, income or parental status.

*Bonus tip:* As you experiment with different lists, find out which ones work best by coding the cards above the address. Have customers bring the cards to the store and track the resulting sales.

### 7. MAIL REGULARLY AND BE CONSISTENT

Mail regularly to keep stimulating customers and informing them about what’s new, especially to your house list. If you make each message com-

## WHEN TO USE POSTCARDS

- To announce “What’s New”
- To make special offers
- To compel people to visit your Web site
- To announce hours for seminars and parties
- To say “thank you” to loyal customers
- To invite lapsed shoppers to return
- To distribute coupons
- To introduce new staff members
- To announce new lines of merchandise or new services

## FINDING A PRINTER

If you are looking for real economy, you can photocopy cards four-up on card stock, then cut them apart and merge print address labels from your in-house database. There’s nothing wrong with that, but you may opt to get better results by farming out the print work.

Start with your local printer who may be able to do your work in a cost-effective way and work hand-in-hand with you so you know the job is done well. If you can’t get the work done locally, try the Web. Thanks to the Internet, prices have become more competitive for short runs of postcards. You can get 500 4¼ x 6-inch postcards for around \$175 and 5,000 for around \$500–\$600.

You can place an order for postcards using the interactive pages of all of the following sites:

- **ArtAndAdvertising.com**, Northport, NY, offers a variety of printing and design services from postcards to color brochures. Minimum order: 500 postcards.
- **CciCards.com**. A variety of promotional postcards and greeting cards.
- **CustomPostcards.com**, York, PA. This site offers an interesting array of stock photos. Minimum order: 500 postcards.
- The best of the bunch is **ww.modernpostcards.com**, an excellent site with the best array of tips on getting more from postcards. Also has an extensive selection of stock color photos. Use their templates to stay within postal regulations.
- **Pelland.com**. Good pricing for orders of 2,500 and up. Has some useful guidance on selecting a card size.
- **PostcardPromotions.com**. This is the online ordering site for Track Marketing Group. Has a specifications page for help in comparing rival print bids.



elling, recipients will learn to pay attention to your cards. "Since it often takes more than six impressions to get

through to someone, consider repeat mailings," says Ehrlich. "To save costs, over-print the front (glossy color side)

and leave the backside blank for future imprinting or print multiple backsides at the original printing. This dramatically lowers the cost per card. Since the back is read first, the same front as not a major problem. Another option is to send the identical card (front and back) to prospects multiple times, perhaps about a month apart."

Be consistent. Create an echo effect by using the same colors, categories of pictures and types of message time after time. "Once you develop a winning look and feel, stick with it," says Ehrlich.

**T**he tips in this article should help you put together a winning postcard promotion that pulls shoppers to your aisles and encourages customer loyalty. "A well-designed and targeted postcard promotion can zoom right into your customer's life and propel them to take action," says Ehrlich. ■

*Phillip M. Perry is a free-lance business writer in New York.*

## COLLECT E-MAIL ADDRESSES

**M**aybe postcards are great for promoting your store, but don't overlook their potential for building your e-mail database. That's the advice from Steve Holsberg, president of Westlake Advertising Agency in Westlake Village, CA.

Here's how it works: "Start by designing a graphically pleasing postcard offering a discount coupon code the recipient can use on your Web site," says Holsberg. "By punching in the discount code from the postcard, the customer receives a one-time discount on products or services. In so doing, the target's e-mail address is automatically entered into your database. This can also be set up to be permission based so as not to spam unwilling targets."

Once in the database, the target is periodically e-mailed new offers, coupon codes and promotions in lieu of using postcards. The postcard served its purpose.

"This system keeps the customers coming back for more while saving you mailing costs," says Holsberg. "That makes everybody happy."

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