

Postcards

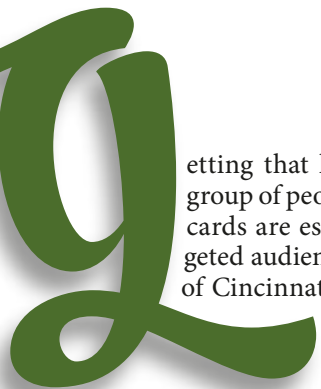
Big results from small mailings



Good things come in small packages.” That saying, so familiar to gift givers, seems equally valid for the direct mail postcard. Despite competition from the Internet, four-color brochures, television and radio, the humble little postcard refuses to cede ground as an integral element in successful marketing programs. “Companies in the rent-to-own industry can and still do use postcards and they can be effective,” says Al Benson, vice president of sales for Central File Marketing, a full-service print shop and direct marketing company based in Brown Deer, Wisconsin. Little wonder why: A correctly designed postcard can pop out of a pile of mail and catch the recipient’s eye with an immediate message. “The reason we like postcards is because they allow the recipients to get your message and your call to action without opening envelopes and breaking open tabs,” says Marty Smith, vice president of sales of St. Louis-based Imagery Marketing Consultants. “Very often recipients toss envelopes without opening them and the sales messages get lost.”

By Phillip M. Perry





etting that high-powered message to a select group of people can heighten the results. “Postcards are especially effective for reaching targeted audiences,” says Bonnie Nitzsche, owner of Cincinnati-based Nitzsche Advertising. For example, postcards might be used to promote a furniture special to a current customer list. And many rent-to-own dealers like to send cards toward the end of the month to their house list, since so many people receive checks at the first of each month.

CREATE GREAT OFFERS: The postcard’s small size, of course, does present a challenge. The fact is, recipients are likely to overlook a postcard that arrives with bulkier and more impressively sized envelopes and catalogs. “A postcard gets about one to two seconds attention when it arrives in a stack of mail,” says Benson. “It will get more time if you’re lucky and it arrives without a lot of other mail. But postcards tend to get lost in the shuffle. It’s tough to get the message across unless you have a good design so that the card stands out in the mailbox.”

Just how do you get your postcard to stand out in the mailbox?

Job #1: develop an offer the recipient can’t refuse. “We

have found that in the rent-to-own industry, ‘free’ is the most powerful message,” says Benson. “Offering the first week free is a traditional marketing offer and it’s a great way to avoid having your merchandise sit on your floor unrented.” The message might be to “bring in this card and your next item is free until January.”

A variation on this is the matching payment offer: The customer pays a week and the rent-to-own store pays a week.

“Present some kind of enticing offer that draws people in,” suggests Nitzsche, who has seen postcards used successfully in promotions such as these:

- ▶ Pictures of three rooms of furniture with a burst graphic in the middle. Text states: “All three rooms for only \$39.95 a week.”
- ▶ Pictures of several items of furniture or electronics. The headline states: “Choose your discount.” The customer can choose from alternatives such as a percentage off, or “rent for three weeks and get a fourth week free.”
- ▶ A limited time offer of a “free gift for the first 500 customers who bring in this card” or “free gift, no purchase necessary.” These offers lend a sense of urgency and are especially good for special events or grand openings of new stores. Another way to get people to act right away is to include a “limited time only” offer.
- ▶ A “\$10 brings it home today” headline. This high-value approach has proven itself a winner, according to Nitzsche. “That’s a grabber; it’s a strong offer.” Any limitations can be covered by a line that says “see store for details.”

PRINT LARGER SIZES: A great offer is one thing; Finding the room to get the details across can be quite another. While larger postcards (such as 4x6 inches or 5x7 inches) are more expensive to print and mail, Nitzsche says it may be worth the cost because they can attract greater attention from recipients. There is also more space for your message. “You can have your main message on the front of the card and print details on the reverse side,” she notes. There will be plenty of room for the store address, information about nearby landmarks, and even a slogan about the store such as “if you are renting from someone else, you are paying too much.”

Smith recommends postcards at sizes of 8x5 inches or larger. “We prefer to see 11x6 inches, since the larger postcards tend to get noticed more easily while still qualifying for bulk postage,” he notes.

Digital printing methods, adds Smith, have now made it cost effective to incorporate variable data and print on larger paper that can be folded prior to mailing. For example, a tri-fold postcard can be printed on 6x12-inch stock that folds down to 6x4 inches. This allows for plenty of personalization in terms of the customer name and offers that are based upon previous rentals.

DESIGN CAREFULLY: Well-designed postcards attract the eye and drive your message home. Avoid trying to cram too much information into a limited space, suggests Nitzsche. “You need to leave enough white space to create an inviting card that people are likely to read.”

Nitzsche adds that the style of type and color of print has

a big impact. She tends to favor white type over a red burst or black type over a yellow one. “These combinations really seem to hop off the page.”

Four-color printing has become the standard for postcards, with most marketers noting that its response rate is far higher than that for black and white. Combine color with graphics for real impact. Remember that many recipients will look at the address side of your postcard first, so make sure there is an eye-catching picture on that side of the card as well as the front.

PERSONALIZE YOUR MESSAGE: Target your consumer directly. Benson suggests including the recipient’s name (rather than “Occupant”) in both the address block and the selling message. You can also tailor the offer to previous rental transactions from the target customer. Add further personalization with a message from the manager offering to take care of the customer personally.

One technique to heighten the postcard’s profile is to get the recipient involved in some way. “The more time the recipient spends with a piece of mail the more effective it is,” says Benson. Recently the industry has been moving toward folded postcards that open up to present larger messages. This involves the recipient in a physical activity, which extends the time spent with the mailing and heightens interest. The larger size does not add significantly to the printing cost, and if carefully planned the postage will not increase. (Folded cards can be as large as 6½ inches by 11½ inches finished size without an upsurge in the bulk postage cost.)

MAIL CONSISTENTLY: The most successful postcard campaigns time their mailings to coincide with a customer’s complete life cycle. This begins with “welcomes” to new customers, “thank you’s” to customers who have made final payments, and “we want you back” invitations to inactive people.

Midway through such a campaign, postcards can be used to “roll over” current customers into additional transactions prior to the expiration of current rentals. The card might



POSTCARDS COURTESY OF CENTRAL FILE MARKETING

offer a discount on the final payment of a currently rented item if the customer rents another item now. “Such cards can help plant the seeds for additional income,” says Smith.

Powerful as they are, it’s easy for such critical mailings to fall through the cracks and companies like Imagery have established automated mailing systems that take the detail work out of the hands of rent-to-own organizations to insure consistency to direct mail programs.

VALUABLE TOOLS: No one suggests that one isolated postcard mailing will work wonders for a rent-to-own operation’s bottom line. As part of a continuing mailing program, though, or as an eye-catching foot-in-the-door for a larger marketing campaign, the ubiquitous postcard plays a significant role. “Rent-to-own businesses can really benefit from a consistent direct mail program,” says Smith. “Postcards and other mailings to your regular customer list are valuable marketing tools.” ■

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WHILE YOU’RE AT IT,

Collect e-mail addresses

Maybe 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 Holsborg, president of Westlake Advertising Agency, Laguna Hills, California.

Here’s how it works: “Start by designing a graphically pleasing postcard offering a discount cou-

pon 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 emailed 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.”

POSTCARDS COURTESY OF IMAGERY MARKETING CONSULTANTS

