



Developing Effective Marketing Materials: Postcard Design Considerations

Amy D. Ladd
Center for Profitable Agriculture

Introduction

Customer communications are vital marketing tools that connect you and your customer. As a direct mail marketing tactic, postcards are the least expensive and most effective way to get your message out. In fact, the postage for standard sized postcards are 36% cheaper than using regular sized letters. Additionally, postcards can have a higher impact as compared to a traditional letter. Letters are enclosed in an envelope which gives the consumer the option to decide whether to open the envelope or throw it away. More often the communication never reaches the consumer because they opt to leave it unopened and dispose of it. However, with postcards, there is no envelope to hide the message, and it is almost impossible to dispose of the postcard without looking at its message.

Postcards can be used in multiple marketing strategies such as:

- A direct mailer
- A hand out
- A mini-flyer left behind at other businesses near cash registers or on bulletin boards
- A marketing piece included in press kits or passed out at trade shows

Postcards give your message immediate attention. Use postcards as¹:

- Announcements for new products or services
- Invitations to special events
- Sale notifications
- Coupons or tickets to store events
- Reminders to reorder or make a visit
- Thank you notes or a special greeting
- Special offers

Whether your goal is to expand your customer base or encourage old customers to come back, a well-designed postcard may accomplish that for you. Postcards can effectively promote products and services for any kind of business when designed properly. They should provide information quickly and to the point. Because space is limited, carefully pick only the most important details that you want to convey.

Developing a Communication Strategy

Before designing a postcard, consider the following to develop a communication strategy:

1. Primary Purpose
What is the primary purpose of your communication piece?

2. **Primary Benefit**
What unique benefit can you offer customers? What primary customer value or need can your enterprise meet?
3. **Secondary Benefit**
What other key benefits will customers receive from your products or services?
4. **Target Audience**
At whom (what target market) are you aiming this promotion?
5. **Audience Reaction**
What response do you want from our audience (come to the operation, visit a website, call an information line)?
6. **Company Personality**
What image do you want to convey in your communication?

Components of a Postcard

Because space is limited, a communication tool such as a postcard should only have a few components. They include a headline, copy and the signature. Let's take a closer look at each component:

Headline

A headline is the most important element of a communication tool. If it fails to grab the reader's attention then the entire effort will likely go unnoticed. Headlines should be short containing only 5 to 15 words which promote consumer benefits and affect the reader emotionally. The goal is to give the reader an irresistible urge to take further action.

Body Copy

Developing copy for a postcard can be challenging. Copy should be concise, with minimal words. You only have a few seconds of the readers' time so use compelling arguments and state strong facts. It is better to have one or two very strong statements than to try to rattle off a long list and risk diluting the message. The copy should persuade the reader to take action.

The use of subheadings and numbered or bulleted lists can break up a sea of type, highlighting a number of ideas quickly. However, overuse of this technique will reduce contrast and balance therefore losing its effectiveness.

Grammar and spelling are important. Run the spelling and grammar check functions on your software. It is also advisable to have several other people read over your materials to find mistakes that might have been missed.

Signature

An effective communication tool should always include a signature. The signature is where the business name, logo and contact information such as an address, phone number and web site address are located in the communication. Placement of the signature is most often located on the back panel of a postcard.

Layout and Design Considerations

Before developing a postcard consider the following design principles:

Layout

Postcards have very limited space as they consist of only a front and a back. Standard size postcards are 6" x 4 1/4" whereas larger postcards can reach up to 11 1/2" x 6 1/8" in size.

1. Back Panel

A postcard's back panel must contain sufficient space for a mailing block which includes the mailing and return addresses and space for a stamp. It is best to visit the Post Office's website for the latest size and set up guidelines before you develop your postcard, as they change frequently. The back panel should also include whatever details of your offer are deemed the most important and the business signature. It is common for the back panel to be designed only in black and white; this also saves on printing costs.

2. Front Panel

You can let your imagination run wild on the front of a postcard so long as nothing can be mistaken for an address or indicia. It is important to remember postcards are not the place to convey a lot of information. A compelling headline and visual element may be all you need to include on the front of an effective postcard communication.

Keep Your Message Very Brief

Postcards should only communicate one simple message for one primary audience. Do not try to explain all the details of the offer, just include some teaser information to get your readers to take the next step, which might be going to your website or calling your business for additional details.

Type

1. The typeface or font used in a communication piece can make a big difference to the results you achieve. Limit designs to no more than two types of font.
2. Use no more than three different font sizes. Keep in mind heading text should be twice as large as copy text and the subheading text should be half-way between. For example a postcard might set the headline font size to 20 points, subheadings at 15 points and copy text at 10 points. If you find you are reducing your font below a 10 point format, then perhaps your communication would be better suited for a flyer or brochure.
3. Upper and lower case typeface has been shown to make headlines more readable.
4. Do not mix too many type styles such as words in all capital letters, italics, bold-face, or underlined. Over use of these styles will deemphasize the message and make the postcard difficult to read.

Illustrations

Carefully chosen images can effectively communicate a message to readers, rather than using words. A single visual element can create a centerpiece which draws the eye into the communication. Graphic images or photographs are equally suitable for postcard designs. The key is to think about what you are promoting and make sure the visual elements support this message but do not overpower it. When possible, visual elements should show action or a product in use rather than static. This design strategy is even more effective when the action features people or other living things.

White Space

White space is the area on a page without words or that is left blank. This term applies even if the background has color. Crowding a communication piece with too many visual elements or information will make it look cluttered and difficult to read, therefore reducing its overall effectiveness.

Summary

Postcards may be an effective way to promote your company's products or services, especially for those on a tight marketing budget. The most effective postcards incorporate simple, design techniques that instantly attracts attention, reinforces a message and directs that attention to a call to action. Keep these simple design considerations in mind for developing a successful postcard that not only gets noticed but achieves results.

References:

Barrett, Eric. *Guidelines for Designing Effective Marketing Materials*. Ohio State University Extension.

Bruch, Megan. *Advertising 101*. CPA #111. The University of Tennessee. Center for Profitable Agriculture. February 2005.

¹Adapted from: *Select a Format: Deliver your message in the most effective way*. United States Postal Service. Available online at <http://www.usps.com/directmail/createyourmailpiece/format.htm?from=globalnav&page=selectformat>.

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