



Dealing with Recession

By Danny Flamberg

Personalizing direct mail can rekindle delight of finding something special in the mailbox

Direct mail volume is down. Big traditional mailers are departing the scene. Costs are up. And the postal rate hike that occurred on May 11.

But highly targeted and personalized direct mail can be an effective break-through medium during this spiraling recession.

1. We're inundated with opt-in and spam e-mail. There's no magic, no anticipation, and there are damn few new tricks to surprise us and prompt more, better opens. E-mail has become institutionalized, and with broad acceptance and use, come response-rate plateaus.

2. Nobody gets personal mail any more. Of the 199.4 billion pieces of mail that the post office delivers, less than 3.8% is personal. Mail is an underused channel to connect directly with people, even though our mailboxes are full of stuff.

The clear implication is that if you write somebody a personal letter—one that looks, feels and smells like a personal letter, not an ad in an envelope—you have a shot at genuinely touching and communicating with a customer or prospect.

3. Refined creative tactics exist. Direct mail creatives have tested and refined an array of techniques to optimize opens and responses—the twin moments of truth. We have a corpus of knowledge on the size, shape, texture, color, fonts, forms of address, keywords, tone and authorial voice to use in individual circumstances to address particular audiences. The trick is to blend this expertise with purchase history or behavioral data to create a compelling, relevant, personal, maybe even intimate communication. The technology to do this—and still make it look private, individual and personal—is widely available.

4. Mail enables small-batch, laser targeting. While the big-volume mailers and carpet bombers are cutting back and scrambling to survive, according to the Winterberry Group, returning to the basic letter format gives marketers a perfect platform for targeting and testing.

5. There's a first-mover advantage to be had. Because so many direct marketers are bombing customers and prospects with self-mailers, double-sided postcards, snap-packs and letter packages that scream "I'm an ad" on the envelope, the novelty of a personal letter will break through the clutter. Victory will go to the first mover who does it right because it will be so different and unexpected.

6. You can leverage remembered joy. As children, we were all surprised and delighted by something special that came to us in the mail from someone special far away. The memory and the feelings of that moment are stored and carried around by millions of people. A well-crafted personal letter taps the reservoir of good will and belief that these memories represent. Mail, more than pixels, carries embedded emotions. These impulses and sentiments can be directed your way.