

WORDS COUNT

Over the last decade, the direct marketing industry has been smitten by data base gurus who have touted the segmentation of donor files as a process akin to the magical mystery tour. And much like the wide-eyed trust we placed in Wall Street to make us rich, non-profit organizations have looked to these donor targeteers as latter-day alchemists who could spin mail into gold. So presto, changeo direct marketing, which once prided itself on the balance of smart messaging directed to the appropriate audience, has become the “science” of slice and dice conjuring with the creative process downgraded to producing formulaic “deliverables.”

Many direct mail professionals and the organizations they represent still cling to the magic bullet theory of marketing. Worse still, they look to high priced consulting firms who affirm that following a set process will produce a predictably positive result. If you still buy this kind of thinking let me suggest the purchase of a short-term, no-interest mortgage or a long-term subscription to the Lehman Brothers financial guide. One thing we have learned in recent days is that there is no sure thing.

So, can we still believe that organizational growth is a product of file massaging craftily handled by data diddlers indifferent to an organization’s mission? That the “word count” of a letter, held hostage to package cost, is more important than what is said and how ideas are expressed? Or that targeting the “right” person is simply enough if the package they receive can’t challenge their thinking or touch their hearts?

Targeted or not, I want to be talked to intelligently, even through the medium of direct mail. Like a lot of people, having survived the culture wars, divorce, multiple jobs, child rearing, an insane world and much more, the rhetoric of the past sounds rip roaringly hollow now.

In the current electoral cycle people have expressed a deep longing for truth telling ... for words that truly excite and messages that genuinely uplift. But in both style and substance, the mail I receive has the ring of yesterday’s telephone, a blah, blah of verbiage that sounds false and fails to “click” or worse, still expects to “work” because it follows the rules which once applied to a medium that has yet to change.

But change it must. Because what sounded good coming out of a typewriter in 1988, doesn’t sound nearly as good when the same style of copy, comes pouring out of a computer in 2008. No matter how much targeting we do or the kind of “deep dive analytics” we employ, today’s climate won’t justify its cost unless we put our message hats on once again. And I don’t mean sound bites, or word twists, or ensuring that the “ask” goes on the third paragraph of the first page, I mean conveying to the readers something of substance, placing on organization’s mission within a real life, 21st century context, or simply talking without hyperventilating or fear mongering.

Something is different out there in the progressive universe. They don't always give us marketers what we want when we put "please," "urgent" and "need" in the same sentence. So change we must. Because unless we do we'll continue to sound like yesterday's news. And soon we may sound like yesterday's medium as well.

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