



Gaining Members with Direct Mail

Q:

What's the best way to increase our membership using direct mail? We currently send out a membership kit (a letter, newsmagazine, and brochure) to prospects, but this hasn't gained us many new members. And, since these mailings are so expensive, we are considering eliminating the newsmagazine from future mailings and just sending a letter. Any other direct-mail ideas for increasing membership? (For your information, we are an association that helps people with the disease of spasmodic torticollis. Many people are being helped with better treatment methods for this disease and perhaps don't feel they need to join an association like ours anymore. However, I believe we offer a real lifeline and a real service to our members.)

Howard Thiel

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A:

Obviously, for one thing, the character and quality of the direct mail packages you've sent have influenced the results of your mailings. But you've given me a few hooks to hang a bit of advice on. Please take this with several grains of salt:

(1) If you believe you "offer a real lifeline and a real service to our members," it's essential that you get that message across to prospective members in a cogent and compelling way. *That* is the true subject of any letter you might send: the *benefits* of membership.

(2) I assume that your "membership kit" includes both an enrollment form (or some other response device) and a self-addressed return envelope. If not, add them to the kit. It's far too much to expect prospective members to address their own envelopes, or to remember how big a check to write in the absence of some form that spells it out clearly.

(3) You write of a "brochure" in your prospect package. In my experience, brochures have often proven to be ineffective in stimulating prospective members to join. *The letter* is the key—

and a powerful description of the benefits of membership. Sometimes, a brochure will help—if it merely illustrates and emphasizes the benefits of membership and reiterates the invitation to join. A more general brochure might very well distract prospects from the business at hand: writing a check to join.

(4) You also speak of a "newsmagazine" among the contents of your membership kit. Here, again, it's entirely possible that the added expense will be for naught. In direct mail—as in any form of advertising or marketing—it's almost always more effective to "sell the sizzle, not the steak." Instead of including an actual copy of the newsmagazine, I would develop a flyer under a headline like "FREE with your membership..." This flyer would describe the magazine in glowing terms, perhaps listing some of the most intriguing articles, and depict one or more covers.

I hope this is helpful. Good luck to you! ■

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