

insidedirectmail

The only newsletter, analysis and record of direct mail in America

October 2004

Design Lessons of the Ages

page 21

Strategy Session: From the Go-Go '80s to the Present

page 11

Direct Mail's Biggest Trends

page 18

Straight Talk: Experts Predict Mail's Future

page 30



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

Jamie Lee Gives More a Lift ...

and more of this month's Top Mailings
page 7



Brochure Ideas for Every Palate

page 12



- Direct Mail Inbox: Direct Mail Grows 20% in 20 Years *page 4*
- Five Production Improvements You Need to Ask About *page 16*
- How I Beat the Control: AVID Evolves Beyond the Double Postcard *page 24*



AVID Evolves Beyond the Double Postcard

Five years ago, AVID Media Inc., Canada's premier publisher of special interest magazines, acquired a new magazine called *Outdoor Canada*. It also inherited an existing double postcard control package from the previous publisher.

Double postcards are among the hardest-working, lowest-cost formats in direct marketing, especially for circulation promotion. They're often control killers, so the folks at AVID knew they had their work cut out in trying to lift response.

Outdoor Canada's control was an oversized "jumbo" double postcard that folded to 6" x 9". It also had two additional elements going for it: a "Free Issue" sticker and a peel-and-stick outbound address label—both of which recipients then placed on a perf-off "Free Issue Reservation Card" and mailed back. These elements added a bit of interactivity to the piece and recaptured the prospect's name and address. It was an easy-to-respond-to piece with a "Send No Money Now" risk-free offer of a free issue.

A Two-pronged Approach

In early 2000, my design partner, Jacques Cantin, and I began working with AVID to help it beat the control double postcard. We typically take a two-pronged approach to beating controls, the first of which is a "tinkers and tweaks" strategy that attempts to change elements here and there to lift response incrementally.



Because *Outdoor Canada* was a relatively new magazine, it was important that the acquisition package stress both the editorial and the offer, which ultimately was accomplished by using the back of the letter as a brochure.

Outdoor Canada itself was changing, going through a redesign as a result of new ownership. It was becoming Canada's only national magazine devoted to "heritage" sports such as fishing, hunting and camping. So we updated the look of the control,

tweaked the copy slightly and modernized the images to be more in line with the new magazine. We kept the hard-working peel-and-stick elements—the address label and free issue sticker—for reader involvement.

At the same time, however, AVID gave us the freedom to "blue sky it" and explore entirely new formats to test. In our creative approach, we were

By BARNABY KALAN

cognizant of two things: 1) cost, since a double postcard is nearly impossible to beat on ROI; and 2) impact in the mail, since the control was a slightly oversized 6" x 9" piece.

AVID selected two of the many concepts we presented for testing. The first was a self-mailer printed on heavier card stock. It was a single sheet of paper that folded to 6" x 9" with a die-cut window for the address to show through (so AVID could continue to recapture the name and address printed on the reply card). It also had a narrow die-cut, perf-off response card we felt people

would impulsively want to tear off. Printed in four colors on each side, the piece wasn't much larger than the double postcard, but it gave us more room to sell the benefits of the magazine. Again, we kept the soft offer of a free issue and no-risk guarantee.

The second test format was based on our experience that full direct mail packages often outpull self-mailers, and even double postcards, on gross response.

There simply is more room for copy and design elements to tell your story. However, there also is the added cost of printing extra pieces, lettershopping, etc.

So we proposed a "streamlined" direct mail package. It consisted of a 6" x 9" window outer envelope and a single 8½" x 14" sheet of paper that featured the letter and perf-off reply card on one side with a color "brochure" printed on the other side. A BRE gave recipients the opportunity to include payment with order, though we still offered a no-risk free issue and a bill-me option.

The perf-off reply form at the bottom of the letter also had die-cut "notches" in two corners, a device that an AVID executive had found lifted response in other test mailings. Our copy on the outer envelope and Johnson box focused on the offer:

You've been selected to receive this SPECIAL OFFER! Plus a FREE GIFT.

Look inside to see how you can get 1 year free.

The Winner

This was one of the most complex test matrixes AVID had ever done: four different creative approaches (they back-tested the original double postcard as well), plus various price and offer tests within certain cells.

Although the updated, modernized jumbo double postcard did lift response, the new streamlined direct mail package was the overall winner. This new package had a 10-percent lift on gross response over the postcard, 8.5-percent on net response (paid), and a better profit/loss ratio. In addition, package costs were only 16 percent higher than the postcard.

One interesting side note: When we tested a \$2 savings coupon in the winning package, it actually depressed response. The free issue offer was enough.

The new winning control package had another benefit for AVID, as well. "Because it was a fairly new publication for us, we were also trying to build our subscriber base, rather than simply make a profit on acquisition mailings. This new control brought in more gross responses

and that's what we were looking for—to build our subscriber base with new, clean, healthy names," says Amanda Stone, circulation promotion specialist at AVID.

"I think it comes down to the nature of the *Outdoor Canada* people we're trying to reach," says Stone. "They're not big readers, but once they have the magazine in their hands, they find it very useful. So I think this mailing had to

tell them exactly what they're getting for their money. Even though there is a fair amount of copy in [the streamlined direct mail piece], it's all very benefit-oriented. It really shows them what they're going to get and entices them to try it for free—with a free issue."

AVID began testing premiums in the fall of 2000, and a free pocketknife was the winning offer. It helped lift response on the control package by 44 percent and consistently has beaten editorial premiums.

In 2002, AVID further streamlined the control to reduce production costs, shrinking the package to a #10 window envelope; printing the outer envelope, letter and reply card in only two colors; and converting the copy and art on the back of the letter into a very simple, freestanding, four-panel flyer. This package has been the control ever since and has been adapted for other AVID publications.

"When you find something that really works, you don't want to give it up. Instead, you try to keep moving forward and find something new and creative to do that's going to attract a response. More 'tweaking' than overhauling," asserts Stone. "We're always going back to some of the elements that have worked for us in the past, to get the best of both worlds. And because we're mailing to the same people over and over, we have to keep it interesting." ■

Barnaby Kalan is an American freelance writer based in Toronto, Canada. He has 25 years of experience creating public relations, advertising and direct marketing programs for blue chip companies, agencies, small and medium-sized businesses, and nonprofit organizations. He can be reached at www.reliancemarketing.com.



The envelope of the winning package focused on Outdoor Canada's strong offer, and the BRE gave respondents the opportunity to include payment with order.