

21 TRUTHS ABOUT GENERATING QUALIFIED LEADS

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Over the past 35 years, I have been involved in the development and deployment of scores of business-to-business lead programs. Here are the 21 most significant truths I've learned.

1. Separate suspects from prospects

Too many advertising/promotion dollars – and too much time – are spent on people who will *never* buy. Unless your lead generation advertising weeds these people out, it's not working effectively. It's putting a strain on those who process and follow up on leads. The media you select, the offers you make, your creative strategy, and even your tone all play key roles in drawing out high potential prospects and screening out suspects

2. Sell the next step harder than you sell your product or service

The objective of lead generation programs is to begin the sales process, not to complete it. Your initial direct mail or e-mail should push for action on the next step – sending for more information, a free sample, a free analysis. Once you have qualified prospects, you can concentrate on a full presentation of product benefits, features, and applications.

3. Construct meaningful, actionable tests

No direct response program – whether executed in direct mail, e-mail print, online or broadcast – can be improved without valid testing. Make sure you test the most significant factors first – lists/media and offers. Once you have a read of results, react quickly and incorporate them into your program. Your results analysis should not only include number of leads and cost per lead, but cost per appointment and per sale. Making decisions on lead costs alone can be disastrous.

4. Once is not enough

Give suspects more than a single time to qualify themselves. No matter how intrusive your direct mail package, email, or online ad, your target may miss it the first time around. Give prospects multiple opportunities to say “Yes” to your offer – whether that means getting

additional information, a price quote, or a call/visit from your sales representative. The more narrowly defined your market, the more time you have to spend on each prospect.

5. Support your mail

Direct mail is still a mainstay of business-to-business lead programs. If you decide to try mail, support it. If your mail package is an expensive, dimensional one, herald its arrival with a teaser package, e-mail blast or print ad. If the mailing is relatively small, think about leaving a voice mail message with the recipient. For campaigns concentrated in particular cities, consider radio. *After* the mailing drops, follow it up with telemarketing, a quick mail reminder or an e-mail.

6. Support your sales force, distributors and wholesalers

Make sure they have full information on your campaigns – sample packages, copies of the print ads and e-mail messages, media utilized, launch dates. Keep them posted on results. An exciting “sell in” can be as important to your success as anything else you do.

7. Don't make it TOO easy to reply...

... if you want more QUALIFIED leads. Checking off a single box on a reply card and putting it in an outbound mail pickup may not a prospect make. Simply asking prospects to hit “Reply” to your e-mail may not qualify them either. Ask your prospects to fill in just a few lines of information and you'll boost the quality of your response without damaging quantity.

8. Let your prospects tell you how serious they are

Allow several options on your response form – ranging from “Have your representative call me immediately” to “No interest now. Call me in six months.” Even the “no interest now” respondents are prospects.

9. ENVELOPE, please!

Unless your objective is to drive prospects to your web site, it's unlikely that self-mailers or postcards are going to work for you. Yes, they're cheaper to produce, but the cost in lost opportunities is astronomical.

In mailing to certain segments, you need envelopes that ape one-to-one correspondence – lasered, closed-face, no teaser copy. Words like “Important,” “Confidential,” or “New” can kill one-to-one perception.

In other segments, think of your envelope as a billboard for what's inside. Use sizes that will stand out in the mail. Test a strong offer or powerful benefit statement as teaser copy.

10. Plan separate creative strategies and offers for different levels of decision-makers

Even if you're prospecting within a specific industry, copy and offer – and sometimes graphics – must change by function and by the objective of your communication. The highly technical approach you make to the head of the IT department will not work in addressing the CEO. And the CEO's possible interest in your product/service will differ from the CFO's.

11. Understand the “hot button”

Executives are much more often concerned about their *time* than about saving a few dollars. Direct mail efforts that don't demand a lot of time and that demonstrate how the product/service can pay back hours works well to management segments. If the savings are enormous, that's different. And the best story is getting the recipient to believe responding is the first step in MAKING BIG MONEY. Middle managers may be more concerned about preservation (of their jobs) and about making a safe, unquestionable choice.

12. Test a survey approach, particularly with suspects

Carefully structured, a questionnaire mailing can help you learn more about your target audience and how to approach it with follow up efforts. Surveys engage interest as they begin selling. If they're kept short, surveys can work in e-mail efforts as well.

13. Throw away the concept of response percentage

If your market universe is 1,000, a 2% response rate is totally insufficient. Standard direct mail will not suffice. You need to call as many media into play as possible. Your direct mail must be an “event in the mail box.” That may involve creating and mailing hand-assembled cartons, sending out videos, or delivering a series of premiums by courier. On the other hand, in working with very large universes (or with a very small sales force), a 2% response may mean you haven't done a very good job of pre-qualifying prospects. You may be better off with a .5% response.

14. Use testimonials and case histories

Aside from the credibility they imbue, they provide the prospect with applications and usage guidance. Large corporations should select testimonials or case histories that emphasize the

company's ability to provide fast, personal service. Smaller marketers should use endorsements reflecting on the company's strength and stability. Include testimonials which underscore how customers were rewarded by finding out more when they were prospects.

15. Peg your copy and offer on the life cycle of your product/service

If you're pioneering a new product, service or process, your efforts will have to do more education to get an appointment. If you're a new entry in an established category, you must convince prospects why they should even consider a switch.

16. When in doubt, play it straight

Humor and cuteness can cut through clutter in a business environment. However, if you have the slightest doubt about how the message will be received, play it safe and use a strong statement of benefits to break through.

17. Include a "keeper" in your mailings...

... particularly if you're planning only one mailing. We all want response immediately, but in most cases (98%?) recipients have no need to respond at the moment. Give them something to remember you by after the "advertising" portion of your mailing has been discarded. It could be anything from a wallet-size calendar or tips for saving time or improving energy to a pad of post-it notes with your company's name on them.

18. Use premiums judiciously

The right premium increases response to your lead-generation efforts, and may even lower your cost per response. It also maintains conversions to appointments and sales. But overemphasizing the premium can bring you response from "freebie junkies." Select premiums with obvious value, but not enough value to be a bribe.

19. Test response lists

Even though you're not selling directly through the mail, you ought to test response lists against the compiled lists you may be using. Proven willingness to open and respond to direct mail solicitations is as important in lead generation as it is in direct selling. Controlled circulation publication lists help achieve the quantity of names you may be looking for.

20. Stretch your prospect base

If you're mailing to technical functions, or even to middle management types, test a routing slip (real or simulated) on the outer envelope. Also include a second response form in the package. It can add as much as 20% to results. If you're using e-mail, ask the recipient to forward it to appropriate parties within the company.

21. Transform gatekeepers into advocates

If you mail to upper management types, be aware that most of their mail is still screened by administrative assistants. To get your message on top of the pile (instead of in the circular file), address a message to the screeners explaining why the VIP should see your communication.

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