by Don Lancaster

Catalog Musings

I recently upgraded to using a "real" catalog from my older simple brochures. So I thought it might be a good time to review several of the fundamentals for effective small scale and low budget catalog production…

The Perception is the Reality

The only clues an outsider has of what you are and what you do lie in what they see and hear. All of your editorial materials, your ads, your catalogs, your reviews, and your phone voice are all they really have to go on.

What they see (and hear) is what they get.

Because of this, it is extremely important to make your catalogs fairly represent what you wish to be perceived as. The first glance at your catalog or the first few words over the phone or the first few characters on a screen are more important than all of the rest combined.

A Catalog is a Business Plan

A catalog layout *demands* a careful resource allocation. Which makes you think a lot about exactly what kind of venture you are in and where you want to be heading. It also forces you to think about your products. And how they relate to each other and your competition.

Deciding what to include and what to leave out forces you to make decisions on what is and is not working.

Because a catalog is so valuable as a business planning tool, you definitely want to play a major personal role in creating its content and conveyed message.

Your best names are your best names

Your own past customers also will be your finest future customers. You know they buy products from you. They know what you have to offer. So, these are by far your most valuable names of all. Very often, a tightly targeted new mailing with a new offer to a previous customer list might generate a five percent response. Compared against a one percent response with ordinary highly qualified but outside names. Or a zero response with bad names.

You will want to aggressively maintain a data base of all previous customers and others who have shown interest in any of your products. This should form the core of your promotional activities.

I apply the working rule-of-thumb "All list brokers are crooks." Not once have I ever seen any exception to this rule. My worst horror story was a LaserWriter owners list that ran a *thirty* percent nixie rate (one percent is normal) and a zero percent response.

When you use third party names, *always* test a small but significant sample. Otherwise, you are almost certain to literally end up paying others cash up front to haul your product away. And remember that your final rollout will *never* come remotely near your test response.

You will find "hot" response states and "cool" or even "dead" ones. After a while, there is no point in mailing to cold names in an area that will not respond anyhow.

Most of my useful new names are generated through my no-charge technical helpline. And through inquiries from display and classified ads. As we've seen in the past, I only rarely pay the list price for any ad. Instead, I'll try to work out an editorial exchange deal or barter for promotional services. Or try for a "space available" rate.

Once I even traded a used hot tub cover for an ad.

The key to the value of a name is how much effort that name made to reach you. The best is when they send you money. Or quest a *tinaja* with you. Second best is when they go out of their way to ask you something or send you a letter. Near the bottom is someone who is suspected to have had a mild interest in something. And worst of all is a name that got compiled out of some directory.

Note that some of the new CD ROM phone lists let you generate your own specialized name lists at zero cost if you are interested in one particular focus area.

Once again, *test, test, test.*

Avoid Post Office Hassles

The Post Office is just about the *worst* possible way to place any catalog in your customer's hands. Much better methods include: (A) one-on-one handing one to a walk-in client; (B) including one with each order shipped; (C) booth pickups at trade shows or conferences; (D) sending instant electronic catalogs over the Internet or a commercial BBS service; (E) using FAX-on-demand, or better yet (F) using new PostScript-on-demand. PostScript-on-demand utterly blows away FAX-on-demand on speed, cost, and quality.

Through superb *Acrobat PDF.*

All choices (A) through (F) give the customer instant and certain results. Something the Post Office could not even remotely dream of.

What if you have to use your Post Office? After failing badly at bulk mail for many years, I very strongly feel that first class mail is the *only* way to go. Some bulk mail never gets delivered. None of it gets delivered in a reasonable time. When and if bulk mail actually arrives, it gets viewed as trash and is treated accordingly. Mixed in with great

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heaping piles of even worse junk. A highly qualified name deserves much better than this.

I once had a costly 80,000 piece bulk mailing get held up for three weeks because a one inch tag on one of the big sacks was not to a postal inspector's liking. It was legal – he just didn't like it. That very same mailing generated a *zero* response from South Carolina and Wisconsin, suggesting that much of it was simply dumped.

At least for me, the small cost savings of bulk mail was completely negated by all the hassles, the delays, the time wasted by mindless petty bureaucrats, those hidden extra costs, and the reduced end user acceptance. Never again.

I've also found out that foreign mail is even worse. At least for me. The Canadian post office flat out refused to accept my earlier first class brochures. Which is but one of the many reasons that I find it inappropriate to seek out any foreign sales.

Life is far too short.

Watch your first class weight closely. You will have a quantum leap in costs once you get past a single stamp. I have found that a saddle stapled sixteen page catalog that's made up of a heavier cover sheet and three inside sheets just barely squeaks by with a single stamp. When you go over, consider a trim or a slight scale reduction.

Some mailers like to use commerative stamps. On the theory that it adds a personal touch. The odds are your response goes up just about in proportion to your extra costs. If you go this route, avoid controversial subjects or colors that clash with your catalog.

Make it Easy to Order

You should give the readers of your catalog as many ways as possible for them to respond to your products. As before, that "check in the mail" Post Office route is just about the *worst* possible way to close any deal.

Better, faster, and more modern ways to order include (A) Phone, preferably to a 24 hour live and courteous operator; (B) FAX; (C) walk in one-on-one; (D) national electronic BBS, (E) local BBS; or (F) use the Internet. Any of these routes are ridiculously faster and more convenient than the post office.

Do you need a removable order blank and postpaid response envelope included with your catalog? Payment options (A) through (F) do not. I chose to simply print the order blank as the center page of the catalog. This becomes a worksheet and a record for your buyer. For those who insist in using the mail, this page can be cut out.

Payment by *VISA* or *MasterCard* is an absolute must. A few years back, it did get impossibly difficult for most unknown startups to become a MasterCard merchant when their primary sales were going to be "TO" telephone orders or "MO" mail orders. Lately, this has eased somewhat. But you do still have to persistently shop around to become a MasterCard merchant. There's also third parties that sublet their merchant status. Watch legalities and costs here.

Most "other" credit card companies usually end up so arrogant and so restrictive that it probably doesn't pay you to seek them out. Nearly everybody who has these cards also has VISA and MasterCard anyway.

What about COD sales? We stopped these several years ago when the return rate exceeded 26 percent! The normal problem rate with MasterCard is well under one percent, and most of those get resolved in your favor. Like it or not, most of the COD crowd tends to be high risk losers of one sort of another. At least for me, they simply are not worth all of the hassles they create.

Do not get sucked into cashing your receipts as they arrive. This is an *absolutely certain* route to business failure. We post our VISA's immediately before we ship. Those new electronic verification machines sure are nice. Even with its fixed monthly rental costs, you are usually way ahead if you use it at least several times a day.

Your shipment, of course, is by way of UPS. Who are infinitely preferable to the Post Office on all counts. After countless years of costly problems and hassles, we simply refuse all foreign orders. And never send them catalogs in the first place. Making sure that undesirable noncustomers stay that way is as important as keeping favored ones.

Bounced checks and flakey invoicing is no big deal. At least not for us. The overwhelming majority of checks are good and most invoices eventually get paid. We charge $5 extra for invoicing. The usual problem with credit invoices is slow payment. Especially schools and the feds.

We try to ship most orders within 24 hours. If shipping is to be delayed more than a month, you must send them a card. If the delay is longer than that, federal law says you must send them a positive response card.

Consider On-Demand Publishing

The three traditional routes to catalog publishing are catalog printers, local jiffy printing, and in-plant printing facilities. Catalog printers are probably best when you are sending out more than 25,000 catalogs per year. Also the cheapest in these humongous quantities. Suitable sources advertise in dozens of trade journals which include *Target Marketing*, *Inside Media*, and *Direct*. Check out the *Oxbridge Media Finder* for a complete listing.

Local jiffy printing is expensive and guarantees mixups and hassles. And I've seen several times where ink-based in house printing became a tail-wagging-the-dog resource gobbling empire. An empire that completely forgets that the primary goal of any venture is delivering desirable final products to customers. At the best possible price.

Instead, I elected to use *PostScript* Book-on-demand laser printing for my catalogs. This is by far the cheapest and most flexible route if you need less than fifty catalogs per day or so. Up front costs are minimal, and turnaround is quite fast. There is very little scrap and most errors can be instantly corrected. So can any prices or upgraded product offerings. The name and address get optionally printed at the same time the rest of the catalog does. Which gets rid of all mailing label hassles. In one swell foop. You can also customize each catalog with a handwriting font.

An absolutely ideal BOD laser printer would include genuine *Adobe* PostScript level II, a 600 DPI enhanced resolution, stunning halftone photos, a bolt-on duplexer, twelve pages per minute minimum speed, an internal hard disk, cheaply refillable cartridges, a popular engine, needed repair manuals readily available, and a street price under $2000. That brand new *Hewlett Packard* LaserJet 4M+ now currently meets or exceeds everything but that essential duplexer and a hard disk; these deficiencies may shortly be corrected. The bolt-on duplexer is promised this fall. And the hard disk is such a glaring omission that it would be

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extremely dumb for HP to not offer it real soon like.

At present, I use a loaner 4SiMX duplexing workhorse and temporarily fake the hard disk by using full page forms downloads and a few sneaky compiling tricks.

By working directly in compiled raw PostScript, your catalog printing can be super fast and largely unattended. You only need your computer for a few seconds to *start* the job. The rest is automatic, generating around fifty complete catalogs per hour.

The printer first grabs a *LaserCast* glossy color cover and prints both sides. Toner does stick extremely well to this exciting new product. The printer next picks up three ordinary color sheets, then prints and auto collates them. On the 4SiMX, the catalogs are auto-jogged into two stacks. You simply grab each catalog, fold it, saddle staple it, seal it, optionally stamp it, and ship it. A trim is optional.

Further details appear in *www.tinaja.com/post01.html*.

After testing just about everything, we are back to plain old removable Scotch tape to hold the catalogs closed. *Never, NEVER staple a catalog shut!* This will infuriate your readers and *guarantee* near-zero results.

Pay Attention to Detail

Your catalog paper selections and colors, the graphics, the art, and the words all combine to create an overall visual effect. These *must* all work together harmoniously in an integrated whole. The wrong type face, poorly chosen typographical weights, the wrong balance of white space, or graphics too weak or too dominant can all instantly ruin the effect you are after.

The best route here is to steal the plans. Get all the junk mail you possibly can and set aside the stuff that works for you. Then try to picture your end users and reselect what probably will work for them.

Let's see. A good place to start copywriting is with that ancient AIDA ploy. Short for *Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action*. Another ancient rule: *The more you tell, the more you sell*. Spell out exactly what it can do for them.

Don't spend *any* time on image building or hype. Just tell them what you have and how it works, and how much it costs. Emphasizing the many benefits they will receive by whipping out their VISA card.

Be sure to include prices! Obviously and prominently. Nothing galls me more than technical ads where the prices are on a "don't ask – don't tell" basis. The first thing that enters into nearly anyone's mind when reading an ad is "How much does it cost?"

Please don't keep them in suspense.

I've found it handy to make each catalog page stand on its own as a mini-ad. Besides actually using some of these in magazine display advertising, when someone tears up their catalog, they still have your name and phone number on all the remaining sheets.

Right side pages early in your catalog tend to get read more often and in more detail than the others. So arrange what you really want to sell to take up your best slots. And proportion the space to the expected income each item is expected to generate. But keep the overall "flow" of the catalog in a logical order. Be sure to include a personal message of some sort early in your catalog. Leave them feeling they are dealing with real people, rather than some mindless megacorporation.

Be sure to offer discounts, bargains, sales, or closeouts on a few items. In my catalog, I offer bulk rates on *Incredible Secret Money Machine III* orders, the *Lancaster Library* tech collection, and that *Whole Works* PostScript collection.

All at attractive prices.

You can fill one $60 order for a lot less than you can two $30 ones. Much less.

You might want to have two or more catalog designs. I use one with fancy fonts in it for the real catalogs, and a separate color and "hot linked" website version.

Naturally, I strongly feel that PostScript is the *only* way to go when doing a catalog. Either on your own as I do, or by using popular pagemaking and illustration packages.

Once you have an image that works for you, fine tune it. Instead of making up something totally different each time. Again, the perception becomes the reality. Clients get used to seeing you in a certain way. It is far better to adjust and improve, rather than making sudden changes.

Make it a Keeper

Be sure to include something in your catalog that makes your reader want to keep it forever as a family heirloom. It is reasonable to set aside as much as *one quarter* of your space for editorial information your clients will perceive as valuable reference material. Or the latest inside scoop.

In my case, I went back over nearly a decade of resource research and pulled out hundreds of impossible-to-find secret sources for hardware hacking and PostScript info. Stuff I've gotten hundreds of helpline calls asking for. The very best of the best was distilled down into a tight no-bull format. To work as a keeper, the info presented *must* stand alone and *must* be obviously useful.

A weaving associate includes warping calculators, color charts, and dye recipes in all her catalogs. And sometimes even actual yarn samples. Naturally, there's a different dye recipe in each catalog, so you have to save them all for a complete set. Even generally useful stuff like an area code directory or a zip map or a resistor color code chart or key math equations or some association directory or useful web links or free samples should do just fine.

For more information

Much more on all of this appears in my *Incredible Secret Money Machine III*, my *Book-on-demand Resource Kit* and in files on my *Guru's Lair* website at *www.tinaja.com* ✦

UPDATE: That last postal rate increase was unacceptable. They've priced themselves out of the market. Concentrate instead on your online PDF catalog. Done in heavily linked full color with lots of expandable digital camera photos. Find a sample at *www.tinaja.com/synlib01 Or, pick up more details in my www.tinaja.com/acrob01.html* and also in my *www.tinaja.com/weblib01.html*

Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 35 books and countless articles. Don maintains a US technical helpline you'll find at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all his own books, reprints and consulting services.

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