

Effective Communication: A Guide for Congregations

Direct Mail as a Public Relations Tool

Pat Patillo, associate general secretary for communication, National Council of Churches, says "Direct mail is a good way to get first-time involvement, but not a good way to keep in touch."

In some communities knocking on doors is not possible or is considered suspect, yet you want to reach people who might attend your congregation. TV and newspaper ads are often too costly. Attractive fliers, cards or brochures - even CDs - sent to every home in your community are inexpensive ways to invite newcomers, though the task may seem daunting. Try targeting a half-mile radius or some other specific area.

To some, direct mail is junk; much tossed without ever being opened or read. In addition, e-mail is increasingly an alternative to direct "snail mail," less expensive and about as effective. A response rate of 1 or 2 percent of people actually following through (ordering, attending, signing up, etc.) is considered good for the average mailing.

Direct mail can be a powerful medium to reach and appeal to people's emotions, and many people do read it because they are lonely, curious or intrigued. In one survey 2,000 adults were asked what daily events they looked forward to most. In first place was "checking to see what I got in the mail." Most people read items that relate to a current need. For instance, if you're in the market for a new car, you suddenly start seeing and reading ads for cars.

People who are currently searching for a church home or wanting to add new meaning to their lives are likely to take time to read a well- designed piece from your congregation. People who have just moved into a new neighborhood might be looking for a congregation. New congregations use direct mail as a tool for announcing start-up plans.

Advantages of Direct Mail

1. Cost: One big advantage of direct mail is costs (bulk rates are about half first-class postage). Any time you want to send more than 200 copies of the same thing, you may benefit from these lower rates.

2. Targeted Audience: Direct mail allows selectivity. You can target a specific group of people to receive your mailing; sort by age, gender, socioeconomic level, interests, occupations, etc.

3. Accountability: You will know in a very short time whether the specific, concrete invitation worked, though the measure will not necessarily be the number of walk-ins on a Sunday morning.

Format Possibilities

There are many possibilities for mailings - from hand-addressed engraved invitations to full-color folders to simple postcards.

Simple flier

A simple letter- or legal-size flier offers enough space for essentials, a listing of various activities, directions and phone numbers, plus an eye-catching headline or photo. Often torn without protection, putting them in an envelope is helpful.

Postcard

A postcard (small, standard size or oversize) immediately suggests brevity; the reader knows it won't take much time to check the message. The congregation should not do much more on a postcard than attract attention: give name, location, times of services, phone number and Web address. Postcards do reduce postage costs.

Multi-panel folder

If you wish to include a much longer written message, multiple photos and quotes, you should consider a larger, two- or three-page folder that will give you a chance to describe in more detail the benefits of being part of your congregation.

How to Create the Best Mailing

There are three main goals for a mailing: get the reader to open or notice your piece; get the person to read it; and finally persuade him or her to act on it. Here are some ways to increase your chances:

1. Carefully consider your objective in sending the mailing. Is it a general invitation? To a specific function? To a particular group or activity (singles, young mothers, etc.)? Make sure the mailing piece fulfills your objective.
2. Word the headline or opening lines to stress the benefit people will get by attending the event or being part of your group. Begin by phrasing it in "You" language.
3. Make sure it is obvious what you want people to do in response to your mailing: call, visit, clip a coupon and mail it in?

4. Think about sending your mailing with first-class postage and handwritten or typed address. Although more time-consuming, "first class mailings get the best results.

Basic Things You Need to Know

Sending direct mail is going to take commitment to follow through with the legwork involved.

If you decide to mail at third-class rates:

You will need to file an "Application to Mail at Special Bulk Third-Class Rates" at the post office. There is no charge for this application, but your congregation will need to document your nonprofit status with a tax exemption number or other evidence; in some cases, where the post office asks for bylaws to satisfy this requirement, the bylaws of your synod may be sufficient.

You will need a "Bulk Third Class Nonprofit Permit" which costs a fee and can be used for any bulk mailing. When you mail "bulk rate," it is best to use a postage meter or to apply for an imprint permit number which currently costs an additional fee for the right to send out mail without applying stamps. In this case a permit number is printed directly onto your envelope or flier ("indicia").

Bulk Mail Permit Number

Acquiring a permit number can take from four to six weeks. You will need to fill out an application form and pay the one-time imprint fee. Securing this permit number and the application to mail at special non-profit bulk third class rates may be the first thing you'll want to do, if your congregation doesn't already have such a permit, but meanwhile you can be working on getting the copy for your flier or card designed and typeset.

Buying a Mailing List or Labels

1. You can order a residential mailing list for your area from many brokers. The labels should provide: ZIPcodes or carrier routes within a ZIPcode, the complete street addresses for homes or apartments - no businesses or "boxholders."

2. To order a list, check with the local post office for the specific carrier routes you would like to include. This information is found in their Carrier Route Information System printout (CRIS). In smaller cities the local post office may have to order it from a larger city post office. In larger cities go to the Address Information Systems office

at the post office to get the CRIS. The list broker will need to know which carrier routes you want.

3. Other types of lists: If you wish to target audiences, you can find lists for specific age groups, occupations, new parents, parents of teenagers, etc.

If you decide to use preprinted labels, buying them may require a minimum purchase, which may be more labels than you need for one mailing; order duplicates to be used for later mailings to meet the minimum. Each set should be provided already sorted by ZIPcode and carrier route.

If you have access through a local business to label-applying equipment, order "Cheshire" machine labels to avoid hand application. Be sure to check the size of the labels the equipment handles before you purchase labels.

Processing the Mailing

Applying labels can be a great volunteer activity. Your local post office can give you valuable information and assistance, sometimes providing free rubber bands, bags and so on. Be sure your volunteers keep the items in order by ZIP codes.

Check with your local post office for specific instructions on how to arrange and bag your "carrier route presort mail."

Final Word

Helping a congregation grow is hard work. One consultant, Lyle Schaller, compares it to pumping water uphill: when you stop pumping, it runs back down the hill. Getting started in direct mail will feel like that at times, but awareness of your congregation will certainly increase in the community as a result of your efforts.

Resources

"Direct Mail: Fundamentals for Success," article by M.L. Hartman at <http://www.marcommwise.com/article.phtml?id=827>

Much help for all aspects of direct mail marketing is available at <http://www.usps.com/directmail/>



