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Lumpy Mail: An Engine for Lead-Generation

By Steve Cuno

There's nothing quite like a box or bulging padded envelope in the mail. It makes your inner child hop up and down, tug your sleeve and ask — nay, nag: "What's inside? Huh? HUH? *WHAT'S INSIDE?*" This happens even when the package contains something you ordered. The effect is multiplied when it's something you didn't order.

An eager, inner child dwells within us all. Even hard-to-reach corporate curmudgeons, who take pride in chucking unopened direct mail or delegating the task to administrative assistants, harbor such a child. And that is precisely why well-executed lumpy mail works. It has the uncanny ability to find its way to the curmudgeon's hands — and heart. It even charms their administrative assistants, some of whom, rumor has it, also once had hearts.

If you want to reach business decision-makers, lumpy mail is your secret weapon. (I could use the more common term, "three-dimensional direct mail." But my own inner child, who likes saying "lumpy," begs your indulgence.)

How powerful is lumpy mail? Consider a credit card provider seeking face-to-face meetings with bank CEOs. Our agency mailed each CEO a box containing a sales letter and a First-Class Mail® reply card. I should also mention that the box was five feet long, to accommodate the pair of stilts that we enclosed. The sales letter promised to help banks compete with "the big guys." Our client set appointments with 40 percent of the mailing list and booked more than \$65 million in business the first year alone.

Not that lumpy mail must be so elaborate. For a client with a tiny budget, we mailed a letter, reply card — and fake mustache — in a Number 10 envelope. The envelope headline read, "Clever disguise enclosed." The pitch? That retailing our client's product would be immensely profitable. The mustache? To hide from long-lost friends showing up for a handout. The package pulled a 25-percent response.

Then there was the air horn we mailed for a community bank (36-percent response), the kazoo for a business service (25 percent), the Lone Ranger mask for a half-million-dollar software product (25 percent), the beanbag elephant for a regional bank (56 percent), the two-headed coin for a transit company (47 percent) ...

I'll resist the temptation to keep raving. Let's move on to what makes lumpy mail work from a strategic standpoint. Here are six musts:

1. Mail something of value. Junk doesn't impress. Neither does a pen or mug with your logo. Note that "of value" needn't mean "expensive." The mustache cost our client less than a buck. Recipients kept it because it was fun. Many donned it and paraded around the office.

2. Mail something with “head-scratcher” value. The last thing you need is for recipients to know what you plan to say before you say it. Make them scratch their head and wonder, “Why did XYZ Company send me a hockey puck?” (The hockey puck mailing, by the way, pulled an 8-percent response.) To find out, they will have to read.

3. Write a darned good sales letter. The lumpy enclosure charms, grabs attention and makes people read, but the letter sells. Do not enclose — and for heaven’s sake do not substitute — a flyer. Not even a really cool one. It will drive response down.

4. Don’t tell too much. Too much information relieves prospects of having to meet with you. Tell enough to create curiosity. Then invite the reader to contact you to learn more. Keep the letter to a page, and add no literature other than a reply card.

5. Be relevant. “Now that I have your attention ...” isn’t strategic; it’s juvenile. Your lumpy enclosure must underscore a salient point. When we mailed high-end wooden puzzles to hospital-based pathologists, we likened the puzzle to laboratory management challenges. Recipients could receive the puzzle’s solution by meeting with a sales rep. (15-percent response.)

6. Follow up by phone. In every case cited here resulting in meetings with more than 25 percent of recipients, there was telephone follow-up. Lumpy mail generates inquiries on its own, but you’ll double or triple results by calling every name on the list. Try opening with, “I’m the one who sent you the [life preserver].” (Yes, we mailed those, too. 40 percent.) Then ask for an appointment. (Hint: Limit mailing quantities to what you can realistically follow up.)

A rare stick-in-the mud may say, “If you must do this to get my attention, you can’t be any good.” Should that happen, congratulations. You’ve just identified someone you don’t want for a customer. Move on to the next name.

Lumpy mailings are powerful, effective and a blast. Right now, we’re preparing to mail deodorant soap for a high-end audio products manufacturer. Next, we’re mailing volleyballs for a law firm.

I’ll let you know how it goes.

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