Direct Marketing
the little red book

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Direct Marketing
best practices

So, you want to be a direct marketer? Learning about the best practices of the industry will help you avoid many of the pitfalls that new comers to the field get caught up in. Once you have learned these things your direct marketing pieces will communicate faster, clearer, and more effectively. More importantly, they will get better response, which is the ultimate goal of the direct marketer.

Over the years direct marketers have honed the techniques that lie hidden behind the creation of effective direct marketing advertising. The purpose of this manual is to briefly discuss some the best practices that drive those techniques and make them accessible at a glance.

Admittedly, it is not possible to detail all of the tips and tricks of the trade in a volume of this nature. That will not be the focus of this manual. Instead consider this your first step along the road to understanding why direct marketers do what they do.

The Basics
the canons of the art

Before going into any details about individual marketing pieces we should review some of the principles that make direct marketing what it is. They are the basic building blocks that every good marketer should keep in mind as they go about creating a marketing piece.

The 50\20\20\10 Rule:

Most direct marketers break the elements that drive direct marketing down into some scale similar to this. These percentages represent those elements that drive the effectiveness of the marketing piece.

50%	**Audience selection** represents the most important portion of your messages ability to be effective.
20%	**The offer** the piece will be built around accounts for the next portion of the messages effectiveness quotient.
20%	**The timing** of the direct marketing effort will be crucial to its success.
10%	**The creative format** that you use will account for the rest of your messages ability to be successful.

While it is true that each of these elements carry different weight in determining the overall success of the market effort it is important to point out that none of them stand alone. A direct marketing effort that does not take all of these elements into account will fail to achieve its goals.

Audience is Everything:

If you are going to remember any rule in direct marketing this should be the one. Whichever portion of the creative piece you are working on, the design, or the copy, it is important to remember that you are speaking to a specific audience. Your work should be tailored so that is conveys the right message to that audience.

Time Is of the Essence:

The average print ad has three seconds to capture the attention of its audience. A direct marketing envelope has two, while the

interior message has another five, if you can get the prospect to venture that far. Billboards, bus-boards, and web sites all have similar numbers attached to them. As a direct marketer you can not afford to waste your prospect's time. Don't. Make your point, make it stick, and make it fast.

If it doesn't do something, don't do it:

Since there is so little time for you to get your message across, you should make every piece of your creative work for its keep. If you don't have a good reason to use something, don't use it.

But what if I like it that way:

As a trained professional it is important to remember that sometimes, "I like it that way", is a good reason to use something. But before you fall back on that excuse you should ask yourself why you like it. If the answer is "I just do" you're probably better off not doing it.

Following your intuition is important but make sure you question it before you listen to it. If you don't your client will.

Ignore the rules, but only after you have learned them:

Don't be afraid to break a few best practice rules. But, if you are going to break the rules make sure you know what they are before you do it. And, make sure you do it wisely.

There is nothing wrong with pushing the boundaries a little and trying something new. Just keep in mind that the rules are there because they work.

Story Telling
a dialogue with your audience

Your job as a creative person is to find a way to tell your audience a story. Whether writing copy, or designing graphics, you should lead your audience though a discovery process that keeps them wanting to find out more at every step. Much like the traveling story-tellers of old, you will use drama, humor, and maybe even a few hand gestures to accomplish that task. Before you can do that, though, you have to decide what story to tell.

Before you dive into your narrative you must determine who you are going to talk to, why you want to talk to them, and what you really want to say to them.

Who:

This is the part where you start using terms like demographics, psychographics, economics, and generational marketing. Before you can send a message you have to know who you are sending it to. Ask for as much information about your audience as you can get.

The age of your audience will play an extremely important role in how you talk to them, either visually or in words. If you haven't done a lot of research into generational marketing you should spend some time doing research into how best to address your target generation. You should do this even if you belong to the target generation. Remember, it's not you you are talking to.

You should also ask about the economic background of your audience. Their ethnicity, geographic location, education level, all play a role in how they will receive your message. While you are at it, you should ask everything else you can think to ask about your audience; you can't know too much at this stage of the process.

I may have said this, but in case you haven't caught it, the cardinal rule is that you should find out everything you can about your audience. They are the major portion of what will determine how successful your direct marketing will be. If you don't know them well enough to tell them something that will resonate with them your efforts will fail.

Take the time to do the research, it will pay off.

Warning

Your best source of information about who your prospective audience is your client. But, there are times when the client is unsure who they are really marketing to. If you find yourself in that position **stop everything**. Make them sit down with you and define who they are marketing to.

They will thank you for it.

The web offers a good, quick, strategy for starting this process if there are no other sources available. Researching the marketing techniques that competitors are using can jump start your efforts.

If budget allows contact a marketing firm that specializes in this kind of thing. They will make your life easier, and help you target your massage more effectively.

Why:

Establish the goal of your intended communication. Do you want to build the clients brand, drive their sales up, or just get someone to leave their name so the client can contact them with more information. There are different strategies for reaching each of these goals, and this is the time to identify which you will use.

What:

Once you have determined who you're talking to, and why you want to talk to them, you will need to determine what you want to say. This is where you decide what to say to tell the most effective story you can to get the prospect's attention.

This is the fun part, telling the actual story. How do you get your audience to jump out of their seats when you want them to? How far can you make them jump?

This is where the creative minds all roll up their sleeves and start brainstorming to see how best to convey their message.

Medium
how will you deliver your message

Before you begin working on your direct marketing piece, you will have to decide how to present it. Will it be more effective to send it as an e-mail, or put it on a billboard? Maybe it will reach more people if you send it through the mail. Or, is a web based micro-site the most appropriate medium?

Your selection of communication medium will be determined by many different factors. You will need to consider things like your client's budget, the size and distribution of your audience, their age, interests, and spending habits. Remember, as you look at all of these factors, that direct marketing is all about getting the right message to the right person. Choose your communication medium with that in mind, and you will do fine.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you look at your choices of medium:

- We like to hold things in our hands. Traditional mail lets us do that. People still like to get something tangible in the mail, so don't write it off as old and worn out.
- Many web browsers are just browsing and aren't serious buyers. Use the web if you want to get a lot of less qualified response to your message.
- Billboards get seen, but most people won't pull over to the side of the road to write down anything they see on one. Keep the message short and memorable.

Building Blocks
the tools we will use

As we continue our discussion of direct marketing practices we will refer back to several basic design and copy writing principles that are common to all of the different medium we will discuss. The way these principles will be applied in each medium will be discussed in further detail in those sections that are dedicated to each medium. However, it wouldn't hurt for us to take a few minutes to discuss these principles in a broader sense before looking at them in specific detail.

In the next few pages we will take a broad look at some of the basic building blocks of both design, and copy, as it is used in direct marketing.

The Graphics
the primary building blocks

Its often the simplest principles that are overlooked as designers get caught up in the process of being creative. Yet, it is always the basics that help us most effectively communicate our message to our audience. If God is in the details, these are the things he is looking at.

The following principles are things that I have often seen professional designers overlook in their work. They are the things I most often send those designers back to re-think. Yet they are the most fundamental principles of design.

As you work on your design, remember it is your job to lead the audience through the communication process and these basic building blocks are the tools you will use to do that. The way you arrange the words on the page, the colors you use, even the placement of the individual elements will say something to your audience–use them wisely.

Hierarchy:

Your primary role as a designer is that of a communication specialist. Like a story teller of old you will share bits and pieces of your message with your audience as you lead them through the process of communicating with them. To be effective at this, you need to control each part of the message they will hear, regulating how, when, and where, they will hear it. That is what visual hierarchy is about–controlling the pace of the story.

The graphic elements you will chose for your design will naturally arrange themselves on the printed page in hierarchical order. As a designer, you can take advantage of this phenomenon to lead your viewers eye from point to point across the page.

Here are a few of the tools you can use to control how your audience experiences the elements of your message:

Scale: The bigger an element is the more it will draw the eye.

Color: The brightness, value and hue of a color can draw your viewer's eye to the visual element.

Placement: In a Western society we read from the top left corner of the page to the bottom right one. The placement of graphic elements on the page will determine the order they are recognized in. Elements placed in the top left will appear in the mind's eye of your viewer before those placed lower down upon the page.

Alignment: Lining up the edges, centers, tops, or other attributes of graphic elements will establish visual relationships between those elements. This will help lead the eye from one element to the next

Eye Flow:

Often called visual gravity, eye flow refers to the way the viewer's eye travels as it scans the information on a page. As the viewer's eye travels from the top left corner of the page to the bottom right corner, it will make several stops along the way as its attention is caught by the things it sees. Controlling how the viewer sees these elements controls the way the story unfolds for them.

You can take advantage of this fact by arranging your visual elements so that they either stop, or contribute to, the natural flow of the viewer's eye. Controlling eye flow allows you to tell them what you want them to know, when you want them to know it.

The Graphics
the secondary building blocks

Having taken the time to introduce the primary building blocks of good design, we should take some time to discuss the secondary building blocks too. These elements are often repeated as designers huddle around their computers and swap stories of design projects gone by. I will not take credit for them here. I will simply try and do credit to the efforts of those that have gone before me.

You can use many tools in addition to using visual hierarchy, and controlling eye flow, to tell your story to your audience. Four of the most commonly repeated elements for you to take advantage of are contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity.

Contrast:

I have often told designers that if something they have done on the page looks like a mistake, it is one, even if they didn't intend it to be. Contrast works the same way. If the contrast isn't an obvious one, it isn't contrast. Take advantage of differentiations in size, texture, or color, to set up contrasts among the visual elements you will be using in your design.

Size: Objects that are larger then others on the page naturally stand out. You can control the order your viewer sees graphic elements in by making the objects you want seen first bigger, and last smaller.

Texture: Design layouts that contrast texture using copy are said to make good use of white space. They contrast the texture of the copy against that of the blank page that surrounds it. Visual elements can also be used to achieve the same effect. Busy, graphic heavy elements can be contrasted against simple elegant ones. Either extreme can be used to pull the viewer's eye in the direction you want it to go.

Color: Often color contrasts are thought to be the most effective contrasts. Bright yellow type on a black background is considered to be the most legible type combination. White objects reversed out of a black ground do the same thing.

Repetition:

Repetition of visual elements helps the viewer to relate those elements to each other. Making all of the headlines the same color helps them to all feel like part of a larger set of ideas. Placing all of a similar kind of information within like-bounding boxes does the same thing. And using the same font throughout your document helps to tie all of the information together as a single unit.

If you are going to use similar sets of information throughout your design, make sure you handle each instance the same way you have all of the instances before it. This will give your viewer visual clues to help lead them through your layout.

Alignment:

We have all seen pages that line similar kinds of information up with each other. Left justification, right justification, and centering are good examples of how this can be done. Aligning visual elements into equal columns and rows brings order to them. As a designer you can control large amounts of information on a page by aligning those elements effectively.

Keep your visual elements organized by aligning them with each other to help control the way your viewer's eye relates like information. You can also take advantage of the way elements align with each other to move the viewer's eye in the direction you would like it to go.

Proximity:

Placing visual elements proximate to each other helps to make them feel like they belong to each other. Placing them apart does the opposite. One of the most effective ways of controlling information on a page is to pay attention to these kinds of relationships.

Place information that you want to belong together close together. Take advantage of your ability to move information apart to separate it from other elements. And remember, if it doesn't feel like it is separated, it isn't.

The Graphics
the building blocks applied

Hierarchy

Your job as a professional communicator is to control the pace of the story you choose to tell, whether that story be visual or written. Each of the graphic elements you chose to use in your layout will appear in your viewer's eye in a natural sequence. Control the order that those elements appear in, in order to control the pace of your visual story.

Eye Flow

Visual gravity will pull your viewer's eye across, and down, the page. Starting at the top left corner of your layout, and moving to the bottom right corner. Controlling the way your viewer's eye stops as it travels along that path will help you to control the way your message unfolds for your audience.

Building Blocks

Controlling the way that graphic elements are arranged on the page will help you to control how your audience receives the message you want to send to them. You can control these arrangements through the use of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity.

Eye Flow

Visual Gravity
Your viewer's eye will travel from the top left corner of the page to the bottom right corner. Reading from right to left, and from top to bottom of the page.

Hierarchy

Entry Point
Once your viewer has finished the initial scan of the page their eye will return to the to top left corner to start reading the message contained in the copy.

Building Blocks

Proximity
Putting elements close to each other makes them feel like the belong together in a cohesive group. In this case, the logo, tag line, and URL feel like a single unit because of their proximity to each other.

Hierarchy

Tertiary Visual Element
This is the third place the eye of the viewer will stop.

Building Blocks

Alignment
Notice how this tag line aligns itself with the eyes in the image. Aligning elements in your layout will help you move your viewer's eye from one point to another.

Hierarchy

Primary Visual Element
This is the first place the eye of your viewer will stop.

Building Blocks

Contrast
Your can use size, texture, or color to contrast elements on the page. Here the reversed type is contrasted against the color block behind it.

Hierarchy

Secondary Visual Element
This is the second place the eye of the viewer will stop.

Building Blocks

Repetition
Handling like elements the same way every time you use them will help make those items relate to each other visually.

America's Leader in Creative Education

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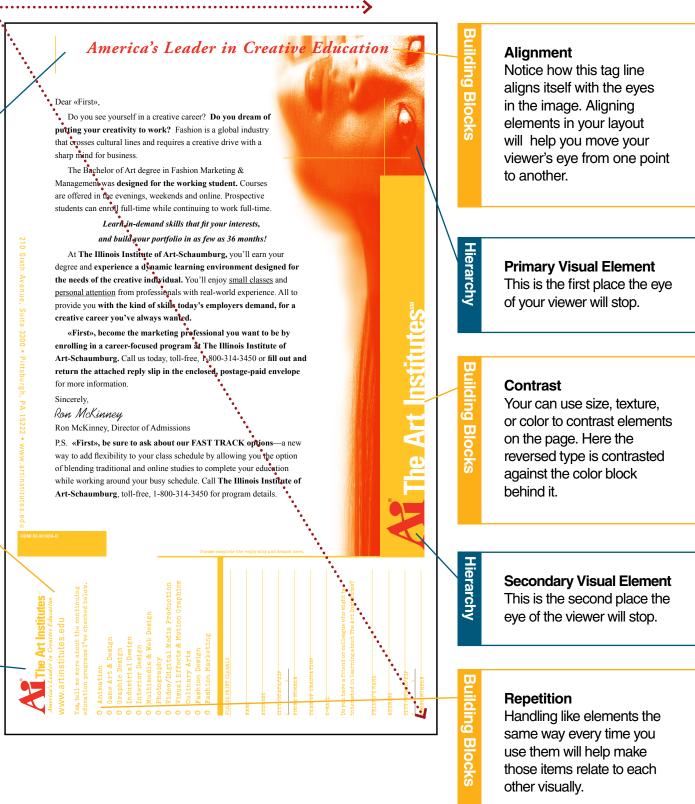
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The Art Institutes

The Copy
what the building blocks are

The most important thing you can remember when you write for direct marketing is that your audience doesn't really want to hear anything about you, or your client. Your audience wants you to talk to them about them. The key thing to remember about your audience, is that they wan to know "what's in it for me".

Focus on those things that are really a benefit to them. Do it in a way that will keep them engaged and won't make them want to put your message down before they finish it. Reward them for reading your message. Don't make them work to get through it.

So, what are the tools you will use to help you do that?

Tone:

Talk to your audience like they are your friends. Do not talk to them like you are trying to sell something to them. People don't want to be sold things, they want to be talked to. Keep the tone of your copy conversational. And don't make the mistake of trying to define their needs for them. Nobody wants to be told what they want either, they already know that.

Remember that the average publication in America is written at a ninth grade reading level. Try to keep your writing at that same level. Your audience prefers to read words that are 5 characters long or less. And, they prefer short paragraphs to long ones.

In short, make it simple.

(The Flesch-Kincaid Reading level scale uses this equation to determine reading levels: 0.39 x Average No. of words in sentences + 11.8 x Average No. of syllables per word - 15.59 = grade level.)

Scanning:

Most people are not going to take the time to read everything you write. Sad, but true. What they will do is scan the information on the page picking out information that is important to them as they go. Scanning the information on the page is how people read direct marketing, so take advantage of that.

Make sure the information you want them to find is easily available to them.

Here are some tricks you can use to help insure that your reader sees, and reads, the message you want them to see.

Personalization: Nothing catches the attention of the reader more than seeing their name on the printed page. Most of today's direct marketing efforts take advantage of personalization technologies to repeat the prospects name in the body of the copy. Try to find ways to make this work for you. If you can repeat the name of the prospect at least three times.

Length: Your reader will find it easier to read small paragraphs, around three sentences, than they will long ones. Keep you paragraphs short to help your reader move more quickly though your message. The principle holds true for both sentence length, and word length. Shorter is usually better.

Formatting

The way you arrange the information on your page will determine how effectively you viewer assimilates you message. Remember to use Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, and Proximity, (as discussed in the "secondary building blocks" portion of the Graphics section), as you format the information on the page.

Don't forget that using color variations, and size contrasts, are tools you can take advantage of.

Calling out parts of your message by using bolding, italics, or similar technics will also help insure that the reader's eye stops at that information as it scans across the page. Use these techniques to emphasis the parts of your message you want the viewer to remember after they have finished reading.

The Copy
the building blocks applied

Tone

Remember to write as though you are talking to someone. Keep the tone of your writing conversational. Use short words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Don't make you audience feel like you are part of an institution. They don't care who you are, who your client is, or what you think they need to know. They care about themselves. Write about them.

Scanning

No matter how well you have written you message, your audience will scan the information on the page, and pick out a few items of interest here and there as they go. They will not read every word you have written.

Use this tendency as a tool to emphasise the important parts of your message. Take the time to make sure that those things you really want the audience to see, stick out.

Make them remember what they will read.

Formatting

Your audience doesn't have time to work at reading your message. Make it short, and make it stick.

Keep it Short
Arrange your message into short, easy to read, sentences, and paragraphs. Three sentences per paragraph is a good length to shoot for.

Bolding
Use bolding, italics, and underlining to call out the important parts of you message.

Since no one will read everything you write, make your bolding stand on its own. Think of it as a message within a message.

Chunking
Grouping information together into blocks helps your reader organize your message into groups of ideas. Readers like to read shorts groups of ideas more than they like to read an entire page filled with information.

Don't make them.

Color
Many people forget that color can be used to make parts of your message stand apart form others.

Don't forget to take advantage of this tool, by using it when you can.

We, We, We
Nobody cares about you. Make your message about them. Your copy should say, you, you, you, to your reader, not, we, we, we.

Personalization
Seeing our name in print makes us feel important. It also makes us feel like someone is addressing us personally.

Personalize your message to your reader by using their name. If your messaging format will allow try to repeat it three times.