

Five Simple Steps To Designing for VDP

By Frank McPherson

Although we talk about the importance of the database in the effectiveness of a variable data piece, the database is not the only aspect driving effectiveness. Equally important is design. It's not just what information you use. It's how you use it. In this column, I'll talk about five specific "do's" and "don'ts" that can make or break a variable data marketing piece.

1. Keep it simple.

Ever heard the phrase "too much of a good thing"? That goes for variable data, too. Just because you have information doesn't mean you should always use it. In a previous column, I talked about the importance of *relevance*, not just personalization. This concept is important here.

When designing a variable data piece, stick to information that is relevant – not just to the recipient but to the offer you are making. The idea isn't to dazzle the recipient with "Look what I can do with technology." It's to be more subtle, presenting a piece that has immediate relevance to the reader without hitting him over the head that he is being marketed to.

Another issue to consider is privacy. Most consumers aren't keen on the idea of their personal information being used to market to them unless it is related to the business they are already doing with your company. For example, consumers would expect their financial company to send them materials showing how their mutual funds are doing, but they won't like an unsolicited direct mail piece that says, "Hey, I hear that your daughter Megan, born April 2, 2002, is turning two next Wednesday, Mr. Jones on Walker Hollow Lane. And boy, do we have a deal for you!"

2. Manage the reader's attention.

When designing the piece, don't focus on the product or service you are selling. Focus on the customer. Ask yourself, "What can I offer this individual that they'll want? And in a way that they will want it?" Use the personalized information to grab the reader and cause him to say, "Hey, this is *me* they are talking about!"

Say you are a Quick Lube shop trying to get customers in for an oil change. A sample promotion might say, "Dear Mr. Sample. We've missed you! The last oil change we did on your 1989 Chevrolet Corsica was on March 21 and we just wanted to send you a friendly reminder that after six months, your vehicle is likely now due for service. Bring in this card by October 31 and save \$5.00."

Notice that the card mentions the customer by name (relevant because he knows that the information is directed at him personally), mentions the vehicle by make and model (relevant because he knows it is talking about, not just any vehicle, but *his* vehicle), and mentions his last date of service and the fact that it's due for service again. Kind of like your spouse saying, "Hey, honey, don't forget to pick up the kids at the daycare center after work."

3. Put the attention-getting content where it will be seen immediately.

The idea is to earn the reader's attention at first glance. We call this the "involvement trap." Once the reader's curiosity is piqued, and he or she feels connected to the piece, they are much more likely to feel committed to read through to the end.

This is one of the reasons that variable data postcards do so well. Most envelopes and folded mailers get discarded without being opened. With a postcard, all of the information is readily visible on the outside of the card. This increases the likelihood that the reader will get hooked.

Obviously, some information cannot be put on a postcard. And there are applications, such as presentation folders, that cannot be produced on a two-sided piece. In these cases, use as much personalization as you can on the outside of the envelope or the portion of the folded piece that will be visible before it is opened. If you are marketing seminars, you might want to print something like, "Sylvia, here is one seminar you don't want to miss!"

4. Use images, color, and personalization throughout to draw the reader into the piece.

Don't just name-step, if you can avoid it. Use images to grab the reader's eye and earn his or her attention by placing a picture prominently on the page. Base that image on something you know about the individual. For example, when you say, "Mr. John Sample, bring your 1998 Civic Sedan in to Parkway Honda," combined with a picture of a Civic Sedan, Mr. John Sample is going to look twice. It's kind of like the difference between shouting, "Hey YOU!" when you see your friend in the park and shouting, "Hey, MARY!"

Once the reader is drawn in, keep them there. In the Quick Lube example, the personal information is used to draw the reader into the piece ("They're talking about my car!"). Then a \$5 discount on the oil change is used to hook the reader into responding to the offer. They are drawn in, step by step.

5. Make it easy to say "yes."

The "startle" response with variable data only gets you so far. Use the piece to make it as easy as possible to say "yes."

If you are asking someone to come in for an oil change, include the address of the closest Quick Lube and a map, if appropriate. If you are asking them to register for something or order a product, imprint the order information on the card so all they have to do is put in their credit card information and add a stamp.

Of course, there are other “musts” when you drill down into the nitty-gritties of designing for variable data. Making sure that you leave enough room in the design to accommodate the variation in the fields (such as leaving enough room for extra-long names) and creating rules between the data and the information being provided, to name two. This is where working with an experienced variable data print shop becomes invaluable. Draw on that experience as you proceed.

These are a few, basic rules to get you started in thinking about designing for variable data. Remember, designing a variable data piece isn't like designing any other print piece. It's more like building a house. That means you have to build a solid foundation before you start adding the trim.