

Congratulations — you've created the greatest promotional piece of your life. But **who are you going to mail it to?** The big marketing suits rent expensive mailing lists... but you're not a big marketing suit. You sit there staring at your masterpiece as it languishes next to a pile of blank envelopes. It feels a little **nightmarish**. All that effort — and no damn mailing list!

Listless No More

by W. Eric Martin

The path to solo success is paved with three things: securing new clients, retaining old clients, and downing lots and lots of coffee. I'm sure you already know where to buy coffee, so you don't need any help there. But most independent professionals have a hard time brewing up business. Mailing lists can be one of the most reliable ways for IPs to keep past customers and draw in fresh blood. Outside of your career as an independent professional, in your everyday role as a regular schmoe, you've probably been on the receiving end of mail marketing campaigns — and if you've been paying attention, you now have a good idea which mailings attract your attention and which make you want to poke somebody some new eyeholes.



The key to a successful mailing is pretty straightforward: send relevant, easy-to-read information about your product or services to people who actually need said product or services. The often unspoken part of this formula is how important it is to *not* send information to those would-be clients who have no use for you. After all, every person who tosses your pretty four-color brochure or postcard into the recycling bin is throwing away your money.

I know that sounds a bit depressing, but shaking your fist at the unappreciative bastards won't get you any more work. Instead, you have to make sure that your mailing list reaches only those people who need and want to see what you can offer them. If you'll just take my hand, I'll get you started.



From Whence Cometh the Mailing List?

Most of what you receive in the mail isn't sent by people you want to hear from; it comes from people who have bought or rented your name and address. Because you are a human being (you are a human being, right?), your personal information has been incorporated into hundreds of different lists: voter registration records, motor vehicle registries, real estate records, school alumni lists, and so forth. Everything you do places you on still more lists: subscribing to magazines, purchasing CDs or books online, joining a bowling league, or being arrested for possession. ("Need a lawyer? We're here to help...")

Marketers love to find out everything they can about you because the more they know, the more likely it is that they can sell that information to someone who wants to sell you something. Of course, nothing's stopping you from buying those lists yourself. There are more than 30,000 lists available, and somewhere on those lists are sure to be the names and contact information for the prospects who will turn you into a filthy rich IP.

Unfortunately, those lists aren't free. Or guaranteed. Keith Snyder, an independent Web producer, professional composer, and published mystery novelist says: "I probably wouldn't bother to rent lists unless I was trying to do direct sales. I doubt that the response I'd get from sending out 'cold mailings' would be worth the time and trouble, not to mention the ill will it would garner."

Kimberly McCall, a marketing and public relations consultant and freelance business writer, has tried bulk mailing lists and found them less than effective. "The response I got from the blind mass mailers showed that I didn't move my intended audience to desired action," she says. "A lot of the respondents were what I call 'tire kickers' or 'lookie-loos.' They were just interested in price, rather than value. I actually got calls that started with 'Hi, what's your rate?' — and no good ever comes from conversations that start that way."



Instead of mailing en masse, McCall now relies on a pared-down list of about 600 companies that she has some connection to. "They may not know me at all," she says, "but I've met someone from their company or have some link to them — or what I provide is just a perfect match for what they need."

If your business is to survive, you need to keep people aware of your existence; that usually requires you to have some kind of mailing list. But like the IPs above, you'll have a better chance of reaching people who need you if you build the list yourself. Even the guys who sell the lists recognize this fact: "Your own list should always perform best, and that's typically the case because you have some affinity with that group already," says Rich Baumer, president and CEO of Venture Direct, a direct marketing firm specializing in lead generation, customer acquisition, and return on investment (ROI) advertising. "When you compile your own list, you're controlling it to a large degree. You're picking and choosing the names."

That control and familiarity with your intended market means that your mailing list is more likely to include names and companies that are valid, that would actually consider using your services. This allows you to work with a smaller list of names, which saves you both time and money on each mailing.

What's more, many list brokers allow you to mail items to rented names only once, and that's going to limit your ability to show prospective businesses what you can do. "After three or four mailings to your cold prospect list, you'll see your response rate rise because you've established your creative credentials with a variety of mailings," says Gil Terriberly, owner of both ListsNOW.com and the Direct Contact Marketing Group. Terriberly says that an

Watch Out for the Seeds, Dude

To make sure that you don't use a list more times than you're supposed to, many brokers use "seeds." That is, they add names of employees or employee relatives to their lists to check, among other things, if renters are playing by the rules. Send out two mailings to a list that you're only supposed to use once, and you're busted.



initial response rate of ½ percent on a first mailing might be followed by a ¾ percent response on the second and a full 1 percent on the third. (Yes, these numbers sound terrible, but they are typical of the response you might get from a mailing. Focus on sales, though, not responses, and remember that one or two sales will often cover the cost of an entire mailing — and when you've covered the cost, you've reached the breakeven point.)

"You want to mail to failure," says Terriberry. "Keep mailing [to the same list of contacts] until you drop below your breakeven point." Relying on rented names that don't allow for repeated mailings prevents you from doing this.

Making It On Your Own

If you decide to compile your own mailing list, you probably already have a good idea of where to start looking for names. Your previous clients, for example, are no-brainers, as is anyone who has ever contacted you for information about your services. (I wouldn't advise calling them "no-brainers" to their faces, though.)

After the obvious names, you'll have to work a little harder to find good candidates; hopefully, you'll already have some idea of whom you want to reach. When Ken Norkin left his position at an advertising agency to become a business-to-business copywriter, he decided to target local corporations, freelance art directors, design studios, and advertising agencies, which he knew from experience hired copywriters.

For corporate contacts, Norkin turned to the personality columns in the business sections of local newspapers; these columns announce recent promotions, new hires, and transfers at local companies. "I looked for anybody who had a position in marketing or sales, jotted down the name of the company, and eventually found the address," he explains. He also looked at the paper's Sunday employment ads, not to see who wanted writers but just to know who was running the biggest ads. "I figured, hey, they're growing, so I'll add them to my database."

Lists for the other groups came more easily than he expected. By chance, Norkin came across membership directories for the Advertising Club and Art Directors Club. He points out that without these directories he would have had to fall back on the Yellow Pages, which often obscures whether a business is a large agency or just one person. "These directories were smaller, but I knew

Quick Facts about Mailing Lists

What they are: In their most basic form, mailing lists are collections of names and addresses of potential clients to whom you mail your promotional letter or brochure. (The lists may also include titles, companies, phone numbers, and email accounts.)

What they look like: If you rent them from a list broker, they're probably sheets of mailing labels (though they may come as printed lists or as Excel spreadsheets). Many IPs, however, compile their own lists into databases or word-processing files.

What they cost: Mailing list costs vary greatly. Prices depend on the type of data as well as the "selects" you choose — i.e., the categories you choose to limit the scope of the list. Some marketers say that a good starting point for estimating the price of a list is 25¢ per name.

that [the companies listed] were serious enough that in the last year they had paid dues to join these organizations," he says. To obtain updated lists each year, all Norkin had to do was run an inexpensive ad for his writing services. Each association would then send him a copy of the directory that contained his ad.

Although she now uses associations' membership lists, such as the American Association of Advertising Agencies, McCall's first lists came from publications put out by her local Chamber of Commerce. "Since I didn't have any money to buy their list on disk, I input everything myself," she says.

An easy but passive way to build a list is to let people find you — but this approach works best when you provide something that can't be found anywhere else. Mark Capitella, who creates wooden jigsaw puzzles, is one such IP. He created a Web site a few years ago that featured samples of his work and invited visitors to sign up on his mailing list. "People were flat-out eager to join up," says Capitella. "It was that simple. I now have an email list of 2,000 people and it grows by three to five a day."



When he sends updates of his activities to the list, Capitella uses E-Merge, a type of mailing software that gives the impression that each message is personally addressed to the recipient. He says that this personal approach encourages people to write back, but often the response is more than he can handle. “When I send out my list, I get about 200 replies within 48 hours,” he says. Typically, ten or fifteen replies will be orders and the remainder will be former clients who want to fill him in on what’s new in their lives. “It’s not easy to answer them all, so I find that a problem.”

(If you try this approach, keep in mind that a personalized form letter is a form letter nonetheless — and some contacts might take offense at being grouped in a herd.)

For more places to find names for your mailing list, check out 1099.com/listless

Possibly the best opportunity for building your mailing lists comes from the contacts you make in your everyday life. That’s right, networking. But you don’t

have to play the role of a schmoozy salesman who’s trying to lure innocent victims into your clutches. Just introduce yourself to everyone you meet and make sure you tell him or her what you do.

Can Homemade Lists Do Everything You Ask of Them?

The answer is no. They have limitations. They lack opposable thumbs, for example, which makes them very poor at handling tools or changing diapers.

Sometimes the people you want to reach can be found only by purchasing, say, a magazine’s subscriber list. But Steven Roberts, president of the list broker Edith Roman, points out that magazine publishers don’t hand over the names and addresses of their subscribers to just anyone. The publisher will likely scrutinize your business and marketing materials to make sure that you’re selling something that doesn’t compete with the magazine itself, and is worthy of their customers’ time.

Lists come in all shapes and sizes. Edith Roman, for example, lets list buyers search through 167 special interest groups, slicing and dicing the lists across 56 demographic categories. List costs vary depending on the type of list that you’re interested in and how choosy you are. Compiled lists, which are groups of names organized by passive categories like location (and which tend to be the

least helpful), come in as low as \$20 per thousand names. Top-of-the-line response lists — which group people by a specific activity, like online purchasing habits — can cost ten times that amount. And most brokers have minimum orders (Edith Roman requires a purchase of 5,000 names) which can force you to buy more than you need.

List brokers that cater to the small-scale needs of IPs are available, though. TerriBerry points out that his ListsNOW.com offers per-unit pricing, “so if there are only a couple hundred names, then that’s what you pay for.” Companies that demand minimum orders will often let you buy the same list for multiple mailings so that you meet their quotas but aren’t forced to buy names you don’t need.

But before you turn to the professionals for help, try your hand at building a list of your own. You’ll probably be pleasantly surprised at the response you receive. “If I was a freelancer today and in charge of my own destiny in terms of marketing myself, I would be constantly collecting names, building a list, and sending out daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly newsletters to stay in touch or let people know what areas of expertise I have,” says Baumer. “The ability to stay in touch with your constituency is the key to your success.” **1099**

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