

Effective Direct-Mail Campaigns

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Direct mail is an effective way to communicate key points about your practice to target audience groups. The communications vehicle used in a direct-mail campaign can be deployed in a number of formats, such as flyers, post cards, brochures, letters and CDs. The design and content also can be diverse: entertaining; funny; picturesque; surreal; serious; conservative; or outlandish. Overall, a direct-mail campaign is used primarily to convey important information to the recipient, resulting in a call to action.

The means of transportation also can be diverse. Traditionally, direct mail was deployed through postal mail. However, direct mail campaigns can be hand-delivered or couriered, and with the help of the Internet, it can now take the form of e-mail.

The most challenging aspect of a direct-mail campaign is measuring its effectiveness and return-on-investment (ROI). If you distribute 1,000 pieces on the first of the month, how do you determine if a call on the 10th of the month is a response to your direct-mail campaign? If you distribute 10 letters to potential patients, and two come into your practice and become patients, how do you determine if the increased business is the result of your direct-mail campaign?

There are two standard types of direct-mail campaigns. The first is quite large, targeting thousands of recipients at once. The second includes an incremental direct-mail campaign, targeting a few controlled groups that each receive mail. One method is not any easier to carry out than the other.

In developing a direct-mail campaign, you must ensure you can measure its effectiveness. There are a number of ways to do this, but first and foremost must be the integration of key questions you and your staff ask every new patient. For example, when a new patient comes into your office, the receptionist must ask the patient how he or she learned about your practice. You can also incorporate a series of questions on the new-patient form the patient completes. The form could ask, "How did you learn about XYZ Practice?" The choices available could include "referral"; "advertisement"; "newspaper article"; "direct mail"; "flyer/postcard"; or "Web site."

Another way to measure the effectiveness of a direct-mail campaign is to instruct the recipient to a call to action. For example, you can include a perforated section on your direct-mail piece that must be mailed back to you, or brought into your office for redemption. You also can request that the recipient answer some questions on your Web site and submit them to you to arrange an appointment.

In any case, to effectively measure the ROI of your direct-mail campaign, you must address two issues:

What are your objectives? What are you trying to accomplish in the direct-mail campaign? Do you just want to educate, or educate and garner new patients with a call to action?

Entice the recipient. Direct-mail campaigns are correlated with junk mail. You must remember that

most people do not respond well to direct-mail campaigns. Therefore, you must entice the recipient to read the piece and respond accordingly.

Traditionally, to entice the recipient, most chiropractors offer a free exam or X-ray. This is good, but it limits your audience, and devalues your abilities, treatment, professionalism and chiropractic. When was the last time you saw a general practitioner allocating a value of \$29.99 for his services in a Yellow Pages advertisement? Never - and don't tell me it's because conventional medicine is institutionalized. That's irrelevant. It's funny, but most marketing "gurus" who are now ex-chiropractors advocate the fee approach. If they truly understood marketing, they would never advise their clientele in this manner. It demeans the profession and the doctor in the eyes of the very audience he or she is trying to reach.

Seasonal Direct-Mail Campaigns

A seasonal direct-mail campaign incorporates annual recognizable and celebrated events and "piggybacks" on their awareness. For example, the first Monday in September is Labor Day, on the weekend that huge sales take place - yet if you really think about it, there is no real correlation between Labor Day and sales.

Americans have become accustomed to seeing a blitz of advertising and marketing campaigns focusing on big sales during important holidays.

The same concept can hold true for your chiropractic practice.

Step One: Create a Year-Long Theme List

The first step to creating a seasonal direct-mail campaign is to list each month of the year and designate a recognizable holiday or national event. As you can see from the sample, it really is quite easy to complete this task.

Month	Theme
January	New Year's resolutions
February	Valentine's Day
March	St. Patrick's Day
April	Easter or Passover
May	Spring
June	End of School
July	Independence Day
August	Summer
September	Labor Day
October	Halloween
November	Thanksgiving
December	Christmas, Hanukah

Step Two: Create a Communications Vehicle

Once you've developed recognizable events and activities with each month, the next step is to create a communications vehicle.

Your logo should be located in the top left-hand corner to encourage branding and support your image.

The piece should be colorful and eye-catching.

The theme or title of the direct-mail piece should be centered, bold, underlined and raised to 20-point font. The creative text and copywriting should be flush left or centered. Lastly, you must always remember to include a "call to action" in your conclusion. For example, a good call to action for a New Year's resolution piece might ask, "Isn't it time to really examine your priorities?"

One objective of the direct-mail piece is to have recipients re-evaluate their current health through education. Another is to entice them to visit your Web site, where they can find more key message points and a convenient method of scheduling an appointment.

Step Three: Develop a Mailing List

In all direct-mail campaigns, the third step is to develop the mailing list. A master list should be developed that includes current, past and potential patients. Obviously, you will use the names and addresses of past patients from your database for the past-patient list. The lists will always need to be updated, especially the potential patient list, which can be developed from a number of outlets, such as the phone book, chamber of commerce, civic or trade groups, or local newspaper.

Step Four: Identify a Graphic Designer or Do-It-Yourself

While you are in the process of developing and updating your target mailing list, you must also identify a capable graphic designer and printer to design and print your direct-mail communications.

Once you've finalized the concept and copy, you need to utilize a graphic designer or printer to typeset the brochure and lay out accompanying photos and graphics. Graphic designers usually have specialized computer software programs that assist them in producing vivid images and incorporating animation.

In identifying a good graphic designer, you should ask to see samples and determine what kind of experience he or she has, especially in the areas of health care and chiropractic. How long has he or she been a graphic designer? What is the fee arrangement? How long will it take to create a logo? Does he or she currently work with printers? Make sure this person truly understands chiropractic.

You may also choose to do the graphics and printing yourself. If you do, make sure it does not look "cheesy." Have one or two people - perhaps patients - look at it objectively. Ask them to be candid. Remember, perception is everything. If the brochure looks cheesy, recipients will associate that cheesiness with you and your practice.

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