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Keys to Effective Catalog Design and Production

Pump up the volume on your catalog sales

For several years, retail catalogs have offered added convenience to a growing number of consumers with more money to spend and less time to shop. In fact, catalog marketing continues to be one of the hottest growing segments in direct marketing. But did you know that the number of manufacturers' catalogs is growing even faster? Well over one billion business-to-business catalogs will be mailed this year. That number has more than doubled in the past few years.

Obviously, the intent of any catalog is to sell something. And studies show that effective catalog design makes a definite sales difference. Designers need to think about appropriate use of space, eyeflow and photography.

In determining the number of pages, size should be dictated by opportunity, rather than number of products. Allocate space by merit and look to add profitable pages only. Many experts use a sales per square inch vs. a variable page cost analysis to determine which products deserve the most space.

Here are a few simple guidelines to make your catalog more customer friendly:

Covers

Front and back covers are the most visible pages of your catalog. They need to work hard to pull the reader into the piece. On the front, clearly state the

purpose of your catalog. Often a quick index of major highlights is desirable to promote contents and pique interest. The front cover is the place to target your audience, graphically state the category of goods and promote the attitude and image of your company.

Common treatments for the back cover include promoting an item not shown elsewhere in the catalog, making reference to some of the more popular items inside, or providing additional support for the company image. Make the most out of your covers.

Other hot spots

Inside front and back covers and center spread are other high visibility areas. Position your most profitable or new products in these locations. Just as in determining number of pages, let economics be your guide. Design the rest of the catalog around these hot spots.

Organization between the covers

Group products with similar or related functions/characteristics into sections, then color-code those sections for easy, visual reference. Provide a contents-by-category listing on page three. It's also wise to run a complete product index at the back of the book, complete with cross reference information about related and competitive items. Finally, create design elements to help draw attention to new products, sizes or specials. However, these elements should not detract from the products themselves.

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Layout

Design is the glue that holds the catalog together. Gallup research shows there is a flow to the way readers view catalogs. Subjects tend to scan spreads in a sideways U pattern. Although good eyeflow is important, eye movement tests reveal that many catalogs lack it.

Readers spend more time on art than copy. Large photos grab attention first, then headlines, price and finally, text. Spreads are important and should be tied together with individual pages to create good flow or pace. Color is a must and since readers look at pages briefly, frequent logos help reinforce identity. Finally, develop "design surprises" such as symbols, shapes, starbursts or other devices to draw attention to important products, features or selling points.

Photography

Photos showing products to advantage are key to the success of your catalog. Customers like to see what they are buying. Uncluttered and sharply contrasting backgrounds help products stand out. Larger photos get more notice and varying photo sizes spark interest and prevent monotony.

Copy

Although the information priority is photo, headline, price and text, copy is what closes the sale. Good catalog copy stresses benefits, as well as features.

It's highly explanatory and makes salient points easy to grasp. To facilitate quick reading, break up large amounts of information by numbering, bulleting or indenting. Also, remember to differentiate similar products and add "helpful hint" copy boxes to provide extra emphasis, recommended uses, etc.

For many manufacturers, a catalog represents a significant investment and one of your most potent sales tools. Make sure you're getting the most for your money. If you would like to see these concepts in action, Riger Advertising has developed a desktop presentation, "Calling All Catalogs." Call 607-723-7441 for your own personal preview. You can also find out more about catalog design by visiting our Web site at www.riger.com.

Writing catalog copy

Many catalogs fail because they are designed to sell individual products only. They consist of a series of product descriptions with very little connection from one to the next. On the other hand, the most effective catalogs focus on the entire package...catalog as a whole...company...and products. They sell the image of the manufacturer, category of goods, quality of products, product uses and competitive advantages...always from a customer's point of view. The effective catalog writer starts by asking, "What are we selling? And to whom? What will this product do for the customer?" Always remember who's on the receiving end and target your copy to the experiential background of that reader.

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