

Developing a Mailing List
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A mailing list is, of course, a vital part of your marketing campaign. You need it to generate interest in, and activity for your business. Member Pat Cross asks:

Any tips on how to start a mailing list?

Sure. First, start by entering all applicable names from your Rolodex. These are people you know, therefore, they are likely prospects for your business. They may also be asked to refer friends and colleagues to you as well.

Collect as many business cards as you can. Some ways to do this are through networking and exchange clubs. If you have a retail business, have customers drop their business cards in a jar and offer them an incentive, then once a month hold a drawing. For example, restaurants offer free lunch to the winner.

Ask everyone you come in contact with during your business day if they want to be part of your mailing list.

If you are a member of a professional organization that publishes a member directory, that's also a great source for qualified names.

What are the top five biggest mistakes businesses make when developing a mailing list?

1. Entering all the data as if it were one long entry. This will severely inhibit your list's usability. Instead, each 'record' (business card) ideally should be entered using contact management software. If you don't have that, simply use Excel and set it up so that each separate piece of information (field) is its own cell. For example, don't enter a full address in a string. Enter the street address in one cell, the city and state in their own cells, and most importantly the zip code as a stand alone item. This allows for sortability, and when your mailing list becomes large, sorting by zip code allows for substantial postal discounts.

2. Not using the list. By all means use it! Whether your list is currently 10 names or 1000, stay in contact with them. As you collect each name, send them SOMETHING, whether it is a postcard saying thank you, an email, even a personal call. But, never waste the contact by not offering them something. For example, a thank you postcard may include an offer for 10% off, or a FREE "something" by stopping by your store, or perhaps announce a sale. Whatever is applicable to your business.
3. Not knowing where each lead came from. Set up a simple categorization system for each name you enter in your database. For example, "A" for association meeting; "R" for rolodex; "T" for trade show. This helps you set up for future success by tracking the response of each type of lead on your list. This becomes critical as your business grows, as it allows you to weed out non-responders (thereby saving your marketing dollars!) and helps when purchasing lists so you know what type of lead responds best to your offers.
4. Letting your list go stale. At any point in time, 10 percent of the US population is moving. If you are marketing to businesses, think about how often people change jobs. By using your list and keeping up with the changes and feedback you get, you'll have a much better up to date marketing tool.
5. Not respecting those that don't wish to be on your list. You must remove anyone who asks to be removed. This can actually work to your benefit because you'll be saving marketing dollars in the long run.

What should I consider when determining whether I should be buying a list from a vendor?

Before buying lists from vendors, be aware of the following:

1. Make sure you have answers to:
 - a. What will I send them? Most list owners require a sample marketing piece before releasing their list for sale.
 - b. Do I want to mail a follow up? If so, you must purchase the list for multiple uses.
 - c. What is my message/offer? Be clear and concise in your written copy.

2. Use a reputable list broker. A good list broker can serve as a research consultant and can give you valuable industry insight. A good source for finding a list broker is through the Direct Marketing Association (www.the-dma.org).
3. You may also purchase lists online. Some good places to start are GreatLists.com and Accudata-America.com. These sources allow you to enter parameters and get counts online. If the counts are too low you can expand your parameters (add more zip codes, for example); or if the counts are too high, you can narrow your parameters (delete zip codes). This immediate count feedback is helpful for planning your campaign budget as well.
4. Lastly, make sure you have a budget to cover the ENTIRE marketing campaign. Buying a list is just the first step. After that, you must produce and print the marketing piece; perhaps use lettershop services; and of course, pay for the postage.

Good luck in your marketing efforts!

Directly,
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