

How Direct Mail Works

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Most individuals greatly enjoy receiving mail. In one survey, more people (sixty-three percent) said they looked forward to the post than to any other of a laundry list of pleasurable activities on the daily schedule. Protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, most people even delight in the so-called junk mail they get, at least the political variety. One study indicated that three-fourths of the individuals who are sent a piece of political direct mail actually do read it.

It is this sort of statistic that has made political direct mail one of the most ballyhooed of the new campaign techniques, while remaining the least understood. Direct mail combines sophisticated political judgments and psychological, emotional appeals with the most advanced computer and mailing technologies. Used for two very distinct purposes (persuasion and fundraising), direct mail is considered a necessity by many candidates, but few know how and why it works. This article unravels some of the direct mail's mysteries by shedding light on the methods of the process.

The process of direct mail is a confusing one for the lay person, if only because at certain stages it often appears to be unprofitable and nonsensical. The accompanying illustration in Figure 13-1, depicting the fundamentals of a presidential campaign's direct-mail system, will serve to elucidate. The "eleven steps to raise \$2 million by direct mail" revolve around two different kinds of mailings, "house" and "prospect." A "prospect" mailing is a general, mass mailing to suspected potential campaign donors, based on some characteristics or qualities thought likely to make them susceptible to a candidate's appeal for funds. Note that this propensity to donate is merely suspected, not proven. Those individuals who actually respond to the prospect mailing become members of the

prized "house list." They are proven donors who, having contributed once, are believed good possibilities for additional donations. As such they are the targets of repeated mailings during the course of the campaign, and normally such mailings are quite profitable—in contrast to prospecting mailings, which frequently lose money or manage to pay for themselves with a wafer-thin profit.

The illustration demonstrates the potential of a well-coordinated direct-mail program, where an initial investment of \$200,000 can produce (under ideal conditions) a gross profit of over \$2 million in a year or so and, far more important, compile a house list of over 200,000 individuals. Direct mailers go back and forth between prospecting and house (or "contributor") mailings, and during the early stage of building a reliable house list, all of the profits from house mailings are reinvested in additional prospecting. Gradually, the house list grows, as does the bank balance,

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even though the cost of later mailings increases because more persuasive material is sent in each letter and the response rates simultaneously decline a bit since the mailings are sent repeatedly to the same house lists. Yet as the election draws near, an interesting phenomenon can be seen: The response rate increases, as does the size of the average gift. The immediacy and impact of events, such as the growing excitement of a forthcoming election, significantly affect the willingness of individuals to give. This can be a bonanza for presidential candidates during the primary season, when another election is held almost every week (assuming a candidate is winning at least some of the contests).

Investment concepts

The direct-mail strategy just described is often referred to as the *basic investment concept*. An alternative *dual investment concept* is used by some direct-mail firms that do not rely so heavily on prospecting. Here only about a quarter of the profits are expected to come from the house list compiled by prospect mailings, while the other three-quarters is derived from a "master file" of past contributions to the candidate (and others like him/her) that is assembled from house lists of

previous and current campaigns. This dual investment pattern ensures that profits are made much earlier and is thus less risky than the basic investment system, which can leave a candidate whose effort begins to flag before the final stages with little to show for all the prospecting investments. Table 1 presents an analysis of two direct-mail letters, one sent in a prospect mailing and the other to a house list. Both letters, signed by President Ford to raise funds for the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), used the same text and were posted during the same general time period. The prospecting letter was mailed to almost 4.9 million people, while the contributor letter was sent to few more than 200,000. Yet the response rate—the proportion of those receiving a letter who make a contribution—was so much greater for the house mailing (11.7 percent to 1.8 percent for the prospect package) that the profit from the small mailing (\$576,000) approached the level of the much larger mailing (\$797,000). Prospecting produced almost three times the gross income (\$1.8 million versus \$636,000), but mailing costs were far higher (\$1 million versus \$60,000). This is despite the fact that each prospect letter, a rather impersonal "Dear Friend" item, was less expensive than the

TABLE 1 A Direct-Mail Letter from President Ford: An Analysis

	<i>Prospecting Mailing^a</i>	<i>Contributor Mailing^a</i>
Period of Mailing	Dec. 1975–June 1976	October 1975
Total Names Mailed	4,883,462	210,760
Number Responding and Contributing (Percent Response)	86,596 (1.8%)	24,674 (11.7%)
Average Contribution	\$20.72	\$25.77
Gross Income from Mailing	\$1,794,658	\$635,934
Cost of Each Letter Sent	\$.21	Computer: \$.27 Robotype: \$1.04
Total Cost of Mailing	\$998,126	\$59,549
NET INCOME FROM MAILING	\$796,533	\$576,385

^aBoth mailings used exactly the same letter text. There were, however, several differences in the contributor cards and mailing envelopes.

Source: Letters and mailing data provided by the National Republican Congressional Committee.

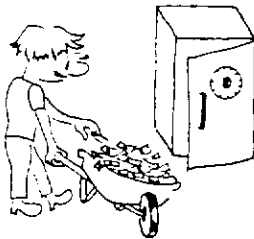
FIGURE 13-1 Eleven Steps to Raise \$2 Million by Direct Mail



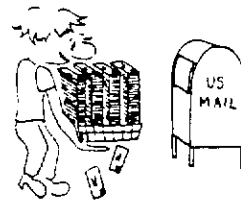
1. Raise initial investment of \$200,000 to pay for the first mailing.
 "House" List 0
 Bank Balance \$200,000



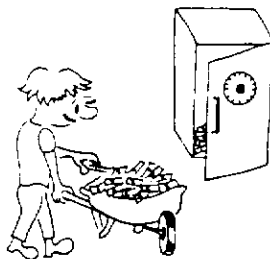
2. Use the \$200,000 to pay for 952,381 letters at 21¢ a letter.
 "House" List 0
 Bank Balance 0



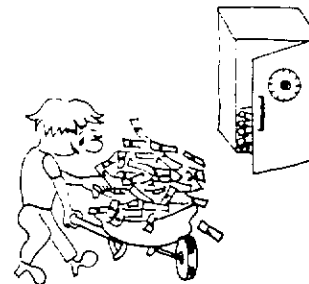
3. The mailing produces a response rate of 2.9 percent, meaning 27,619 letter recipients give a donation (at an average of \$10.82 each). The mailing returns \$298,838.
 "House" List 27,619
 Bank Balance \$298,838



4. The whole balance is used to mail again (1,423,038 letters at 21¢ each).
 "House" List 27,619
 Bank Balance 0



5. This time the response rate happens to be a bit lower (2.6 percent) but since a larger list was used, more new donors are produced (36,999). The average gift is about the same as before (\$10.75), producing \$397,739. All the new donors are added to the "house" list total.
 "House" List 64,618
 Bank Balance \$397,739



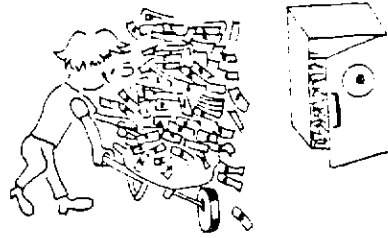
6. Now the "house" list of all previous donors is mailed. The letters are bulky (with personalized enclosures) and therefore costlier (38¢ per letter), but the response rate is a high 14.8 percent and the average donation is \$13.10. After deducting \$24,555 in mailing costs, the profit is \$100,733.
 "House" List 64,618
 Bank Balance \$498,472

FIGURE 13-1 (continued)



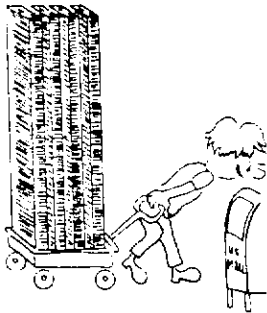
7. Empty the bank to prospect again. At 21¢ a letter, 2,373,676 letters are sent. Less reliable lists are used, and the response rate dips again (to 2.2 percent), but the largest mailing so far still yields the most new donors yet (52,221). The average gift of \$9.91 adds \$517,510 to the empty bank account.

"House" List	Bank Balance
116,839	\$517,510



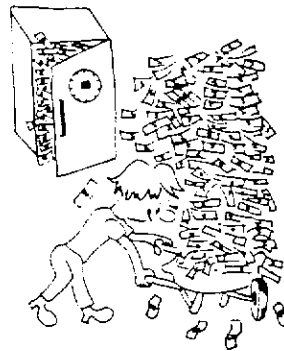
8. Take the whole sum and go prospecting again, buying 2,464,333 letters. With a 2.0 response rate this time and an average donation of \$10.68, 49,287 new donors and \$526,385 are produced.

"House" List	Bank Balance
166,126	\$526,385



9. Since a month and a half have passed since the last "house" list mailing, send another one. At 38¢ a letter, the costs are \$63,128. The response rate, though, is 16.3 percent with an average gift of \$14.20. Thus the mailing yields a hefty profit of \$321,380.

"House" List	Bank Balance
166,126	\$847,765

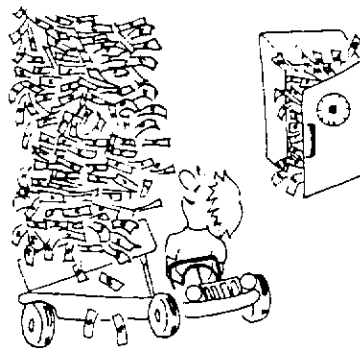


10. Take about half the money (\$425,000) for a final prospect mailing of 2,023,810 letters. The 1.9 percent response rate and average gift of \$10.74 produce 38,452 more donors and \$412,974 (or less than the cost of the mailing).

"House" List	Bank Balance
204,578	\$835,739

11. With the primaries now underway, the political excitement and attention permit regular mailings to the "house" list (about every six weeks), and produce both a higher rate of return (an average of 22 percent) and a higher average donation (about \$28). The first mailing (at these average rates) brings in \$1,260,196 at a cost of only \$77,740.

"House" List	Bank Balance
204,578	\$2,018,195



computer or robotyped letter sent to the house contributors. The computer version had a computer-imprinted personalized address and salutation, and the addressee's name was invoked twice in the text (those lines being computer imprinted, with the rest offset). A facsimile of Gerald Ford's personal stationery was used. The robotyped letter, sent to contributors with the most generous donation records, was the most personalized of all—printed on a heavier bond, individually typed, and machine signed in real ink. There were five two-cent stamps on the return envelope and a large, attractive commemorative on the mailing envelope, and the return envelope was stamped "personal" in red ink, with the individual's name typed in the return address slot and the envelope addressed to Ford at the White House. (As we shall shortly observe, these items are not the insignificant details they seem.)

This sophisticated package proved to be exceptionally lucrative for the NRCC, with an unusually high rate of return on both packages, especially the house list. The presidential imprimatur was no doubt responsible, and the letter's text was kept noticeably bland (by comparison to most direct mail) in keeping with the dignified tone thought appropriate for a chief executive. A similar house list letter mailed out by the NRCC under Ronald Reagan's signature in February and March of 1976 secured a 6.4 percent response and netted \$250,000—still good but far below the presidential letter's results.

Mailing lists: finding the committed

There is no more crucial stage in the direct-mail process than the assembling of mailing lists. Knowing to whom to send a letter is as important to the success of a fundraising effort as the message and the candidate. There are five basic types of lists: in-house, outside contributor, compiled, commercial, and universal. "In-house" lists are the most valuable, consisting of current and previous

contributors to a candidate, the names of campaign volunteers, and records of individuals who have made inquiries of the candidate by mail and telephone. Past and present donors are always identified by the time of their last donation, the frequency of donations, and the amounts contributed.

A good past contributor list, if kept current, is an irreplaceable campaign resource. Members of Congress have a great advantage in the access they have to the correspondence and in the constituency contact files they have built up over the years. The average House member has between 20,000 and 30,000 names on file, which are periodically updated by his/her staff, and most senators have even larger voter reservoirs. Occasionally, a campaign can gain access to "outside contributor" lists, which record donors to various causes and other candidacies. Some direct mailers believe that people who are constitutionally inclined to give to charities, religions, and educational institutions are good bets to make political contributions as well, given the right incentive. And obviously, if an individual has given to a previous liberal cause or candidacy, there is every reason to consider him/her a possible donor to a new liberal product.

"Compiled" lists are basically group and membership rosters. Doctors, lawyers, businesspersons, labor organizations, alumni, gun owners, veterans, and scores of other professions and special-interest groups have rosters of one sort or another. Some of these lists are obtainable free from supporters, and others can be purchased. Another popular source for direct mailing is the voter registration roll. Most states permit voter registration lists, including the names and sometimes telephone numbers of all qualified voters, to be bought by candidates or campaigns. The National Republican Congressional Committee has found lists of registered Republican voters to be very productive in prospect mailings, and the cost of the lists when purchased from states or localities is generally far less than similar lists bought from list "brokers" or companies. On the other hand, such firms and individuals

have an unbelievably wide range of "commercial" lists for sale, from magazine subscribers and all people who buy products or enter contests through the mail to lists of all deer hunters and trout fishermen in Arizona and all burley tobacco farmers in Tennessee. Magazine lists have proven popular with liberal and conservative candidates for prospecting, since demographic information on subscribers is usually fairly comprehensive. Liberals often mail to readers of *New Yorker*, *New Republic*, and *Mother Jones*, while conservatives pick *Human Events* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. "Universal lists" (such as telephone directories and social registries) normally are not profitable for direct mailings precisely because they are so diversified.

These are standard criteria for evaluating the worth of any mailing list to a campaign. If the individuals listed have a history of giving to campaigns (and possibly to anything), if they are politically active in some way, and if the candidate has had some previous exposure or relationship to them, the odds are good that the list will be useful for prospecting. The same holds true if the individuals are likely to agree with the candidate on some important issue or have a strong reason to dislike his/her opponent. Additionally, a record of contributing or purchasing by mail is a good indicator of direct mail's potential effectiveness.

Personalization and package design

Gimmicks and personalization are two of the most pronounced characteristics of the successful direct-mail package, and these qualities can be detected in each of the five pieces of a traditional package: (1) the letter; (2) the additional enclosures; (3) the contribution card; (4) the return envelope; and (5) the carrier or mailing envelope. In each part, the direct mailer attempts to attract and rivet the recipient's attention in some way, while making the approach seem as personal as possible. The overriding principle of direct

mail is intimacy. As a Republican party direct-mail expert once advised GOP campaign chiefs, "It would be best to have your candidate write a letter by hand to every name on your list. And every step you get away from that weakens the letter a little."

In keeping with these rules, the letter is usually printed on the personal or business stationery of the signatory, and brown or ivory stationery with dark blue or brown letterhead (rather than starchy, official white) is often preferred. The body of the letter is typed on a regular-faced typewriter in black, with short, indented paragraphs of variable length that are never more than six lines long and sometimes consist of just a single sentence. The signature is printed in fine-point blue ink, closely resembling a fountain-pen-signed name. If the letter cannot be properly dated because of the production or mailing schedule, then a designation of "Monday morning" gives the effect of immediacy. Surprisingly, longer letters generally produce greater profits than shorter ones. Letters should run a minimum of four pages (two pages front and back, single-spaced), and one of the most lucrative direct-mail letters ever sent—for George McGovern in 1972—ran seven full pages.

Direct mailers are especially careful about design and enclosures. Mass-produced brochures and literature are thought to be far too impersonal, and sending bumper stickers has been deemed a complete waste of money. Some consultants believe that enclosures are more effective for prospect mailings, when the recipients presumably appreciate additional information or it is needed to stimulate contributions. (A member of the house list is already convinced, and his/her letters should be kept uncluttered and direct, according to the prevailing theory.)

The enclosures contained in direct-mail letters indicate the range of creative gimmickry in the field. Letters for George Bush in 1980 included reprinted news articles with "personal notes" laser-printed in the top margins: "To Irving Potzrebie—I thought you might be interested in these recent clippings—G. B."

Several consultants reported that occasionally respondents return annotated clippings with notes such as "Thanks for lending this—I'm returning it because I'm sure you'll want to keep your copy."

When Texas gubernatorial candidate William Clements sent out money requests for television advertising, his direct mailer attached a list of all the reserved spots by city, station, and program so that the individual could see precisely what he was purchasing. A 1979 National Republican Senatorial Committee mailing let respondents target their money to the Democratic senators they most wanted to see defeated. Each respondent got to judge the Democratic incumbents on a "Danger Rating Scale" and was encouraged to scratch out, as viciously as he/she liked, the names of personal targets. There are all sorts of other "participation mailers," as letters including involvement devices are called. People are frequently sent "mock election" ballots to vote or "critical issues" surveys to fill out and return (along with a contribution, of course); the Republican party even charged a fee in 1979 to count a recipient's mock presidential vote. Individuals are also inundated with "status gifts." Ronald Reagan sent each of his "first supporters" a "commemorative edition" wallet-sized card emblazoned with his countenance and the supporter's computer-typed name. Multicolored plastic membership cards are also common enticements to "join" (i.e., contribute to) various Victory Funds, Eagle Clubs, and Stars and Stripes Forever candidates. Photographs are becoming quite popular as enclosures. Snapshots of the candidate and family or the candidate receiving an award or the acclamation of admirers are adorned by handwritten descriptive notes in blue pen ink on the back. The Republican party used three photos of President Ford to evoke sympathy and stimulate giving as he was leaving office. The highly successful piece, mailed on December 30, 1976, included poses of Ford in the Oval Office, at his swearing-in, and with his family.

Occasionally, large past contributors receive

a worthwhile gift with a new solicitation, such as a superbly illustrated historical calendar. More frequently, respondents are made to feel as guilty as possible if they seem inclined not to contribute. The state and national Republican parties use the marvelous gimmick of a laser-printed "memorandum" from the party's finance director to the chair, bemoaning the absence of "key supporter" Irving Potzrebie of Jonestown from the contributor's list and vowing to "keep the books open" until he opens his wallet. Many times letters will also enclose a sealed envelope with the handwritten notation, "Read this please, if you have decided not to contribute," containing a desperate, breathless final pitch for money. For doubting Thomases, unconvinced of a candidate's electoral promise, direct mailers have a cure: an official-looking "excerpt" from a fictitious "Viability Study for Candidate X," concluding that, if the candidate can just get enough money from the person reading the note, victory is assured and the future of Western civilization is secure. No one else, though, has matched the number and sheer diversity of enclosures in Richard Viguerie's "state-of-the-art" direct-mail packages for the Conservative Caucus's anti-SALT treaty campaign and the National Tax Limitation Committee's drive to secure a budget-balancing amendment to the U.S. Constitution. No trouble is spared, as up to a dozen different items are packed into a booklet format with perforated tear sheets. There are gifts ("Christmas Seal"-like stamps with political messages on them), participatory devices (postcards expressing strong views on the subject at hand, preaddressed to the individual's representative), and a legion of persuasive materials—all in a package that is almost as much fun to go through as a box of Cracker Jack.

The contributor card is a crucial part of the direct-mail package, since once an individual has decided to contribute, he/she often determines the size of the gift while completing the card. Direct mailers have discovered that people tend to donate more when the suggested amounts listed go from greatest to

smallest (\$500, \$100, \$50) rather than the reverse and when a blank is left for even larger contributions at the higher end of the scale. The contributor is asked to sign a personalized statement as he/she donates: "Yes, Candidate X, I want to help you rid Washington of the superliberals. . . ." The reader is even asked to sign and return the card without making a contribution—if he/she can sign a statement only slightly milder than this: "Sorry, Candidate X. I'm afraid I cannot contribute to your crusade even though I know your defeat would condemn my children to a life of misery and enable Sodom and Gomorrah to prevail on earth." Richard Viguerie's shrewd anti-SALT package asked each respondent to signify a contribution decision by affixing one of two flags onto the reply card—either the Stars and Stripes or the "White Flag of Surrender" (printed on a blood-red background).

Even a simple envelope can be a useful tool in direct mail. The carrier (or mailing) envelope, after all, influences the recipient's decision whether or not to bother opening it. The more personalized is the address, the better is the chance that an individual will read the contents. If an envelope cannot be personally addressed (handwritten or typed), then window envelopes are generally used, allowing the typed address on the letter itself to show through. "Live" (i.e., real) stamps on the envelope are vastly preferred to either meter or bulk-mail, and colorful commemorative stamps are especially prized as attention grabbers. "Teaser copy" is sometimes printed on the carrier envelope as an enticement. A gun control group was very forthright ("ENCLOSED: Your first chance to tell the National Rifle Association to go to hell!"), while the sponsors of Proposition 13 were deceptive ("Your 1978 Property Tax Increase statement is enclosed . . . RESPONSE REQUIRED"). The return envelope is, if anything, even more carefully and attractively designed. Colors that contrast with the rest of the package are often used, and ideally the individual's name is personally typed in the return-address space. Sometimes a calendar appears on the envelope

with a date circled, as a reminder to the recipient that the candidate needs a gift by a certain time.

A bulk-mail indicia is frequently used in prospect mailings, but again, live stamps are more desirable, and for good reason. As an experiment, the National Republican Congressional Committee mailed the exact same fundraising package to two different samples of the same list, the only difference in the mailings being that one used a bulk indicia on the return envelope while the other had five two-cent live stamps. Incredibly, the mailing with the bulk indicia raised only \$0.50 per name mailed, while the stamped mailing garnered \$1.64 per name. It is a fascinating commentary on human behavior that our actions can be so easily manipulated, and this illustration serves to underline the subtle but substantial impact that consultants and the new campaign technology can have in politics.

Copywriting with emotional ink

Direct mail is a copy medium. On television, visuals supplement copy, and on radio sound effects can embellish, but direct mail has only graphics, stamps, and the printed word. Words unspoken cannot easily move, but direct-mail consultants have long known of a secret ingredient to stir the soul: emotion. "To raise money by mail you don't have an hour of explaining things across the table to someone," insists Democratic direct mailer Robert Smith. "You have to do it in a couple of pages of print. The message has to be extreme, has to be overblown; it really has to be kind of rough." Smith's axiom for the political left applies as well on the right. One antiabortion group, for example, sent out a "Stop the Baby Killers" letter in 1979 to 50,000 Catholics, Baptists, and members of other religious faiths, calling for the defeat of five proabortion "baby killer" incumbents in the U.S. Congress. The words "baby killers" and "murder" appeared forty-one times in the text of the letter. When someone in the antiabortion movement complained to Jim Martin, a former Viguerie

employee, about the extreme emotionalism of the letter, he replied as a businessman who knew the role of emotion in direct mail: “. . . the bottom line in my business is to raise money.”

The letter tone for in-house mailings, particularly to high donors, is usually softer, since these givers already have some sort of commitment to the candidate. But in prospect mailings, the tacit rule among direct mailers is that there are no rules—anything goes in the pursuit of profit. Direct mail, consultants insist, must make the quantum leap between belief and action—painful action (the parting with money). And only emotion can do that, they argue.

A candidate near the extreme ends of the spectrum can be himself or herself in direct mail, but for more centrist candidates, emotion must be manufactured, either by selective and exaggerated emphasis on a couple of issues or by sharp, personal contrast with the opponent. Involvement devices can also be useful for centrists. Robert Smith advises campaigns contemplating a direct-mail program to “Find your candidate a nasty enemy. Tell people they’re threatened in some way. . . . It’s a cheap trick, but the simplest.” Events that generate their own emotion can also be harnessed with great effectiveness by direct mail. One of Smith’s profitable letters for the prochoice National Abortion Rights Committee was mailed shortly after Congress cut off Medicaid abortion payments in response to a 1973 Supreme Court ruling liberalizing abortion laws. And one of his firm’s best fund-raising letters for the American Civil Liberties Union came on the heels of the furor created by Nazi demands for marching privileges in Skokie, Illinois.

Almost every line of copy is related either to emotionalism or personalization. The letter is always in conversational (if ungrammatical) English, it is written from one person to another (not from one to thousands), and it is spiced with dozens of “you’s” and “I’s.” The salutation is as personal as possible (individually typed to the addressee if possible, but “Dear Friend”

it not). The opening paragraph, the most crucial part of the entire letter, is usually succinct and breathless. It is designed to rivet the reader’s attention and pique his interest immediately, explaining in an intimate or momentous way why the letter is written, what the common ground with the reader is, or how the candidate’s election will be vital to the recipient’s own welfare. Urgency is the mood most often created in the first few words, as these examples of opening lines indicate:

If you’re like me, you’ve received literally thousands of pieces of mail this summer. But I urge you to pay special attention to this letter, the MOST IMPORTANT LETTER you’ll receive this year.

I believe you’ve been waiting 25 years to receive this letter. . . . But unless you step forward . . . there may never be another like it.

I need your advice. And I need it right away.

This is the most urgent letter I have ever written in my life.

These same lines recur frequently in national direct mailings, since they have been found effective. As one consultant wryly reported, “We usually write about ten ‘most important letter ever written’ letters a year—but not to the same group, obviously. It’s always good for one shot.” There are other approaches besides urgency. Involvement phrasing is sometimes used: “You and I can save America” or “Will you go to the White House with me on October 1st?” Guilt is always handy (“The Republican party can’t afford to lose people like you!”), and the personal touch can charm (“I need your advice immediately” or “Would you do a very special favor for me?”). Frightening the recipients can certainly work with appropriate lists. Former military personnel responded generously to a letter that began “If you and I don’t do something immediately, our country’s vital security interests will be sold down the river.” California suburbanites were gripped into giving by a direct-mail piece that opened like this: “If a bloodthirsty criminal like Charles Manson had you or your family brutally murdered, that criminal would not face the death penalty under current California law. We can change the law.”

The body of the letter is devoted to selling the candidate and his/her chances and closing the sale with a contribution. Boosting the candidate's electoral prospects usually comes first. A Republican party direct-mail manual advises campaigns to "think in terms of how your candidate's election will provide something for the reader that your opponent cannot provide. In selling terms—think of benefits to the reader." Testimonials and endorsements in the body of the letter can bolster a candidate's credibility and pave the way for the quarter of the letter spent in actually asking for the contribution.

In general, the reader is asked to make a specific contribution; the amount is computer- or laser-printed in the body of the letter and is based either on the recipient's contribution pattern or projected potential given the list from which the name was taken. Previous donors are never asked to give precisely the same amount as they gave before. Rather, the last previous gift is noted and gratefully acknowledged, and a percentage increment (ten to twenty-five percent) is added to comprise the new donation request. The pitch for funds is normally based on the campaign budget, which is identified as the minimum necessary to win, according to "the experts." The candidate explains an immediate need for a certain amount (\$25,000 or less) to be used for a specified purpose (radio and television time being the favorite justifications). The recipient can even be asked to buy "four prime-time radio spots for \$312.18"; the more precise the request, the better it is likely to be considered. Finally, adding to the sense of urgency, the reader is given a make-or-break deadline by which time the money must be in the candidate's hand.

All the while, the letter continues to make personal connections of various sorts. These are raw, scratchy "blue pen" underlinings, dashes, and checkmarks "personally" added by the candidate to emphasize parts of the typescript. If the letter was individually addressed, then the heading of all pages after the first reads, "Page two (three, etc.) of letter

to Irving Potzrebie," and the addressee's name is parenthetically interspersed throughout the text in computer- or laser-printed lines ("And now, Mr. Potzrebie, let me turn to another matter of interest"). The phrasing is kept direct and simple with lots of conversational connecting phrases ("It would mean a lot to me personally," "NOW—here is the most important part," "But that's not all," etc.).

The final paragraph usually restates the candidate's greatest attractions and attempts to end on a dramatic and very personal note. Sample closing lines give the flavor of the climax:

Success in the 1980s will be measured by your support today.

When we meet in person, I'll be honored to shake your hand. And you—with good cause—will be proud of your actions today.

I need help from my friends. Can I count on you again, Irving?

The survival of America is on the line. Let me hear from you today!

The signature follows, usually that of the candidate, but occasionally of someone who is well known to the people on the mailing list (the president of the American Medical Association for doctors, for example) or who has special credibility on the issue stressed in the text (a retired general for a letter on national defense, for instance). Believability is important. The Republican party almost sent out a letter that would have been jointly signed by President Ford and Ronald Reagan at the time they were hotly contesting the 1976 GOP presidential nomination. But the party's fundraisers concluded after testing that average people simply could not conceive of the two sitting down together for any cooperative purpose at the time, so they scrapped the original plan and enclosed two separate letters, in the same package, one from each man.

Postscripts are standard devices on direct-mail letters, because people have been found to pay close attention to them. (A "P.S.," in the signer's handwriting, often follows the typewritten postscript for added emphasis.)

The requested donation and specified deadline are almost always repeated, along with still more phrases evoking guilt, urgency, patriotism, and hatred of the enemy:

If I fail to win your support . . . I'll begin to despair of success in 1980. I've figured and refigured our chances of raising dollars every way I can. There's just no way to make it without you.

I will be given a list of contributions soon and I certainly hope your name is on this list.

We are waiting for your verdict. As far as we're concerned, you'll be passing judgment on America's future.

But the emotionalism of direct mail is not always so hard and virulent. Conservative Richard Viguerie's ingenious "wife letter" is a good example of the soft sell, which pulls the heartstrings instead of pumping adrenalin. Written in longhand by the candidate's wife on personal, pastel stationery, the letter is an expensive, photo-offset production that is mailed in a ladylike envelope with full postage (no bulk reduction, and using live stamps). It is even shipped back to the candidate's hometown for a local postmark. In the four-page letter the wife gives a chatty rendition of her family history, children, and marriage, lightly connecting it all to her husband-candidate's concerns about inflation, taxes, energy, and other problems. The text is opened and closed with references to housewifely and childbearing duties ("The baby's crying so I must close for now," ended one), and a photo of the happy family, pets included, is enclosed with a "hand-scrawled" inscription.

The "wife letter" has been widely mimicked, but that is the fate of most effective direct-mail packages. Richard Viguerie himself discovered a 1980 Reagan fundraising letter that was almost precisely copied from one he had mailed for another GOP presidential contender fifteen months earlier. The same format, the same issues, and many of the same words were used; ten of the first eleven paragraphs were virtually identical. Direct-mail letters are not copyrighted, and the techniques are certainly standard. If direct-mail consult-

ants were as emotional as their letters, charges of plagiarism would often fill the air.

Production and mailing schedules

Artful, inventive wording can greatly increase the profit margin of a letter, as can the quality of the letter's production, and it is in this area that technological precision has made its most significant impact. "I started out typing envelopes, 500 a day, each of them individually stuffed with letters," recalled GOP direct mailer Bob Odell. "Now I'm at the point where I'm not sure I can keep up with the new technology." The added degree of personalization, which multiplies a letter's effectiveness, is a direct result of changes in technology. The first direct-mail letters were unvarying, mimeographed copies in an envelope carrying a computer-printed label. Then window envelopes came into widespread use (with the label affixed to the inside letter). The computer-typed letter, at first in all uppercase type and then in more natural lower and upper was a major advance, since each letter was individually typed even if identical in message. Next came the computer "fill-in" letter, where the addressee's name was interspersed in the initial attempt at personalization. Simultaneously, advanced photocopying and printing equipment was being developed, allowing continuous production and unheard-of quantities of letters to be mailed each day.

The latest generation of word processing machines is nothing short of phenomenal. Five or more items in a reasonably priced direct-mail package can now be personalized in some way, and the machines' operation is far more flexible than previously. Another marvel, a laser printer, uses a "burning" process to print 10,000 lines per minute (compared to the computer's 1,200 lines) and can print sideways and upside down. New package preparation machines easily convert the long printed forms into manageable, mailable packets with all enclosures neatly cut and properly folded.

The exact schedule for posting a direct-mail

package necessarily varies considerably from campaign to campaign. Generally, prospect mailings are done as soon as a list is available, so that house donors can be identified and added to the files as quickly as possible. Mailings to house donors, though, must be more carefully planned, and there are usually specific times during an election when awareness will be heightened or the sense of urgency and immediacy will naturally seem greater. Just before or just after a candidacy announcement, at the time of a major media broadcast or blitz, and shortly before the primary or general election are all dramatic entry points for direct mail.

Direct mailers try to avoid the summer period, when many people are away, and December/January, when many are financially drained from the holidays, but there are few other clear scheduling rules. Many of these rules are made to be broken; two consultants reported their most successful mailings are regularly sent in early January and around the Fourth of July, presumably because of the lack of competition from other mailers who have read the "rules" too carefully. Standard guidelines are also quoted, and often disregarded, about the frequency of mailings. Normally, the house list is mailed every thirty to forty-five days, but within a month or so of the election another letter is sent each fortnight. Generally, five percent of those on the house list will give with each mailing (averaging perhaps \$25 a head). The most important job of each new contributor letter is to upgrade previous gifts, of course. The Republican party has had a lengthy program of trail-and-error testing to determine the percentage increase that is best to request for each category of donor. In general, there is just a small percentage upgrading for gifts of under \$100, but for gifts of \$500 and more, a major increment is added. It is helpful to thank the individual for the original contribution first, citing the amount and specifically what it bought for the campaign; for larger donors, some sort of certificate and memento might be sent along as a symbol of gratitude.

Occasionally, reminders are used to prod negligent givers. For robotyped letters to large contributors, carbon copies are kept and sent along with a new cover letter if a recipient has not responded to the original within a few weeks.

Concluding remarks

Because the art of direct mail is still inexact, and conditions and circumstances vary so greatly from candidate to candidate and election to election, there are few guaranteed techniques. Direct-mail consultants frequently contradict each other; what one thinks is a shrewd idea, another discounts as wholly worthless. The direct-mail industry, and the professionals who run it, like to operate on the principle "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," but most are insecure (and wise) enough to realize that last week's magic may not work for this week's candidate. Therefore, a testing phase is sometimes added to ensure that a mistake is not too costly. Testing requires taking a 1,000- to 2,000-person random sample from the mailing list and posting the prepared copy to this small group first. This adds four to eight weeks to the schedule, of course, but the adjustments and improvements can increase the profit margin substantially.

Indeed, given the primitive nature of the direct-mail "science" and the considerable financial risk involved in each mailing, it is surprising that testing is not almost universal. Many direct mailers foresee a time when they will commission extensive psychological testing of word patterns, colors, and approaches, and use focus groups and much more sophisticated list selection techniques. For the moment, though, direct mail is a decidedly trial-and-error technology, where professionals rely on instinct and whim as much as test results. One consultant cited an instance where he disposed of \$10,000 worth of already printed letters because he had last-minute doubts about the mailing's success. Better to do that than mail at great expense a package that does poorly—which is exactly what very often happens.