

Do Johnson Boxes Still Work?

**Due to Internet marketing, shorter consumer attention spans
and tighter budgets, the direct-mail letter is changing –
possibly to the detriment of the package**

By Britt Brouse

Associate Editor, Inside Direct Mail

Did your eye stop at the top of this article and focus on the headline centered in the Johnson box, or move elsewhere? If, like most direct-mail marketers, your biggest concern is achieving a good overall ROI against rising postage and production costs, testing a single letter element like a Johnson box may not be the first item on your agenda.

Instead, today there is less testing of individual elements in a letter, as direct mailers are testing entire packages or formats. "Budgets are shrinking, and there's a lot less testing – publishers are taking controls and trying to squeeze the most out of them," says Ruth Sheldon, a New York-based copywriter and marketer. "I don't see too much testing where different letters go out against one another. Sometimes publishers will test two or three packages for a launch, but not letters."

But in the interest of making the letter work in this modern age of heightened pressure – from online-affected prospects, from smaller budgets, from postal costs – let's revisit direct-mail letter tweaks and tactics with some select copywriters.

Is the Letter Shrinking?

There is a sentiment within the direct-marketing community that the letter is shrinking. "I think attention spans have shortened to the point that 10-page letters really aren't cutting it anymore," says George Duncan, owner of Peterborough, NH-based consultancy for direct marketing, Duncan Direct Associates. "We don't have the luxuries of long, drawn-out letters and getting friendly with the reader and that sort of thing. I think the offer takes precedent now," he adds.

Yet the long copy versus short copy debate remains as unsettled as the chicken-or-the-egg question, and most copywriters treat their letter length on a project-by-project basis. Duncan believes that people will read what's relevant to them regardless of how long or short the copy is. "Long copy works well for those people who like to read, so if you're sending something to teachers, they like to read," adds Debra Jason, owner and copywriter for Hanalei, HI-based The Write Direction.

Jason also measures letter length according to how long it takes to make the sale. "I have clients who will call and say, 'I just want a one-page, one-sided letter, because my audience is busy.' That's right, they are busy, but if you have enough information that is targeted and hits the prospect's hot buttons, a one-page letter may not be long enough," she asserts.

The Stalwart Johnson Box

As illustrated in the headline, the Johnson box is one of the first things a consumer will look at besides the P.S. "It's one of those standard direct-marketing techniques that still works," says Jason. Nowadays, almost any letter headline qualifies as a Johnson box. "The Johnson box has taken on a million different configurations. It's no longer a rectangle outlined by asterisks with a clever headline or offer positioned in the center," Duncan says.

The purpose of the Johnson box, however, remains the same. "You have a fair amount of your message above the salutation before the person even gets into the letter, so they understand what territory they're in. And then if they go on to read the letter, you've got them kind of saying 'yes' to you already," Duncan explains. He has tried a few different approaches to the Johnson box, including one successful tactic of a headline with a few bullet points underneath that expand on the main message.

The *Who's Mailing What! Archive* has recently received a number of financial mailings featuring sidebars, which run down the margins of the letter and reinforce the letter's main benefits. These sidebars are one new iteration of the Johnson box – and may work well if tested in other sectors.

Letters Within Self-Mailers

When developing a self-mailer, it's important to retain the letter as its own element. Sheldon describes writing a letter for a self-mailer as a fashion conundrum. "It's like going through your wardrobe and saying, 'I have one shot to make my best impression,' and picking that outfit that's really going to do the most for you."

Sheldon advises focusing the letter on the big idea and using segmentation to enhance results. "Let that prospect know you are aware of their big need, and communicate the big idea that's going to either solve the problem or make them feel better. If you can, customize that letter – to different interest groups – because not everybody has the same need or responds to the same idea. You have a better chance of honing that idea to really mesh with the needs of the prospect," Sheldon says.

If the self-mailer is rolling out in an A/B test against a traditional envelope package, it is best to keep the letter identical in both the envelope and self-mailer test cells. "You want to test as few elements as possible beyond the fact that you're doing a self-mailer versus a letter. Try to reproduce that letter package as closely as possible in the self-mailer format," Duncan says.

The Curse of the Voucher

In the publications sector especially, the letter is still taking a back seat due to the popularity of the voucher package – a plain-Jane business communication listing benefits, discount subscription prices and a reply – meant to simulate a bill. Within the voucher format, the letter is either nonexistent or reduced to a small portion, or even a lift note element in the package.

"What's going on with vouchers is a lot of publishers are now seeing the handwriting on the wall and saying to themselves, 'At some point these guys are going to fatigue, and what are we going to do?'" Sheldon says. To combat fatigue, publishers are testing four-color brochures, buckslips and other promotional content into vouchers to help boost fatiguing campaigns, yet this is taking away from the format's original intent of acting like an invoice. In lieu of adding fancy elements to voucher packages, it might benefit publishers as well as copywriters to develop and test letter-driven packages.

Personalizing Letters

Copywriters have been creating emotional appeals for years, but in recent years, personalization has become an added technique to drive that personal appeal home. "I am a strong believer in personalization. If in a letter, I say I am understanding your needs, do I even know who you are? Better to use personalization and say, 'Yes, Joe, I know who you are,'" Jason says.

As more digital presses and some of the first fully variable presses come online, copywriters often incorporate variable data into letters. "Personalization is a big deal now. We have a lot of variable data that we did not have access to before, and we have the technology to do it at reasonable costs today," Duncan says.

Even when data and technology are unavailable, you can still personalize a letter to a particular segment. "If you can't use the name, then you use something else like 'Dear Lover of Golf.' Try to get as close to what you're writing about and what you know they're interested in," Sheldon advises. "You have to be careful that you don't overdo it and make it feel very false," Duncan warns. Duncan also points out that while personalized messages resonate well with an older audience, he does not see the tactic working as well with younger prospects.

The Letter Finds New Digs

No longer confined to 8 1/2 x 11 letterhead, these days marketers are trying the letter in new places: as an insert folded into a brochure, as part of the brochure itself or perfed onto a reply form. "I was working with a publisher that folded and inserted the letter into its brochure, and I asked, 'Did you test into that?' And they said, 'No. It was just a cost-saving device with the letter printed on the same paper as the brochure,'" Sheldon shares. This unscientific approach is counterintuitive to the rules that direct mail is built on.

Without testing to back up such efforts, it is difficult to determine the success of formats without traditional letters. "My sense would be that if you get an envelope that you're usually looking for a letter, so if you're going through a package and there is no sort of traditional letter, you might not read the copy, and [may] think, 'Why am I getting this?'" says Jason.

Multichannel Calls to Action

Letters and packages have multichannel calls to action written all over them. "An online channel is never a bad idea. It takes up another line or two of copy to include the website and gives the prospect every opportunity to respond," Jason says.

"Everybody in every category wants to get their clients online so that they can promote them online, where it's cheaper, faster and easier to test," Sheldon says. Sheldon says she will mention the URL all over the mailing, not just in the letter, but in as many places as possible, so that her client can gain the opportunity to move the prospect online for cross-selling, upselling, automated renewal and other low-overhead, high-profit approaches.

Some direct mailers incentivize online response with special rewards and discounts, while others gamble with a mail piece offering only an online response channel. "Usually it's as simple as 'Visit our website,' but there are those campaigns that go out, where the purpose of the campaign is to get people to the website, so there's some special offer, or some kind of game or participation element where you need to go to the website to find out more or qualify," Jason says.

The State of the Copywriting Trade

As the face of direct marketing changes, more and more copywriters seem to be entering the formerly niche profession.

"There's an awful lot of us out there," Duncan says. "I am so deluged by copywriters who are selling online aids to writing – it's as if everyone has gone into copywriting," Sheldon adds.

One way to get your voice heard in today's market is to carve out a specialty. "If I were coaching somebody today, I would recommend they develop one or two product or category specialties which have durability, and become an expert in those particular areas," Duncan shares.

The jump to online marketing is opening new doors for direct-mail copywriters because digital publications are much more content-hungry than printed materials. "I was a traditional copywriter, but I have been doing a lot of websites and e-newsletters ... and I don't find it too much different as a copywriter," Sheldon says. "I think that the rules that made you a good copywriter before are still there. You have to do the same things, but you have to do them a lot better because there's not that available money out there to keep testing," she concludes.

[Ed. Note: This article first appeared in [Inside Direct Mail](#), the most comprehensive publication in the direct-mail industry. Each issue takes an inside look at what's in the mail, what's working and what's not – and most importantly how to improve your response.]

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Cheers, Jan

Guest (Jan) – over a year ago

Rocket-Ray introduced me to the Johnson Box many years ago and I have not stopped using it since, in web pages, emails, e-postcards, even on business cards!

So thank you for this article - its been very useful!

Guest (Mark Mogridge) – over a year ago

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American Writers & Artists Institute

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924