Call it what you want. Direct mail, pre-call letter, prospect mailing, contact letter, or even junk mail. One fact remains clear: most general contractors want to be contacted by mail by a subcontractor interested in doing work for him. This way, when general contractors meet a wall and ceiling contractor personally they know something about him and from the mailing piece, have already formed an impression—good or bad.

Why, then, do many contractors not send letters in advance of personal contact or call? One reason is that many of them misunderstand the objectives of a letter. So, they “turn off” this technique when results don’t achieve their expectations.

Another reason why many contractors are soured by prospecting letters is that the letters they write are ineffective. Although a certain flair for waiting is helpful, writing an effective letter to a potential customer can also be a learned skill.

Developing an effective prospecting letter—one that will get you in to see an architect, an engineer or a general contractor—is partly a science, partly good knowledge of the marketplace, and partly an art form. It’s a skill in which a talented amateur can be every bit as good as a veteran professional . . . at a single mailing. The real difference between the professional and the amateur is consistency and a thorough knowledge of the techniques. For there are well-
established ground rules in writing good letters.

When a pro breaks a rule to achieve a specific effect, he knows what he’s doing and why. The amateur won’t even be aware that he’s broken a rule. The importance of this is that an amateur won’t have the foggiest notion why one letter helped him get so many appointments—while another letter did poorly.

If you’re a professional at making sales, but somewhat less than that at writing sales letters, here are a few key points to keep in mind. . .

Your letter should have only one primary objective: to get you face-to-face with a prospect who wants to hear how your company and its services will help him.

Don’t ever let any of your secondary or “spin-off” objectives get in the way. Some secondary objectives may be to promote or advertise your company . . . perfectly valid minor objectives. Just don’t fall into the trap of promoting your company at the expense of selling its service. Or more accurately, selling the opportunity to make a presentation about its product or service. Keep in mind that a prospective buyer is less interested in how old or large your company is than what these features mean in terms of reliability or capability.

A pre-call letter is a rifle bullet going directly to the buyer. Despite some “consumerist” myths, direct mail does get read by most people. In fact, if your letter is going to a big firm, the higher up you aim—the more likely it is to be read.

A well prepared prospecting letter is your first opportunity to make a favorable impression on a potential customer. In some ways it can create an even more favorable impression than a phone call. For example, even under the best of circumstances a phone call is an interruption. However, people have a tendency to open and read their mail as part of the normal flow of the business day.

Your prospect will always be “in” to your mailing, even though he may be “out” for a phone call or personal cold call. Take advantage of that fact.

When you do follow up by phone to set an appointment, you can build your conversation around key elements of the letter you previously sent the prospect. Reinforce your company’s capabilities, or unusual features of what you’re proposing in the letter first, then build on it in your personal contact.

Don’t send out more letters than you can reasonably expect to follow up within a week. In other words, follow up your letters within one week. Nothing is staler than a follow-up to a letter sent more than ten days before. After ten days chances are that the prospect won’t remember the letter at all.

Don’t go into detail about all the features and benefits of what you’re selling. Tease the prospect a little. The letter is designed to pave your way for a sales presentation, not be a substitute for it. In the Pacific during World War II an enemy-held island wasn’t taken simply because the navy bombarded the shoreline. The marines had to storm inland and take it in head-to-head fighting. Your letter is just the opening salvo in the bombardment of convincing a prospect to become your customer.

A prospecting letter sent is merely the first sales communication to him. Your job doesn’t end when you send the letter. You must take the next step and follow up each letter with a phone call . . . normally three to seven days after the letter has been sent.

Of course there may be a few people who do respond to your letter. Follow up these “hot” prospects first. Be sure to follow up every letter with a phone call to make a specific date/time appointment. There are as many sales to be made among people who don’t respond as there are among people who do.

**Letter Writing Tips**

After the salutation and date, there should be four basic parts to every prospecting letter: a short attention-getting first statement that offers a benefit to the prospect; an interest arousing elaboration of that benefit; the meat of your message aimed at getting you an appointment (including the selected benefits and features of what you’re selling); asking the prospect to take some action in addition to telling him you will contact him soon. A shorthand way to remember these parts of a letter is often referred to as A-I-S-A . . . Attention-Interest-Sales Message-Action.

Keep your letter oriented to the prospect. The use of “you” in a letter should occur far more frequently than “I”, “me”, or “we”.
Pinpoint the advantages to be gained by the prospect when he does business with your firm. Support these advantages by offering statements which prove them. A good proof statement is a list of satisfied customers — especially ones he might know.

Use a short checklist to compare what you’ve written with all the factors that go into a good prospecting letter. Here’s one checklist you may wish to use . . .

- Does your first sentence hit the reader where he lives?
- Is your lead sentence no more than two lines long?
- Do you offer a benefit to the buyer in the first sentence?
- Have you highlighted your biggest benefit first?
- Did you give the prospect an overall reason for seeing you?
- Is what you say believable?
- Do you use simple, direct language?
- Have you asked the prospect to respond on his own to you?
- Have you asked the prospect to expect your call?

Hot Buttons

Experience is invaluable when determining which psychological motivating factor will turn on a prospect. This factor has been called the “hot button.” There are lists showing anywhere from six to sixty hot buttons. Here are a few reasons why prospects would be willing to see you:

- To make money
- To get a good team player
- To save money
- To save time
- To get his job done on time
- To save effort
- To reward his ego

Push one of these hot buttons in an interesting way, and your letter will pay off in an appointment.

The Envelope, Contents

Before you even draft the letter, take a long hard look at your envelope and letterhead. Are they bright, attractive, or distinguished? Or simply cold and flat. Use what I call the ultimate test. First, look at the envelope and ask yourself, “Would I open it . . . and why?”

Second, look at the stationery and ask, “Does this letterhead really reflect the spirit of my company and the quality of what I’m selling?”

If the answer to either question is no, fire your stationery and hire a better one. Your stationery (and business card, too) are critical selling tools. Multi-color letterheads aren’t always necessary, but color shouldn’t be ruled out because of expense factors alone. The real test isn’t dollars, but effectiveness.

What else should be in the envelope, besides the letter? There are all kinds of combinations of items, however the simplest, most effective combination seems to be:

- The letter
- A brochure about your services and company, designed to fit a standard business envelope
- A business reply card with your return address. The card should have space for the prospect’s name, title, company, address, city, state, zip, and phone number. There should also be spaces appropriately marked for the prospect to fill in the date and time he would like to have an appointment.
- Your business card.

. . . all these should be paper clipped, not stapled or loose, in a way that permits your business card to appear at the top of the letter when the prospect unfolds it. An interested prospect may mislay a letter—or the business card—but normally not both.

A Beginning

In the area of direct mail, and especially prospecting letters, I’m not sure that there even is such a thing as “all the answers.” But by understanding more clearly the objectives of a pre-call mailing—and the techniques used in effective mailings—you can write letters that help you get appointments. Appointments that mean profitable business for you. And isn’t that what all sales prospecting is about?