By S.S. Saucerman

BEING DIRECT

You've defined the direction of your company and have a pretty clear idea of what you want to achieve. You have a plan. But something's still missing. Even with the gains you've made, you're still not generating the continuous work—the smooth continuity—that would let you feel like you've made it over the top and make you feel comfortable.

But there's more to it than that. Over the years, you've come to realize that forward momentum and continuity is crucial in the contracting business, and you've further found that even your finest efforts don't carry you through the periods of stagnation brought about through the natural ebb and flow of a fickle construction market. The periodic down times (particularly when prolonged) are just too much to absorb ... slowly and steadfastly interrupting and poison-
ing your company's growth and prosperity via worker layoffs, lack of venture and expansion capital, lowered employee morale. You're sure marketing is your solution, but you're stuck about which marketing vehicle to choose. You certainly can't pick something costly and time-consuming because you simply don't have the resources to waste!

If this sounds like you, perhaps it's time to take a look at direct mailings. Why? Because the tools you need to create and send effective direct mailings are readily available, easily learned and well within the budgets of even the smallest of firms. And though these new marketing waters may seem a bit unnatural at first (after all, you're a contractor, not an ad executive), it won't be long before, with a lit-

How to Create
EFFECTIVE
Brochures and Mailers
tle practice, you’ll soon be swimming like a direct-marketing fish (Would that be, a “marketing marlin?”)

**Mailing Direct**

Direct mail, of course, is where you a brochure or flyer and send it directly to the prospective client’s home or firm in hopes of garnering their business. It sounds simple enough and—often—it really can be. From a technical standpoint, all you really need is one of many readily available desktop publishing and/or word-processing software programs (I use WordPerfect®, but there are many more), which you may already own. You could also opt for any number of software programs specifically designed for brochure-making.

Whatever you choose, by combining any one of these programs with (the also readily available) “merge-type” database programs (that personalize your message to many different clients in one operation), the ability to create expedient, professional and attractive mailers is well within the technical expertise of virtually any moderately skilled computer-user. Even the novice can learn to create attractive and colorful mailers in only a short period of time.

**What’s Inside That Counts**

There’s more to a brochure than making it pretty and colorful; you also have to have something to put in it! If your content isn’t efficient and effective, your time will likely be wasted. So, here are a few tips for creating your own direct-mail program. First we’ll discuss some general rules and then move on to the mailer (in the form of a brochure) itself

Here are the general rules:

✓ Always personalize your mailings. No “occupant” or “current addressee” labels. They just get tossed.

✓ Don’t fill your direct mail with a lot of unrelated, unrequested junk literature about products and fads. All this does is increase your postage and lessen the chance that it will be read. In general, the message should be short, simple, and focused (we’ll talk more about this later).

✓ Include (or make it a part of your mailing) pre-addressed reply cards with your mailings. This will increase your response rate.

✓ Get a bulk mailing permit. These permits are often available for a yearly fee and will get you a reduced postage rate per mailed item. This will save you a bundle on postage costs, if you do a lot of mailings. Now, there will be some restrictions, like minimum quantities, requirements that mailings have to be of the same size and shape, and more, but it can often be made to suit your program well.

There are also bar-coding and pre-sorting mailing options available. Software for bar-coding may already be loaded as part of your word-processing program (and you just don’t know it). If so, your WI? program may also be able to sort and code your mailings. This will ease office strain and, since bar-coded mail is often even cheaper than regular bulk mail, it will save you even more on postage costs.

✓ If you decide not to go the bulk-mail route, be sure you choose an appropriate class of mail. First-class mail may cost you a bit more, but (besides making a nice impression on the client) mailings that can’t be delivered by the postman will be returned to you, thus giving you the chance to update or correct your computer database and avoid wasting money in the future (and trust me, this happens a lot!). Along this same line, make it a habit to periodically purge your database of old or redundant customer names. If your database is quite large, you may even want to buy purging software to help you with your task.

**Creating Your Brochure**

Of course, if you’re going to go to all the effort of developing a direct mail program, you’ll want the message you send
to be effective. Before you go throwing just anything together, there are a few things you may want to consider. Now, above, I used the word focus. The focus or objective of your brochure is an essential element in creating an effective mailer (or any type of communication for that matter). Focus simply means taking the time to ask yourself, “What are we trying to accomplish with this mailing?”

There’s a reason for this exercise. You see, many brochures that I receive daily seem to have no discernable message or purpose. I’m sure you’ve seen them too: bundles of disoriented and disconnected shreds of information and promotional literature with no clearly stated, focused message to the customer about what your company can do for them.

Now, I’m sure these fine firms aren’t complete marketing misfits. These misguided attempts at promotion are more likely the result of harried company employees throwing together unrelated globs of propaganda in a well-meaning but ill-conceived attempt to get something into his prospective customer’s hands by a certain deadline.

This is no way to get your message out. To avoid having your direct-mail program rendered ineffectual due to a disconnected, disoriented and just plain dull mailings, let’s examine some elements of effective brochures and see if we can put a little pizzazz in your promotion:

- Have an objective, and get to it quickly! Company histories are nice, but most people (and especially the busy executives who make up a lot of the contractor’s clientele) simply don’t have time (or the energy) to read through a lot of fluff.

- Don’t try to pack too much into the brochure. This goes back to maintaining an objective. Including information that doesn’t serve to move your message along will only end up muddying the water.

- Target your brochure to your audience. Don’t send out general information at random because it will generally (and randomly) not be read. If you do medical construction work, target hospitals, clinics and doctors’/dentists’ offices. Tell them precisely what you can do to help them, and why your company is the one for the job. Then, follow up with a phone call or a visit (better).

- Yes, it’s OK to include a small blurb about your company’s excellent people, solid reputation, and company vision, but then get on to what your company can do for the reader.

- Try to make your brochure inviting to the client. No long, rambling diatribes of information. Use catchy, descriptive titles, and break your copy down into small, readable sections with sub-headings or bullet-points (like this article). Include photos, graphs, charts and graphics periodically to keep it visually appealing.

- Don’t put your company name as the leading headline. Go for something that will grab their attention, such as a question (remember composition class in high school?).

- Speak English. No, I don’t mean the language; I’m talking about technical wording. Too much complex or detailed jargon is tiresome and confusing to most readers, and will ultimately give them a good reason to set the brochure down. On the other hand, you also don’t want get too relaxed or pile on too much
slang, for it may backfire. Something you thought was clever when you wrote it may end up offending a prospective customer, and that’s certainly not what you’re going for.

✓ Give names and talk about key people from your organization in the brochure. This includes estimators, project managers, salespeople and even job foreman (if you think it’s applicable). The goal is to get the customer to associate your company with human beings, not marble walls. This can work on different levels, but it’s still amazes me how often I’ll gain a customer simply because they know someone in our organization—perhaps through affiliations such as churches, clubs or professional organizations.

✓ On the back of the brochure, include some references from past clients and list some past (and relevant; remember: focus) projects. Again, if your brochure is meant to appeal to medical clients, include only those related projects.

✓ As tempting as it is, try to avoid using old, washed-out cliches like “We’re the industry leader” or “We’re number one.” Terms so superlative have simply saturated most people’s everyday lives, and they’ve come to ignore them. Talk as if the person were standing across from you.

✓ I’m guilty of this next one: Stay away from using too much color and too many gimmicks. With the advent of less-expensive color printers, graphics packages (that go on forever) and other add-on “bells and whistles,” it can be easy to get a little carried away with your ability to “jazz up” the brochure. But, unfortunately most of the time you simply end up distracting the reader from what’s truly important: your message.

✓ Choose a heavy, non-bleeding paper. Nothing comes off cheaper than a flimsy brochure.

✓ Finally, ask for the sale. OK, we’ve stepped back to Salesmanship 101, but never forget this all too important element of the good pitch. Also, always give the customer something to do in response, such as “mail in this card” or “call our toll-free 800 number . . . .”

There are other considerations to weigh when developing a direct-mail program, not the least of which is to be sure that it makes sense at all from a business point of view. Remember, the whole point of any marketing program is to generate revenue for your company. After the first few direct-mail attempts, if your response rate isn’t at least “break-even” (that is, the profit from the work you’ve taken in from the direct mailings isn’t at least what you’ve expended in postage, office time, printing, etc.), then it’s time to either re-think your current program (perhaps through a re-designed brochure or more streamlined database of potential clients), or move on to other marketing avenues altogether. Good luck!

About the Author
S.S. Saucerman is a full-time commercial estimator/project manager, professional woodturner and free-lance writer. He teaches Building Construction Technology and Construction Materials at Rock Valley College in Rockford, Ill.