

Vouchers:

All Dressed Up & Going Places

Duckling becomes swan as the evolution of this tried-and-true format makes palpable waves in the testing arena

In the fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” townspeople from miles around came to witness their ruler’s decidedly “different” attire. They oohed and aahed, so the story goes, until one small child pointed out the all-too-obvious fact that, well ... the new clothes weren’t, in fact, clothes at all.

Similarly, the voucher package is undergoing a makeover of sorts, though not necessarily of the less-is-more variety. In sharp contrast to the story above, the formerly “naked” format has been primped and primed for a new coming out—and its full regalia is all-too-visible to the eyes of the industry.

In the Beginning

The design of the original voucher package hinged on the inherent quality of cost-effectiveness, which partly explains its rise in popularity. However, timing also was a factor, says Thomas Coté, president of Wayne, N.J.-based direct mail production company The Ballantine Corp. He explains the post-Sept. 11 economy crisis has a lot to do with its ubiquity. “Advertising dollars dropped like a rock, so everybody’s budgets got squeezed. A lot of people started to scramble to reduce their costs in the mail,” he describes. As such, the success of a pared-down mailer became a coup for publishers, while emerging as a source of constant frustration for creatives.

Judging from the Who’s Mailing What! Archive’s monthly haul, times have not changed—but a revamp is most certainly in the wind. According to Coté, the ramifications of the format become magnified with each passing year. As a result of a cheap design working gangbusters, and the aforementioned lack of budget dollars, mailers stopped allocating money for testing, which is, as Coté describes, “a slow death.” Today, the design still pulls response, but, he adds, marketers

have been expressing concern that the format is fatiguing. Not to mention the fact that tomorrow will be here soon enough. “When you don’t continue to test and all of a sudden your control is dropping off, and you have nothing in the pipeline to replace it, that’s a scary spot to be [in],” Coté says.

A return to the principles of traditional direct mail is leading the charge in the mailstream. As a result of advertiser demand for better-quality subscribers, says Zimmermann, extra information is being added to the voucher to form a more conventional subscription acquisition vehicle. “What I see people—and

\$100
CASH BACK after your first purchase

3% CASH BACK
IN YOUR TOP 3 EVERYDAY SPENDING CATEGORIES

1% on EVERYTHING

NO ANNUAL FEE

WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO BE IN CHARGE OF YOUR REWARDS CARD?

\$100 CASH BACK after your first purchase

1% CASH BACK on your everyday spending

SPENDING CATEGORIES:
Gas stations and convenience stores
Fast food and quick service restaurants
Movie theaters
Drugstores
Department stores
Grocery stores
Pet stores & veterinarian offices
Cable/Satellite TV & Internet

FREE FREEDOM **SM**
VISA

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE CASH BACK OR TRAVEL AND MERCHANDISE.
CHASE FREEDOM
LETS YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND.

Financial vouchers hawking the usual low-interest rates and cash-back offers stand out from the pack with bold colors on the outer and letter.

It's this position—between the proverbial rock and a hard place—that has led to the current shift from what were once considered fundamental qualities of the voucher. Both Coté as well as Caroline Zimmermann, president of The Zimmermann Agency in Brookville, N.Y., report a new wave of voucher testing with surprisingly similar qualities across the board.

myself, as well—doing, they're really kind of taking the classic editorial packages and dressing them in voucher clothing,” Zimmermann says.

Extreme Makeover

Although this “new generation” of the format begs the question of when, exactly, it ceases to be a voucher and becomes something else, Coté is quick to say these modifications simply are part of the industry's long-standing testing philosophy. “The

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tried-and-true approach is to take your existing format and tweak it," he affirms. "Within the vouchers themselves, [it's] starting to get a little bit interesting."

Zimmermann describes the new iterations as "fancy vouchers," and the classification is quite accurate. The statement-of-benefits bones of the voucher package are staying the same; however, the magic is in the extra components that pull elements from classic direct mail packages. "Now we've got four-color, we've got buckslips, we've got flyers, we've even got brochures in them now. . . . and it's been working," she maintains.

Though the voucher has earned its place among lasting direct mail trends, when asked if she believes its new interpretation will have similar staying power, Zimmermann says, "I think it's here to stay because it's beating the old vouchers. And there's nothing like a win to put it firmly in place."

Happily Ever After ... Perhaps

The downside of the voucher transformation is that with all the added elements, the package naturally becomes more expensive and negates the very reason for its creation. Yet the art of direct mail means the "plain vanilla" voucher (as Zimmermann likes to refer to it) and its expanded version can coexist

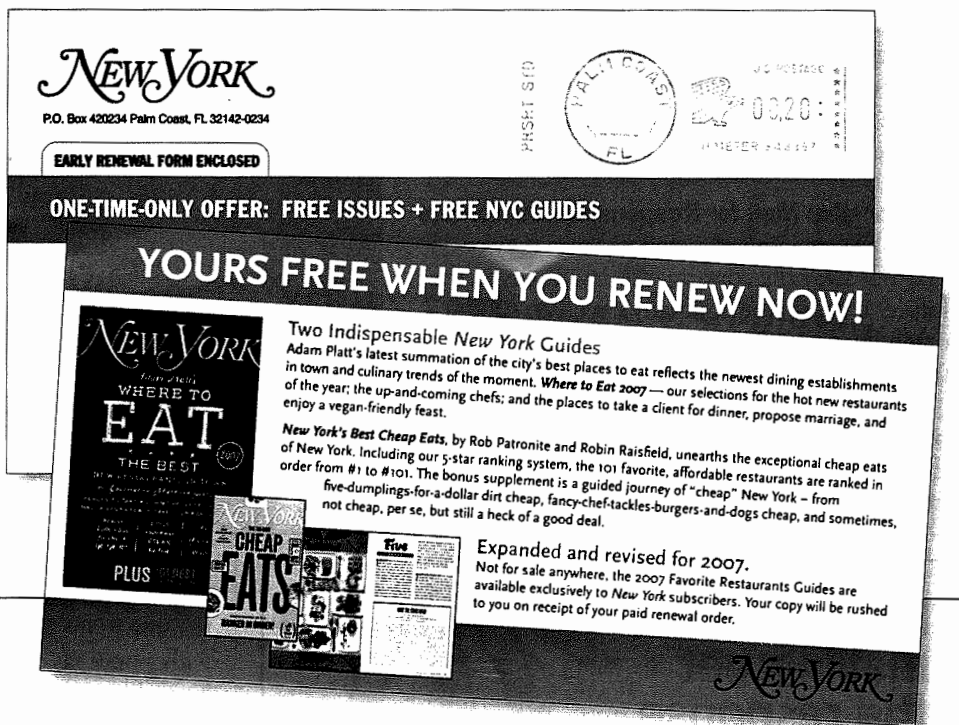
peacefully. Though copywriter and consultant Shira Linden, of Shelton, Conn.-based PromoWriting, is not a fan of the vanilla format, she maintains a voucher sans extra features works especially well when the brand is well-known, such as *Newsweek* or *TIME* magazine. However, if more real estate is needed to tell the story, Linden says, extra components are required. Fortunately, with the new voucher, this space is readily available.

The evolution of the voucher package was imminent, especially consider-

ing that the tides of the industry roll at a fairly steady pace. Linden likens its mercurial nature to retail: "Direct mail has styles, like there [are] styles in fashion. This is the current style that's in vogue right now but chances are, five years from now . . . there will be something new on the horizon." If the voucher's current state of change is any indication, that comparison certainly rings true. ■

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This publication renewal looks more like a magazine launch package with a colorful outer and a buckslip featuring thumbnails of the editorial and premium.



Time For A Quick Change

With a few tweaks to the classic voucher, mailers can move their formats into the next generation:

- ✓ **Keep the outer.** Coté recalls a business-to-business publisher that kept the envelope used for its statement-of-benefits control, yet added conventional components to the "guts" of the mailer. "They're giving it a look people are used to—a closed-face, faux label outer," he says. Noted additions include a few lines of personalized copy as well as a letter, brochure and order card.
- ✓ **Get colorful.** While vouchers are notoriously simple, giving a package an attention-getting hue could extend the life of a control that's losing steam. Linden reports that direct mail designer Jyl Ferris, of Ferris Design, suggests using unusual colors like orange, turquoise or lime green can work for a more attention-getting piece. Coté agrees, "We do have clients, especially business-to-business clients, that will vary the color of the envelope."
- ✓ **Beg, borrow and steal smart.** A magazine Coté worked with used three four-color stamps on its outer, a similar tactic many charitable organizations employ. Yet another example, he adds, also culled a few tricks from the fundraising sector. "Their voucher: the top third is the order form, the middle third is the statement of benefits . . . and the bottom third is twelve return-address labels."
- ✓ **Add a freemium and promote a premium.** The Who's Mailing What! Archive has seen publishers include an image and short description of the offer premium right on the voucher. Coté took it one step further with a client, who not only added a four-color flyer promoting the premium, but also included a seed-packet freemium within the package. Linden also cites this smart idea. "Kiplinger's keeps testing different freemiums," says Linden. "They also have a little, yellow mini-bucksip that restates the offer with a 'reply within 5 days' tagline."

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