

## Alternative Catalog Formats to Test

WHAT DO ALL the following situations have in common?

- You're launching a new catalog.
- You're spinning off a catalog from an existing product line.
- Your catalog design is flat, tired and you're re-thinking the look of the entire book.
- You're considering adding an extra mailing to the season and want it to really stand out.

Every one of these examples must deal with a common question: What's the size and shape (or format) of the new book going to be? Catalog format is often taken for granted. It is typically established by a previous creative team or art director. It's the control or standard for the company. When we really think about alternative catalog formats, there aren't all that many times when we have the opportunity to re-visit or even challenge the fact that one format might be better than another.

### Does format make a difference?

I believe it does. We know from our basic direct marketing training that there are a number of key factors that impact response rates and average order values (AOV) and ultimately, that all-important revenue or sales per

piece mailed. The pros will argue about what's most important, but the following variables certainly are high on the list:

- ✓ Offer
- ✓ List (segment being mailed)
- ✓ Creative presentation (design, layout, photography, typography and use of color and white space)
- ✓ Format

If format is indeed a key response factor, then we need to give it more than a cursory review.

### Key word to catalogers: "Differentiation"

Setting your catalog apart from the competition is the goal of every catalog manager, designer or creative team. Size of the book, shape, number of pages, type of cover, binding and printing and density of the layouts all are part of the overall ambiance or "persona" that makes up a catalog's ultimate format.

And there are a number of other considerations that go into thinking about format. Here are a couple.

#### Customer vs. Prospect

Is the catalog mailing to customers, prospects or both? There is a major difference. Customers want consistency in the format and design of a book. They don't want to have to explore a new for-

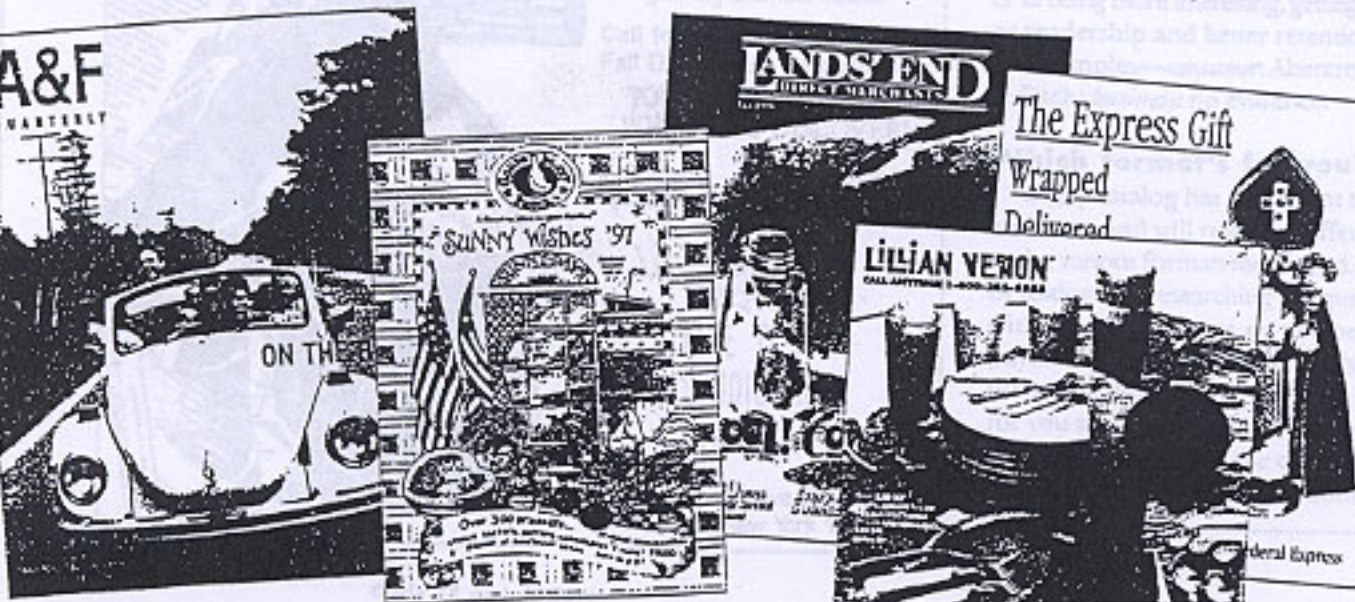
mat like a new store they have never been in before. Customers are interested in "what's new" with this edition, and they want the comfort level to order quickly by phone, fax, e-mail or mail. Prospect catalogs need to work harder in every creative aspect—a standout format, brilliant covers, delightful, benefit-laden copy, motivating offers and ease of use. To prospective buyers, everything in the catalog is NEW, but it must stand out and grab the reader to get that important first order.

#### Business vs. Consumer

There are major league differences between business and consumer catalogs and how they speak to customers. B-to-B catalogs are used differently, organized differently, have different ordering requirements, are retained differently, and often have unique design, copy and pricing techniques. B-to-B catalogs, in my judgement, must fit into a file, binder or be easily shelved. By default, they should be 8 1/2" x 11" (or the printer equivalent) or they won't be retained and used. Consumer catalogs have far greater leeway in their format choices.

What considerations beside the ones just mentioned should catalogers think about in format choices? Here is a

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to consider. Certain product lines need more space to present their products and the oversized format is available.

Examples—consumer: Pleasant Company, Patagonia, American Express; business: never!

6. **Tabloid:** This format is typically associated with sale or discount offers and is usually printed on newsprint or another low-grade paper. B-to-B mailers use it for interim sale mailers and consumer catalogs use the format to add an

additional mailing at the end of a season or off-season. The format is totally different from slicker, smaller catalogs.

Examples—consumer: Gurney Seed; business: Quill.

7. **Mini-digest:** A number of consumer catalogs have featured this format at the end of a holiday season with "last minute" gift suggestions. Many times only a single item is featured per page. Excellent success is reported by several catalogs that have used this format.

Examples—consumer: Crate & Barrel,

Hammacher Schlemmer, Maytag; business: no evidence.

8. **Multi-mailer:** A multi-mailer is defined as a multiple product offering that is half solo mailing and half catalog. Typically, products are not bought but offered as individual product sheets, with usually only one item per page. Blair and Signature are two pioneers of multi-mailers, but today a number of catalogers use the format for additional customer mailings. There is not much evidence that the format is used for prospecting. While the format tends to be a bit "downscale," even upscale cataloger Horchow uses it for personalized paper products offerings.

Examples—consumer: Fingerhut, Blair, Horchow, Signature; business: no evidence.

9. **Handbook:** A number of large business catalogers put out annual handbook-type catalogs that often exceed 500 or even 1,000 pages. These books contain thousands of stock keeping units (SKUs) and are typically published and distributed only once a year. It's hard to throw this catalog away, but one surely wants to make certain that the database is correct before mailing.

Examples—consumer: none; business: Grainger, Hewlett-Packard.

10. **Magalog:** A "magalog" is a bound promotion that is half catalog and half magazine. This promotion contains a healthy amount of editorial or non-selling space, but is justified by the mailer as being more interesting, getting higher readership and better retention.

Examples—consumer: Abercrombie & Fitch; business: no evidence.

### Which format's for you?

Every catalog has a different target audience and will respond differently to the various formats mentioned. Only by testing and researching this question with your customers or perspective buyers can one be more assured that the format(s) that you are using are right for you and your audience. Now is the time to think outside the creative box in re-visiting your format options. ■

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