

Tips For The Most Important Pages Of A Catalog

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By Lynn Stimolo

Almost every promotion created has its own very unique characteristics due to variables such as product, offer, audience, and promotion budget. Catalogs are no exception. However, there are some common aspects that apply to all catalogs such as the pages that are consistently the most important in terms of generating reader interest and, consequently, product sales.

The most important pages of a catalog are those pages the reader will see first. If these are of no interest, the reader can't be expected to go searching any further through the catalog. These important pages are:

Front Cover

Back Cover

Front Inside Spread (pages 2 and 3)

Center Spread (in a stitched catalog)

Back Inside Spread (last two pages)

Order Form

The order of importance of these pages may vary depending upon what type of reader is receiving the catalog. Catalog readers fall into two general categories: Those who read front to back and those who read back to front. If the readers' attention has not been captured within a short period of time (10 to 15 seconds) with either the front or back sections of the catalog, chances are they will never venture inside.

The Front Cover

Reference catalogs (like some large textbook and school supply catalogs) can afford to have passive covers that do not attempt to call readers to action. They can depend upon a school contract, a sales person, or some other relationship between the reader and the catalog to cause interest and involvement. Such is not the case with a direct marketing catalog. Only the words and graphics on the outer covers can create involvement with and readership of the catalog. Consequently, the outer covers serve one purpose — to command enough attention on the part of the reader to turn the cover.

There are three techniques available to school marketers to make their direct marketing covers compelling. These are strong benefit claims, intriguing offer copy, and compelling graphics.

Benefit claims tell readers what the product line will do for them. Strong benefit claims focus on the best features of the most popular products. Intriguing offer copy teases about the unique opportunities available to readers. Compelling graphics make it impossible for readers to miss these messages when scanning catalog covers as they review a stack of mail. The desired effect in combining these three elements is a catalog cover that one simply can't pass over.

Too often readership is presumed. It is presumed that because educational materials are being produced and/or distributed, an educator is somehow bound to consider and review the material. This is a dangerous presumption. Product lines will be better served if disinterest is presumed and compelling readership is the goal.

An interesting photo and corresponding headline will usually serve to accomplish the primary goal of the front cover. Chances are the scanner will look at the photo first and then glance at the headline. Give the photo some zip. Try and include people in the photo. A smiling teacher holding a workbook in front of eager, excited students will probably generate more interest than a shot of workbook covers.

Another technique that can be applied is to promote reader identification. Try a headline such as "Science Is Their Favorite Time Of Day Thanks To ACME Workbooks" instead of simply "ACME Science Workbooks." After reading the first headline, there's a good chance the prospect will want to find out why these workbooks can make science exciting to students.

The inclusion of a good offer is another method that has proven to inspire readership. Developing a good offer is an art and it usually takes some trial and error to find a winner. The options are virtually unlimited and could be any one or combination of the following elements:

Discount
Free Trial
Guarantee
Free Product
Premium

Another underutilized offer opportunity available to catalogers is the organization of sets of material at discounted prices. This process is also known as "bundling" and is often effective at raising the average order size for most catalogs. Select items that make sense grouped together. Then package and promote them as a set at a discount in addition to offering them individually at full price.

Choose what is considered to be the most appealing offer and feature it on the cover in a headline, in a burst, in a banner, in a corner cut, or as an inset. For example, suppose a teacher's guide is free with every set of 30 classroom workbooks and the workbooks are unconditionally guaranteed. One approach on the cover might be a headline of "ACME Workbooks Are Guaranteed Forever" along with a burst containing "Free Teacher's Guide."

The goal is to encourage the reader to get inside the catalog. Once a good offer has been created, don't make the mistake of telling the whole story on the cover. Tease about the offer to encourage the reader to turn the page and look inside for details. A popular method is placing a corner cut in the lower right hand corner with some teaser copy such as "Free Gift - See Page 3."

Finally, included somewhere on the cover should be the company name and address, the grade levels covered by the products in the catalog, and the season and/or year of the catalog. If space allows, also include any toll free telephone and/or FAX numbers.

The Back Cover

The back cover will probably include a mailing label area. Since this is the area containing the name or title of the recipient, there's a chance this may be the side first seen as a result of mail sorting. Therefore, the back cover could be the first side of the catalog viewed regardless of whether or not the prospect reads back to front. It pays to make the most of this page.

The post office requires that a catalog mailing area contains the indicia, return address, and room for a label. Meeting these requirements still leaves a large area to fill. Here are some suggestions on how to better utilize space on the back cover.

Include any guarantee. Some art surrounding the guarantee can help to highlight this benefit and make it look official.

Include any toll free numbers. Even if they are included on the front cover, it's perfectly acceptable to repeat them on the back where there may be more space to encourage their use. A photo of an attractive phone representative with a phone to his/her ear is a great way to enhance a toll free number. Additional suggestions would include repeating any special offers, highlighting

a popular product, or featuring any free gift or premium. The company's goals or commitments along with an accompanying photo of a distinguished employee such as the president or editor-in-chief could also be included. This treatment is a nice way of highlighting a company's qualifications and establishing its credibility within the industry.

Pages Two And Three

So often catalogs devote an entire inside front cover or the second page to a letter from someone within the company organization. Keep this rule in mind. If the cover has stimulated enough curiosity for someone to turn the page, a letter from the president describing modern warehouse and office facilities on page two is probably not going to cement a sale.

Pages two and three are perfect places to sell. This area is where a company's most popular and/or new products should be featured along with any discounts, savings, or special offers. Also, while several products per page is the rule of thumb, it is perfectly acceptable to limit the products per page to three, two, or even one on the front inside spread.

Another important rule to remember is that when a page is turned from right to left, the reader's attention is usually focused on the right hand page since this page is revealed prior to the left page. That means page three is slightly more important than page two, page five takes precedence over page four, etc.

For example, let's imagine three popular software programs in science, math and English are being promoted. Each sells for \$29.95 but all three may be purchased for \$59.95, a savings of almost \$30. A suggestion would be to promote two of the programs separately on page two, promote the special savings of the set on the top of page three, and the last program separately on the bottom of page three.

The bottom of page three is also an excellent spot for any free gift or premium information. An exception to this rule would be in the case of a premium structure or choice of free item based on the quantity or amount purchased. The page prior to the order form would be a prime location for that type of premium offer. However, page three might be a nice place to hype the premium program in general with instructions as to which page features the actual premium items.

Last Two Pages

Remember our reverse readers. As with pages two and three, it is important to stimulate reader interest with the last two catalog pages, although a slightly different approach may be employed. Despite the fact that readers may begin at the back of a catalog, they usually realize that the information contained there may be different than the beginning of the catalog.

Rather than promoting the most popular products or repeating the information contained on pages two or three, it is perfectly acceptable to include products of lesser appeal. However, try to include product with special savings or advantages. A simple list of advantages may be included such as guarantee, toll free number, 30-day trial, shipment within two hours, etc.

If it is necessary to include an index in the catalog, the back pages are recommended. However, try to avoid the inside back cover and use this space to sell.

Just because the majority of orders are received on purchase orders and not order forms doesn't mean order forms aren't important. Our next issue will be devoted to designing a user-friendly order form that gets results.