

Rules of good catalog design

1**) Appeal to lifestyle desires**
Appeal to what makes a person buy

Sometimes people buy to fill a need but most of the time people buy because of want. They buy something they want because they envision feeling better, more satisfied after they have exchanged their hard-earned money for the product or service you have to sell. The art of creating the desire to buy is appealing to the customer's desire to attain a particular lifestyle. Show the customer the lifestyle they can attain and desire and you will sell more product.

Images, copy and page elements

Therefore, orient all the elements of your catalog around conveying lifestyle. Do this at all levels. Your catalog might have an overall lifestyle theme while the individual products might have modifications or even mini-lifestyle themes of their own. The text and copy should not only describe the product in sufficient detail that the consumer can make a buying decision but it should tell the reader how this item will help them achieve the lifestyle they want.

2) Design for the audience
Tailor your catalog design to appeal to your audience. A business-to-business catalog (B2B) should be very different than a business-to-consumer (B2C) catalog. Catalogs for young people will have a different look than a catalog for older folks. Make the style of your catalog match the style desires of your audience. You will gain more affinity and hence more sales.

3) Make the product the centerpiece
A rule of thumb in catalog design is the larger the product photo the greater the product's sales. To this end we generally strive to maximize the size of the product's image, especially in conjunction with each product's profit value - the more total profit a product generates the larger the product photo should be. Then support the product with compelling copy.

Some catalog companies attempt to save money on photography and printing by grouping items together in photographs. This often results in poor sales because in such a photo no product stands out to draw the customer in. It is better to show items individually or in very small, related groups. We prefer to show most products with no background and with a subtle drop shadow. This allows the product to stand out from the clutter of the page. Then we add lifestyle shots with a subtle background to add variety to the design and convey lifestyle moods.

4) Use great product photos
The Pitfalls of Scrimping on Product Photos

Creating a catalog is expensive and we all want to cut costs when possible. However perhaps the single most important catalog element - the product photo - tends to be the place where clients cut first and it hurts their success every time.

Supplier supplied images

In some industries and with some vendors you can get excellent photos of their products for use in your catalog. And so can your competitors. However most supplier images are just not that good in the first place. Almost all lack clipping paths requiring labor and expense at the catalog design side to use them well. This reduces the perceived savings of these free images. Plus your catalog will not have a unique look all your own.

Web images

About half of our new customers began life as a web-based company and the images they've created so far are low resolution web images. Other times the images received from the supplier are web resolution images. These images are not acceptable for print catalogs! They are less then 1/4 the resolution and have no clipping paths. If you use them your products will be blurry, the design will suffer and so will your sales.

Shooting your own images

The third way clients hope to save money is by taking their own photos. The physical process of shooting the photograph is but about 1/3 the cost of preparing a digital image for use in catalog design but is most important to the resulting quality of the finished image. We highly recommend using a volume product photography service such as ourselves or one of the many others available. If you feel you must do your own photography we provide an article with suggestions on making the best photograph possible but be prepared to pay extra at the design side to prep those photos for printing.

What a great photo will do

A great photo is "worth a thousand words" but a poor photo can persuade a customer to not buy your product. Don't risk it by scrimping on good photography. It would be better to show fewer products on fewer pages to save on printing than to cut your sales with poor photos.

5) Put important items on the outside edges of the page
Readers typically look to the top right first then sweep across the page to the other side. If they don't see something compelling they'll flip the page. Therefore put your most appealing products (which are typically your products that generate the most profit) on the outside top corners. Make these elements strong - larger in size - than the remaining products on the page spread.

6) Use opportunities to cross sell
Between products

Suggesting companion products can increase sales another 5-15%. Take every advantage of cross selling in your catalog. You can do this in the product copy or with call-outs, or by placing companion products together on the page.

Between your website

An advertising rule of thumb is multiple forms of advertising run simultaneously will result in greater response than the same forms of advertising run separately at different times. Take a retail store running some television ads and some radio ads. If they did a promotion with the television ads one month and a promotion with the radio ads the next month, they will have less impact than if they ran the same promotion on both television and radio at the same time. In essence one feeds off the other. The same holds true with your catalogs. Take advantage of cross media merchandising by promoting your website in your catalog and your catalog on your website. Post your print catalog in pdf format for people to download.

7) Use consistent type styles and limit their number
Limit the number of fonts and/or weights to 2 or 3

To keep a clean and consistent look use no more than 2 to 3 fonts throughout your catalog. Further, keep text spacing and placement next to images consistent. Use the same style of text consistently for common elements such as product name, product description, etc.

Keep fonts to within your style and function - don't get too fancy unless your style requires it

Choose fonts that are easy to read and whose style matches the lifestyle you wish to convey. Be careful with fancy fonts. It is easy to reduce readability, the professional look and perhaps translate into printing issues if the font is low quality.

Type should be secondary to product photos

Once again the product is the centerpiece and much of that is due to the product photograph. The text should support the reader to make a buying decision and not take away from the impact of the photo.

8) Keep the style consistent from issue to issue reinforcing your "brand" image

Once a successful look has been established resist the urge to change. REI (Recreational Equipment Inc.) has kept a rustic border theme for the last 5 years. The look of their catalogs and sale promotion catalogs is easily recognizable by their customers and has created a brand image. One advertising rule of thumb is when you are tired of the look of your catalog (because you've seen it over and over again) your customers are just starting to recognize it as your look. Protect your investment by keeping your theme for several years and if you decide to change, do it in small increments over a long time. Repetition brings brand identity recognition and brand recognition brings acceptance and sales.

9) Give products the space they need - and analyze the results
Give your top sellers more space than your less important items

When first designing your catalog give your items that generate the most profit - the most total profit over time, not necessarily items with the most profit margin - more space in your catalog than lower profit items because the rule of thumb is the more space a product has in your catalog the greater the sales will be.

For instance take two items. Both sell for $5 and make a profit of $2.50 for each item sold, but product A made you $5000 in profit last year while product B made only $2000. Therefore product A should have more space and exposure in your catalog. And here's why: let's say giving more space to a product will increase sales 10%. If you give product B more space you might increase profits by another $200 but if you gave product A that space it would increase profits by $500.

Analyze the results

About two months after your catalog has been distributed analyze the profit results using square inch analysis. With this analysis you calculate the total cost of the catalog (design, printing, mailing) divided by the total square inches of available selling space. Then figure how much each product cost to show in your catalog by multiplying the cost per square inch times the amount of space each item received in the catalog. Compare this cost against the total profit earned on each item. For the top 20% of most profitable products give them more space in

your next issue. For the bottom 20% give them less. By doing this repeatedly you will continue to optimize your catalog costs and maximize profits.

10) Design for economy
The new Slim Jim advantages

The 2007 postage rate increases have created a dilemma with traditional Standard size catalogs and an opportunity to keep costs down using the Slim format called "Slim Jim". Rates for standard catalogs rose 40% while for letter rate only 9%. Because of the extreme disparity the Slim Jim format will net a savings of 15-20% for the same physical printed space over the Standard format.

Standard catalog formats are more economical.

Formats such as a standard full-size, slim-jim or digest-size catalog in whole signature page counts tend to be the most economical catalog designs to print and mail. Spend time with your printer and the Postal Service to determine an efficient trim size.

Not only do standard catalog formats save money, they also tend to "fit" better. This is both a positive and a negative. A catalog design that is too unusual in format may not fit the customer's environment and may get disposed of fairly quickly. On the other hand a standard format may come across as plain and boring, not getting the notice you desire.

16-page count increments are more economical