

Transforming Direct Mail with Print Embellishments

A white paper from the Foil and Specialty Effects Association



The term embellishment has been around for a long time – associated with the creative ornamentations for bakery decorations, hobbyists, sewing and architectural fabrication. But now, it has taken on a new meaning in the graphics industry: Embellishments are a unique method for enhancing printed materials that transform the readers' perception and assessment of what they are seeing.

A previous FSEA white paper further defines print embellishments: "Today, processes that increase visibility, stimulate attraction, hold attention and convey an image of value are known as high-visibility enhancements. The list of high-visibility enhancements includes ... foil stamping, embossing, specialty UV coatings and metallic finishes."

This white paper will define 'embellishments' as the process of enhancing a printed piece with tactile textures, scents, shapes and foils. It is strongly viewed that embellishments added to direct mail pieces increase visibility and captivate a reader's attention to stimulate a call to action.

DIRECT MAIL ENGAGES MORE THAN DIGITAL ADS

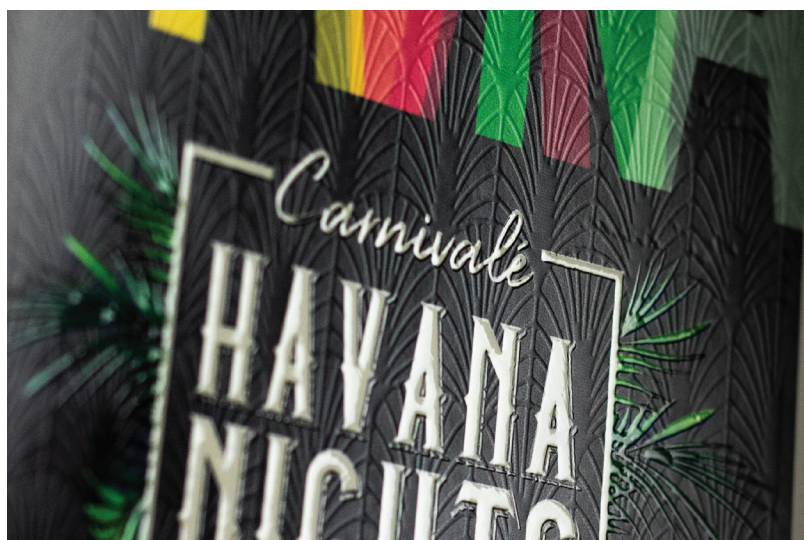
Historically, one of the great attributes of printed pieces is the ability to engage the attention of those who receive them. Recently, that thought has been tested by the heavy use of digital marketing technologies. As marketers seek out alternative and less expensive digital media choices, direct mail has lost some of its popularity. However, a great deal of research has shown that a reader of a printed piece is more likely to recall that marketing piece than an online banner advertisement, including a 2015 study by the Canada Post that said "Direct mail requires 21% less cognitive effort to process than digital media... suggesting that it is both easier to understand and more memorable." In addition, "When asked to cite the brand (company name) of an advertisement they had just seen, participants' recall was 70% higher if they were exposed to a direct mail piece (75%) rather than a digital ad (44%)."¹

Therefore, a top priority of marketers should be to maintain a close alignment with both new and traditional marketing methods to best communicate with end users. Successful graphic arts providers are working in concert with brand owners to facilitate successful delivery of content, offering direct mail as an essential part of that service portfolio. Print has always been

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recognized as a highly effective tool and, when embellishments are added to these printed pieces, a new experience is realized. Embellishments can boost the awareness factor for those engaged in building brand identity as these specialty effects draw attention, engage and motivate the recipient to trigger a positive action.

Joanne Gore, founder of marketing and communications company Joanne Gore Communications, was quoted in an article in *WhatTheyThink* magazine: "People spend 39% more time engaging in direct mail vs. digital campaigns alone, impacting brand experience, recall and results. Print has the power to keep



Print embellishments draw attention to direct mail communications and engage the recipient.

readers informed and engaged. Adding textures and finishes like embossing, debossing, raised ink, foil or glitter teases them to do more than see print, but to touch it – and remember it.”²

This can be especially true for the younger generations. The myth is that Millennials and Gen Z’ers do not respect direct mail – or other printed material, for that matter – since smart devices and diverse digital technologies are stealing their attention. This has raised alarms among the print organizations and brand managers who must reach these potential buyers – now the largest generation in America – to grow business revenue. However, the research tells a different story.



With only a short time span to attract consumer attention, embellishments get the direct mail message across. Photo courtesy Baugh Graphic Finishing House.

In a study by the US Postal Service³, 84% of millennials take the time to look through their mail and 77% of them pay attention to direct mail advertising. In fact, 90% of millennials believe direct mail advertising is reliable and 57% have made purchases based on direct mail offers. To “create engaging mail pieces for this generation,” the US Postal Service study suggests that marketers “use enhancements such as scent, sound or texture to make your piece stand out.”

Embellishments techniques are a strategic way to gain momentum in the direct mail marketing world. The companies interviewed for this white paper cite meaningful results when leveraging embellishment offerings with printed mailing pieces.

PRINTED MAIL VOLUME DECREASES, BUT RESPONSE RATES RISE

According to USPS statistics⁴, marketing mail volume has decreased from 81.8 billion pieces in 2010 to 75.7 billion pieces in 2019 – a 7.45% dip in the last decade (first-class mail is down 43.89% over the same time period). However, recent numbers compiled by a 2018 DMA Response Rate Report shows that direct mail response rates are on the rise. Internal house lists received a 9% response rate, while prospect lists received an average response rate of 5%.⁵ Could some of that be due to creative embellishments that are catching the eye of these Gen X and Z generations?

The mailbox is a competitive marketplace – not much different than retail shelf space.

Another interesting recent survey on “The 25 Most Trusted Brands in America” found that the United States Post office ranked the highest No. 1 brand amongst Americans with a 42% rating.⁶ The fact that 42% of those surveyed believed they could rely “a lot” on the US Postal Service “to do what is right” is most revealing when evaluating the leverage direct mail has among consumers. MarketingSherpa reinforced that point with a survey that said 76% of consumers trust ads and catalogs they receive in the mail when making a purchase decision.⁷

With all the tools that marketers employ today, these statistics clearly illuminate the power of direct mail. But, these direct mail pieces cannot be of a vintage nature. To make authentic connections with the target direct mail audience, brand managers need to utilize tactics that will resonate. Unless a direct mail piece strikes an immediate recognition factor with relevant personalization components and highly attractive designs that feature tactile coatings/laminates, embossing or decorative foil, the piece may lack an emotional bond. People react to messages that connect with them, and the story must be designed and highly personalized to enhance the message.

Mark Baugh, president of Baugh Graphic Finishing House, a print finishing and decorating operation in Indianapolis, Indiana, has seen an increase in volume in the direct mail market segment over the past several years. “The mailbox is a competitive marketplace – not much different than retail shelf space,” said Baugh. “Direct mail marketers have a very short time period to attract a potential customer, and embellishments have helped get the message across.”

WHY DOES DIRECT MAIL WORK?

Personalization drives results

Potential customers want to be treated as individuals, not as a commodity. Personalization – coupled with a relevant message – is one of the best ways to engage an individual. By using data to target the person to whom the direct mail piece is being directed (i.e. birthdate, wedding anniversary, new homeowner, etc.), the direct mail piece increases in value to that person. The direct mail piece becomes something more than a sales tool – it begins to build long-term business relationships that grow revenue.

Valassis, a leader in marketing technology, shared insights from “The Future of How People Shop.”⁸ Based on responses from 1,000 US consumers and conversations with industry leaders, the Valassis survey – conducted in partnership with Kantar – concluded: “To engage consumers most effectively today, brand touchpoints need

to be more than personalized – they need to deliver highly relevant information in incredibly precise moments when consumers are most receptive,” said Carrie Parker, vice president, marketing, Valassis. “To deliver what consumers want, marketers need a rich understanding of a consumer’s life context and what influences them. Effective marketing strategies must consider the individual motivations that spark each consumer to engage with brands.”

Neuroscience can’t be ignored

Touch is an especially important element in a direct mail piece. When a potential customer opens the mailbox and starts to sort through the contents, a piece of mail that is enhanced with a special softness, look or shape becomes a powerful form of non-verbal communication. Couple that with intriguing imagery and a compelling personalized message, and a direct mail piece is a step ahead in capturing the attention of the recipient. This relates to the neuroscience of touch.

In 2015, Sappi North America produced a book called, “A Communicator’s Guide to the Neuroscience of Touch.” This book illuminated the science of haptics – or “how the things we touch shape the way we feel.” Feelings are an integral part of a purchase decision, so it makes sense to integrate ‘touch’ into printed direct mail as a means of gaining attraction. Dr. David Eagleman, director of Baylor College of Medicine’s Laboratory for Perception & Action, is the



Sappi's Neuroscience of Touch was produced to explain the science that connects how touch can influence how we feel. Courtesy Sappi North America

primary author of the publication. Dr. Eagleman explained, “In humans, touch represents a powerful form of non-verbal communication. Our sense of touch plays a fundamental role in daily life, from learning about objects to communicating with people.”

The book explained, “To touch a thing is to trigger a reaction: as soon as we do, we begin to feel differently about it. We begin to feel we own it, and research shows that makes us value it more.” This ‘endowment effect’ can translate into purchase decisions. “Scientific studies show that people who merely touch an object, or even imagine touching it, begin exhibiting a sense of ownership.”



A Jeep® sales brochure was created to attract the vehicle’s target audience: those who love the great outdoors. Courtesy Classic Color

If direct mail can trigger an ownership response, it follows that creating a touch-and-feel sensory experience through the use of specialty coatings and embellishments may enhance that response. Engaging the brains of consumers through touch increases interest in the messaging of a direct mail piece and increases the chances of achieving a brand’s marketing goals.

EMBELLISHMENTS DRIVE RESULTS

Producing more than two million direct mail pieces per month – most with some sort of embellishment – Classic Color of Broadview, Illinois, has exciting options for its offset and digital print clients. Vice President Jeff Hernandez said, “We are no longer in the printing industry. We are in the visual communications business, and our goal is to provide outstanding value to our customers. We have perfected a myriad of print and finishing techniques that boost visual impact and result in a higher measurable return for our customers. It also has been a great growth opportunity for our company.”

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The automotive industry is one of the main market niches for Classic Color. A great example of the company’s finishing artistry is a piece produced for Jeep®. The Classic Color design team had an understanding of the target audience, knowing that many Jeeps are marketed to consumers with a love for nature, and that inspired a backpack concept. Classic Color added unique embellished features to the printed piece to make the viewers feel like they were touching a backpack, with embossing and tactile coatings for the zipper and the cloth. The company ultimately produced over 250,000 pieces.

It is a common misconception that many of the creative embellishments are too expensive to purchase and, therefore, make the process of offering these value-added services out of reach for many customers. Today, there are many ways Print Service Providers (PSPs) can work with printers and finishers to add specialty foils, coatings, and laminates to all types of printed materials. This includes hot and cold foils, digital foils and coatings, and specialty laminates (ex. soft touch). When these added embellishments encourage a higher direct mail response rate, the return on investment becomes evident.

MCD, Incorporated, a print finisher in Madison, Wisconsin, has seen an increase in recent years from customers looking to enhance direct mail pieces using foil stamping, embossing and specialty coatings. “We feel there is a direct correlation in increasing response rates by using specialty embellishments,” stated MCD National Sales Manager Sean Hurley. “By increasing brand recognition and perceived value, the customer’s response rate increases. We feel this justifies a slightly higher cost per piece and dramatically improves the customer’s return on investment.”

On the website home page of The Slate Group of Lubbock, Texas, is a phrase that transcends the success of the company: Educate and empower. The

company has an array of offset and digital equipment, but it is not just the equipment that exemplifies its fantastic double-digit growth and profitability – the company also thinks “out of the box” with creative embellishment offerings. The Slate Group purchased a Duplo DDC-810 Spot Coater two and half years ago, and it has led them down the path of customers saying a lot of “oohs and ahhs” when they see the unique internal marketing pieces presented by the sales team. Don Denny, owner, believes, “a large part of our success is educating young designers who have never been in a printing plant to the many embellishment opportunities to make direct mail pieces stand out.”

“Customers are looking for ways to transcend the ordinary with their direct mail pieces,” according to Brad Phinny, COO for The Slate Group. A great example of a distinguished direct mail piece is one done by Slate for the University of Wyoming, which includes both diecutting and raised spot UV coating (Illustration 3).

The world of print is changing from one of impressions to experiences. The more we can make a direct mail piece – or any printed piece – feel good, we have successfully reached that person.



*A direct mail piece for the University of Wyoming featured diecuts and spot raised UV, helping the school increase enrollment by 18%.
Courtesy of Slate Group*

Trey Laverty, director of Sales Development for Slate, shared an example of how a local college added soft-touch coating and unique diecuts to a 2019 promotional brochure that led the school to achieve an 18% increase in enrollment. Laverty said customers are “looking for creative and uniquely different ways to touch people.” Embellishments are effective in accomplishing that. Laverty also believes once a customer sees what other customers are doing with foil and coatings, they want to do the same. “While not every job requires an embellishment,” he said, “it definitely leads to opening many new doors.”

Denny added, “Our investment in embellishments has provided us with an excellent ROI and provided great value-add to retain customers.” With more than 1,000,000 direct mail pieces printed per month, embellishments have been a big “WOW” factor that leads The Slate Group to good partnerships and door openers.

Eagle Systems is one company playing a major role in the embellishment marketplace. Mike King, CEO and founder of Eagle Systems, has a 40+-year history in foils. He created some of the first cold foil devices, making cold foil a viable, cost-effective alternative for many print applications. The innovative Eco-Eagle is a unit that fits inline onto an offset press making. King said, "This inline capability provides easy registration and amazing detail with a clean look and no costly dies. It is like adding another color to a printed piece. When you add other complimentary embellishments, like soft-touch coatings, you have a dynamic piece that immediately attracts reader attention."

D'Andrea Visual Communications of Cypress, California, calls itself a "visual solutions provider reimagined." The company has embraced the world of embellishments with a diversified portfolio of offerings and have leveraged the Eagle System cold foil embellishment to the advantage of its customers. One of the best examples, as explained by account executive Denise Okata, is a piece done for FX Networks, a division of The Walt Disney Company. This piece is not a typical direct mail piece – instead, it is 64-page booklet.



An FX Networks booklet used cold foil enhancements to attract the attention of its audience. Courtesy of D'Andrea Visual

The print run of 1,500 was directed to solicit local TV stations to air a television program. "This piece was expensive to produce but got an excellent return for FX," said Okata. Hot and cold foil, debossing, flocking and special UV inks were employed to make this product truly unique and get the attention of the target recipients. "We are not a huge company," she continued, "but we provide a boutique offering of services with creative ideas that separates us from our competitors." It seems like a winning strategy as this company is expanding into new locations with a facility in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Embellishments can be an effective attention-getting addition – whether foils, coatings, creative diecuts or other options – and the companies behind these techniques are spreading the word about the potential benefits. Sun Chemical's SunInspire family of coating products includes rainbow glitter, soft touch, reticulation, raised, sandy feel, color shift, pearlescent and other offerings. This portfolio of specialty coatings provides the commercial print space with an array of innovative products tailored to achieve meaningful results for the direct mail world. Heather Buchholz, manager, Global Marketing Inks and Global Communications, shared, "Sun Chemical is working to provide brighter ideas to printers in how they can incorporate many of these coating products into direct mail pieces. Our goal to make our print customers the best they can be." Sun Chemical President Charles Murray continued, "If it involves making communications tangible and impactful, we have something for you."

Rick Sands, president of the Fenway Group in Boston, Massachusetts, is examining new embellishment opportunities after he saw the exciting new options available. Sands said, "The world of print is changing from one of impressions to experiences. The more we can make a direct mail piece – or any printed piece – feel good, we have successfully reached that person." Fenway does a great deal of healthcare and higher education work, and adding unique soft touch, foil, 2D and 3D spot UV finishes could be just the right methods to make direct mail pieces gather the audience attention required to make customer campaigns successful.

CONCLUSION

Direct mail is a significant part of every individual's life, whether it is directed to a consumer or business – but not all direct mail is effective. As part of a 2019 study conducted on millennials⁹, one of the millennial consumer interviewees said, “I don't read a newspaper... but I will look at a direct mail piece if it is highly personalized and has an intriguing design.”

Optimizing direct mail for consumers requires a seamless marketing platform that creates an engaging personalized message with attention-grabbing design techniques. Graphics organizations that take advantage of these concepts can propel their companies – and their customers – to higher levels of success.

When a printer goes beyond ink on paper to add the vibrant tactile elements that can be experienced with diecutting, foil and other embellishments, a direct mail piece now resonates with statistical ROI for the customer. Now is the time to reach out to print customers and prospects to encourage the use of embellishments to increase response rates and profitability with direct mail projects. Marketers are fighting for attention in the consumer's mailbox. Embellishments are the key to winning the battle. ◆

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Additional resources offered by FSEA:

1. White paper: An Initial Study into the Impact of High-Visibility Enhancements on Shelf Presence
2. White paper: The Impact of High-Visibility Enhancements on Shelf Presence, a Second Study
3. The PIRA Report: Repulpability of Foil-Decorated Paper
4. Foil Cheat Sheet, created in cooperation with PaperSpecs