



Designing Brochures that Work

.by Al DiMarzio

Introduction

Let's face it...a brochure is nothing more than paper and ink. Right? So why do some brochures work and others end up as scrap paper? There are many reasons, but the most significant one is simply a lack of foresight and planning. This article will guide you through the process of creating a brochure that works for you. We'll discuss such things as the overall image of your brochure and the message it portrays, as well as the content and basic design guidelines. We will also discuss paper choices, ink colors and fonts (style of lettering) you chose. And finally we'll share a few thoughts on how to work with your desktop publisher and printer. When you plan ahead, your brochures will work for you, and you'll have to get your scrap paper somewhere else.

Delivering the Message

What kind of message do you want the customer to receive when they pick up your brochure? Some brochures deliver the message "We're your quality store to deal with", or "We're the greatest, so rent from us", or unfortunately in some cases, "We don't know what we're doing".

We look at brochures as a form of visual communication inviting people to interact with us. The rental store owner wanted to show how they address their customer's real or perceived needs, help them to solve repair problems, plan a great party, and in general improve their quality of life - all for only a modest rental fee.

Not everyone is a gifted brochure designer, but you do know what you like when you see it. So why not start collecting brochures that are creative and save them for future reference. Make an effort to get a wide variety as business specific brochures tend to become stereotyped. Show your samples to friends and family and see what they like. Select the fonts (type styles), colors, and the size and texture of paper that will deliver the message you want. After all, your brochure reflects your business!

Remember, the brochure is an invitation for the customer to do business with us. We want them excited about what you can do for them.

Deciding on the Content

Before we get into the nuts-and-bolts of a brochure, there are several decisions that need to be made concerning it's direction and content.

Question one: Why should the customer read or pickup your brochure? Answer: It is attractive and contains useful and beneficial information to the customer. Pure and simple, it provides value.

Second question: Do you want the brochure to build image, tie in with other ads, promote your products, show off your new logo or develop a brand name following? Answer: Focus on one or two of these themes. It would be difficult to successfully address all of these issues in one brochure.

Question three: Will it be a general listing of items, an order form for party rentals or a guide to help the customer with home projects? Answer: It depends on what you are promoting. You can have a listing without prices as the rental store did in their General Equipment Rental Guide, or a listing with prices and spaces to fill in quantities, as in their Party Planning Guide.

Establishing a Budget

Next, how much are you willing to spend? What kind of distribution do you want? How long will the information in the brochure be relevant? If you are a small operation you might choose to have a medium cost brochure and mail it to everyone. However, you could have a fancy, four color, more expensive brochure that you mail to specific customers. Budget permitting, mail the fancy brochure to everyone. Only you can decide your market place. Whatever the decision, establish your budget and stick to it. Try to avoid the mentality of "...but if it brings in one more sale...". Advertising does have a point of diminishing returns. The "one more sale" will come in anyway if you have a solid marketing plan (and budget) in place.

Design Principles

Think about how you will display the brochures in the store and how you will mail them to customers. You can have multiple pages stapled in the corner, pages folded in half and stapled down the middle (saddle stitched), or a single sheet of paper with one or more folds. These are just some of the many choices. But keep in mind the size of paper and format will determine how much and where you place information. Multi-page brochures allow the opportunity for a heavy and/or glossy cover which will attract more attention and will be more durable but will also be more expensive. A single page with multiple folds will allow an economical approach with a nice look and feel. A tri-fold 8-1/2" by 11" paper will fit in a standard business envelope but will not offer much space for content. The rental center chose to use a tri-fold 8-1/2" by 14" paper. Together with an accompanying letter (folded in half), they are mailed in a standard 6" by 9" manila envelope.

Paper color and texture play an important role. Gloss paper with bold colors creates an upscale image. Plain copier paper creates a poor image. The rental center chose a medium weight Ivory paper for both their equipment and party brochures. However, the party brochure was printed on a linen textured paper to give it a higher quality look and feel.

Check with your printer for the most economical paper size in the color, weight and texture of your choice. You might even consider papers that come pre-printed in a variety of colors and graphics. Ask your printer to explain your options in relation to cost. Also choose your ink colors with care as printers charge extra for each additional color. You can get a nice three color look for the price of two when you use colored stock and two inks. You could also shade back (tint) some of the text or graphics, allowing only a percent of the ink to print. For example, a 20% tint of black will appear as a grey. Your brochure will appear to have multiple colors without the extra cost of additional inks.

The content portion of the rental center brochures is printed in black. We then used a second color to highlight the company name, logo and borders around the tri-fold panels. We chose blue accents for the equipment brochure for it's strong feeling and calming influence. The party brochure, on the other hand, was accented in red to convey brightness and excitement. Sounds silly? Maybe, but it works.

As for pictures, graphics and line drawings, the most extensive collection of graphics can usually be obtained from industry specific organizations. In this case we contacted the American Rental Association. They publish an Advertising Instruction Manual (AIM) full of artwork. Additionally the ARA has many graphics available on computer disk and on their Bulletin Board Service. Regardless of where you get your graphics use them sparingly and with purpose. You can ruin an otherwise fine brochure with a lot of cutesy or meaningless pictures.

Fonts play an important role in reinforcing or countering the brochure's message. On the equipment brochure the font for the title was selected for its bold rounded shape without serifs (Bordeaux Bold), hopefully conveying the message of strength and usefulness. The party brochure title is in a bold simple script (Brush Script), not too fancy and frilly since the business caters to the backyard and small wedding crowd, yet fancy enough to give the feeling of something special. The company name on both of the brochures is in a font with soft serifs (Schoolbook) and the content is in a plain sans serif font (Helvetica) for easy reading. It is a good practice to use no more than three different fonts in any one brochure. One font carries the message while the other fonts serve as design accents. Bolding or italicizing a font does not necessarily count as a separate font. However, only use bold and italics as emphasis to impart clarity to the message.

Communications

What to communicate? First of all, gear the language to the customer. That is, don't be high-brow to the backyard picnic crowd. Try to be direct and plain spoken in your choice of words. But most of all, keep the information flowing smoothly. Look at the brochure as a road map taking your customer from the front cover through your product offerings to the final sale.

Other things to include in the brochure might be: helpful hints and tips; working guidelines; directions to your store; addresses; phone and fax numbers as well as your e-mail address. You could choose to indicate what makes your business special and sets you apart from your fellow rental dealers. You might even include company policies, but if you do, try to avoid a threatening tone. The rental center likes to let their customers know they appreciate their business, but if loss or breakage occurs they expect to be reimbursed.

Cover to Cover

Okay, let us start with the front cover - the most important part of the brochure. The cover should jump out and grab the customer's attention and in effect, say "take me, read me". Make it visually appealing by using simple designs and well chosen fonts. Include your logo and business name. Consider using a design similar to your store sign and/or stationery. This is an effective identity tie-in with future correspondence. In the cover design for the equipment brochure we chose to put the company name and logo at the top and the address and phone number at the bottom. In the middle of the cover we boldly printed "General Equipment Rental Guide" followed by the statement "Tools and Equipment for Homeowners, Contractors and Industrial Facilities". Below this we listed the general categories of equipment contained in the brochure.

In a similar manner, the party brochure is labeled "Party Planning Guide" with the statement "Party, Wedding and Banquet items for ordinary and extraordinary celebrations" and a general listing of party item categories. We further bolstered the party brochure by making it a "Planning Guide" where the customer could select specific items, fill in the quantities desired and calculate the costs. We also provided charts assisting in the proper choice of tables, tents and dance floor sizes. This is not an earth shattering innovative design, just clear communicating.

We consciously chose to use the word "Guide" in each of the brochure titles to convey the sense that the rental center would guide them and help them attain their goals. Choosing a title such as "Equipment List", in our opinion, would not have given a feeling of assistance or help - merely a list of equipment.

The back cover is a great place to extend an invitation for the customer to call. You might summarize your business philosophy, make a mission statement or express your personal appreciation for their business. The back covers of the brochures contain a map, a statement about the quality of equipment and service, some graphics and a signature after a personal closing. We use sentences such as "We will help you locate specialty items", "We pride ourselves on service..." and "...this brochure is a partial listing..." to convey the message that the rental center is ready, willing and able to help them be the best that they can be. One theme that the rental center carries throughout all their correspondence and advertising is that they are "Your rental store and a whole lot more".

Now that we have the covers covered, let's look at the inside - the working part of the brochure. If you choose to have a simple list of items, you could add some graphics to make the pages more interesting. As an alternate to a general list, you could describe some common problems, suggest remedies and indicate which rental items would best handle the situation. Don't worry about listing everything or all the possible problem scenarios. Focus on the big picture and not the minutia. The issue here is to give the customer the confidence, that no matter what, you can help them.

Wrap up

A few more thoughts before we close the subject of brochures: desktop publishers and printers. The desktop publisher can assist you through the entire process from design to production. If you choose this route we suggest you give them a rough design and all your text material. You can rely on the desktop publisher for a clean layout and design advice. But you will still need to oversee the process and get rough drafts as the project progresses. It would also be to your advantage to have two or more people check the final draft for spelling and numbers. Believe it or not, one of the more common mistakes is overlooking an incorrect phone number!

Be sure to check with your printer at the beginning of the project. Show them a rough design and solicit suggestions. Explore their capability for registration of colors, types of paper folds available and other things which might affect cost. As an example, if you want a color to run off the edge of the page (called a bleed) the printer must print on over sized paper and trim it to size. A design without bleeds will be less expensive to produce. When you are ready to take the final masters to the printer make sure you provide him with a mock-up of your completed brochure.

The rental center concluded that they can not manage without brochures. They stopped producing the equipment brochure one year and their customers complained. And their party brochure, which is used as a working document for event planning, can be faxed conveniently to and from customers. The rental center also made the conscious decision to make low cost brochures so they could pass them out freely in the store, include them in Welcome Wagon packets and mail them just about anywhere without hesitation.