

Anatomy of a Great Training Catalog

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Why is it that the most profitable training companies typically have the best catalogs? It's no accident. They put a lot of time and effort into strategizing cover imagery and messaging, how to group and order courses, and selecting promotions that complement best-selling offerings.

As important as it is for catalogs to stand out in today's ever-crowded mailboxes, "different" does not equate to "better". Successful training companies realize the power of following the many tried and true principles of good catalog design for one simple reason: They sell.

So, before you reinvent the wheel and embark on an unusual or unconventional creative approach in an effort to make your mark in the training industry, make sure you and your designers know what the "rules" are.

Here are 10 solid, creative rules that are sure to produce spectacular results:

1. Violators are king

Place a teaser or "violation" referencing a best-selling or "new" course in the upper corner of selected spreads. As a rule, when readers glance through a catalog from back to front, their eyes tend to go first to the upper right corner of a spread—so, make this space work for you by putting a strong message there. Grab readers' attention with a strong visual or color and keep the message benefit-oriented.

2. Less is more

Keep the catalog layout easy to read with adequate white space and simple typefaces. Training catalogs tend to contain a ton of information and the tendency is to cram in as much information as possible on each page, sacrificing legibility. Keep your course descriptions concise and benefit-oriented. Utilize action-oriented feature bullets to chunk information into small, readable bits. Bold and increase the size of important subheads to communicate a special benefit or offer and don't use fonts smaller than 7 points.

3. Call your readers to action

Make your page footers work for you, by including a prominent call to action on every page spread. Your company's name, telephone number and web address should be accessible at a glance.

4. Consistency is key

To create a strong brand, it's important that your training catalog incorporate recognizable spreads, typographical elements and icons, consistent with your current corporate "look". However, be careful not to make every spread look the same, otherwise readers will get bored. Instead, mix up the spreads by using different layout grids or colors to engage readers. For example, you might use different colors, backgrounds, or asymmetrical layout format for different course categories.

5. Standardize for maximum profitability

You can gain many economies by working with your printer and post office to determine the most economical catalog size and paper type and weight. While oversized publications may attract more attention than a standard full size, slim-jim or digest-sized catalog, they can also add as much as 25% to your paper, production and mail costs.

6. Use opportunities to cross sell

Suggesting companion courses and or products can increase your sales up to 15%. You can do this through promotional call-outs, chunking courses in logical groups either by classification (type), skill, or technology. By chunking courses you also increase the readability of your course catalog.

7. Maga-catalogs don't sell

A maga-catalog is half "magazine" and half "catalog". While you may be tempted to try this format as a means to stand out from the competition, in most cases, this layout detracts from selling "real estate", thereby reducing sales per square inch. You can create value and interest without sacrificing space, by using editorial-based sidebars. For example, powerful customer testimonial snippets and course-related tips and tricks will provide added value to your catalog without detracting from the catalogs overall purpose.

8. Four-color does not equate to better

Generally speaking, full-color publications are more attractive and grab readers' attention; however you might find the increased sales do not justify the cost of four-color printing. Perhaps to stand apart from the competition, you may opt for printing your catalog in two colors or trying a duo-tone effect.

9. Design for your audience

Tailor your catalog design to appeal to your audience. A B2B catalog should be very different than a B2C catalog. Catalogs for a young audience will have a very different look and feel than a catalog for adults. Catalogs for techies should be very different than catalogs for executive management or non-computer people.

10. Analyze your results

Create mechanisms by which you can measure the marketing success of your catalog. With these results you can determine which techniques are working to increase sales and those you should discard or re-think.

Mercy Ehrler is founder and principal of AdVanced Design, Inc., a marketing communications firm providing graphic design, writing and marketing services to B2B enterprises, not-for-profits and retailers. Since 1997, AdVanced Design has been a design partner to the training industry, working with Productivity Point International, Thomson Learning (formerly NETg), Watermark Learning and others. You can contact Mercy directly at mehrlers@ameritech.net, 630-718-0872, or visit her website at <http://www.advanceddesign-online.com>