

The Plain-Jane Voucher Gets a Makeover

American Craft Council's voucher membership mailing features creative and strategic enhancements

Vouchers have been in favor with publishers and fundraisers for years because they are not as expensive as larger 6" x 9" or 9" x 12" packages—and they still capture good response rates. The voucher is bare-bones by definition, consisting of a one-page description of benefits and a reply device, usually carried in a #10 outer.

When American Craft Council, a nonprofit membership organization dedicated to fostering an environment in which craft is understood and valued, partnered with Sage Communications to redesign its direct mail package, the Westborough, Mass.-based direct marketing firm used the voucher strategy but added a few bells and whistles to get a big lift in response.

The voucher that Anne and Josef Kottler, founding partners of Sage Communications, came up with is not your typical plain-Jane effort. The Kottlers refer to their format as an enhanced voucher or voucher-plus package because it includes a brochure and insert and contains personalized messaging and community-based content that you would not find in a regular voucher.

"We now call it an enhanced voucher or voucher-plus package, in that ... we can enhance response by adding the right combination of content-related messages. All the publishers would love to have more content in the presentation as long

as it's cost-effective, and in this particular case, we've shown it can be," Mr. Kottler shares.



Nonprofits rarely go the voucher route, but American Craft Council dressed it up nicely with a creative, attention-getting outer—with its full-bleed image and membership card—and glossy brochure. • Archive code #202-713749-0907. To order, call 215-238-5225 or go to www.whosmailingwhat.com

Instead of a stark-white, business-looking outer, the package arrives in a #10 with a full-bleed, black-and-white photograph of a potter's hands on the front. The hands are open, and there is a window in the middle of the envelope with a personalized, temporary membership card showing through that looks like it's being cupped by the hands. The image really stands out in the mail;

it is a piece of creative that Sage Communications carried over from one of American Craft Council's previous packages. "Essentially, when you get the envelope it's like we're handing you this membership card," Mr. Kottler says.

On the reverse side of the envelope are the address blocks, along with the copy, "Charter Invitation Please respond within 10 days," and a "Do Not Bend" stamp. Inside are a voucher page with content on both sides, a colorful brochure, an

insert and a postage-paid BRE (Archive code #202-713749-0907).

The focal point of the package is the double-sided voucher. The front, main page of the voucher includes

a list of member benefits and a quick, personalized message written to the recipient, explaining why she's been chosen for membership and that she'll receive 50 percent off the regular price. The temporary membership card is perforated at the top of the page, and the reply form is perforated onto the bottom. While Mr. Kottler says the magazine is the biggest value to prospective members, the temporary membership card works well as an involvement device and helps stoke interest in the membership itself. "The temporary card suggests, 'You're a member now, but to be a permanent member, you have to send in your money,'" he remarks.

The reverse side of the voucher features the headline "Join Our Community of Artists and Craft Masters" and reveals how the Kottlers added a community feel to the voucher package. "A magazine and its readers and writers are part of a community that shares an enthusiasm and a common interest for a subject matter ... The back of this form refers to and invites you to join our community of artists and crafters and then shows you five artists who have appeared in the magazine, with a brief biography and then an actual sample of one of the pieces of their work," Mr. Kottler says. The council's mission state-

ment also appears in a box at the bottom of this page.

One of the package's highlights is the brochure, a four-color, high-quality piece that reproduces sample covers of the recently redesigned magazine and shows beautiful photographs of crafts featured in the publication. There is also copy on the brochure detailing what readers will learn from the magazine. "Time and time again, we've noticed and we've learned at Sage Communications that including a nice little brochure with a voucher package has lifted response," Mrs. Kottler comments. She says the brochure highlights the magazine's new design and its content without adding much to the overall cost of the mail package. "This piece is really quite simple but delivers a sense of elegance that the magazine delivers," Mr. Kottler adds.

The final element in the package is a small, yellow insert reiterating the offer.

Mr. Kottler says such an insert has shown a steady lift in response when tested in isolation in similar voucher packages.

Mailed in the summer of 2008 and winter of 2009, this package was sent a third time in July 2009 and remains the control for the American Craft Council. It is an acquisition-only package sent to prospects who have expressed interest through events or other subscriptions in crafts and art appreciation, Mr. Kottler says.

The enhanced voucher package provided a lift over the previous packages the council had been mailing. With the enhanced voucher, the gross response (the percentage of people who responded to the mailing) and net response (the percentage of people who responded to the mailing and also paid) both almost doubled.

Another benefit of the enhanced voucher package is the smaller gap between the gross response and net response, which

Mr. Kottler attributes to the package's hard offer. "We advised that we stay with the hard offer because it's the type of thing that works better than having to send out sample magazines," Mr. Kottler reveals. He says that around 70 percent to 80 percent of people provided cash with order, and as a result, the client incurred many savings down the road with no free issues and less "bill me later" invoices to send.

Sage Communications and American Craft Council currently are working together, with ProCirc, a Miami-based circulation vendor, to determine plans for next year's mailing. Both Anne and Josef Kottler are pleased with the control but hope there will be some testing in the works. "We hope to test more ideas, such as email capture or new creative, in the next mailing cycle," Mrs. Kottler says. "This package has worked extremely well for them, but there's always new things to test," Mr. Kottler adds. **IDM**

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An Offer by a Different Name

In an acquisition mailing designed for American Craft Council, Sage Communications dusted off an ever clever way to refer to the offer. Instead of just a plain, old membership, Anne and Josef Kottler, founding partners, call the offer a "Charter Membership Invitation." From testing in their other publication and nonprofit clients' mailings, the Kottlers have found success with the word "charter." "We liked the use of the word 'charter' ... We've had a lot of luck with that," Mr. Kottler says. He also felt "charter" was a good word for referring to the first year of membership.

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