

Are You Personalizing Your Mailing Envelopes?

By Frank McPherson

In this column, I've talked about the benefits of using four-color personalization in your direct mail—trifold mailers, postcards, and other marketing documents. But have you thought about using it on the outside of your mailing envelopes?

I'm not talking about the traditional method of using inkjet to print one- or two-color teaser copy or pre-printing the envelope in four-colors and then post-printing a simple message. I'm talking about variable printing full-color text and images on the exterior of the envelope, just as you do for the contents.

Until recently, printing four-color, personalized messaging on envelopes was either cost-ineffective or prohibitively slow, or both. Fortunately, the technology is always improving. Today, the opportunities for 1:1 marketing are expanding.

Four-Color 1:1 Messaging on Envelopes

There are four ways to produce full-color, 1:1 messaging on envelopes:

1. Light-production inkjet presses and toner-based digital presses that feed envelopes from trays. This is an ideal option for low production volumes.

The process is slower and more cumbersome than other solutions, but it makes full-color envelope personalization accessible even for smaller projects. Toner-based presses have a higher level of print quality than inkjet, so keep that in mind for logos and other elements that require a high degree of detail. In their favor, inkjet presses offer more flexibility in handling different envelope sizes and formats.

2. Offline printing or post-printing personalization on one- to four-color inkjet envelope printers. This is an economical way to personalize text and images on the outside of envelopes at higher volumes. These printers can handle both graphics and text, but quality is in the middle of the range.

Offline envelope printing may or may not include pairing the personalized envelope with matching personalized contents. When inserts and envelopes are being paired, you need to have a plan for maintaining integrity between the personalized contents and their envelopes. Enhanced quality control using cameras and other monitoring devices is a must to ensure that the correct personalized insert is being paired with the correct personalized envelope 100% of the time.

3. Specialized lines for high-volume and transactional jobs. 1:1 digital press output can be paired with special inserting and envelope-printing equipment lines to match and personalize envelopes in the millions. At Graph Expo, HP and its partners MCS and Pitney Bowes showed an inline webfed solution that prints the web, cuts it, reads the barcode, inserts the sheet into a blank envelope, then prints the envelope in four-color at up to 1200 dpi at 600 fpm. Large print providers like R. R. Donnelley and DST Output have offered similar proprietary capabilities for years.

4. New equipment can print and fold envelopes on the fly. Using the Kern 515 EasyMailer, for example, printers output 8.5" x 11" or 11" x 17" sheets of paper that contain both a personalized envelope and matching personalized letter on one or both sides. Printers then take the job offline to the EasyMailer to insert up to three personalized pages together with a Business Reply Envelope (BRE). There, the solution cuts, folds, wraps, and seals the completed job into the newly created personalized mail-ready envelope. For this particular piece of equipment, the monthly volume is rated at 200,000 envelopes with one inserted sheet.

Impact on Response Rates

To what extent have marketers embraced full-color messaging? We're seeing it happen more and more often. While most marketers are still pre-printing generic messages on the outer envelope, an increasing number have stuck their toes into the water of envelope personalization.

Messages like "John, this is the news you have been waiting for. . ." and "Bob, important documents inside, please respond by ..." are an important first step. We are also beginning to see more sophisticated envelope personalization. At Custom Data Imaging Corporation, we regularly produce jobs that pair personalized messaging with demographic-appropriate images to increase response. We have also heard of others doing dynamic mapping.

What impact does four-color exterior personalization have on response rates? We know that it grabs attention, creates involvement, and reinforces your message from the outset—all elements that contribute to getting the envelope opened and ultimately increase response rates. At this early date, however, benchmarks on response rates are not available. Your best option is use control groups to test in a live print run so that you can isolate the lift from the personalized envelope versus the lift from the personalized contents.

Four-color personalization isn't the only option for lifting response rates, of course. There are other options, such as personalized Post-It Notes and personalized labels.

Options Are Expanding

There are lots of ways to boost response rates on the outside of envelopes. Four-color personalization is just one of them.

Whatever solution you use, the good news is that your options are expanding. Be sure to check with your print provider to see what combination of quality, personalization, and volume they can handle. And remember — what you put on your envelope is just as important as what you put in it.