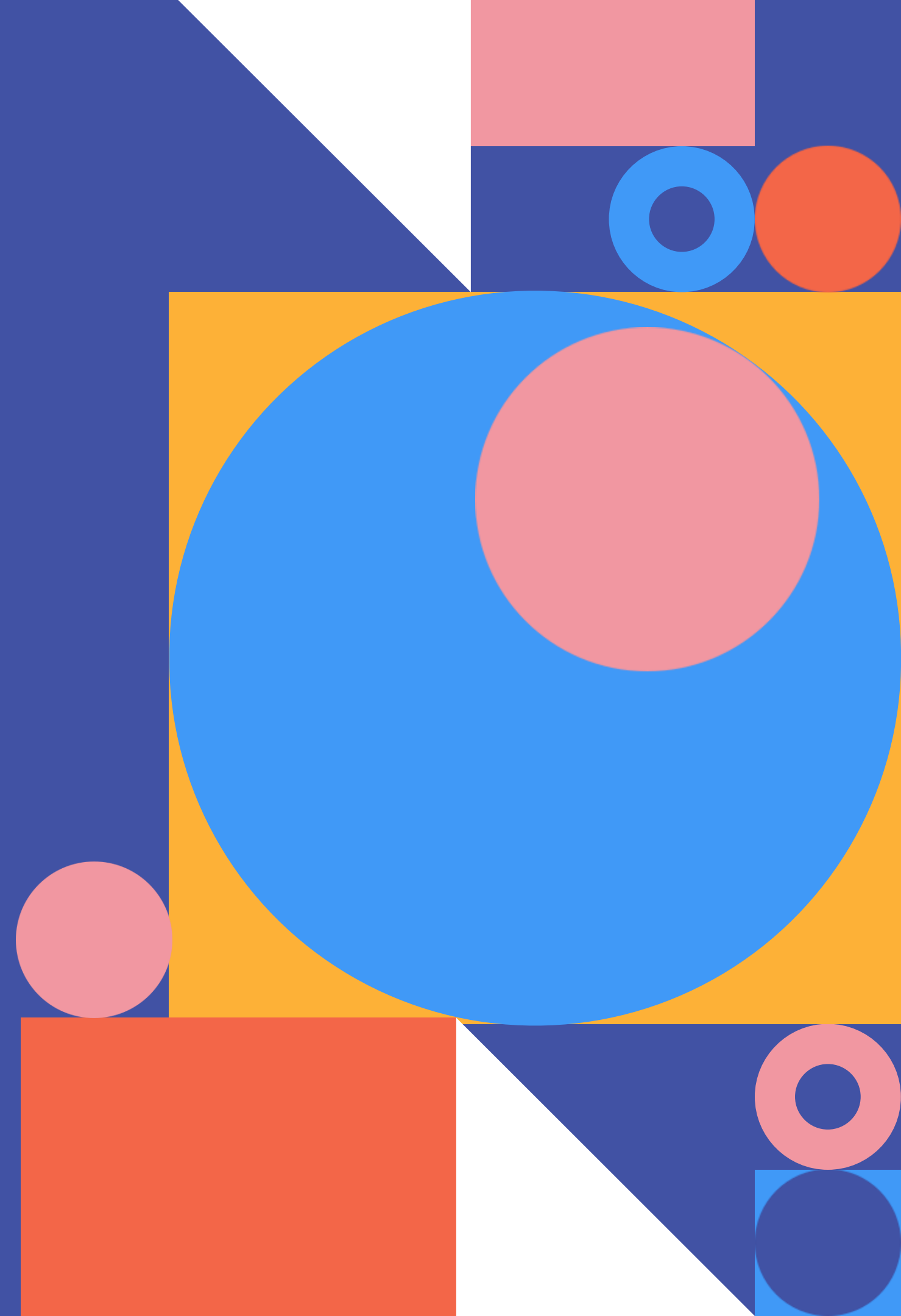

Creative Strategy & Implementation

How to Create Killer Mailings
Without Killing Yourself in the Process

Wednesday, October 7
1:15 - 2:45 PM EDT

DMAW
Direct Marketing Association of Washington



THE CREATION PHASE

- Sometimes the best way to learn how to do something, is to learn from your mistakes.
- So I'm going to focus on 10 Disastrous Mistakes I've Seen ... that You Don't Want to Make

MISTAKE #1:

“Why don’t you just write about something you think will work.”

NOPE. Great creative is a by-product of great collaboration between the nonprofit, the people in the field, and the agency.

Some Key Questions to Consider As You Begin the Creation Phase

- What does the past data tell us?
- Are our donors responding better to certain kinds of appeals, over others?
- What kinds of appeals seem to work well for us *this* time of year ... and what kinds don't?
- What new events have happened that should be considered?
- Are there any creative 'red flags' we should factor into our decision ... i.e.
 - budget limitations
 - timeframe to collect what's needed
 - timeframe to produce the appeal
 - hurdles with getting approval

MISTAKE #2:

“The Board really, really, really wants us to send out an appeal about _____”

NOPE. Sometimes you’re going to get internal pressure to do an appeal, that you know won’t work. A bad idea is a bad idea ... even if the boss wants you to do it.

'Red Flag' Ideas:

- 'It's our 35th Anniversary. We want to do an anniversary mailing.'
- 'The chairman of our Board just got a big award, and we should write about that.'
- 'Our website just won a big design award, so let's write an appeal that drives more people to it.'
- 'Let's just cancel all our direct mail this summer, and channel all that money into digital.'

Moral of the Story: If the idea is an appeal that brags about our charity and its employees, other people won't be interested.

MISTAKE #3:

“The Boss is sick of sending these kinds of appeals. So let’s not do that anymore.”

SO WHAT? If an idea/theme/approach works, don’t be afraid to do it again.

Never Deep-Six a Great Idea, Just Because You've Done It Before

- If you've had success with one matching gift appeal ... then don't be afraid to do another.
- Yes, follow-ups work.
- Yes, multiple stamps on the return envelope work (even if it seems gimmicky).
- Yes, name labels often work (even if your neighbor says he's sick of getting them).
- Yes, Certificates/recognition devices can work again and again.
- Yes, 'gimmicks' work great, even if they seem too gimmicky to your boss
 - Name labels
 - Handwritten fonts
 - Circled gift amounts
 - Yellow highlighting, etc., etc.

MISTAKE #4:

“We don’t have time to put together a strategy. Let’s just wing it – everything will turn out”

NOPE. Every successful appeal begins with a plan.

Creative Brief/Strategy Overview

- Objective of mailing – what we’re trying to do?
- Target Audience – who are we trying to reach?
- Theme/Big Idea – how are we going to get people to notice?
- Offer – What is the big offer (expressed as “If you _____, then you’ll get_____”).
- Budget – how much do we have to spend?
- Logistics: time frame for all deliverables.
- Format: sizes, colors
- Style Guide – does everyone know the rules on how you look and talk?

MISTAKE #5:

“Just check the website for the background you need. That should be enough to figure it out.”

NOPE. The more effort you put into creating a good appeal at the beginning, the better the appeal.

Some Key Questions to Consider While You're Collecting Your Background:

- Have we checked to see if there are any compelling new stories?
- Is our mission facing some new emergency needs?
- Do we have any new photos that can tell our story in a dramatic way?
- What does our past history tell us?
- What approaches do our donors seem to like?

MISTAKE #6:

“Yeah, I think we have approval to use these stories and photos, so let’s not sweat it.”

NOPE. I’ve seen 100 appeals over the years cancelled at the last minute because people didn’t get the approvals done upfront – leading to wasted time, wasted money and nervous breakdowns.

Make Sure You Have Approval to Create Your Big Mailing Before You Start working on your mailing:

- Do you have permission to tell the story you want to tell?
- Do you have permission to use the photo you want to use?
- If you have to buy it, will it cost too much?
- Does the person signing your letter know that she/he is going to sign your letter?
- Can you definitely talk about the project you want to talk about (or is it still hush hush?)

MISTAKE #7:

“Hey, sorry to be last minute about this, but I think we need to do something totally different.”

NOPE. Unless there has suddenly been a life-changing event that affects your nonprofit, it's never a good idea to change horses in mid-stream at the last minute.

Real-life Impacts of Changing an appeal at the last minute

- Cost ... poor planning means you're going to spend more money now.
- Anxiety ... it's a great way to blow your weekend.
- More mistakes ... the more rushed something is, the more screwed up it will be.
- Results ... your first idea is usually your best idea. Stick with it.
- Your life-expectancy ... your vendors will kill you.

MISTAKE #8:

“Let’s just worry about the messaging for now; we’ll figure out a format later.”

NOPE. Always require a sketch at the beginning. For a hundred reasons...

Why a Sketch Should Always be Mandatory

- It will ensure everyone is on the same page regarding what the idea is
- It will help your boss visualize the idea, so he/she isn't 'surprised' in layout stage
- It will help your production team budget the appeal
- It will spur more creative improvement – 'hey, what if we did this instead? Or what if we added this to the appeal?'
- It will ensure the address block fits through the envelope!
- It will ensure the reply slip actually fits into the reply envelope
- It will ensure the idea is even possible to produce!
- It will keep your design team sane (many have gone crazy because a copywriter told them – "I'll just describe the concept – you'll figure it out").

MISTAKE #9:

“Just give us a letter – we’ll figure out the rest of the package later.”

NOPE. Insist on getting thoughtful Reply Slip copy with the letter – because it can make or break your appeal.

A GREAT REPLY SLIP SHOULD STAND ON IT'S OWN (in case all other components are lost). IT SHOULD INCLUDE...

- A great headline that:
 - Summarizes the importance of the appeal OR
 - Calls the recipient to action
- A compelling, cogent 'Yes statement' (if this can't be articulated in 15 words or less, then the appeal isn't focused enough or compelling enough)
- A deadline to act
- A gift string that works
- The brand logo and return address
- Information on 'how' to give ... check or credit card, online option

MISTAKE #10:

“Testing? Nah, we don’t have time to test anything.”

NOPE. The most vibrant and successful programs feature regular testing. Insist on learning something every appeal.

SOME ADVICE ON TESTING

- Best case, test something totally different against your control
 - Different subject matter
 - Different theme
 - Different format
- If you have to stick with one basic package, here are the most important elements to test:
 - Test different outer envelope ... teaser, color, blind v. with logo, #12 v. #10, handwritten v. typewritten
 - Different letter copy ... 1-page v. 2, personalized v. offset, story v. institutional
 - Different offer ... test a magic amount that shows impact, i.e. 'your \$32.67 will provide 5 meals to starving children'
 - Different gimmick/techniques ... multi-postage on return, post-it notes, lift notes, handwriting, yellow highlighting, etc.
 - Timing (particularly around the holidays) ... test dropping the mail ten days later or earlier.