



NEWPORT  
CREATIVE  
COMMUNICATIONS

## **I Would Like To Propose a Test**

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Once upon a time, instead of presiding over my own agency, I was sitting on the other side of the desk as the Vice President of Development of the National Easter Seal Society.

Back then, I had the responsibility to pick and choose among the many direct mail marketing agencies that came knocking on our door looking for new business and promising breakthrough results leading to higher income, lower costs, less attrition, greater efficiency and more loyal donors.

All of the sales people had basically the same stories to tell, but, of course, some told their stories better than others.

Indeed, some of these sales people were extremely well-spoken, while others were tall and good-looking. Some of them were very intelligent, while others were gregarious and very knowledgeable.

There were long proposals, short proposals, detailed proposals, well-written proposals and pie-in-the-sky proposals.

How was I to choose?

I decided that I couldn't make a good, informed decision about such a major purchase, one that would have a decidedly significant impact on our organization, based on a proposal alone.

So what do you need to make such an important decision with the utmost of confidence?

Personally, I don't think nonprofit organizations should be making any big decisions about the future of their fundraising programs based on proposals received from a short list of direct response fundraising agencies.

Have you ever purchased anything of such size and scope without knowing more about the product? Would you buy a home without a house tour? Would you buy a car without a test drive? Would you buy a chair without at least sitting in it first? Of course not.

So here's what I would like to propose:

Don't send out that RFP and trust that the best proposal necessarily represents the best agency for you. Don't fool yourself into thinking that your suitors' references aren't carefully selected to provide only the most flattering recommendations. Don't mistake charisma for capability or promises for results.

Clearly, there are many good agencies out there. But instead of asking for a proposal, why not ask for a test package? It's quick, easy and objective. And the best part is you can use the results as a basis for your decision.

This is what most agencies don't want to hear, however. They don't want to change the way in which they acquire new clients. They'd rather just fine-tune their proposals, dust off their references and trot out their most presentable sales people for your consideration.

But this is what you should insist on because it'll make your decision easier.

For example, a few years ago, we – along with two other agencies – were asked to create a new direct mail package for a major health-related nonprofit organization. The organization planned to choose the package they liked best and test it against their current control.

I thought there was a better way. I sat down with the development director and convinced him that it really wasn't possible for the organization to select the best package by committee, test it against their control and be assured that they, in fact, had made the right decision. There was no sure way to predict which of the packages would perform best in a test. Fortunately, he agreed with me, and decided to mail all four packages. Ours, which was *not* the consensus favorite, beat the others by a 15% margin. This success led to another test, which we also won, resulting in a long-term, mutually-beneficial relationship that lasted more than 10 years.

Now I'm certainly not suggesting that one winning test package provides enough information on which to base a future client-agency partnership. However, what this initial test does provide is the knowledge that such-and-such agency can beat your control. You get a good feel for your account team, their abilities and their responsiveness to your needs.

The bottom line is that proposals have their shortcomings, while testing provides objective, conclusive evidence of an agency's capabilities. After testing has been completed, you may discover that your current agency is doing a fantastic job for you. You may find a way to improve your direct mail fundraising program. Or you may find that it really is time for a change.

Now, about that test....

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