

Three Folds, Twelve Tips

Steven Skyles-Mulligan
Evoke Strategies

The most common piece of marketing literature is actually also the trickiest to produce. Of course I'm referring to the trifold brochure, that ubiquitous little pamphlet that consists of a standard-size sheet folded into three equal sections. Just about everybody uses it: product and service companies, small and large businesses, charitable organizations, institutions of higher learning and even political campaigns.

The difficulty in producing it is not in getting it done; a trifold can be created more quickly and at less expense than almost any other brochure format. But therein lies the rub. When was the last time one of these highly portable little pieces of paper captured your attention? My guess is that your answer will fall somewhere between seldom and never. That is the hard part of using a trifold: getting it to stand out and do its job of delivering your message.

If you are part of a small organization looking to create a brochure on a tight budget or part of a larger organization that needs to develop a suite of pieces for a broad range of products and services, the trifold might be an appropriate solution. As with anything, though, as long as you are going to spend time and money to create it, you might as well do it right. Here are twelve tips for creating a trifold brochure that has more impact – and stands a greater chance of attracting attention.

How Not to Do It

There are few hard and fast rules in this arena, but there are some mistakes you can make that will cost you dearly. The greatest danger you face is that your piece will make you look small – and that a prospective customer will get the idea that you are not big enough to meet her needs. Here are four things to avoid at all cost:

1. *Shun the "homemade" look.*

According to Michelle Novak, President of mNovakDesign, "The self-published look is the single biggest thing that stands in the way of making a trifold an effective marketing piece." The proliferation of desktop publishing software and affordable color printers has left all of us with the illusion that we can do layout, and that is a big mistake. Think about it: when was the last time you saw a self-published piece of marketing literature that looked anything but?

2. *Don't design each panel separately.*

Have you ever noticed how most trifold brochures tend to follow a three-column format on the inside – and that the columns don't always relate to each other? Richard Falk, Executive Director of Marshallin + Sachs, a visual brand strategy firm, says that this approach often makes the piece seem disjointed, "There's a real irony here; by making the reader's eye travel from the bottom of one column to the top of the next, pieces set up like this can make the text seem very long. At the same time, it can make the organization that puts out the piece look very small."

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3. *Stop limiting yourself to glossy white paper.*

Most trifold brochures are printed on standard glossy white paper. “This just makes every piece look the same,” says Sharon Kleinberg of Symmetry Prints, “paper stock can be a major differentiator, especially with a small piece. Following the ‘same old’ format will probably just get you the same old results – or none at all.”

4. *Avoid the temptation to cram everything in.*

Small organizations in particular run the risk of tossing in the refrigerator and kitchen sink. This leads to a piece that looks crowded, says so much that it effectively says almost nothing, and makes you look like a very small organization that couldn’t afford to do anything different. While that may be true, you don’t want the world to know; otherwise you’ll never grow.

Be Thoughtful

Now that you have a clearer idea of what not to do, let’s talk about what you should do to get the maximum impact from your comparatively inexpensive marketing piece. Let’s start with the content.

5. *Determine why a trifold is the right format.*

It could be that you need a piece that people can stick in their pockets, that you really need to watch costs or that you need to put something together very quickly. If none of these applies, then look at a different format which will make you appear bigger and more sophisticated.

6. *Focus your story sharply.*

Things that can effectively be presented in a trifold include descriptions of a single product or service line. Richard Falk of Marschallin + Sachs says – and I wholeheartedly agree – that it is a big mistake to attempt to describe your entire company in such a small piece. You can, however, use it to describe your signature product or service or to issue a special offer.

7. *Be economical with words.*

You don’t have a lot of space, so choose your words carefully. Create short paragraphs that are easy to read, use headings to break up the text and insert bulleted lists in one or two places as appropriate. I have only known of one person who uses a trifold that is chock full of information, incorporating much of the core content from a 22-page booklet. He’s a business strategist and psychologist who loves to hand the piece out with the instruction not to read it. Unless you’re a pro at manipulating the human mind, though, I wouldn’t suggest that you take this approach.

8. *Come up with a teaser for the cover.*

As with any type of brochure, if your cover simply lists your organization’s identifying information, you are seriously limiting yourself. Only those people who are already convinced they need your product or service will even look twice at the piece. Consider what questions might intrigue your ideal prospects – or what problems might plague them. That’s your cover message, and it could very well make your piece irresistible.

Get Creative

Only after you've figured out what you want to say should you consider how you want the piece to look.

9. Look at unusual ways to use the paper.

I was recently handed a trifold brochure by an exercise physiologist that opened the long way; I kept it for my example files. Richard Falk also suggests trying an accordion fold or fan approach, rather than the more traditional center-opening gatefold. This lets you get creative about how the information can flow on the paper. In both cases, you get all the benefits of using a trifold with the added element of surprise (and, if you really do it right, delight).

10. Use images well and wisely.

Several times in the past couple of months I have been handed a trifold with several stock photographs or clip art images. While images are great at breaking up the page and can amplify your story powerfully, they can also be distracting. Resist the temptation to include too many images (we have done very expensive, full size brochures that utilize only a single stock photo); you do not have enough room. Pick something surprising that will attract your audience's attention. As for clip art, stay away from the most commonly used images at least, and consider avoiding it altogether.

11. Get inventive with color.

Color can make a huge difference in getting your piece noticed, so long as you are bold and brave. The exercise physiologist's piece I mentioned above included some striking graphics in a very pleasing, simple color palette with plenty of white space. It really grabbed my attention. Sharon Kleinberg suggests another possibility: limit yourself to two colors for a small format piece. This will help you stand out in a world that's either black and white or full color.

12. Hire a good designer.

The most important thing you can do to create a small marketing piece (or any marketing piece) that has impact is to hire a designer. He or she can help you create a distinctive look that builds on your brand and appeals to your audience. He can also help you avoid some mistakes that could make you look smaller – or less professional – than you want to.

The Last Word

The effort involved in getting the most from a small marketing piece is inversely proportional to the size of the piece. Still, you can create some impact if you plan carefully. This includes the content; as Mark Twain once wrote to a friend, "I would have sent a shorter letter, but I didn't have the time." If you are under a lot of pressure or find that you're not creating what you want, you can also work with a messaging firm like Evoke.



Steven Skyles-Mulligan
steven@evokestrategies.com
245 Eighth Avenue, #364
New York, New York 10011-1607
212.967.7611
www.evokestrategies.com



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Steven Skyles-Mulligan is a marketing communications consultant who works with CEOs of closely-held businesses to help their firms — and their ideas — stand out. The company he heads, Evoke Strategies, is known for making dull businesses interesting and interesting businesses irresistible, as well as for creating some powerful pieces that hang around on people's desks (instead of ending up in the trash like most brochures). Visit us on the web at www.evokestrategies.com for more information. You can also call **212.967.7611** or email info@evokestrategies.com for a free consultation.