

Technology advances make laser letters effective

By Don Powell

Personalized direct mail has moved rapidly from the computer letter of the 1970's to the laser letter of the 80's. The use of laser letters in political direct mail continues to increase across the country. Due to innovations in solid-state technology, laser printers are dropping in price and shrinking in size. As a consequence they are now beginning to make up a major portion of nonimpact printer sales.

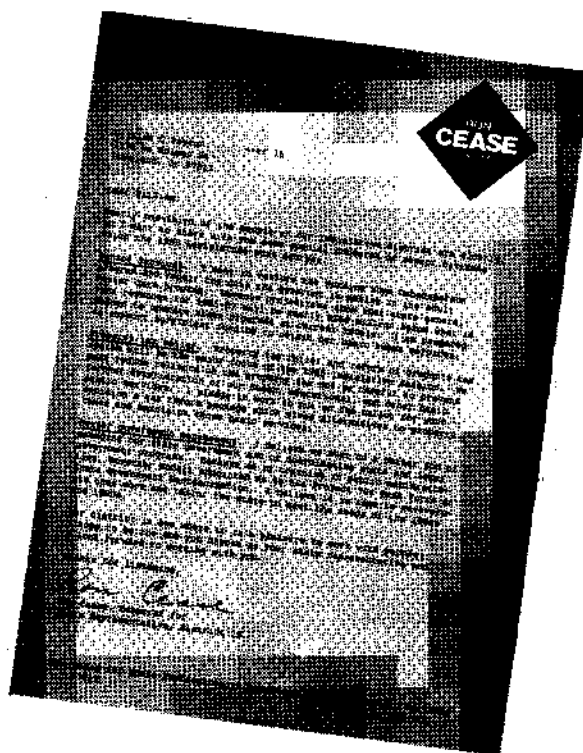
Modern high speed laser printers (i.e., Xerox 9700) are really little more than highly sophisticated copy machines. The text of the letter is set to imprint on each letter as it passes through the printer. Simultaneously, the name, address, and salutation are printed by the laser.

The principal advantages to using lasers for direct mail letters is that the technology has so improved that the letters look like they've been individually typed. Campaigns can then either have a laserhouse or mailhouse add a signature that can make the letter look like it has been individually signed. Most important, all this can be done at a speed of 7-8000 letters an hour on a Xerox 9700 laser printer. At that speed, and if the production house has several machines working at the same time, a personalized and signed letter can be completed in large quantities and in the mail in a matter of days.

Those who run or consult political campaigns are always faced with the question of how to put their media dollars to the best use. Often, money is allocated to television, radio, and newspaper advertising and anything left over goes towards personalized direct mail. With the advent of cable television and VCR's fewer and fewer people are watching local TV stations. More and more people therefore are missing political TV ads. Also, as our technology changes fewer people are getting their daily news from newspapers. As readership declines the effectiveness of newspaper campaign ads also declines. Radio ads, while being effective if properly produced, certainly cannot be targeted to people who have a voting history or to people in a small geographic area—like a city council district.

Targeting laser letters continues to be the most widely used technique of many consultants and campaign managers. There is no reason to send one to every household within a political jurisdiction if voter history, for instance, is on the file. Why not target those voters who have a history of turning out for specific elections?

If advance polling shows that a candidate is weak within a certain age group then those particular vot-



ers could be targeted for a personalized letter. Or, using Voter Contact Service's ethnic dictionary, a particular ethnic group could be targeted for a letter signed by a number of influential residents of that community.

In some states, like Oregon, where age is on some county voter files or available by matching a Department of Motor Vehicles file against the voter file, targeting seniors for personalized letters is a part of many campaigns at every level. Seniors, by and large, read their mail carefully and turn out in higher percentages to vote. Often, when they receive a personalized letter they will keep it around the home for a few days where visiting neighbors will see it on the coffee table. It can be a very effective piece especially if it deals with issues that most concern seniors. A candidate needing name recognition shouldn't underestimate the value of these letters and the residual impact they have upon the recipient when they remain in the home for several days.

Of course, doing business with an established political computer firm like Voter Contact Services is essential if you're going to obtain the best targeted file to begin the process. In order for a laserhouse to produce the letters it must first receive a magnetic print-tape set up and programmed the way you want it. You

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may want the letters to be personalized "Dear John and Betty," "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Johnson," or just "Dear Friend" below the inside address. There are several different ways to set up the letter as well as space requirements and the first step should be contacting a vendor experienced with the process.

A popular use for laser letters, done in Oregon and Alaska, has been adding the voter's polling place in a P.S. at the end of the letter. This technique has the advantage of adding a service to the direct mail piece. It is no longer viewed by some readers as just a self-serving political letter. In order to include the polling place the information must be obtained (checked for accuracy!) and keypunched so it can be inserted accurately for each voter.

With competition in the mailbox vying for the voter's attention the envelope containing your letter becomes increasingly important. There should be an effort made to put an interesting message or slogan on the envelope that will encourage the reader to open it. Although there continues to be a debate amongst consultants as to how effective window envelopes are, there is no question that they are still by far the least expensive way to mail personalized messages. We again come back to the message on the outside being a possible determining factor as to whether the envelope will be opened, regardless of whether it is a window or not.

To summarize, targeting personalized direct mail laser letters using special selections like voter history, age, gender, assessed value of homes, political party, or precinct can be a very effective means of political contact. As most consultants realize, in a hotly contested race the candidate with the highest number of quality contacts with the voter will win the election. With laser and computer technology now a part of our lives it's a good bet that if you don't take advantage of what's available using sophisticated techniques, your opposition will.

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