

# MADD Skills

When it comes to grabbing the attention of potential donors, this nonprofit knows the power of using direct mail.

Interview by Lara Jensen | Photograph by Tadd Myers

The folks at Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) have been fighting to eliminate drunk driving in the United States since the organization's inception almost 30 years ago. Although alcohol-related deaths have been on the decline — due in no small part to the efforts of MADD — the nonprofit organization continues to raise funds for, and awareness about, the scourge of alcohol-related deaths in the country.

The organization launched a national, ongoing effort in 2006 called the “Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving.” As part of this campaign, MADD is looking to new technologies, tougher enforcement and grassroots support to help it make the elimination of drunk driving a reality.

Nick Ellinger, MADD vice president of strategic outreach, explains how there's no better way than direct mail to relay the powerful stories of the victims of drunk driving, and how — from fund raising to advocacy — direct mail plays an increasingly important role in the organization's outreach efforts.

**DELIVER: What's new with your communication efforts?**

**ELLINGER:** We're enabling people to engage with us in every possible way, whether that's making a donation, volunteering or being an advocate. And we're planning to segment our donor base and create dedicated campaigns for certain groups, such as those we think have a propensity to give at a higher level. In addition, we're talking more to donors about MADD's missions outside of eliminating drunk driving, such as serving the needs of drunk driving victims and preventing underage drinking. To that end, we're putting out more urgent appeals that tie in to current events. So, for example, if MADD holds a press conference around an issue, we'll be trying to get an appeal in the mail soon after, referencing that same issue.

We're encouraging multichannel giving by using e-mail to support direct mail and sending out appeals that are more focused on drunk driving from a state perspective — as opposed to a national one — to make them more relevant to recipients. Our first attempt at this was a report showing the progress that each state was making on the campaign to eliminate drunk driving. The report rank-ordered states by their percentage of fatalities involving a drunk driver and included remedies for each state to help address the problem.

**DELIVER: How does MADD use direct mail to reach out to its constituents?**

**ELLINGER:** MADD grew into a national organization mostly through the use of telemarketing. But that's a very expensive way to raise money. So we started shifting the focus of our fundraising to other tactics, such as direct mail, in the 1990s. This year, we expect more than 20 percent of our net funding to come from individual donations made through mail.

While MADD uses mail primarily as a fundraising tool, this year we have launched an advocacy campaign to educate audiences about an important technology, called ignition interlock. This device requires previous offenders to breathe into a device that's fitted onto the ignition systems of their vehicles. If they don't pass the test, their cars won't start. The mailer includes a petition and an envelope that recipients can use to communicate with legislators about their thoughts on ignition interlock legislation.

**DELIVER: Why add advocacy to the mix?**

**ELLINGER:** In the past, we have shied away from explicitly encouraging people to vote a specific way on a bill, as this incurs lobbying costs. However, we realized that we could increase our lobbying efforts via direct

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**CAUSE AND EFFECTS:** Nick Ellinger, MADD vice president of strategic outreach, finds mail an effective type of in-depth storytelling that persuades people to act.

mail. By mailing to six large states simultaneously — instead of executing on a state-by-state basis — we also were able to lower our production and postage costs.

Plus, mail is an especially effective way to persuade people to act. In the ignition interlock piece, we tell the story of a mother who lost her son in a drunk driving crash to a repeat offender. That woman is now lobbying for ignition interlock bills in a number of states. That type of in-depth storytelling is something we can't do as well with other methods of communication. Direct mail is a significant portion of our education efforts about this technology — and one we think will have a significant impact.

**DELIVER: What's the most recent piece of direct mail to which you responded?**

**ELLINGER:** My grandmother received a piece from an Alzheimer's charitable organization asking her to solicit her family and others for support. She reached out to me. Since my grandfather has Alzheimer's, I happily gave. I think this effort was particularly effective because it came from someone I love, and it was about something that is particularly relevant to me. That kind of pass-along activity is a great way to make mail that much more effective.

**DELIVER: Is there a piece of direct mail that you hold on to because it inspires you?**

**ELLINGER:** I have a couple MADD campaigns displayed around my office. One recent example is about DUI child endangerment, which is when someone drives drunk with a child in the vehicle. Many think this is a fairly uncommon occurrence, but actually more than half of the children killed in drunk driving crashes in the United States are riding with the intoxicated driver. The reason I keep this particular direct mail piece is because it tells the story of a 5-year-old girl who was killed in a drunk driving crash when her mother was the drunk driver. Her father works for MADD now, and I know him well. I keep his daughter's picture out as a reminder of why we do what we do.

**DELIVER: Anyone creating direct mail you admire?**

**ELLINGER:** The most interesting pieces I've seen recently have come from a nonprofit organization that raises awareness about children with cleft palates. The organization has really pushed the envelope in terms of the images it uses to depict children with cleft lips and cleft palates.

For me, the graphic makes a direct mail piece that much more compelling. Recipients can see the before-and-after images and understand exactly what their donation does. These pieces also reflect what is going on more broadly in the nonprofit industry, I think, in that organizations are trying to be more cognizant of letting donors know exactly what is being done with their funds and how their donations have had a transformative effect. [▶](#)