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Best practices for Email Marketing

By Stefanos Cunning

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Best practices for e-mail marketing

Business use of email has increased dramatically the past 2 years, with many workers checking their email constantly throughout the day. A study from the Gartner Group showed that 42% of users check their business e-mail even while on vacation, and 23% check it on weekends. During the workweek, 32% check their e-mail constantly throughout the day, and 53% check their e-mail six or more times a day. This is the good news.

The bad news is estimates that by 2005 the average e-mail recipient will receive 1,600 commercial e-mail messages, as well as 4,000 other e-mails in their inbox. How do marketers cut through the clutter?

Success factors:

Obtain permission

Permission boosts response rates. Give the client the perception that they are in control of the messages they are receiving.

Target your messages

Not only do you generate better response for the initial mailing, it builds credibility with clients so that they will read future e-mail. The main point is to avoid e-mail fatigue.

Deliver value

Whether sending content or promotional info, don't send fluff. Make sure your copy is well written.

Use personalization

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Where possible segment your list and personalize according to your client's profile, to add personalization beyond simply addressing them by name. For example, if you have five types of clients, use "dynamic personalization" to customize your feature/benefit points to the client (e.g. Law Librarians vs. Legal Secretaries).

Monitor and limit quantity and frequency of mailings

General guide for frequency is one email message a month to stay in the client's mind, and max once every two weeks. This guideline is only for marketing email, and doesn't include other customer service or confirmation emails you might be sending. Other factors impact your client's tolerance, such as the level of relationship they have with you, how many other marketing communications they receive

through mail, advertising, etc. If you can't control other messages, at least be aware of the risk of email fatigue, and keep those messages targeted!

Fitting E-Mail into your Marketing Mix

Speed, ease of response, and cheap production costs make e-mail ideal for:

customer relationship communications (e.g. a newsletter)

testing offers

relationship-building customer service e-mails

product/service updates

It can also really boost response when used in conjunction with your other communication vehicles, such as PR, advertising, postal mail, or telemarketing. Email excels in offering levels of personalization and segmentation that can be cost-prohibitive with print.

Comparison of E-Mail vs. Postal Direct Mail

Strengths of e-mail:

Speed of response – find out how your campaign is doing within hours instead of weeks

Reduced production time

Increased testing capabilities

Personalization opportunities

Potentially more cost-effective than print

Ability to track every single action and tie it back to a single user

Ability to increase campaign reach through forwarded email (tell-a-friend or viral marketing)

Can create dialogue with your customer

Easiest and quickest way to get customers to come to your site to fill in your database (vs. collecting paper forms and business reply cards).

Weaknesses or Differences:

Up to 50–80% of response is generated within 48 hours and up to 90% within a week. Compare to

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postal campaigns where it can take two months to receive 85% of response, with peak response typically in week three and four. However, some marketers are finding customers hanging on to their emails, especially newsletters, and generating up to 20% of their responses two to four months later.

Like postal mail, a targeted, opt-in list is the key to response, but seems even more important with email. Whereas postal campaigns one can argue the importance of list, offer and creativity is balanced, with email it is still weighted to your list and offer. With the increase of spam, expect your customers and subscribers to demand better creativity to cut through the clutter. Bad creativity can kill response. Read on for details.

Planning your email campaign

Just as important as the actual email and offer itself, you need to plan the following:

Landing Page

Where do you want recipients to go when they get your email? Do you need to design a landing page?

If you are designing a specific campaign, then, yes, you want to create a landing page for them that reinforce the offer and encourage them to close an appointment. Coordinate your landing page with your email, i.e. use the same design, wording, etc. Continue the copy started in your email. Repeat the promotion and your call to action.

Replies

Where will replies be sent? Who will respond to them? What questions could be answered in the email instead of making clients ask for information?

Forwarding messages

Is there any information in the email that could not be forwarded to a recipient – e.g. a special offer only for that group of clients? If so, be sure any specifics are covered in the email.

Bouncebacks and Undeliverables

Every email campaign generates undeliverable mail. A soft bounce is when the address is good, but is getting bounced back by the recipient's mail server because it is too busy or the mailbox is full. If you are using a service provider to send the email campaign, they usually allow for four tries over 48 hours and then consider the email undeliverable.

A hard bounce is when the recipient's mail server responds that the user is no longer at that address or is unknown at that domain.

A service provider will flag these addresses as undeliverable and not mail them (so you do not incur mailing fees). A download of these addresses should be taken to update the internal database. If the

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client warrants the cost, a call out or postcard requesting an updated email address can be sent.

Testing

Do not miss an opportunity to test an element of your campaign in order to understand how your customers respond to email. Don't base results only on clickthroughs (unless it's just an awareness campaign). Base your results on final actions, which are usually sales.

These are just some of the things you can test:

List
Offer
Subject line
Creative: tone, content, copy length, layout
HTML vs. Text
Landing pages – layout, copy
Time of day/week – for B2B generally this has proven to be Tuesdays and Wednesdays between 10am–11am. For consumers you may find a spike in the evenings and if you email Fridays or on

weekends.

Test email vs. print, email in conjunction with print.

Email as part of initial sales cycle instead of phone or print. Find out when a customer needs to talk to a human being.

Email formats

Text

Text email must be in ASCII format, and preferably 65 characters per line. This means no bold, no underline, etc. For formatting it's very restrictive, but with some imagination you can create a layout that's easy to scan and read.

URLs within a text email must be on their own line for them to work properly as a hotlink. Don't forget to include the full URL with "http", e.g.: http://www.abccompany.com/landing_page to make sure all email programs will display your URLs as a clickable hotlink.

What you need to know about HTML

Depending on your audience, 50–90% of subscribers today can read HTML. Consumers are more likely than business customers to be able to read html, due to corporate measures to lower bandwidth requirements and exposure to viruses.

HTML can increase response rates by up to 50%. HTML for Business-to-Business has gone in and out of favour, but is generally now preferred. The only way to know is to either offer your subscribers a choice of formats or test it.

Key issues:

Not everyone can read HTML, so if you are sending HTML you also want to create a text message. Most email marketing software programs can send a multi-part message with a bit of code that 'sniffs' what email program they are using and delivers the appropriate version, either text or HTML.

Message size should be kept low, preferably under 35k to ensure quick loading speed. Graphics are actually stored on the marketer's server, so the delivered message only includes the HTML code. But extensive use of colour, formatting and graphics all add code which increase message size. Some corporations will block messages over a certain size.

In some situations, customers prefer text, even if they can read html. It's nice to offer the choice if possible.

Creative Elements of a Promotional Email Campaign

The following elements are all part of the design the email for your campaign and should be considered during planning and creative production.

Subject line

Your subject line not only drives or depresses response rates, but can be used to set the tone of your

email to solicit a desired action. For example, a simple relationship-building message from an online retailer saying thank you to customers before the holiday buying season had the same content, but 2 subject lines. They each generated similar clickthrough numbers, but look at the difference in conversion rate:

"Thanks, June" – virtually no sales

"June, we're open if you are" – double the sales

Why? The first created a passive environment where the recipient didn't need to do anything, whereas the second implied an invitation to visit the store, encouraging "the shopper within" to come and browse.

Sender address

The actual email address from which your campaign is sent. If you are using a third party email marketing service provider (also called an ASP-application service provider) and have not set up a sub domain for them to use, you will see their domain name.

For example, if you are using an agency or service provider, the Sender and From address displays as:

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ABC Company [ABCCompany@agency.provider.com]

If your budget permits, set up your own domain to enforce the brand and the trust it generates, eg:

ABC Company [info@abc.com]

"From" display address

In your email program, this is whom the recipient sees the email is from. You can select to display a formal name, eg. ABC Company Inc. Or just the email address. Best to use a name that is trustworthy and relevant to the recipient, such as your company name, which continues your brand enforcement: e.g. ABC Spring Deals. Or test using a real person's name. Be careful with the From name, so you aren't confused with spammers.

"Reply" address – similar to your from address above. It's best to have an internal address to send replies to. For tracking purposes you might want to set up a separate address, but have the response go to your Customer Service department.

Communicating the offer

With print you can spend some time in your letter talking about features and benefits before getting to the pitch. For e-mail promotions you need to have your main feature/benefit points, offer and call-to-action, and URL within the first 10 lines or 2 paragraphs of your email. You want clickable links to appear above the fold – i.e. in the preview pane – of your recipient's email program. This means you only have a couple seconds with email to grab the reader's attention.

Subscribe/Unsubscribe information

All emails need to include unsubscribe information. This is standard practice, which customers expect from a reputable company. It reminds them that you respect their privacy and reinforces their feeling of control over the email they receive. As marketers we want that reinforcement to be sure they read our mail!

Customers should be able to unsubscribe easily and on their own, but remember there will always be some who reply to the email instead, so make sure you have someone in place to handle replies.

Long or short copy?

There is debate among email marketers, many claiming short is best, but both have proven effective, depending on the audience and the offer. My own tests have shown that longer copy can generate higher average sales, but also lower response rates.

If longer copy is needed to sell the product, then use it. The more you can complete the selling process in the email, the better your conversion rate. The advantage of email is that you can test your copy before rolling out to your whole list.

Links to your landing page

For promotional email, include one link above the "fold"; 50% of responders click on this first link. Be sure to repeat the link at the end of your message, 25% of responders click on the last link. The rest click on the middle links.

Landing page

You should build a separate landing page whenever possible to guide your user through whatever action you want them to take. There is nothing worse than have a call to action in your email and then providing a link to your website home page.

Why? It's confusing to the user; they had one message in the email, then on your home page are suddenly confronted with a different message. They will get distracted from what you wanted them to do.

If you are selling one product, have the links in your email take them to a page with only that product. Continue the same design and copy tone from your email to your landing page. Repeat key elements of the offer, but don't make them wade through the whole spiel again. Think of email to web as one seamless process.

For more information please see <http://www.unilabplus.com>

Director of Unilabplus Ltd, a London-based online business management software house.

3 Essential Tools for Email Marketers

By Jinger Jarrett

3 Essential Tools for Email Marketers by Jinger Jarrett

Marketing your business with email is an art.

It's very easy to get accused of spamming nowadays. Add to that the filters ISPs are using, and your message may not get through.

If you do it right, email marketing can become a very effective method of marketing your business.

Before you consider this method, there are three tools I consider absolutely crucial to your success.

1. Educate yourself.

Get accused of spamming and you could destroy your

reputation forever.

Learn everything you can about email marketing and implement those strategies in your marketing campaign.

Here are two sites you can use to educate yourself about email marketing:

Email Results – <http://www.emailresults.com/> – This site offers a newsletter, a directory of lists, and plenty of articles.

Email Education – <http://www.emaileducation.com> – Also offers articles to help you learn how to use email to market your business. You'll also get information on the latest trends in email marketing as well as the latest news.

2. Email Formatting Utility

Once you've written your email, you want to make sure it looks professional.

Check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. Make sure it is easy to read.

You can use this utility to format your emails to the right width. It's not perfect, but it will save you plenty of time because you can format your text at different widths. Overall, it does a very good job.

<http://www.jbmckee.com/formatit/index.htm>

3. Anti-Spam

Before you send your message out, you want to check to make sure it can get past the filters frequently used by ISPs.

There's a simple and easy way to check your message. SiteSell.com has created a new feature called Spam Check.

Basically, you can send a your email as a test message and find out how the filters rank it. Then, you can make changes to your email before sending it to your list.

<http://spamcheck.sitesell.com>

Email marketing is a time consuming process. Done right, it

can be a very lucrative tool in your marketing arsenal. These tools will help you make your email marketing efforts more effective.



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