

Elements of a Successful Email Campaign

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Introduction

An effective email campaign can reach your customers faster and cheaper than any other medium. However, today's wired public receives more email than they can possibly read, and the inundation of email has desensitized them. Readers *expect* garbage in their inbox. In order for your organization to reach your customer with mail they can really use and that they'll really read, you must be sensitive to the issues and savvy in your delivery.

About Spam

Get permission first. Regardless of its legitimacy, email advertising is often labeled as "spam." To avoid alienating your customers, employ an opt-in strategy when creating your contact list. To put it plainly, get permission first. Even if your customers provided an email address when registering for one of your products, do not assume you have permission to send them email. You may even consider sending an email requesting permission before your campaign, giving your list contacts the chance to opt in or out before you begin.

Make it easy to unsubscribe. The theme in email correspondence should be "don't make me think." Don't make your readers work too hard to unsubscribe. Make sure you include an unsubscribe link or process in each email that goes out. Test the process first to be sure it works. One company sent out a marketing email with a broken unsubscribe link, and an irate customer reported them to a spam blacklisting organization. The company's web host was not in compliance with the blacklisting company's requirements, and both the original company and the web host spent hours trying to clean up the mess and remove themselves from the blacklist.

Managing Your Contacts

Make it easy to sign up. Include a sign-up form on your website so customers can opt in to your newsletter and email list. When gathering paper information during product or account registration, collect the email address on the form with a checkbox asking for permission to send emails.

Don't abuse the privilege. Once you have permission from your contacts to send occasional emails, don't swamp them with too many. A few targeted, benefits-driven emails carry far more weight than the "blah-blah-blah" effect you will have if you send too many.

Pay attention to feedback. Take note of customer feedback to weigh the tolerance level. If you are sending too many emails, chances are you will hear about it.

Keep your list current. Include a simple way for contacts to change their email address. You don't want to lose an interested contact simply because they can't figure out how to let you know their information has changed.

The Campaign

In creating an email campaign, think campaign—not just one independent email after another. Develop a plan—a series of offers—and then link them together with a common theme. Each individual email should focus on one topic; after all, the reader’s attention span is limited. But a series of topics linked together in a logical plan of attack create a campaign. For example, let’s say the campaign is designed to increase sales of a particular credit card product. One strategy is to develop a seasonal campaign based on increased consumer spending habits. Spring is tax time, when consumers need cash to pay taxes. Summer is vacation and travel time. Fall is time for back-to-school and the need for college tuition. Winter is time for holiday spending. The seasonal theme ties the campaign together, with each email covering a single topic.

The Subject Line

Email marketing experts concur that the subject line is the most important part of the email message. It can make or break the email, as the content of the subject line becomes the reader’s decision point on whether to continue reading. The following tips may help your subject line compel your reader to further action:

- Make it accurate and meaningful.
- Communicate a hint about the content of the email, particularly the value or benefit you are offering.
- Enhance your response by encouraging action. For example, the subject “*Sign up now for our free e-banking class*” conveys the content, presents a value and encourages immediate response.
- Avoid exaggeration or exclamation. The subject “*Free!!!! Act Now!!!*” does not convey real meaning, and the repeated exclamation points may trigger spam-filtering software to block it. If it does get through, the reader may simply choose to delete it because of the obvious hype.

Basic Writing Tips

Before writing the body of the email, review these basic writing tips.

- **Grammar.** Don’t ignore good grammar. Use proper capitalization, avoid fragments, and proofread everything. Better yet, have two others proofread your email: one for content accuracy and one for spelling and grammar. Your company’s reputation is on the line.
- **Spelling.** Use the spellchecker *and* a human eye to check spelling.
- **Tone.** Human communication is based upon body language, tone, and words. Take out the body language and the tone and all you have left are words. Don’t assume readers will understand humor or sarcasm. Your words will stand alone without inflection or the context normally available in conversation. Write in a friendly yet professional tone and clearly convey your meaning.

Email Etiquette and Format

Unlike business letter writing, email has unique variables and rules of etiquette that apply only to this media. Here are several tips:

- **Don't "shout."** Writing in all capital letters is considered "shouting" in email. Avoid it.
- **Don't share names.** When sending email to an entire list, it is poor business practice for recipients to view other recipients' addresses. Use the "BCC" (blind carbon copy) feature in your email program.
- **Think twice about HTML and graphics.** While it is tempting to put colorful graphics and HTML formatting in your email, not all recipients are set up to receive them. Sophisticated email campaigns allow the recipient to select how they want to receive the email. When in doubt, use plain text for universal acceptance.
- **Spare the emoticons.** Smiley faces, known in email jargon as "emoticons," are useful in conveying emotion in personal emails. However, avoid using emoticons in business emails. It is unprofessional.

The Body of the Email

Now that you have all of the background information about your email campaign, you are ready to write the actual email. The following tips will assist you in crafting a compelling, attention-getting, response-activating email.

- **Brevity.** Keep it short and to the point. Readers with short attention spans and a whole list of emails in line behind yours want the point and want it quickly. Grab them.
- **Single subject.** Focus on a single subject to keep the offer and the call to response as clear as possible.
- **Focus on the reader.** Don't focus solely on your company, your product, or your service. Focus on your reader, how you can meet their perceived needs, and how you want them to respond.
- **Value and benefits.** Again, the email is not all about your company. The email is about the value you are offering and the benefits to your reader. Compel them to action because you are meeting a legitimate need.
- **The call to action.** Clearly define how you want your reader to respond. Incorporate a deadline or a reward for speedy response to encourage immediate action.

Managing Results

Once your email campaign is underway, its effectiveness will be measured by the increase in inquiries about your offer. Sales are made or lost by how you manage incoming inquiries.

- **Communicate with your staff.** Nothing is worse than sending out an email campaign, having a potential customer respond with a phone call, and then dropping the ball with uninformed customer service. Be sure all customer service staff is aware of the content, timing, and details of the email and the offer.
- **Track correspondence.** Keep a record of all company correspondence and make it easily accessible, so that all parties can use the information in the selling process. Also track response rates to individual emails and campaigns for future reference.
- **Build internal knowledge.** As customers call with inquiries, build an internal knowledge base so that everyone can benefit from the answers. Your staff will respond more quickly and accurately to future inquiries.