



BEST-PRACTICE GUIDE:

Using email marketing to get your message across

4 cornerstones of email marketing

Don't spam

Bombarded by a constant stream of emails all day, every day, your customers and targets may be less tolerant of your efforts to communicate than you hope. Having formal permission to send someone an email says nothing about how they will react to that email or whether they will regard it as spam. Ignoring best practice risks alienating instead of engaging.

[See page 2](#)

Respect your list

It's not easy to build a database of people who genuinely want to hear from you. Respect the law in terms of who you add to your list but, more importantly, keep them on your list by finding out what they really want to hear about from you. Give recipients choices, track their behaviour and focus on what they respond to.

[See page 4](#)

Put substance over style

Eye-catching design is important but, as in all media, if design interferes with the reader's ability to grasp the message quickly then it's not good design no matter how much of a 'wow' factor it has. Good HTML emails are subject to more design constraints than print and our advice for a business audience is: keep it simple.

[See page 7](#)

Work your content

A marketing email or newsletter, even if not considered junk by the recipient, is not the sort of thing they are likely to hang onto if the content doesn't pique their interest at that precise moment. But priorities change. Find ways to keep the content live and make it available to recipients as and when they want it.

[See page 9](#)

It's still spam even if you don't realise it

Summary and top tips

You may not mean to spam and everything you do may be legal. But your emails may nevertheless be disregarded or junked by recipients or their spam filters. Be careful:

- Define spam as your recipients would
- Don't make assumptions about their behaviour
- Be selective about what you send and explain why you're sending it
- Keep your spam score low

21% of all respondents said they use the 'report spam' button to unsubscribe even though the email is not technically spam.

MarketingSherpa: Email Marketing Benchmark Guide 2008 (2008)

Who decides what spam is?

The companies we help with email campaigns are reputable businesses that wouldn't dream of spamming their customers or prospects. The same is no doubt true of you and your organisation. But what you view as spam may not be the same as what the recipients of your emails view as spam. And the simple truth is: if you're looking to be more successful with your email campaigns and newsletters, it's your recipients' views that count.

If you define spam narrowly, as 'unsolicited email', you may feel perfectly comfortable emailing anyone who has at some point agreed to receive communications from you.

Believe us when we say that the majority of your recipients don't define spam narrowly. Bombarded by a constant stream of emails all day, every day, they define spam as any kind of undesired email. It matters not one bit to them that they've agreed to receive an email from you; if they don't want it when it lands in their inbox, in their minds it will be associated with that negative label: spam.

Customers decide—and they can change their minds

People's interests and priorities change. You may sign up to receive information when looking to buy something and welcome the influx of emails. Post-purchase, the same emails just become annoying.

To suddenly call these emails spam might seem unfair and technically incorrect. But the label is unimportant. Do you want your company to annoy existing or potential customers, whatever the circumstances?

Many people won't take the trouble to unsubscribe; instead they'll use their junk/spam folder as a filter. If your emails no longer make it to the inbox you may as well not be sending them. Worse still, ISPs take note of email marked as spam by recipients and act accordingly: if it happens enough they may block you automatically.

How not to be annoying

So before you start crafting the killer message for your email, think about how to be sensitive to your recipients and their (changing) interests:

- Genuinely put yourself in the recipient's shoes. Think about the streams of email they're receiving. Will this piece of news, perhaps about your company's 25th anniversary, really be welcomed among everything else? If you can't think of at least one very good scenario in which this content is the answer to a customer's prayer, it may not be worth the risk of inciting them to unsubscribe.

- Be selective. You don't have to send every single piece of communication to everyone whose email address you have
- Ask people what kinds of communications they want to receive from you. Track their behaviour and adapt your communications accordingly.
- Be careful with purchased lists; avoid them if you can. Although they can be legal, many are not.
- Tell recipients how you've come to be contacting them: "You're receiving this email because you signed up for our monthly newsletter on 1 January 2010".
- Always include an unsubscribe link.

How to keep your spam score low

Many recipients will have more than one spam filter, maybe one on their email server and one in their email application. Every spam filter is different and many include algorithms that are literally changing their ratings from minute to minute. So it's difficult to stay ahead of the filtering process; but here's how to minimise your spam score:

- Avoid using, and certainly over-using, known high-spam-score words such as 'free', 'low-risk', 'click here', 'order now'.
- Avoid excessive use of CAPITALS and too much bold or red text.
- Don't over-use images; they increase your spam score. Some filters automatically block emails that are predominately image; some also check for flesh tones and block anything deemed possibly inappropriate.
- Use a tool—there are many online—to check the spam score of your email before sending.
- Include a plain-text version of your email; many people, including PDA and mobile users, prefer plain-text versions and it will lower your spam score.
- Don't send from your desktop email application (Outlook, Notes, etc.): they won't allow you to combine a plain-text version with your HTML message. Outlook is also particularly bad at adding unnecessary codes to your email that will trigger spam filters.
- Send your email via a reputable company and avoid blackhole lists (servers identified as sending a lot of spam and blocked by their DNS address).
- Implement one or more of the sender validation standards such as Sender Policy Framework (SPF) or Sender ID. Many email management tools employ these.

More than 80% of participants favour doing business with organisations that use opt-in permission to send them email.

Habeas (2008)

B2B subscribers are twice as likely to consider email 'spam' if it comes too frequently.

MarketingSherpa (2007)

Achieving strong inbox placement remains a challenge in the B-to-B sector with a delivered rate of just 75%.

Return Path: The Global Email Deliverability Benchmark Report, 2H 2009 (2010)

Your list is your number one asset, look after it

Summary and top tips

Treat your list as a valuable asset: respect the law and your recipients. Grow your list by giving people choices and responding to their wishes and actions:

- Create legally compliant processes; lip service isn't good enough
- Make it easy to opt in and invite others
- Give 'opt-down' options and respect people's choices
- Track and measure list growth and reader behaviour
- Focus on engaged readers
- Use a good list management tool

Marketers' average click rates are down 8.2% from last year and 18.2% from two years ago.

Epsilon Q3 2008 Email Trends and Benchmark (Jan 2009)

Quality over quantity

In email marketing your list is your most precious asset. Building a list is hard work, but it's worth it. The read rate for people you do business with can be very high, but don't jeopardise your hard work by sending irrelevant stuff or emailing too often. Building a list is hard; unsubscribing is easy.

The law: EU

The relevant legislation is The Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003, which came into force in December 2003.

Highlights:

- If you've had no prior commercial relationship with a person you'll have to obtain their permission—actively and knowledgeably given—to communicate with them by email.
- If you have an existing relationship you can send an email about the product or service the customer has purchased from you, or a similar one. 'Similar' is not defined, nor does it say for how long the implied permission lasts. We'd recommend that if you haven't emailed somebody for six months, and certainly after twelve months, you've lost the right to email them again.
- You must make it easy for recipients to unsubscribe from future communications. Opt-out requests must be processed promptly.
- Every email must clearly identify the organisation sending the message and provide a valid reply address. In the UK, emails must include the company's place of registration, registration number and registered office address.

The law: US

The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 became law in the US in January 2004. Unlike the European legislation this law takes an opt-out approach—you do not need to get explicit permission prior to emailing, but there are clear prescriptions on how you can do so.

Highlights:

- If an email recipient has not actively opted-in you must include a clear notice that the message is an advertisement or solicitation. Pre-checked boxes don't count as giving active consent.
- Every email must include an easy-to-use opt-out mechanism for at least 30 days following the despatch of the email. And you must process opt-out requests within ten days.

- You may not sell, exchange or otherwise transfer the email address of any recipient who has made an opt-out request.
- You must include a physical postal address in the body of your email—PO boxes are not adequate.

Opting in: make it easy

Your website, your email signatures, even your printed communications should all tell people where to go to sign up to receive communications from you. All emails should include a forward-to-a-colleague option.

When people do sign up, consider giving them something in return: for example, access to valuable content they couldn't otherwise get.

Opting down: give choices

Your list is much more valuable if your email recipients are receptive. Put another way, respecting your list means being willing to respect a choice not to be on that list. But if someone does want to unsubscribe, it might just be one type of email that's getting on their nerves. Rather than a blanket opt-in or -out, why not give them the option of choosing what they do and don't receive?

"More than 88% of respondents said they would like organisations to give them more choices over the content and frequency of the emails they receive."

Habeas (2008)

You could have an unsubscribe landing page (where those clicking on an unsubscribe link are sent) that offers tick-boxes for different categories of mailing. Not only can this make a difference to whether people 'walk away' completely or not, but if any common patterns emerge in the choices people make it can tell you what's working and what isn't.

If you do give choices, you'll need differentiated mailing lists and a process for managing them. It's no use letting someone specify that they want your newsletter only, if you can't (or don't) remove them from your mailing lists for everything else.

Opting out: ask why

On your unsubscribe landing page, give those unsubscribing the opportunity to tell you why. They may not do so but, if they do, it will give you valuable information about what people don't want to receive from you.

Tracking

Sustain and grow your list by understanding what people do want to receive from you. One way to do this is to track which emails are most read and, for emails linking to online newsletters, which articles are most read.

In an HTML email the usual method of tracking whether it's been opened is to embed a small (usually 1 pixel by 1 pixel) image. This is

Definitions

Opt-in list

Someone submits an email address (eg, on a webpage). This triggers an automatic email back to the submitted address. The email informs the recipient that they will start to receive the communications subscribed to unless they take action to prevent it; this ensures that anyone whose email has been submitted without their consent can take action to opt out.

Confirmed, closed-loop or double opt-in

An email address is given (eg, on a webpage). This triggers a confirmation email that requires the recipient to take an action to activate the opt-in, such as following a link or sending a reply.

Unconfirmed opt-in

An email address is given (eg, on a webpage) but no steps are taken to verify the address or the intent of the owner of the address to opt in. Malicious subscriptions are possible.

Opt out

The action of notifying the sender of an email that a recipient no longer wishes to receive that type of communication by email.

Open

A recorded open occurs when a recipient views your email, including in a preview pane. It does not necessarily mean that the email has been read. An actual open occurs when a recipient does open your email, but this may go unrecorded. Recorded opens are only a rough indicator of actual opens.

Click-through

A recipient follows a link in your email. To track this you need to use a redirect script.

Soft bounce

An email is temporarily undeliverable: the recipient's inbox may be full or there might be a routing problem. Most systems will retry soft bounces automatically. If they continue to be undelivered, they'll ultimately report a hard bounce.

Hard bounce

An email is undeliverable: the account has either expired, maybe because an employee has left, or it never existed. Remove hard bounces from your lists promptly or you could be flagged as a spammer.

MIME multipart message / plain-text MIME alternative

This is the technique for sending both plain-text and HTML versions of your email in a single message. It's essential good practice to give readers this choice. You cannot send MIME multipart messages from most desktop email applications such as Microsoft Outlook.

called a web beacon. Each time the recipient displays the email, the image is downloaded from the server and this can be tracked. This figure, however, can be skewed either upwards or downwards (or a bit of both) by two factors:

- If an email is displayed in the preview pane the image will be downloaded, but this doesn't mean it's been read. Your 'open' figures may be higher than is really the case.
- If, following best practice for email design, your email is perfectly readable with images switched off, recipients may read your email without ever downloading the web beacon, especially if they're reading it on a PDA or smartphone. If this happens your 'open' figures may be lower than is really the case.

As well as (roughly) tracking opens, you can track click-throughs from the email to your campaign microsite, online newsletter or other online destination. The usual method for this is to use a redirect script that registers the click in a database and then directs the browser to the target content. Many email tools have this functionality built in. They customise the link in every email so you can find out who clicked.

A good email management system will also help you manage bounces, send a plain-text version of your email along with the HTML version (for recipients using a PDA or smartphone to read your email) and much more.

Act on the results

Tracking is relatively simple, but if you don't act on the results it's wasted effort. At the very least, take note of the types of content that attract people and the types that don't. Use this information to adapt future communications. Focus on those who are interested in what you have to say and target them appropriately.

We also recommend using the results to cull your list. Of course you want to grow your list, but bigger isn't always better. For one thing, a list with a large proportion of unresponsive recipients can affect your chance of getting through at all: many email providers monitor for large mailings that get very few opens and flag them as spam.

Equally importantly, a smaller, more engaged list lets you measure the right things. A recent email that we sent for a client achieved over 2,000 click-throughs from just 3,000 addresses—a 66% response rate; but if we hadn't removed over 4,000 unresponsive addresses from this list over the last year, it would be more like 29%. The correct measure of success is not how fast your list is growing, but whether your response rate is keeping track with its growth. Of course we want those 3,000 addresses to become 6,000—but only if the click-throughs rise to 4,000 or more at the same time.

If culling your list makes you nervous, email unresponsive addresses first, asking them to confirm if they still want to receive the relevant mailing(s). If you don't hear from them, remove them from the list.

Three of every four respondents prefer engaging with organisations that exhibit strong privacy practices.

Habeas (2008)

15% of all marketers in the study were still using 'opt-out' registration tactics. 64% used a single opt-in tactic.

21% were employing double opt-in.

MarketingSherpa: Email Marketing Benchmark Guide 2008 (2008)

Style without substance is nothing

Summary and top tips

Effective design in HTML emails is subject to more constraints than in print. The best rule of thumb is to keep it simple:

- Avoid too many images
- Make sure the design works well with images switched off
- Always include a plain-text version
- Design with the preview pane in mind
- Don't let your designer use the latest web HTML developments
- Test your design in all the main email applications

One in five emails are invisible and ineffective due to blocked images.

Email Experience Council (2007)

Different medium, different rules

An attractive design may help your email get attention (certainly an unattractive design will put readers off). But you should be careful not to let print-focused ideas of attractiveness, which may be image-heavy, influence your design of emails, where different rules apply.

Firstly, too many images add to your spam score and may lead to your email being blocked. Is it really a good use of time and money to produce an email that is not even going to get to your target audience? If you do plan to use lots of images, encourage subscribers to put you in their 'whitelist' (list of approved senders).

Secondly, while some audiences expect elaborately designed emails—for example, music fans receiving emails from their favourite bands—business customers don't. It's common for people at work to scan emails quickly to assess if they're worth reading; an image-heavy design works against your message coming across quickly. If your email looks like junk mail rather than valuable information, it's more likely to be treated as junk mail.

The benefits of 'simple'

The trick is to get the balance right. 'Simple' can be very effective when it comes to emails. Recipients may not mind receiving more frequent communications if they can scan them quickly and decide whether to spend more time on them.

How many decision-makers catch up on work-related emails using a Blackberry or iPhone these days? Complex, image-heavy designs are wasted on them.

Also, more and more email programs are turning off images by default: recipients have to actively choose to turn images on. You should ensure that your design works well with images switched off; the simpler the design, the easier this is to achieve.

The preview pane

Most people's first impressions of your email will be formed in the preview pane: it's here they'll decide whether to read further. The preview pane may be horizontal/landscape or vertical/portrait (depending on the program and sometimes user preference).

Think about it: when recipients are deciding whether to open your email, the only part you can be certain they'll see is a square-ish area at top left. Top-right will be cut off in a narrow vertical preview pane; and a shallow horizontal pane will impose a 'fold' fairly high up the email.

That top-left area is your email's prime real estate. Don't waste it with a pretty but non-informative picture. Your company's logo, if it's likely to be recognised by the recipient, is more appropriate: it gives the email an identity and credibility as well as something visual to draw attention. If you can't rely on the pull of your logo

If they do read your email, recipients may do so by scrolling in the preview pane; you certainly can't assume they'll open it and maximise the screen. So keep your emails to 600 pixels wide; 800 pixels at most.

Test, test and test again

Different email programs use different HTML engines to display your mail, which may mean that different recipients see it differently.

The best way to ensure that your email displays well, whichever program your targets use, is to stay away from recent HTML coding developments that work on a website but are not well supported by all email applications. Use a designer who understands this. For example, they should know to avoid:

- Cascading style sheets (CSS). It's safer to use HTML tables for positioning; if you must use CSS, use 'inline CSS'.
- PNG image files. Many email programs don't support them; use GIF files for logos and JPEG files for photos.

Even if your design is simple, always test it in a variety of email applications. As an absolute minimum check Outlook 2007 (this will also cover you for Outlook 2010), Outlook 2003, Apple Mail, Lotus Notes 6.5, Gmail, Yahoo!Mail, Hotmail and the iPhone mail application. There are tools and online services that can automate this for you.

48% see pictures automatically (in HTML emails) while 52% do not.

Merkle Interactive Services (2009)

16% of mobile users' permission-based email is viewed on mobile devices: five points higher than last year.

Merkle Interactive Services (2009)

Image-based spam first hit 5-10% of all spam in March 2009 before skyrocketing to 15-22% in April

Computer World (2010)

Subscribers who receive promotional permission-based email estimate that they delete 55% without opening.

Merkle Interactive Services (2009)

Are you getting your message across?

Summary and top tips

In the end it's all about getting your message across in a way that reader's find interesting and relevant:

- For every article, ask yourself what's in it for the reader
- Make sure you have something to say: be careful with schedules
- Re-purpose existing content
- Have a clear call to action
- Make a good impression with the subject line
- Get your timing right

75% of respondents say lack of relevance is the biggest reasons subscribers choose to opt out, followed closely by sending too frequently (73%).

Merkle Interactive Services (2009)

Again: quality over quantity

We've said it before and we'll say it again: bombarding everybody with everything there is to say about your company is not a strategy for success in email marketing. Just because an email is easy to send, doesn't mean you should. Choose your messages and frequency of communication by putting yourself in your readers' shoes and responding to what their behaviour and choices are telling you.

Schedules

Be careful with rigid schedules. 'One campaign per quarter' may be a sound strategy, but if you put out a weak campaign just to stick to the schedule you may do more harm than good. Busy people have short memories; you're only as good as your last email campaign or newsletter. And once you lose a subscriber you can't contact them to try and change their mind.

If a regular schedule is important don't be over-ambitious in setting it. Many companies produce two or three good newsletters in quick succession and then run out of steam. Start small, even if you're thinking big; and don't feel you have to use every piece of content you have, all at once.

Repurpose existing content

Piggyback on existing ways of generating content. Most organisations create lots of content: sales win announcements, letters to customers, press releases, exhibition materials. Save yourself time and effort by harnessing these existing sources of content. When you're doing a case-study interview, think about a newsletter article too. Then use the newsletter article to generate interest in your case study.

Say that again

When you do have something worthwhile to say and you've got the right audience, don't be shy about saying it. You won't always hit a reader's interest the first time but, if they are the right audience and are engaged with your communication efforts, then a fresh spin on the message or a different medium at a later date might do the trick.

Maybe when you run your desktop services campaign in May it's not top of mind for a reader. But in August they're beginning to wonder about how to improve desktop services, so it's just as well you're running an article about it in your August newsletter. Related articles in future newsletters can refer back to the August article, with a link. Think about including a list of the most-read articles of the last six

months. Put an archive on your website to give readers an easy way to access previous articles. Does your company have an active twitter account? Use it to send links to new and old articles: those who've chosen to follow you on twitter want to hear from you; and a certain amount of repeat linking is acceptable there. Just don't do it so often that it becomes annoying.

Don't forget a clear call to action

After working so hard to get a reader interested, make sure you can follow through. Don't expect readers to work hard. It's amazing how many good emails don't give you somewhere to go.

And that applies to newsletters just as much as to invitations and sales messages.

Don't make readers search your site to find out more. Give them a link to a relevant page or a number to call.

Email subject line

The subject line is your first impression. Make it intriguing, but keep it factual, relevant and short. The general rule of thumb is to keep the subject line to 50 characters or less, although if you're targeting a very specific audience with a particularly relevant message, a longer subject line with good additional information may be appreciated. Avoid 'spammy' words and don't use too much punctuation.

Which would you be most likely to open?

DOWNLOAD FREE WHITEPAPER!!!

Or

ACME: the case for SOA in retail

Timing

There are hundreds of articles out there telling you the best time to send your emails. But differing timezones, work hours and personal habits make it impossible to specify some magical golden hour that will increase the number of people that read any given email.

The one generalisation that can be made is that emails sent during the height of summer and over the Christmas period are generally opened much less often. If you send out a monthly email, consider skipping the August (northern hemisphere) or January (southern hemisphere) edition and avoid late December/early January.

Instead of worrying about the day of the week or the time of the day, it's more useful to be prepared to react to significant events. You don't know when the next big data loss story will hit the headlines, or the next virus scare or natural disaster will put business continuity in sharp relief; but you know it will happen at some point. Think about the newsworthy stories that constitute a compelling event for your services and have something that's ready to be adapted and sent.

Making electronic newsletters work

An electronic newsletter is easy to distribute. That doesn't make it easy or fast to create; not if you want to produce something that people will actually read. Our advice is to:

- Form an editorial board and give it the power to say no.
- Publicise submission deadlines. Formalise the submission process and give yourself plenty of time to generate content and get it approved. A missed publishing date can have knock-on effects beyond just the one issue.
- Consider using themes. Traditional publications often have special issues (for example The Economist's Technology Quarterly)
- Consider having regular features that are flexible enough to carry a wide range of content: top five tips for X; Q&A with Y; industry news roundup; technology of the month.
- Use a variety of types of content: product, case studies, news, trends.
- Encourage readers to comment on your articles and suggest subjects for future pieces.

Emails with shorter subject lines significantly outperformed emails with longer subject lines.

MailerMailer (2008)

Conclusion

HN's four cornerstones

Whether you are trying to generate leads, create awareness or build stronger relationships, email marketing can be a powerful and extremely cost-effective tool. We hope that this guide has given you some useful information and will help you to make your future email campaigns more successful. Remember the four cornerstones and you'll be off to a good start:

- [Don't spam](#)
- [Respect your list](#)
- [Put substance over style](#)
- [Work your content](#)

Email marketing may look simple, but looks can be deceiving. Getting good results is considerably harder than just staying on the right side of the law and getting the HTML right.

You'll always be able to find surveys and studies that make authoritative statements about what does and doesn't work, but the truth is that you have to find your own sweet spot—finding just the right frequency of communications for your different audiences, combined with the style and content that piques their interest. What works in FMCG probably won't work in luxury goods, never mind business-to-business marketing.

There's no substitute for testing your own intuitions on your own audiences—and seeking professional advice.

The advice that we've given in this guide is based on our extensive experience of creating successful campaigns for a wide-range of companies—not just email design and content creation, but also helping them to define their strategy, integrating their online and offline activities, and leveraging social networking. But even with all our experience, we're always learning.

We hope that you've enjoyed the read and learned something that will help you make your future campaigns more successful. Visit our website to find out more about HN Marketing and check out our ['Worth a read'](#) section for more useful marketing information.

Useful links

Tools

- Mailchimp: an excellent managed service that we've found to be very powerful and exceptionally easy to use
www.mailchimp.com
- Campaign Monitor: another managed service
www.campaignmonitor.com
- Sender Score: a tool for checking how likely your organisation's emails are to be considered spam
www.senderscore.org

Marketing resources

- The Institute of Direct Marketing (IDM): offers courses and information for professionals involved in direct, data and digital marketing
www.theidm.com
- EmailStatCenter: a lot of marketing metrics brought together in one place
www.emailstatcenter.com

Technical resources

- The email standards project: working with designers and email application developers to create HTML email standards
www.email-standards.org
- Sender Policy Framework and Sender ID Framework are standards for minimising the risk that your email address can be hijacked by spammers or fraudsters
www.openspf.org
www.microsoft.com/mscorp/safety/technologies/senderid/overview.msp

The logo consists of the letters 'HN' in a blue, handwritten-style font, centered within a white rectangular box.

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