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SEVEN TRENDS THAT ARE CHANGING EMAIL MARKETING
(AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM)

Contents at a Glance

WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD OF EMAIL MARKETING

You may recall a couple of years back when some people augured the death of email. Social media, they said, was the game changer that would completely reshape how consumers communicate with each other and with brands. And with the proliferation of social media, they said, older technologies such as email would grow increasingly passé until they ultimately met their demise.

It doesn't take much to see that they were wrong. Well, mostly.

They were certainly wrong about the collapse of email. And if that isn't already apparent in your day-to-day as a marketer, it's certainly substantiated by the following reports:

- 92% of online adults use email—61% on a daily basis, according to Pew Internet Project research.

- Attitudes toward email marketing have improved, according to a Forrester Research study, which found that fewer consumers are deleting email marketing messages without reading them (59% in 2010 vs. 63% in 2008 vs. 73% in 2006).

- A whopping 74% of online adults prefer to receive corporate communications via email instead of social media, direct mail, text messaging, or phone, according to research by Merkle (PDF).

- Email and search marketing retain the greatest influence on consumers' online buying behaviors, according to a study by Forrester Research and GSI Commerce.

- 89.2% of marketing managers say email remains as important or more important to their overall marketing strategy compared with two years ago, according to an EmailVision study.

- For 2012, more business leaders plan to increase spend on email marketing than any other channel, according to a study by StrongMail and Zoomerang.

Still, those email doomsayers were accurate on one extremely crucial point: *Change is upon us*.

The growth of social and mobile technologies has created new ways of connecting, communicating, and learning. It has cleared the path to new experiences, new habits, new attitudes, and new assumptions. It has even helped spark a new consumer revolution. And though those things have not demolished email,

they have changed the environment in which email exists. To remain effective as email marketers, we, too, must adapt.

This report is designed to help you do just that. It highlights the implications of recent advancements and details the fundamental steps email marketers need to take to keep pace and continue generating positive returns.

1. MEET INBOX 3.0

In an attempt to assist their users with the massive influx, many email platforms are prioritizing messages based on how the user has interacted with similar messaging in the past and whether the sender has been added to the user's address book.

Email volumes are high and still climbing. On average, each inbox receives anywhere from 10 to 44 email messages per day, according to various studies by Return Path and ExactTarget, and retail email volumes continued to grow throughout 2011, reaching another all-time high on Cyber Monday 2011 according to Responsys data.

In addition to the increase in commercial messaging, many consumers are now receiving a plethora of social media alerts via email. Most social network users (63%) use the same email account for social network messages that they use for commercial list subscriptions, Merkle found (PDF). Meanwhile, heavy social media users tend to check email more often because of these alerts, Nielsen found. And although that suggests more opportunity to engage these users, it's also an indication that corporate marketing messages have descended yet another rung on the inbox attention ladder.

Web-based email service providers (ESPs) no longer treat all mail the same, either. In an attempt to assist their users with the massive influx, many email platforms are prioritizing messages based on how the user has interacted with similar messaging in the past and whether the sender has been added to the user's address book.

Some have also added advanced features. Hotmail, for example, provides newsletter filtering, a flagging system that pushes user-selected messages to the top of the inbox, and a tool called Instant Actions, which enables users to designate how incoming messages should be automatically categorized and filed. (And, yes, it includes a "mark as junk" option.)

Gmail, too, has launched a variety of priority inbox features, including SmartLabels, which automatically filter and categorize incoming mail, and personal level indicators, which let subscribers know which messages have been sent only to them or to their addresses specifically (i.e., not a mailing list). In fact, 81% of Gmail accounts analyzed by Return Path in 2011 had priority inbox enabled.

No wonder, then, that 14% of email sent to North American addresses (and 19% sent to email addresses globally) either goes straight to the junk folder or gets filtered into oblivion, Return Path found. Similarly, 20% of all permission-based messages sent to business email accounts never make it to the inbox.

Facilitate unsubscribes: It's much better for your reputation if recipients officially unsubscribe instead of heading straight for the "spam" button. Besides, interested email recipients generate higher open and engagement rates, and that's much more important than a monster-sized list.

Here's What to Do

Get your rep in order

Sender reputation is the main cause of ISP delivery issues, according to Return Path, so take appropriate steps to correct any smears to your name, maintain a clean list, and deliver on subscriber expectations.

Begin by understanding where you stand. Pay attention to your delivery rate, and use seed lists to get a better idea of your inbox placement rate. Check spam-filtering services such as Spamhaus to see whether you've been blacklisted anywhere. Also, sign up for ISP feedback loops and analyze any complaints to determine how to improve your approach.

Keep the Gmails of the world happy

It certainly helps to use a Web-based ESP with solid Internet service provider (ISP) relationships, but there are a few things you can also do on your own.

Start by reviewing the information most ISPs provide around their specific standards and anti-spam measures. You can also invest in a program like SuretyMail to become an accredited sender.

Avoid tactics that scream "Spam!" such as all-caps subject lines, recipients' addresses in "From" fields, or improper personalization.

Don't over-send, but also don't under-send: Emails sent to subscribers less than once per month generated the highest bounce rates, [MailerMailer found](#).

Work with your subscribers

Frequently remind recipients to add you to their address books and safe lists, and encourage subscriber feedback to help you keep tabs on how your program is perceived.

Facilitate unsubscribes

It's much better for your reputation if recipients officially unsubscribe instead of heading straight for the "spam" button. Besides, interested email recipients generate higher open and engagement rates, and that's much more important than a monster-sized list.

On your opt-out page, present subscribers with alternatives to opting our, such as receiving messages less frequently and pausing their subscriptions for a certain time period.

If you have subscribers who want out, make it easy for them by including an obvious unsubscribe link, preferably in the same spot of every email you send. On your opt-out page, present them with alternatives such as receiving messages less frequently and pausing their subscriptions for a certain time period.

But if they still choose to unsubscribe, don't mess around; immediately remove them as requested.

*Although most marketing campaigns tend to tuck the unsubscribe link in the message's footnotes, **Silverpop** places its on top, in the main navigation bar of its Digital Marketer newsletter. As a result, it's immediately visible without scrolling, and it serves as a reminder to subscribers that they are in control and that continuing to receive these messages is their choice.*

Just as with search, the emails that get the most notice and clicks are the ones that appear at or near the top when users check their inboxes— and mornings are often identified as the most popular time for people to log in.

Chris Penn also wants to make sure his newsletter's un-subscribe option is unmistakable to readers—and this loud graphic clearly gets his point across.

Time it right

With so much to contend with in the inbox (and we haven't even touched on the interactive applications such as preview snippets, chat, and text messaging that several providers, including Gmail, have integrated), the timing of your delivery becomes even more consequential.

Just as with search, the emails that get the most notice and clicks are the ones that appear at or near the top when users check their inboxes—and mornings are often identified as the most popular time for people to log in. Over 83% of global mobile workers check email before they get to work, with the 55+ age segment the most likely to wait until they're on the clock, according to the iPass Global Mobile Workforce Report. Moreover, most people open email between 7 AM and 10 AM, with a lesser peak in the early evening when everyone's gener-ally getting home from work, MailerMailer also found.

Also important to consider is how your subscribers access email (e.g., via desktop email client, webmail, mobile device). Webmail users, for example, may

be more apt to check personal email before heading to work, whereas desktop users may be monitoring their work accounts throughout the day.

The same applies for determining the best day to send email. Desktop client use is highest during the week, spiking on Wednesday, and then recording a dramatic drop-off over the weekend, Return Path found. Webmail use, on the other hand, is lower during the week and lowest on Wednesday, with more use recorded on Monday, Thursday and Friday, and a big uptick on Saturday and Sunday. Mobile email activity is relatively steady during the week, with increased activity beginning on Thursday into the weekend.

2. RELEVANCY IS VITAL

In an age of mass information, time constraints, and immediate gratification, the key lies in offering something truly relevant.

Timing, it turns out, isn't everything. Just because your messages arrive in the inbox during the hour they're most likely to be viewed doesn't mean subscribers are going to give them the time of day—unless you prove to them that they should.

In an age of mass information, time constraints, and immediate gratification, the key lies in offering something truly relevant—not just once, but each time you send an email. Such relevance not only improves campaign results such as opens and clicks but also fosters loyalty and trust and reduces unsubscribe rates and "spam" complaints.

Nearly one-half of consumers (46%) unsubscribe from email when they feel it isn't relevant to them, according to a study from the CMO Council and InfoPrint Solutions. In addition, 22% have quit purchasing from companies that send them irrelevant email, while another 41% would consider doing the same.

Here's what to do

Collect detailed preferences

In addition to asking for personal information during the opt-in process, enable subscribers to select the types of email communications they wish to receive. Available options can be organized by type of offering (promotional discounts, industry news, company updates, how-to's, etc.), or subject matter (topic/area of interest or industry/niche, etc.).

Also allow subscribers to choose the frequency of communications—for example, by offering weekly digests as well as daily emails.

Avalara breaks its email content out by type so that subscribers can opt -in to receive only the information that interests them.

Bright Cove allows its subscribers to self-identify based on whether they're interested in product-specific news and tips, partner resources, developer information, or corporate updates. An option to "Select All" is also highlighted at the bottom.

Subdivide your subscriber list in order to send highly targeted messages to each segment.

Segment your list

Subdivide your subscriber list in order to send highly targeted messages to each segment.

To determine the segmentation criteria, consider the attributes that affect the relevancy of your messaging: demographics and geography, industry, title or decision-making authority, expressed interests, stage in the purchase cycle, and behavior based on open and click data, on-site activity, purchase activity, etc.

Aim for 4-5 segments in total, and update then regularly to ensure that subscribers who take action, or those who progress through the sales cycle, continue to receive messaging that corresponds with their needs.

Make it dynamic

Save yourself some time by developing flexible email templates that allow you to dynamically populate each message with segment-appropriate content.

Hotwire greets the recipient by name and inserts different offers (or "picks") based on what that person last browsed on its site.

Fully 75% of brands that use automated, event-triggered, email marketing programs (also called lifecycle email marketing) say these campaigns generate better results than traditional blast campaigns.

Get trigger happy

Create trigger campaigns designed to get the right message in front of subscribers when it's most relevant to them.

Fully 75% of brands that use automated, event-triggered, email marketing programs (also called lifecycle email marketing) say these campaigns generate better results than traditional blast campaigns, including increased subscriber engagement (67%), increased campaign performance (55%), higher customer satisfaction and retention (54%), higher ROI (45%), and increased revenue (46%), according to a StrongMail survey.

Set up automated welcome and onboarding streams for new customers and subscribers; special greetings for holidays, customer anniversaries, and important life events; and instant autoresponder messages for confirmations, receipts, notices, reminders, and alerts.

Respond both to action and to inaction on the part of subscribers: Show appreciation to those who take action or otherwise convert, and remarket to those who don't.

Also establish segmented tracks that are triggered to deliver the specific information subscribers need as they enter each new stage of the sales cycle and customer lifecycle.

Fine-tune your timing

Marketing emails generate most of their opens and clicks within 24 hours of being sent, and 47% of resulting transactions occur during that same timeframe, according to research by Experian Marketing Services and CheetahMail.

Therefore, we need to get the right messaging in front of our subscribers immediately before they're most likely to act.

Get a sense of when you see the highest levels of customer engagement—not just with email, but through all channels, including social media, in store, etc.—and adjust your timing to precede those events.

Go long on subject lines

For years, we've been told that short subject lines get the best response, and that's true if we look at open activity.

Marketing emails generate most of their opens and clicks within 24 hours of being sent, and 47% of resulting transactions occur during that same timeframe. Therefore, we need to get the right messaging in front of our subscribers immediately before they're most likely to act.

A MailerMailer study, for example, finds that subject lines of 4-15 characters tend to generate the highest open rates—14.1% compared with 13% for 16-27-character subject lines, 12.9% for 28 -39-character subject lines, 11.6% for 40-50-character subject lines, and just 9.9% for anything over 50 characters.

But when we instead look at what really constitutes success—that is, clicks, conversions, sales—we see a drastically different picture. In MailerMailer's study, emails with subject lines 16-50 characters received more clicks than those with 4-15 characters.

More detailed and comprehensive work on the subject has been performed by Dela Quist of Alchemy Worx, who discusses the issue in his MarketingProfs seminar on subject lines.

According to Quist's findings, emails with short subject lines do generate the highest open rates, perhaps because they're more ambiguous and therefore arouse curiosity—but the higher the subject line's *word* count, the higher the click rate, likely because longer subject lines act as relevance filters and prequalify their audiences before the email is opened. Accordingly, he recommends going long and including multiple propositions in subject lines to appeal to different needs.

Quist also found that in the context of sales, email marketing has a very long tail: Around 25% of all sales are generated more than 20 days after an email is deployed. He therefore suggests omitting any references to dates or time-limited offers in subject-line copy.

Layer your messaging

Let's face it, most email marketing messages aren't opened, including those with highly relevant and well-crafted subject lines. Maybe the need for your products and services isn't pressing enough yet, or it's just not a good time right now.

Whatever the reason, there's a solid chance recipients will still browse your subject line and, consciously or subconsciously, make a mental note about your brand and its value in their lives.

By developing a tiered messaging strategy that takes advantage of that fact and builds relevancy, trust, and value with each successive touch, you can keep your brand "top of mind" and ensure that it's the first solution that comes to mind when the time *is* right.

Don't assume

Attitudes change, interests evolve, knowledge builds, and decisions get made. Regular testing is the only way to know whether you've got the right read on your audience and whether you are achieving optimal results.

3. SHARING IS CARING

Suddenly, our trusty little "forward to a friend" feature seems quaint. But that's a good thing. Social sharing is capable of reaching much larger and broader audiences while requiring minimal effort on the part of your subscribers.

Online peer-to-peer sharing has soared with the emergence of social media. Suddenly, our trusty little "forward to a friend" feature seems quaint. But that's a good thing. Social sharing is capable of reaching much larger and broader audiences while requiring minimal effort on the part of your subscribers.

Plus, fueling social sharing in relation to your content and brand can produce the ultimate form of relevancy among new and current audiences: *their friends' interests.*

Moreover, email messages that include a social media sharing option generate up to a 115% higher click-through rate than those without sharing options (5.6% vs. 2.6%), GetResponse has found.

Here's what to do

Add social-sharing buttons

Identify the social media channels where your subscribers share content and actively engage with each other. Find that information by surveying subscribers, searching the various networks and reviewing their demographics data, analyzing inbound traffic sources, and employing tools like RapLeaf.

Or, begin by implementing share buttons for the most popular networks—Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+—and any promising niche networks. Then, monitor sharing over time to understand which networks get the most action and offer the best conversion rates.

The Facebook sharing option is the most widely integrated, likely because Facebook is the largest social network and accounts for 56% of all content shared on the Web, according to a study by ShareThis, Starcom MediaVest Group, and Rubinson Partners.

GetResponse found, however, that emails containing the LinkedIn sharing button generate the highest click-through rate on average (9.6% vs. 5.4% for Facebook and 5% for Twitter)—making it particularly important for inclusion by B2B brands.

The networks, including the major four, offer code for adding their respective share buttons to email and website content:

- Facebook: Share and Like
- Twitter

Keep your "forward to a friend" feature intact. Companies report that email remains their subscribers' share mechanism of choice, particularly when the subject of the content being shared is more personal (e.g., personal finances, investments, health, etc.).

- LinkedIn
- Google+

In addition, several all-in-one sharing providers, such as ShareThis and AddThis, are available for adding a bundle of social-share options at once.

HubSpot gives its messages' share features prominent placement and graphic appeal, so they're sure to get noticed.

**Don't abandon tradition**

Keep your "forward to a friend" feature intact. Companies report that email remains their subscribers' share mechanism of choice, particularly when the subject of the content being shared is more personal (e.g., personal finances, investments, health, etc.).

The same might be said for niche topics that don't pertain to most friends in the subscriber's social network.

Don't be shy: Use clear calls to action that politely request that subscribers share your content with their networks. Consider offering incentives or running contests to increase the motivation to share.
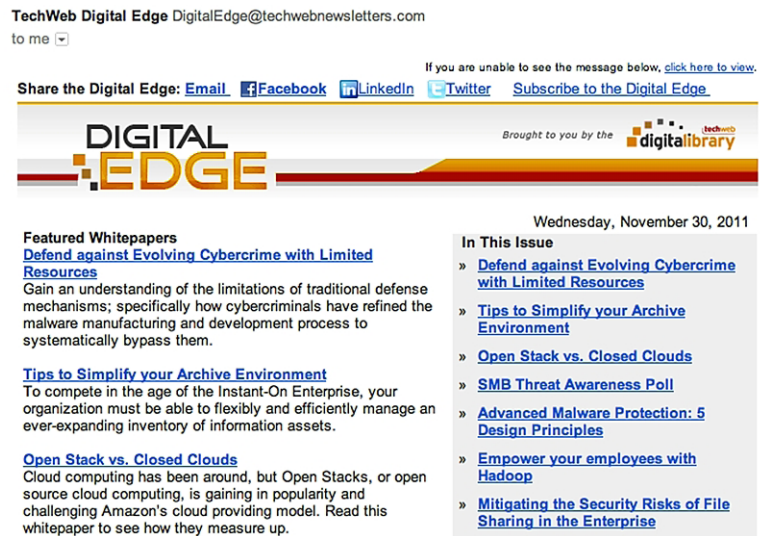
TechWeb puts its call to action "Share the Digital Edge" right on top, alongside options for sharing by email and social media.

Create share-worthy content

Go beyond relevant to create content that begs to be passed around. First, identify with whom your subscribers are most likely to share content and offers. Then, consider both your subscribers' motivations to share (e.g., being associated with thought leadership content, being first to know, getting people to laugh, helping family and friends, winning a prize, getting a better discount, etc.) and their audiences' motivations to consume (e.g., useful information, entertainment, savings, etc.).

Also, design your message to conform with the content formats that most appeal to these groups: for example, do they prefer video or audio, visuals such as infographics and charts, detailed articles, or quick snippets of tweetable text?

Keep track of which content generates the highest share rates, as well as which garners action and conversion among new audiences (i.e., your subscribers' contact networks), and use those insights to guide new content development.

Ask for it

Don't be shy: Use clear calls to action that politely request that subscribers share your content with their networks. Consider offering incentives or running contests to increase the motivation to share.

Nurture your advocates

Thank and recognize the subscribers who frequently share your content. Offer them a special incentive or gift; feature them in your content; and reach out to them to learn what you might do to inspire them more.

4. EXPECTATIONS HAVE EVOLVED

The rise of social media has brought down many of the barriers that once stood between brand and consumer—at least in consumers' minds. Internally, your business may look the same, but for consumers there is a new sense of entitlement.

If you've seen the movie "Meet the Parents," starring Ben Stiller and Robert DeNiro, then you'll remember Greg Focker's formidable and often hilarious quest to win acceptance from his father-in-law-to-be and earn a place in the man's precious "circle of trust." In many ways, your quest is the same—because that's exactly where you want to be: in each subscriber's "inner circle."

Merkle defines the "inner circle" as "a measure of the number of companies sending email which is regularly read by recipients." Achieve such status, and the chances of your email being opened and read rise significantly: 49% of online consumers say they "always" open emails from their "favorite" companies, compared with 16% who say they never open those emails, ExactTarget's Email X-Factor study found.

But there's a heck of a lot more to it than that.

The rise of social media has brought down many of the barriers that once stood between brand and consumer—at least in consumers' minds. Internally, your business may look the same, but for consumers there is a new sense of entitlement, an expectation of being able to directly interact with your organization in any way they choose and of receiving not only personalized one-to-one service but also all-around outstanding brand experiences at every juncture.

Fail to deliver on that, and you'll find yourself at the mercy of the people, because they are the ones who now control your brand's image and fate.

All that collateral and messaging you've strategically developed over the years is now largely overshadowed by a multifaceted symposium contributed to by anyone and everyone who wishes to voice an opinion. It's powered by Yelp reviews, Tweets, blog posts, and Facebook comments from friends, friends' friends, online trolls, hyper-venters, and, if you're lucky, satisfied customers.

To survive, we must not only recognize these changes but also embrace them and kowtow to them in an ongoing attempt to steer public sentiment in our favor. Content marketing and SEO constitute the core of your battle plan, but all corporate programs should now champion this cause; and because of its one-to-one nature, email marketing needs to do more than aptly support.

We've already covered how email can effectively promote peer sharing and provide search-optimized content for circulation, but email should also be used to spearhead brand affinity and relationship-building efforts in order to grease those engines and drive even more advantageous forms of advocacy.

Take an authentic, human-to-human approach; use a conversational tone; and don't be afraid to give your messaging a healthy dose of personality.

Here's what to do

Put on your service cap

Build affinity for your brand and develop trust-based relationships by placing greater emphasis on email offers designed to educate, assist, entertain, and engage.

Change out some of those direct sales campaigns for content that's of interest, such as free whitepaper downloads, special reports, behind-the-scenes videos, contests and sweepstakes, and subscriber-generated content.

Be relatable

Take an authentic, human-to-human approach; use a conversational tone; and don't be afraid to give your messaging a healthy dose of personality. As explained by Gary Levitt in a MarketingProfs article:

> *Be you. The best brands—much like the best people—have an identity, a voice, idiosyncrasies, and unpredictable quirks. That is the stuff of relationships, the brand glue that turns customers into friends.*
>
> *Think about the emails you read most—your priority emails. They're from friends, family members, and co-workers: emails packed with quirks and typos and life, but always relevant and real. Relationships are what dominate real email communication. To become a priority, you have to be human, not a watered-down, mass-oriented chunk of supposed perfection.*
>
> *I'm not suggesting you sprinkle in some "mood" or typos (very bad idea), but do let your guard down a bit. The play-it-safe tone of boardroom presentations has no place in your email. It's the one-on-one candid stuff that happens behind closed doors that perks readers up.*
>
> *Let them see the fire and passion you have for your brand, products, and services. Take chances, be real, and you'll increase the odds of being read, liked, and trusted.*

Get the conversation immediately started with new subscribers in a friendly way by deploying welcome and onboarding campaigns designed to get them introduced and excited about the new relationship.

Get personal

You practice certain common courtesies among friends: You know and call them by name, you remember what went on the last time you spoke or hung out, and you don't treat them like a number or a tool. The same applies here.

Incorporate personal references such as name, title, employer, industry, city, school, etc. into your body copy. Dong so generates higher click-through rates than nonpersonalized content, MailerMailer found.

Take caution when personalizing your subject line, however; that produces much lower open and click-through rates than nonpersonalized content, likely due to spammers' overuse of this tactic.

Also employ dynamic content and recommendation engines to personalize email content according to recipients' subscription preferences, past purchases, and demographic information.

Automate with care

Ensure that the data you're pulling from to personalize email messages is completely up to date and accurate. Also try to ensure that your personalization elements aren't obvious to recipients (e.g., match font size and type to surrounding content).

Offer a warm welcome

What do you do when friends stop by? You welcome them in, of course! And, hopefully, without a hard-sell that they try your homemade spinach-infused fruitcake.

Get the conversation immediately started with new subscribers in a friendly way by deploying welcome and onboarding campaigns designed to get them introduced and excited about the new relationship.

Use those campaigns to establish expectations around message content and frequency, remind them of the value these communications will offer, and let them know that their opt-in preferences can be adjusted at any time.

What do you do when friends stop by? You welcome them in, of course! And, hopefully, without a hard-sell that they try your homemade spinach-infused fruitcake.

Radian6's welcome message resembles a quick note from a friend. In a relaxed, conversational tone, it lets subscribers know what to expect and reminds them to add the company to their approved-senders lists. It also aims to immediately deepen the relationship with subscribers by directing them to helpful resources and inviting them to connect on social media sites.

Make a habit of thanking subscribers regularly, and personally, without pushing a sale or asking anything in return.

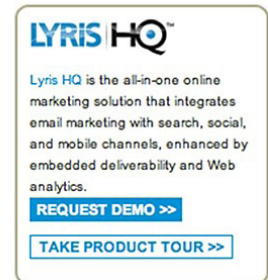*Lyris* welcomes subscribers by name and thanks them with a complimentary downloadable guide. It also offers a sense of control through a quick list of links for accessing different newsletter issues, making suggestions, and updating their subscriber profiles.

Mind your manners

Make a habit of thanking subscribers regularly, and personally, without pushing a sale or asking anything in return. Consider special incentives or gifts for those who prove their loyalties year after year.
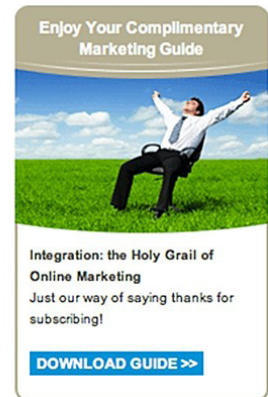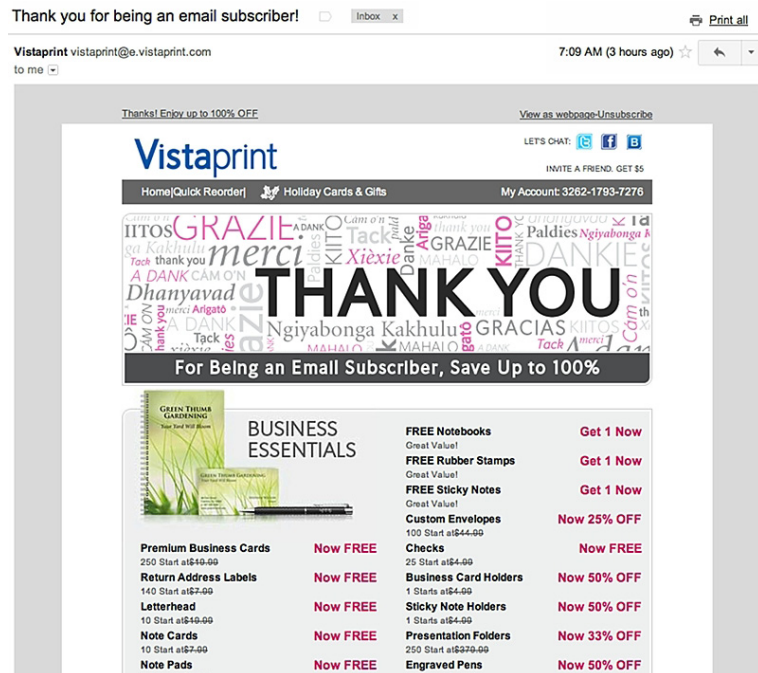
Personalized email campaigns that acknowledge recipients' birthdays or anniversaries generate open rates that are three times higher than standard bulk campaigns on average and transaction rates that are five to six times higher.

Vistaprint says "thank you" in all sorts of ways—not the least of which is offering subscribers an array of freebies.

Celebrate special dates

Be the friend who remembers and cares, and you'll enjoy the bounties that come with being a well-wisher.

Personalized email campaigns that acknowledge recipients' birthdays or anniversaries generate open rates that are three times higher than standard bulk campaigns on average and transaction rates that are five to six times higher, according to Experian CheetahMail research. They also bring in at least double the revenue of standard bulk campaigns, so be sure to add these types of events to your lifecycle program.

If you plan to include a special promotion in these messages, go with "dollars off" offers, which tend to be more successful and garner more revenue per email than those offering free shipping or "percent-off" promotions, the same study found.

Don't come on too strong

Relationships become unbalanced when one party pushes too hard and over-whelms the other with too many expectations or requests. Keep your subscriber

Survey your list, then prioritize your messages in line with subscribers' preferred frequency so that you can achieve key business goals and your subscribers can receive what is most relevant to them without feeling inundated.

relations alive and well by managing message frequency and assuring your communications don't resemble a broken record.

"The Social Break-Up" report from ExactTarget and CoTweet found that 54% of consumers unsubscribe when they receive too many emails from a brand, and 49% do so when they feel the company's email content has become too repetitive or boring. The preferred frequency, according to MarketLive and the e-tailing group (PDF), is once per week (39% of respondents), followed by twice per month (18%).

Survey your list, then prioritize your messages in line with subscribers' preferred frequency so that you can achieve key business goals and your subscribers can receive what is most relevant to them without feeling inundated.

Set clear expectations for new subscribers, and always re-establish those expectations before increasing email volumes.

Recognize when it's time to move on

Aim to keep the relationship alive with win-back, cart-abandonment, and reactivation campaigns that target inactive subscribers and make it clear how much you appreciate them. Push the option to change frequency preferences before users unsubscribe, and let them know they're in control. But also set limits and take a hint when subscribers repeatedly don't respond.

Send a final request for permission to keep emailing, detail the steps the recipient needs to take to continue hearing from you, and include your best offer in a prominent call to action. If that doesn't work, call it a day; remove the subscriber from your list. Better to relish what was than become a nuisance—or, worse yet, "spam."

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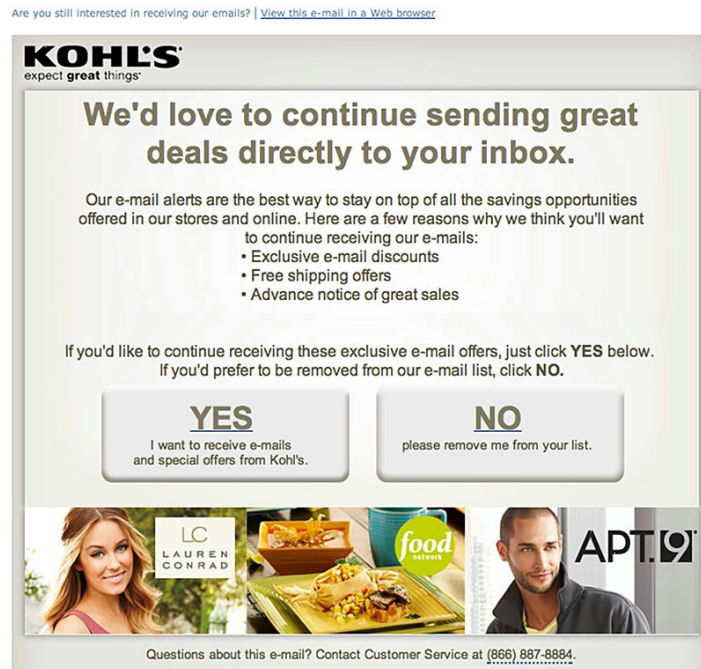
Kohl's sends a series of three requests to perpetual nonre-sponders. The email body and call-to-action buttons remain the same in each, but the subject lines and headlines are varied. The first message inquires, "Do you still want to hear from us?" and continues with the headline "We'd love to continue sending great deals directly to your inbox." The second implores, "Is this goodbye? Please let us know" while the headline reads, "We'd love for you to reconnect with Kohl's." Finally, the subject line of the third message cautions subscribers "Reply Needed: Don't Let This Be Goodbye!" and a large-font headline warns, "Don't miss out!"

5. FLASH IS HOT!

Motivating customers via a strong sense of urgency may be nothing new, but flash sales take that approach to a level that requires special planning to pull off.

It's a deals economy, and consumers are lining up—and signing up—for savings. When asked what factors motivate them to give a company or organization their email address, 67% of online consumers cite discounts and promotions, followed by freebies (55%) and updates on upcoming sales (50%), according to the Email X-Factors study by ExactTarget and CoTweet.

But we're not the first to tell you this, just like you won't be the first to act on this information. Sales are big business these days, with 89% of top 500 retailers and 70% of other retailers hyping sales or discounts in their email messaging, according to Silverpop's 2011 Top 500 Retailers study (PDF), which also found that 69% of those top retailers include sales or discounts in 75% or more of their email communications and 35% do so in every mailing.

So how to stand out from the pack and motivate your audience to act right now on your email instead of all those?

How about with flash? No, not that Adobe technology that's falling by the wayside, but flash *sales*, the today-only, first-come-first-served, act-fast-or-you'll-miss-out frenzy that's sweeping the nation.

Nearly six in ten businesses (56%) have higher click-to-open rates on their flash sale emails compared with yearly click-to open averages, and flash sale email campaigns generate some 35% higher transaction rates than standard bulk campaigns to the same clients (0.11% vs. 0.08%), according to an Experian CheetahMail study of email campaigns.

Motivating customers via a strong sense of urgency may be nothing new, but flash sales take that approach to a level that requires special planning to pull off.

Here's what to do

Get limited

Set a time span that is short enough to trigger immediate, intense action—but still affords just enough response time for people who don't incessantly live in their inboxes. Experian CheetahMail's research found that two-hour flash sale emails produce the best click-to-open rates, but three-hour sales bring in the highest transaction rates.

Your flash sale becomes all the more tantalizing when buyers know they're getting a special invite that can't be had by all. Plus, an exclusive approach can help grow your list.

Time it right

Figure out when your audience is most likely to check email and when they are most likely to make time to buy, and schedule both your flash sale and related mailing accordingly.

In Experian CheetahMail's experience, flash sale email campaigns sent after 3:00 PM ALT (Audience Local Time) produced 9% higher open rates, 33% higher click rates, about 23% higher transaction rates, and almost 30% more revenue per email than those sent at lunchtime. But your audience might be more of a morning crowd, so always research and test to determine what will work best for your flash campaigns.

Also make it easier on your subscribers, and you, by giving your sales a sense of regularity (e.g., same day and time every week or month) so that subscribers know when to check for your email alerts.

Be exclusive

Your sale becomes all the more tantalizing when buyers know they're getting a special invite that can't be had by all. Plus, an exclusive approach can help grow your list: Many subscribers expect to feel part of a special "club" that receives member-only perks when they join a company's list, and one-third of consumers say that's what motivates them to subscribe in the first place, a study by ExactTarget and CoTweet (PDF) found.

Get two things across in your subject line

Those first 50 characters need to instantly make it clear that the sale is "exclusive" and a time-limited offer. Yes, in this case, you definitely want to make that deadline explicit—because that produces the quickest response, Experian CheetahMail found. It also found that including the word "exclusive" in the subject line of a flash sale email increases unique open rates 14%.

Go all out

In a sense, you're directly competing with Groupon, LivingSocial, Fab.com, and their myriad challengers, so your offer needs to stand up to their deep discounts. For best results, Experian CheetahMail suggests, make a strong offer and provide a selection of desirable products.

In a sense, you're directly competing with Groupon, LivingSocial, Fab.com, and their myriad challengers, so your offer needs to stand up to their deep discounts.

Red Envelope alerted its subscribers to a special 24-hour-only sale with the subject line: "Clock's ticking...flash sale ends soon"

6. DESKTOPS ARE THE NEW DODO

With smartphone sales continuing in high-growth mode, and the tablet market still only in its infancy, it won't be too long before mobile usage matches desktop usage.

Popular as they are, flash sales have nothing on the mobile movement. People love their smartphones and tablets, not in small part because of the portable interactive access these devices provide.

Some 55% of internet-enabled mobile phone owners use these devices to check personal email, according to Merkle (PDF), and a high 85% of corporate professionals use their mobile phones and tablets on a daily basis to access business email, according to the Radicati Group.

And usage continues to grow. From Q4 2010 to Q2 2011, Knotice recorded (PDF) a 51% increase in the share of emails being opened on mobile devices: from 13.36% to 20.24%. Similarly, Return Path reported an 80% lift in mobile-based email viewing between October 2010 (9%) and March 2011 (15%), then another big jump to 23% by September 2011.

With smartphone sales continuing in high-growth mode, and the tablet market still only in its infancy, it won't be too long before mobile usage matches desktop usage.

Even now, mobile email users are not a segment to ignore. Merkle calls them "hyper email checkers" because 43% check email a minimum of four times per day and 63% check email on their mobile devices at least once a day (compared with 29% of those who don't yet access email via mobile device).

In addition, 56% of US consumers who have made at least one purchase using their smartphone have done so in response to a marketing message delivered via mobile email, according to an ExactTarget survey.

Here's what to do

Understand subscriber usage

Different platforms offer marketers distinct advantages. Apple devices, for example, continue to outperform the competition in mobile email opens, accounting for 16.7% (12.78% for iPhone and 3.92% for iPad) of all email opens and 82.5% of all mobile-based email opens during the first half of 2011, according to Knotice research (PDF).

The same report, however, found that click-through rates on mobile-viewed emails are higher among Android device users across all industry segments: 19.49% vs. 7.75% for iPhone and 11.18% for iPad.

It's best to collect usage data specific to your subscriber base, and then prioritize and customize your mobile-optimized designs according to the specs for the devices they use most.

So where to start? It's best to collect usage data specific to your subscriber base, and then prioritize and customize your mobile-optimized designs according to the specs for the devices they use most.

Tools for gathering this information include Litmus, Pivotal Veracity, PercentMobile, admob, and Bango. You can also survey your subscribers directly or make a point of asking during the opt-in process. Additional intelligence can be gleaned by monitoring mobile-version link traffic and website metrics.

Mobile optimize your design

Knotice research also found that the click-to-open ratio for mobile email activity is drastically lower than that of desktop email activity across most industry segments—likely a result of poor user experiences due to non-optimized content.

Use the following tips to make your email mobile-user friendly and improve your mobile click-through rates:

- Limit your file size to 20Kb to work with slower connection speeds. Implement a single column design and scalable layouts, fonts, and images so that your emails render well on different screen sizes.

- Use large fonts (Apple recommends 17-22 pts), and select colors and backgrounds that create contrast and can be easily viewed on the mobile screen under all types of light.

- Shorten copy as much as possible. The average mobile page measures 320x280 pixels or 480x142 pixels (including the display of To, From, and Subject line information); also ensure that all key messaging elements, including the call to action button, are positioned above that fold.

- Design for finger navigation, and make buttons and other tappable elements at least 44x44 points in size so that they're easy to click.

- Before sending, check to see how the design will appear on various mobile screens by having everyone on your team get out their phones, or by using preview tools such as Litmus, Pivotal Veracity, Return Path, PreviewMyEmail, EmailonAcid, DeviceAnywhere, Keynote MDPI, iBBDemo, iPhoneTester, TestiPhone and iPhoney.

Highlight click-to-call, store-locator, and other interactive elements that help mobile users act quickly to get the information they need on the go.

Accentuate special features

Highlight click-to-call, store-locator, and other interactive elements that help mobile users act quickly to get the information they need on the go.

Inform subscribers

Use the pre-header space to link to and let mobile users know there's an alternate version for them to view. Check out the following examples for ideas.
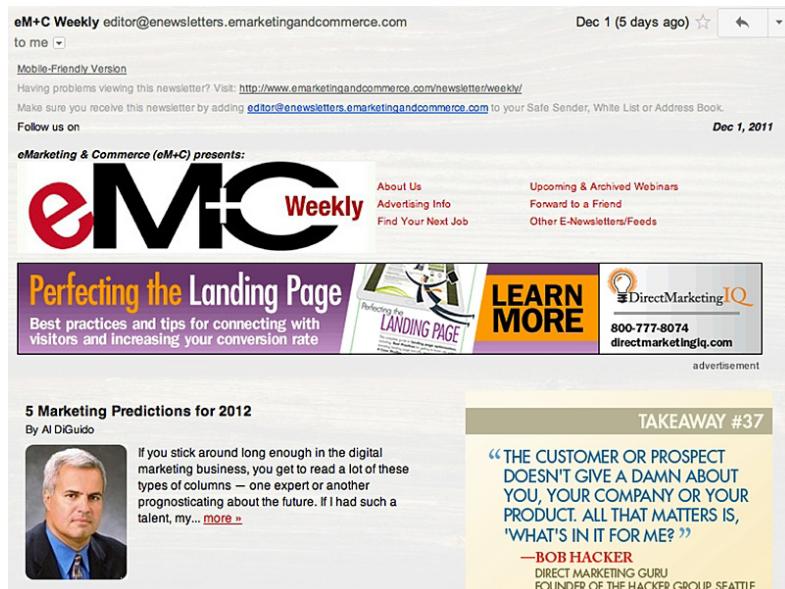
eM+C places its "Mobile-Friendly Version" link at the very top of the message so that it's easy to find, appearing as it does directly after the subject line.

Send mobile email traffic to a custom-designed, mobile-optimized webpage that has the same offer, messaging, and design as the email it accompanies.
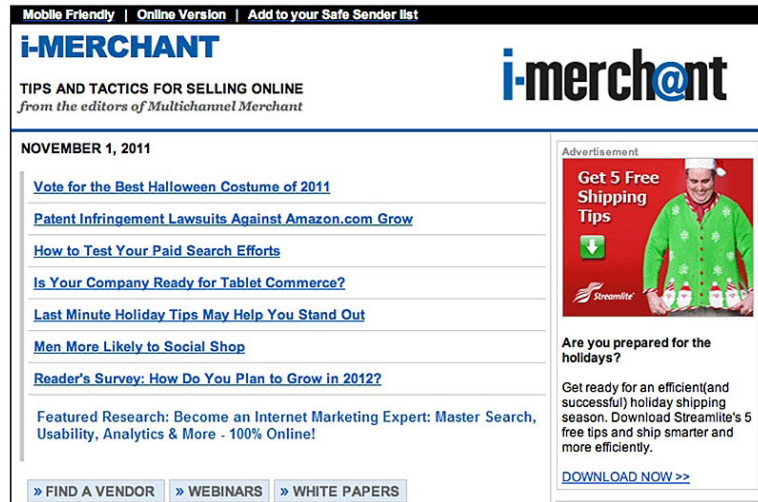
iMerchant uses reverse type (white text on a black background) to help its mobile link stand out above the message headline.

Don't forget the landing page

Send mobile email traffic to a custom-designed, mobile-optimized webpage that has the same offer, messaging, and design as the email it accompanies. Use the same optimization tips discussed above.

Also, avoid using Adobe Flash (HTML5 and JavaScript are better substitutes), consider using video in place of long blocks of text or large image files, and include a minimum number of fields when incorporating an on-page form.

7. SECURITY IS JOB ONE

Clearly communicate during opt-in and onboarding processes exactly how personal data will be collected, used, and shared. Also include a link to your privacy policy in every communication.

Hackers and spammers and beacons, oh my! Although a Nigerian money-transfer request may no longer be cause for alarm, we can't ignore the recurrent reminders of online phishing attacks, exposed customer data, and myriad privacy issues that play into the decision to share personal information and engage with brands online.

And though in this report we've covered various best-practices for evolving your email marketing program, none of that will matter one bit if your subscribers don't trust you to "protect and serve" their interests.

Nobody's expecting that you'll don a cape, fight crime, and make the Internet a safer place for us all, but here are a few steps you can take to ease nagging concerns, instill confidence, and earn the ethical seal of approval.

Here's what to do

Tell them what's up

Clearly communicate during opt-in and onboarding processes exactly how personal data will be collected, used, and shared. Also include a link to your privacy policy in every communication.

Prove you can keep a secret

Do everything you can to keep customer data safe. Security measures should include establishing a clear policy around where sensitive information should be stored, how it can be accessed, and who can access it.

Don't assume that non-sensitive customer information is fair game. Facebook's Sponsored Ads, which are under fire for including users' images and information without their consent, as well as its failed Beacon experiment, which broadcast users' purchasing activities on sites that had partnered with the program, are recent reminders that privacy needs often go well beyond personal-identification and financial data.

Always gauge what customers would feel is appropriate before you share information about them with partners, customers, other subscribers, and social media fans and followers. When in doubt, ask for permission.

Look the part

Create professional-looking email designs, thoroughly proofread and test all links ahead of time, use a recognizable name in the "From" field, and avoid spammy-looking subject lines (e.g., FREE!!!!!!) to affirm the legitimacy of your communications.

Follow through on your promises

Demonstrate that you're worthy of your subscribers' patronage and trust by always taking the high road and consistently meeting the expectations you've established.

CONCLUSION

Subscribers just want to feel the love and know that the brands they love have their interests at heart.

Not so hard, right? Subscribers just want to feel the love and know that the brands they love have their interests at heart.

Build that bond and effectively maintain it, and you'll be rewarded with more clicks and conversions, higher ROI, lasting customer loyalties, and the holy grail of marketing—customer advocacy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Smith is a MarketingProfs Staff Writer and author of several MarketingProfs reports, including *Influencer Marketing Success Stories* and *Content Machine: The Street Guide to Building a Successful Content Marketing Program in 7 Weeks*. She has also written numerous case studies and actionable marketing articles available on our site. Kim can be reached via kims@marketingprofs.com or on Twitter at @ks_wordsmith.

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