

It's all in the wording

A guide to optimizing your email subject lines



An Experian CheetahMail white paper

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Introduction

There are many techniques brands employ to capture a subscriber's attention and initiate a conversation. Whether it is using the perfect imagery with the catchiest headline or precision targeting to a specific audience, every detail can be carefully orchestrated to entice a subscriber to engage with an email message. However, before a subscriber can explore the content of the email, there is one vital step that must be taken. He or she must decide to open the email. Hence, the subject line, which is often thought of as just a simple phrase, becomes a crucial component of email strategy.

From the moment an email is sent to a subscriber's inbox, it occupies space with numerous other emails and looks, at a glance, the same as its neighbors. Each email contains a subject line with a simple sentence or phrase from a sender. While it is important to craft a subject line that matches your brand, what makes an email worthy of opening? Is it an offer the subscriber just can't turn down or an intriguing remark that sparks curiosity?

There are a handful of ways to approach writing a subject line that will capture the attention of a given audience. Experian® CheetahMail® has defined these techniques and has classified them into four different categories. We've used this research to organize and study more than 1,000 promotional mailing subject lines.

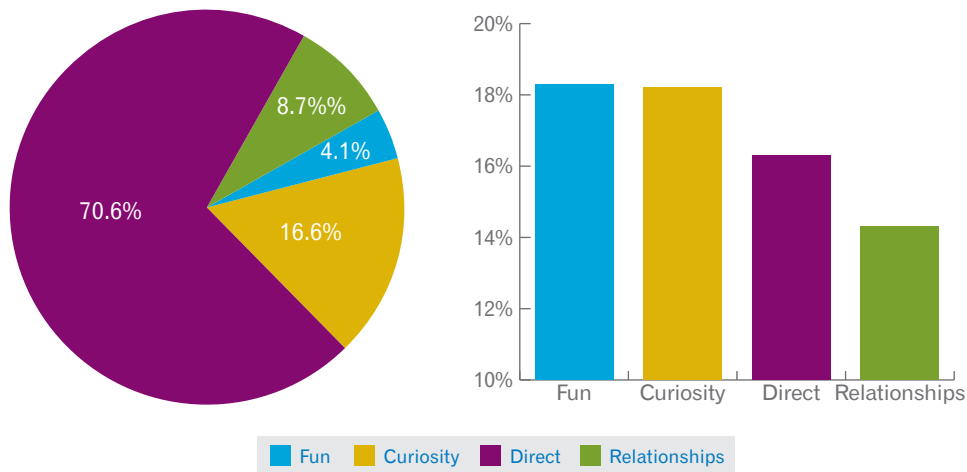
The four main categories are:

- **Fun:** Humor, puns, plays on words and provocative language are used to surprise subscribers and keep them reading.
- **Curiosity:** Questions, riddles and unfinished thoughts evoke a sense of mystery, causing the subscriber to want to read more.
- **Direct:** Clear and to the point, Direct messages use urgency, succinctness, promotions and price incentives.
- **Relationships:** Subject lines help subscribers identify with the products by their association with some group or special interest. These can include social media, special events, member newsletters or group buying sites.

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Which category works best?

Direct messages make up 71 percent of subject lines
... but Fun and Curiosity have higher unique open rates



Fun and **curiosity** have the highest unique open rates and definitely are good choices for sparking subscribers' interest. However, they can lose some of their appeal if used all the time.

Direct messages play a key role in informing subscribers about offers, deadlines and special products. While the unique open rates for Direct messages are lower than those seen in the Fun and Curiosity categories, in multiple past studies we have seen that offers and time limits can provide a boost in transaction rates. A 21 percent increase in transaction rates was noted for offers in subject lines in our holiday reporting and subject line analysis in 2011. **Relationships** subject lines allow subscribers to relate and connect to products and topics that enhance their identification with the brand and further define their overall experience. These relationships can bridge marketing channels and give subscribers a chance to interact with the brand online, on social media sites, through loyalty benefits and through special events.

To optimize response, a well-balanced email program will incorporate all of these categories, as well as incorporate continual subject line testing.

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A closer look at each category will provide ideas on how you can write the best subject lines.

Fun

In certain cases, formal language doesn't grab the subscriber's eye and he or she will not give sufficient time and attention to the subject line or its partner email. Stiff language may not convey enough excitement about the offer at hand and that may directly affect open rates. Adding personality to subject lines and making them "fun" can be done by using humor, puns, plays on words and provocative language that surprises subscribers and keeps them interested in reading more. Conversational language also appeals to customers because they feel like they are talking to a friend.

Puns

- **Example:** Travel to Ireland and feel like you're walking on Eire
- **Explanation:** A pun such as this, where "Eire" takes the place of "air," provides information about the destination while cleverly convincing subscribers that they should vacation there. Not only will subscribers be inspired to open the email and learn more, but they also will be locked in to the message after appreciating the pun. Using humor in subject lines can be risky if it is not done in an appropriate context.

Plays on words

- **Example:** More boat for your buck
- **Explanation:** In the same way puns make the email more interesting from the very beginning, using plays on words such as "More boat for your buck" in place of "More bang for your buck" also draws the subscriber's attention. It is a creative way of presenting the contents of the email; it also shows that the subject line was carefully crafted to make it stand out as much as possible. When subscribers read the play on words in the subject line, they dedicate more time to deciphering it. Therefore, the line and the email will make a lasting impression.

Provocative

- **Example:** What does your wife really want?
- **Explanation:** This type of subject line, like many that are formatted as questions, piques subscribers' curiosity, making it almost impossible for them to resist opening the email. In this case, subscribers want to know the context of the question as well as what product might be offered. This sort of subject line may be used as a Valentine's Day or a birthday email with gift offers and discounts.

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Tips for writing Fun subject lines:

- Topics such as travel and leisure are good opportunities to use a comical approach to attract subscribers and allow them to get a sample of the fun they could be having.
- A provocative subject line will challenge the status quo, encourage subscribers to look at something differently, stir interest or opinions, and make consumers want more.

Curiosity

Curiosity is a popular subject line wording theme that is used to tempt the subscriber into reading more. There are many different ways to evoke curiosity in your target audience, but all can be categorized by five simple tactics: question, riddle, unfinished thought, indirect language and intrigue.

Question

- **Example:** Are you getting the most out of your Internet service?
- **Explanation:** This is a basic curiosity tactic. The question is simple, yet it makes recipients scrutinize their Internet service. It appeals to their curiosity because they'll want to know whether they really are getting the most out of their Internet service or if someone has something better to offer. Questions can be applied in many forms, but the more simple the question, the more direct an answer that can be given within the email.

Riddle

- **Example:** What's red, blue and waiting for you?
- **Explanation:** A riddle makes the reader want to guess at the email's content. There are a multitude of items that can be the subject of this email, so it will keep the subscriber wondering what the email is about, especially if personalization is involved (referring to "you" or a name). Using a riddle as a subject line can raise more questions, which therefore renders the promotion more efficient and effective: What could be waiting for me? What is red and blue? Do I need it? Is it clothing? Electronics? Holiday-related? How much is it?

Unfinished thought

- **Example:** What if you could....
- **Explanation:** This tactic can work in a few different ways. The subject line can go hand in hand with a headline. If the headline for this was "Have the world at your fingertips" and was promoting a new smartphone, then the thought is finished once the email is open. On the other hand, an unfinished thought can

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be finished by the entire email, not just specific words. Conveying the message in words is simple, but relating your subject line message to pictures is also possible and can even be considered fun.

Indirect language

- **Example:** Saving you money and time
- **Explanation:** Using indirect language to evoke curiosity refers to an instance when a subject line gives you only a small glimpse of the whole picture. It is language that lets you know something is happening without telling you what it is. This is curiosity because it leaves subscribers wondering about the email's topic and makes them want to open it and find out more — especially if the language makes subscribers think the topic may be relevant to events in their life.

Intrigue

- **Example:** Your procrastination paid off!
- **Explanation:** This differs from the other types of curiosity because this type of subject line employs mystery as a complete thought without asking a question. It invokes curiosity by stating something seemingly random or unrelated to what a person would expect to see, causing the subscriber to want to read more.

Tips for writing Curiosity subject lines:

- Use riddles to raise more questions and keep subscribers wondering what your email is about.
- Finish unfinished thoughts in your subject line with pictures in your email message.
- Invoke intrigue with subject lines that are unexpected.

Direct

In conversations and emails, being direct often is the best way to interact with others because it eliminates the possibility of the receiver misconstruing the sender's message. When messages are direct, time is saved, negotiations are simpler, and interpretation and second-guessing are not required. When writing direct subject lines, you must be concise and tactful. For mobile, subject lines ideally should not exceed 33 characters. This limits the wording to one line. Multiple lines cause the creative to be pushed down and lost, causing less visual impact.

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Whether the email is delivered on mobile or on a PC, send your message in the clearest way. Employ urgency, be succinct, and mention promotions and price points.

Urgency

- **Example:** 1 DAY LEFT!
- **Explanation:** Not only does this subject line instill a sense of urgency within the customer, but it also creates curiosity and provides an incentive to learn more. Customers will want to know what they have “1 DAY” to do and whether they need to act quickly. By urging customers to act now, the subject line elevates the importance of the email, and the message becomes more important. Urgency is a common tactic around the holidays, when people are purchasing gifts.

Succinctness

- **Example:** \$1.99 Ebook!
- **Explanation:** Analyses suggest that succinct subject lines are more appealing and therefore receive higher open rates when they are 26 characters or less.¹ “\$1.99 Ebook!” names both the price and the product without using any unnecessary words to distract from the message. Succinctness is crucial when trying to craft a lucrative subject line because when lines are kept short and to the point, the most important information is immediately discernible. In this example, there is nothing excessive about the way the promotion is delivered. Either it sounds like a good deal to the customer or it doesn't, and he or she will be able to determine that quickly. Often, customers will be tempted to open the email regardless of interest because they will feel as if they are missing out on a great deal if they do not.

¹ Experian Marketing Services' 2012 Digital Marketer

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Promotions and price points

- **Example:** Extra 40% Off Sale (Today Only!)
- **Explanation:** When a price point, sale, discount or shipping offer is presented numerically in the subject line, subscribers realize just how much they will save and are eager to take advantage of the deal. Urgency and a discount are used in this example to encourage the subscriber to open the email and learn more. Knowing that they will save 40 percent immediately is incentive enough for many to open the email and start shopping. Another tactic is to mention free or reduced shipping when the customer orders within a certain amount of time.

Tips for writing Direct subject lines:

- Subject lines are effective when they highlight products, offer discounts and stress the importance of ordering early for shipping purposes.
- Mentioning a date and a time ("TODAY ONLY!" or "ONLY THROUGH JULY 5," for example) further encourages subscribers to take action.
- When appealing to a mobile audience, shorter subject lines are more easily rendered, viewed and read on mobile devices.
- Naming prices, announcing discounts and offering free shipping are effective ways of grabbing subscribers' attention and convincing them to follow through with a purchase.

Relationships

Relationship subject lines capitalize on subscribers' ability to relate to the brand or product by targeting specific interests and groups. These include events, a niche group to which they belong, a social media invitation, or a recurring newsletter they expect in their inbox at a given time, among others.

Events

- **Example:** Pacquiao vs. Marquez: Tonight only on DIRECTV
- **Explanation:** This is an example of a subject line that would attract strong attention from a subscriber who follows boxing. By mentioning a specific event in the subject line, the audience of DIRECTV subscribers feels invited and welcomed to the viewing of this event. Other specific events that can be mentioned in subject lines are meetings, exclusive sales, special store or sale hours, and members-only activities. An invitation seems more exclusive. Since exclusivity is something that generally is craved at certain events, like vacations or concerts, using this language can be very beneficial. Even inviting someone to a sale at a retail store provides a sense of exclusivity that could make a sale seem more worthwhile.

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Niche groups

- **Example:** Adele Fans! Get Her New Album Here
- **Explanation:** A niche group is a particular group of consumers comprising a narrowly defined, targetable portion of a market that a company makes an effort to connect with and sell to. In this case, the group consists of fans of Adele. By mentioning a specific artist in the subject line, the company has a good chance of capturing the attention of that artist's fans and in turn realizing a successful click rate. Even those who are not already fans of Adele will be intrigued by the subject line because they will want to see what they are missing. Other niche groups can be demographically oriented and sorted by age, gender, religion, profession or geographic location.

Circular/Newsletter/Recurring updates

- **Example:** Your Weekly Discounts & Offers!
- **Explanation:** Unlike emails that are sent with the sole intention of promoting one sale, event or opportunity, there is a category of emails that are sent out on a schedule — weekly, daily or even multiple times in the same day. If a consumer is accustomed to receiving the same company's mailing regularly, he or she develops a familiarity with that company and looks forward to hearing from it. There is a sense of assurance and trust that comes with a circular, a newsletter or constant updates that will lead the customer to stay in touch. The purpose of these emails can be for weekly promotions (as the example illustrates), news and updates, or for informational purposes to keep subscribers in the know. The key here is to be consistent with your wording. Changing the formula of the subject line too drastically may result in fewer opens.

Social media

- **Example:** Like us on Facebook for a chance to win \$1,000
- **Explanation:** In the age of “follows” and “likes,” it seems as though people today spend more time interacting on social Websites than they do in person. As the population gravitates more toward these Websites, it is important for companies to keep up with such mediums in order to reach and relate to the appropriate audience. Email has proven to be a great way to invite people to join your social media sites.

Online communities

- **Example:** Adventurers like you are logging on... Who will you meet on your quest?
- **Explanation:** From message boards to online gaming, there are large communities online that don't involve the typical social media. Appealing to either members or potential members of these communities can be very useful, especially if a company's product or service relates to them.

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Group discounts

- **Example:** Serious discounts for parties of 5 or more!
- **Explanation:** Being social doesn't just mean making online connections. It also can apply to situations where multiple buyers can get a discount that individual buyers cannot. It is a means of having your target audience want to be "social" in the literal sense of the word. People will gather and spend time together in order to experience the service or product offered by the email.

Tips for writing Relationship subject lines:

- Subject lines that include social media topics, such as "Fan favorites" or "Fan contest winners," can create cross-channel engagement in your brand.
- Stay consistent in your subject line formula for circulars, newsletters and recurring updates.
- Create a sense of exclusivity to give your messages a "personal touch."

Conclusion

With so many strategies to employ, it is still very common for a company to fall into a subject line rut. Many have the mentality of "Why fix something that's not broken?" While that may save some time, it is simply too risky. The excitement and curiosity wear off when emails with the same subject line format are sent repeatedly. This may cause the subscriber to tire of receiving them, start ignoring them or mark them as junk. Companies need to maintain the allure of their emails by employing new ideas and a creative outlook. To optimize the response from your subscribers, spice up your subject lines, and don't forget to gauge their effectiveness through testing. Be prepared. Be data-driven. Most of all, be memorable.

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