

E-MAIL DO'S AND DON'TS

How to get the most out of your e-mail communications

E-mail is a powerful medium that can play an effective — and cost-effective — role in your marketing and client communication programs, provided you take steps to maximize the likelihood that your e-mails will be opened and read. Following are some tips to keep in mind when planning your next e-mail client communication or marketing campaign.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- **Carefully craft the subject line.** Most readers decide to open or delete an e-mail on the basis of four or five words they see in the subject line. So you need to choose your wording very carefully. A good subject line will encourage recipients to open the e-mail by sharing news of interest, rousing their curiosity, creating a sense of urgency or indicating how they can benefit from what you want them to read. A great subject line will include a call to action. It's best to keep your subject line at no more than 50 characters, because that's all that most readers will see in their inboxes.¹
- **Keep the body copy short and single-pointed.** For e-mail marketing, the shorter the copy, the higher the response.² Your goal is not to sell but simply to motivate the reader to click on a link that leads to a landing page where you can go into greater detail about the product or service you're offering. Key points and links should appear in the top two inches of your message, because that's what appears in the preview pane — which is all some recipients will see of your e-mail before they decide to delete, read further or click through.
- **Run a test e-mail through a spam-scoring program.** To see how likely your e-mail is to get blocked by a spam filter, run a draft through a spam-scoring program like that offered by BlueHornet or SpamAssassin. You'll see how the e-mail ranks on the program's spam scale and what words or features are raising your score. For example, adding images or including words like "free" or "special discount" can increase the chance that a filter treats your e-mail as spam.³
- **Maintain accurate, up-to-date lists.** E-mail addresses change more frequently than postal addresses. Studies show that the business-to-business e-mail change or "churn" rate is between 20% and 40% per year.⁴ If you don't check to see why various e-mails — especially to clients or key contacts — bounce, you may fail to communicate exactly with the people you most want to hear your message. Be sure to call and confirm the e-mail addresses for important bounced e-mails. If the address is bad, correct or remove it. The Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that transmit e-mails will often block addresses that repeatedly bounce.

- **Send it out when people are most likely to read it.** For business e-mails, the best time to have your e-mail opened and read is between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.⁵ Mondays are generally not good because people are just getting into the week and have less time to spend on e-mails — but more e-mails to go through from the weekend. Fridays are not optimal because people are trying to wrap things up for the weekend and may not want to take time to act on or make decisions about your offer. For consumers, weekend e-mails to their home addresses typically are better because people have more time to open and read them.
- **Track and analyze results.** Because most of today's e-mail distribution technology enables you to see which e-mails bounced, which were opened, and who clicked on what links, you can quickly and easily gather valuable marketing intelligence. For example, this capability allows you to test different subject lines, messages and offers, and to identify reader interests. It also shows whom you didn't reach, so you can use other media to communicate with them.
- **Integrate e-mail with other marketing media.** While e-mail is a wonderful addition to your communication toolkit, it should not be the only one you use. E-mail works best when combined with other forms of communication, such as your Web site, direct mail, telephone calls, seminars and in-person meetings. For example, you can use e-mail to alert clients about an upcoming mail promotion, follow up on a mailing or other communication, reinforce a key message, or remind people about a deadline.

BUT DON'T:

- **E-mail without permission.** Although generally not appropriate for initial contact with prospects or people you don't know, e-mail can be a good way to keep in touch with people you know — provided you have their permission. You can presume permission from clients or from people who initiate contact with you via e-mail (unless they've opted out of future e-mails). And you may be able to purchase lists of people who have given their permission to be contacted by e-mail. But it's best to send e-mail only to people who have opted in for it through your Web site or regular mail.
- **Get blacklisted.** Sending mails to people who have not given you permission, have opted out or have asked not to be communicated with by e-mail can lead to complaints that get you blacklisted — and then none of your e-mails will be delivered. To make sure you don't run afoul of the "spam police" you may want to use double opt-in. This procedure involves sending a confirmation e-mail to a person who opts in, and requires receipt of a reply to the confirmation e-mail before you add the name to your list. And promptly remove the name of anyone who opts out. Also, don't give your e-mail list to others. If you do, you'll earn the wrath of those whose information you shared — and possibly violate privacy laws, too.

- **Rely solely on e-mail to deliver important information.** Because studies have shown that one-third of e-mails are not even delivered⁶, and two-thirds are typically not opened⁷, you'll fail to communicate with more than half of your audience if you rely only on this medium to reach them. E-mail is a complement to, not a substitute for, other forms of communication. If you don't use other media to provide the more detailed information e-mail is simply not suited for — and to reach people who didn't get your e-mail or don't want to hear from you in this way — e-mail is not likely to get you any further than you already are, and may cause you to actually lose ground.
- **Ignore the technical side of e-mailing.** If the technical infrastructure that supports your e-mail delivery is not properly configured, you could be blacklisted as a spammer. Make sure you have enabled Reverse DNS Lookup (which confirms that the company supposedly sending the message is actually the company sending it) and closed all open relays, so other e-mail servers — especially spammers — can't relay messages through yours.
- **Use e-mail for sensitive or confidential communications.** With e-mail, as with letters and memos, there's no tone, body language or facial expression to "interpret" the written message, and no opportunity to immediately ask for clarification. Therefore, it's easy for the reader to take what you write the wrong way. This can lead to misunderstanding and, possibly, hard feelings. Also, because you can't control what happens to an e-mail once you send it, one that contains confidential or potentially embarrassing information can easily end up in the wrong hands. Use telephone or face-to-face communication when you need to present difficult or sensitive information.
- **Send frivolous or overly frequent e-mails.** If you do, like the boy who cried wolf you'll soon be ignored. With the volume of e-mails increasing daily, the last thing a client, prospect or other contact wants is an unimportant e-mail from you. Because e-mail is "cheap," there is a tendency to overdo it. Make sure you have something worth saying — and worth opening and reading — before you hit the send button.

A POWERFUL TOOL — WHEN USED CORRECTLY

E-mail is a wonderful addition to your communication toolbox. But it is by no means your only tool, and often not the best for the job at hand. And while it may be easier and less expensive to e-mail a message than to place a call or send out a mailing, if the recipient doesn't get the message, you're wasting time and money — and possibly losing out on revenue-producing opportunities.

So be smart and use e-mail selectively, taking care to match the message to the medium. If you do — and integrate e-mail with telephone calls, personal visits, letters and direct mail campaigns — you'll increase the effectiveness of your marketing and client communication programs, and boost your success.

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