



Email Best Practices

A WORD TO THE WISE WHITE PAPER | BY LAURA ATKINS, CO-FOUNDER



Introduction

Discussions of best practices for email marketing can be a confusing array of one-size-fits-all suggestions that may or may not have anything to do with your own products, services, customers, or communication strategies. Practices that are appropriate for a B2B marketer focused on large hardware sales, for example, are very different from practices that are useful for a large B2C marketer focused on volume.

There's also confusion around what constitutes best practice communication strategies for the email channel versus delivery best practices. We'll focus here on delivery: the things you can do as a sender to consistently get your mail into the inboxes of your recipients.

There's a "Golden Rule" for effective delivery for any brand or business: Send mail that recipients want and expect. For practical reasons, this dictates that all bulk email should be opt-in.. This does not mean that senders can't use email for acquisition, but it does mean that acquisition is more complicated than buying a list of addresses and sending out mail to those addresses.

The flip side of best practices is that there are really also worst practices. These bad practices can affect your entire mail stream, even when you try and segregate the good mail from the bad. Because spammers have spent a lot of time, money and resources to get messages to users despite poor reputations ISPs and filtering companies have created filters that look at the whole of a sender's practice.

Smart senders understand the differences between best and worst practices in their email programs and work to maximize effective delivery.

General best practices

Only send opt-in mail

The absolute best practice for any email marketer is only to send opt-in mail. This means that the recipient gives an email address to the sender to receive marketing mail from that sender.

There are, of course, complications. Is providing an email address during a purchase an opt-in for marketing emails? Is providing an email address to one division of a company an opt-in for marketing emails from other divisions? Many senders make the choice on behalf of the recipient, and that's not an opt-in. This doesn't mean you shouldn't send updates to customers

or cross-market. But it does mean you should think about how to make sure your customer is expecting the mail.

Comply with all local laws

It seems obvious that mail should only be sent in compliance with laws, but it's always important to mention. In the United States, the law covering email marketing is called CAN SPAM. This law says that all email must meet a number of criteria:

1. The sender must provide accurate routing information about the emails.
2. Advertising emails must be clearly labeled as such.
3. Recipients must be allowed to opt-out of emails. Opt-out mechanisms must be electronic and require only the recipient's email address and their choice to opt-out. Companies may not require passwords or other information in order to process the opt-out.
4. All emails must contain the physical address of the sender.

Note that CAN SPAM does not require that senders have permission to send mail. Permission is not a requirement under US law. In other countries, however, senders must have permission to send marketing and commercial email. In some cases, permission cannot be shared or sold; thus even purchasing opt-in lists is illegal.

Sending mail without permission to recipients in jurisdictions with opt-in rules such as Europe Canada may open up the sender to legal liability. Some senders have attempted to bypass this by segmenting lists by country. But this segmentation assumes that the companies selling lists are correctly compiling the data. Obtaining recipient permission before sending protects the sender from inadvertently violating opt-in laws.

Practice good data hygiene

Very few people keep the same email address for long periods of time. Research indicates that about 30% of email addresses are abandoned by their users every year. These addresses become dead weight on an email marketing program, pulling down stats and complicating measurements of how effective an email program is.

Senders should periodically purge lists of non-responsive email addresses. Specific rules on how to do this vary depending on the sender, the product (or products) and the sales cycle.

Bad practices

In order to make good decisions, it's also important to know what email marketing and delivery practices to avoid.

Sending mail without explicit permission

The most obvious bad practice is sending mail without the explicit permission of the recipient. It may seem obvious, but there are many scenarios in marketing to customers and prospective customers where there is no permission granted.

For instance, many companies will automatically add purchaser names and email addresses to mailing lists without asking the user to opt-in. This is a very common source of delivery problems, particularly when the recipient is making a one-time purchase.

In one common scenario, the purchaser is buying a gift for someone else. The purchaser isn't really interested in future mails from the sender, but the sender assumes permission to send mail. The recipient not only does not want the mail, but they do not return to that vendor ever again. If the recipient is at one of the major ISPs, they may even report the sender as a spammer.

Buying lists

There are thousands of companies, people and websites that will sell "100% permission based opt-in lists". Many of these lists are nothing of the sort. They may be harvested, compiled or even stolen. Because of the history of delivery problems and blocklistings caused by purchased lists, many ESPs prohibit the use of purchased lists.

Some purchased lists contain spam traps or large numbers of undeliverable addresses. All of these factors drive down the reputation of the sender, which can contribute to significant delivery problems down the line.

Purchased lists are also poor tools for acquisition. Many lists are sold over and over and over again. The recipients on the list get a lot of mail they never asked for, and thus are often immune to any offers. Delivery is poor and problems may affect the entire email program not just the acquisition marketing.

Affiliate programs

Affiliate programs are another major problem. Companies work with affiliates for many reasons but sloppy affiliates can cause major delivery problems even for opt-in mail. Some affiliates hire sub-affiliates who may spam on behalf of your brand without your knowledge.

When someone has a financial incentive to send mail advertising a product or service, unscrupulous mailers will send spam advertisements for those products. Too much spam advertising a particular product or service may end up contaminating the reputation for all mail for that product or service. Even legitimate opt-in mail, receipts, and transactional mail end up suffering delivery problems.

Conclusion

Effective email marketing relies on effective delivery, or getting mail into the inbox. The best way to get mail to the inbox is send mail that recipients want and expect. Ask recipients for permission before sending mail. Make it clear what recipients are opting into, and keep those promises – don't start sending them daily email when they've opted in for a monthly newsletter, or share your lists with other vendors if users haven't given explicit permission to do so.

Reputation can track across multiple mail streams. Poor practices in acquisition marketing can affect retention and transactional email. Even when senders think reputation can't be tracked and applied, it often is.

Need to take a closer look at how your email program measures up?

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