

# Getting Past the Gatekeeper

Best practices for e-mail marketing campaigns

By Shannon Good

**W**hen considering an integrated marketing program, or even looking for a powerful low-cost medium, e-mail marketing can be an effective and cost-efficient marketing vehicle. If you follow the five tips outlined below, you should expect more success in preventing your message from being blocked by spam filters, or worse, deleted or marked as spam by the “e-mail gatekeeper.”

Like other social marketing efforts, the goal for an e-mail marketing campaign is to strengthen relationships with your customers, boost sales, increase traffic to your website and build brand loyalty. Bonus points are incurred if the e-mail is forwarded to a friend—also known as a new prospect.

## Lists

No matter which advertising vehicle you use, you must understand your target audience and why they are or *should be* interested in your company. There are a few ways to build your e-mail marketing list: social links, purchased lists and in-house customer lists. We recommend starting with in-house customer lists because you already have an established relationship with these people. Customer lists are termed “permission based,” meaning these customers have given you permission to stay in contact with them, whether they specifically gave you permission to e-mail them or not.

The relationships you have with your customers are similar to personal relationships: Levels may range from acquaintances to friends to best friends, etc. Ideally, you want to take your relationships to the next level by offering relevant and value-added information, which then will boost sales, increase traffic to your website, build brand loyalty and (hopefully) generate word-of-mouth advertising when a customer forwards your e-mail to a friend.



To build trust with your e-mail subscribers, use a third-party system like Constant Contact, Mail Chimp or GMG-mail and offer a “privacy policy” link that directs recipients to a page on your website. There you can specify your e-mail policy and manage expectations, including frequency of e-mails and assurance that you will not sell contact information to outside companies. Also, be sure to include an “unsubscribe” button or link at the bottom of the e-mail. Try not to take it personally when someone clicks this. Customers may not pay attention to the sender and click unsubscribe without realizing it was from your company. To avoid this, be sure your subject line and content clearly identify who is sending the e-mail and why they are receiving it.

## Subject

The e-mail’s subject line should be treated like a headline in an advertisement. Three-quarters of an advertisement’s success is based on the headline, or, in the case of an e-mail effort, the subject line. It should be short and sweet, clearly stating the benefit of your e-mail. Be aware of a few keywords that could cause spam filters block your message, including free, win/won, earn, profit and gift.

Also avoid using only capital letters or any special characters in the subject line. Finally, according to the Association for Interactive Marketing, adding “Pls. Forward” to the end of your subject line may increase your circulation. Other successful e-mail subject lines might include:

- Reasons why, for example: “Top 3 Reasons Why You Should ...”;
- Benefits or how-tos, for example: “ABC Product Saves ...” or “How ABC Product Benefits ...”;
- Questions, for example: “Do You Think ...” or “Do You Have/Want/Know ...”;
- Testimonials, for example: “XYZ Company Took Care

of My ...";

- News, for example: "XYZ Company Named Best Local ..." or "ABC Product Recognized as Top ...";
- Targeted, for example: "What Every DEF Customer Needs to Know" or "For Every ABC Product Lover"; or
- Lists, for example: "Quick Tips for ..." or "Strategies for ..."

Personalizing e-mails also increases engagement and open rates. When you upload your customer e-mail lists, include first names or company names. Most programs allow you to personalize the e-mail's subject line and content.

Also, be sure to personalize the "from" so your recipients do not feel like they are getting a robot-generated e-mail, but rather a personalized message from you. Even if you are not the one writing and facilitating the e-mail, stay on a first name basis with your customers—remember, the goal is to strengthen and build relationships.

## Content

Frequency is important to discuss before we address formatting and content. If you plan to develop a campaign that is sent quarterly or monthly, you may want to include more information. If you plan to send an e-blast weekly or daily, keep the content short and to the point.

As in the subject line, compose content in a conversational way. There are two types of recipients: skimmers and readers. Many people are both types at different times, so timing is everything. Once you have captured the recipient's attention with the subject line, keep it for the first few sentences. Identify who you are and describe the e-mail's objective and value to the reader. Within this timeframe, recipients will determine whether they will continue reading the e-mail, save it for later, delete it or mark it as spam.

If you send an e-mail covering multiple topics, include a bulleted table of contents highlighting them after your introduction. These bullets and/or topic titles can be anchored or linked to the

message further down in the e-mail. This way, readers can determine whether they want to jump immediately to a particular topic rather than scrolling and potentially losing interest.

It is also important to use your e-mail to increase traffic to your website. Add hyperlinks to keywords that will bring readers to a specific page about that word and/or subject on your website. You also can tease and direct your readers to your website by ending the message in mid-sentence or at the end of a sentence right before you make your point by adding the words "Read More." Then, hyperlink those two words to the Web page that continues the message or topic you started in the e-mail. This is also a good technique to use when including a call to action in your e-mail.

Finally, encourage interaction. Create a form on a Web page or hyperlink to an e-mail address where your recipients can update their contact information. Ask them to submit ideas and offer feedback to help you provide valuable information in future campaigns.

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### Tracking

Because e-mail campaigns can be easy and inexpensive, many companies fail to track or learn from the results of each campaign. Important information might include open rate, click-through rate, number of clicks, Web traffic, unsubscribe and spam lists, hard and soft bounces, time of the day of interaction, and shares/forwards to friends.

Many third-party e-mail programs provide detailed results and keep track of the cleanliness of your lists. Oftentimes you can see who clicked what and when to help determine what was interesting and what was not so engaging.

Following which recipient clicked and then contacted your company gives you a conversion rate, or return on investment. We recommend following up with a phone call or a more direct/targeted e-mail to the engaged recipients within two to five days after they clicked through your e-mail. You do not want to seem like you are stalking them, however, they did show an

interest and it is important to find out why they have not contacted you yet. This opens the door to insights into their interest in your e-mail and clarifications on concerns, thus achieving the goal of your e-mail campaign to strengthen relationships, build brand loyalty, increase Web traffic and boost sales.

### Formatting

Once you have the right message, present it the right way. HTML and Rich Media messages that include audio, video and animation generate high response rates, but have a text version for people who prefer or can only receive text.

Always include a hyperlinked table of contents at the top of the e-mail. Studies show that most people do not look beyond the first screen if there is not something that immediately interests them.

Here are some quick tips for e-mail formatting:

- Use bullet points and lots of white space for plain text messages.
- Minimize use of all caps and italics.

- Keep columns of copy narrow.
- Test messages in a number of e-mail accounts and formats, like Microsoft Outlook, Gmail and Web mail programs to ensure they look good in all mainstream e-mail clients.
- Write your message in the same format it will appear on customers' screens so you can see what they will see. Most third-party e-mail systems will do this for you automatically.
- For headlines, use a larger, bold font.

We all get inundated with e-mails everyday. Do not take it personally if everyone does not read all of your e-mails, all of the time. Stay consistent, interesting and thorough, and you will begin to have predictable open and click rates. **WQP**

*Shannon Good is partner for Good Group LLC. Good can be reached at [sgood@goodgroupllc.com](mailto:sgood@goodgroupllc.com).*

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Wednesday, April 22, 2015

11:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Thursday, April 23, 2015

10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.