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Boosting Email Campaign Effectiveness ***Tips for improving deliverability and response rates – Part 1***

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This is the first in a two-part series on email marketing effectiveness.

Email continues to be a popular and effective marketing medium. The DMA reported in its 2007 Response Rate Trends Report that “email produced the highest absolute response rates for those whose primary objective was to generate leads.” And according to the “Email Marketing Benchmark Guide 2008,” published by Marketing Sherpa, marketers are bullish on email effectiveness but are concerned about eroding trust due to spam and standing out in crowded inboxes.

Although it is relatively easy to launch an email program, doing it well takes some planning. The following tips were extracted from a recent DMA Northern CA seminar presented by several email marketing experts: Michael Kelly, Director of Sales and Business Development at [ClickMail Marketing](#); Cameron Kane, President of [Strategic Design Group](#); Michelle Eichner, COO and VP of Client Services at [Pivotal Veracity](#); and Sharon Long Baerny, President of [We Know Words](#).

There are many factors that impact email effectiveness. These include:

- the **email delivery mechanism** – email platform, authentication, reputation, and broadcast attributes
- **content** – relevant messaging, offers and design, and
- special considerations for **delivering content to mobile devices**.

This article provides important best practices for improving email deliverability. A second article will focus on content, and tips on delivering email to mobile devices.

Email Platform

One of the most important decisions to make regarding email delivery is which email platform to use to send broadcast emails. You can do this internally, using your organization’s mail servers, or outsource the function to an Email Service Provider (ESP). Most internal mail servers are not well suited to deliver broadcast emails for a variety of reasons: 1) lack of analytics to track opens and clickthroughs, 2) difficulty in managing opt-outs, and 3) large volumes of mail can bog down servers and interrupt regular inbound and outbound mail. And, as you’ll see below, it takes effort to maintain or improve your company’s email authentication and reputation. As a result, most organizations choose to outsource email transmission to an ESP. ESPs offer many advantages over internal mail server platforms. They:

- work diligently to stay on the ISPs’ “white lists”
- offer valuable analytics (opens, clicks, forwards, etc...)
- provide design tools, personalization and testing, and
- manage opt-in lists.

There are many ESPs to choose from, ranging from hosted platforms such as [VerticalResponse](#) and [Constant Contact](#) to enterprise vendors such as [ExactTarget](#) and [SilverPop](#). The best way to determine which ESP is best for your organization is through testing. Test at least two or three

vendors against your internal mail server (or existing ESP) as a control. Measure open rates, clickthroughs, conversions and bounces to assess which method/vendor produced the best results. Additionally, you can measure inbox deliverability by using third-party vendors such as [Pivotal Veracity](#), [Email Advisor](#), [Return Path](#), and [Habeas](#). These vendors can tell you whether the email was delivered to the inbox or if it was routed to the junk, bulk or spam folder.

Whether you choose to send broadcast emails via an ESP or through your internal mail servers, it is important for you to understand the following key factors in email delivery effectiveness:

Authentication

Authentication is the term for determining if an email claiming to be from a particular organization is indeed from that organization. Since October 2004, an industry standard called Sender Policy Framework (SPF) has been adopted to help Internet Service Providers (ISPs) determine the true sender of an email. SPF, an extension to the Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP), is part of the Domain Name Service (DNS) listing, the filed record that every website domain has published. SPF allows software to identify and reject forged addresses in the SMTP MAIL FROM (Return-Path).

Best Practices:

Any organization sending email should have an SPF record that indicates which mail servers are authorized to send email on your behalf. Information and tools can be found at (DNSstuff's) [DNSreport](#) and the [Sender Policy Framework Project](#) has a wizard on how to create/publish a SPF record.

Reputation

Your organization's email reputation can be thought of as a grade or score given by ISPs (and/or corporate mail domains) based on your organization's email practices. Your reputation is determined by a number of factors, including:

- 1) the frequency and volume of email
- 2) spam/abuse reports
- 3) sending to unknown or bounced email addresses
- 4) how recipients interact with your email, and
- 5) the attributes of your broadcasts (i.e. "from" address, reply-to address, etc.)

Are recipients reading the emails (opening them, clicking on links), moving them out of their spam folder, adding your address to their address book/safe-sender list? If not, ISPs like Hotmail will take notice. There are a number of free online tools, such as IronPort's www.senderbase.org, that can check your organization's reputation.

Best Practices:

If you plan to send emails from your organization's mail servers, begin by using a dedicated IP address. You should also use a double opt-in process for list sign-ups and regularly cleanse your lists of bounced email addresses. Make sure you publish and adhere to a privacy policy and NEVER rent, sell or share your list.

Broadcast Attributes

Broadcast attributes refer to the standard components of an email, such as the subject line, "from" field, and "reply-to" field. These attributes play a part in email deliverability as well as in response rates.

Best Practices:

- **"From" Address:** Find a consistent, static "from" address to use, so that when a recipient adds your emails to their address book or safe sender list, your emails are assured of making it to the inbox. Be sure to include your company's name in the "From" line: "Mary Gospe –

KickStart Alliance.” Studies show that more recipients open emails based on who it is from rather than the subject line.

- Subject Line: Your subject line should be no longer than 6 or 7 words (no more than 50 characters, including spaces). Include the main “call to action” or offer from the email. Be specific and if possible, create a sense of urgency. Avoid special characters (\$, %, !!!, @, &) spam-catching words such as “Free.”
- “Reply” Address: Make sure this routes to a “live” inbox.
- View Online: Include a link at the top of the email so recipients can view the HTML email in a browser.
- Multi-part Alternative (MPA): Include both HTML and text versions of the email. The delivery engine will determine which version a recipient prefers.
- Preferences Page: Ideally, it’s nice to publish a ‘preferences’ page whereby your audience can designate what format they want to receive information from you in, and be able to choose what content they’d like to receive.
- Forward to a Friend: This is a great functionality to include that will help you grow your email opt-in list.

This article provided best practices for improving email deliverability, including email platform, authentication, reputation, and broadcast attributes. In a future article, we will focus on content, and tips on delivering email to mobile devices.

About the Author

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