

37 email tips

EVERY MARKETER SHOULD READ **BEFORE** PRESSING SEND

Compared to traditional direct response marketing, email marketing can be easy and relatively inexpensive. Perhaps too easy. Cluttered mailboxes are nothing compared to the “spamming and scamming” that clog email inboxes these days. But savvy marketers are learning that email communication that is interesting, relevant and targeted can be more effective than any other marketing channel available today.

The success of your email marketing efforts, perhaps more than any other method, is in how you handle the details. The following 37 tips will help you steer clear of major missteps and master many of the details that will lead to your success as an email marketer. Consider using them as a checklist before launching a campaign and in educating your marketing staff.

1. Permission is everything. Ask your customers or prospects for their permission (from the outset) to send them further emails relevant to their information needs. This will begin a dialog and a relationship that will turn prospects into leads and leads into sales, sign-ups and enrollments -- at a lower cost than nearly all other channels. Also, read *Permission Marketing* by Seth Godin.

2. Permission is two-sided. You must honor your side of the agreement by keeping prospect and client information private (unless you make it clear you will share their information within your organization or with others) and sending them information targeted to their wants and needs. Getting a recipient to “opt-in” for further emails from you and then just blasting them with irrelevant information is not good permission marketing.

3. Permission is rarely transferable. If you must rent email lists, be aware that the overall campaign costs will be higher and the response rates lower than you can expect from an email campaign to in-house lists. Be cautious about renting lists from third parties unless you sincerely believe the recipients will find your information interesting and relevant. And as with all direct marketing, test a random sample of names before rolling out a large and costly campaign that may fizzle.

4. Build your own database. Capture email addresses and information about your prospects and customers at every interactive touchpoint you have with them: web inquiry forms, customer sign-up sheets, change- or upgrade-in-service calls, customer service centers, business reply cards, return-of-payment forms, etc. And don't forget to email interesting, relevant, actionable information.

5. Make it easy to “opt-out.” Make sure every message you send includes “opt-out” links so recipients can unsubscribe from future email communication. Giving recipients this obvious control will help to lessen the number who say “no” -- but honor those who do.

6. Spam will get you in a jam. Unsolicited Commercial Email (UCE), or spam, is not only ineffective, it can have a multiplier effect of damage to your company's reputation. Think about it, how often do you hear and retell a bad customer service story?

7. Strategy before structure. A truly effective email campaign begins with answering strategic questions such as: Who exactly am I trying to reach? Why is email the best communication channel for this audience? How frequently should I send emails to this group? Where do I want to send my audience if they want more information? What is my ultimate goal for this campaign?

8. Send a “Dear John” email. And a “Dear Jane” and a “Greetings Mr. Smith.” When done correctly, email is a one-to-one mass communication tool, perhaps the first one in recorded history. Whether you're sending 100 emails or 100 million, every message can and should be personalized by name. Personalization can deepen relationships and increase response rates.

9. Customize your content. Make your messages relevant. Use your database to help customize content to match the interests, needs and demographics of your recipients.

10. Leverage your web site. Include URLs in every message so you can link people to your web site or to a landing page or web form customized to a particular offer. This allows you to enrich and segment the content you send to recipients without overloading their email (they'll click on what interests them and skip links that don't).

11. Don't be the weakest link! Whether an opt-out link or a link to your fabulous offer, make sure that every link and every URL works and that they work in different email clients (such as AOL). The same goes for reply email addresses. And then check them again before you send a single message.

12. Read minds (and mouse clicks). With direct mail, you only know when someone responds (and not what happens to the other 98% of your messages, although you and landfill experts can probably guess). A good email marketing system will report which links are clicked and by which recipient so you can tell what's working and what's not and follow up -- one-to-one -- with each recipient based on their expressed interests.

13. Be subject-ive! The subject line is crucial to the success of your email message. Think of it as a teaser on a direct mail envelope. It should telegraph to the recipient a “why-should-I-care?” message and the compelling points of your offer. All in about 35 characters or less (we never said it would be easy). Email recipients are too busy and quick with the delete key when a subject line is too long, too cute, confusing or doesn't seem relevant.

14. Be a cynic (like your customers). Wired consumers tend to be more educated and a bit more cynical. Keep away from over-the-top words that prompt them to reach for the delete key as soon as they read the subject line. Words like “free” and “save” and almost anything in all caps may mean your message looks like spam and won't be read.

15. Short = Sweet. As in all direct marketing, there is no magic length to an email. No one can tell you exactly how many words or lines a message should be. But remember that most people sort quickly through their email and don't like to scroll beyond the bottom of the screen. So keep it short and reserve the details for the web page/site they can click to.



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16. Turn the pyramid upside-down. Think like a newspaper reporter and keep the most important and relevant facts in the first one or two paragraphs and let the rest of the message provide the support (like the inverted pyramid of good reporting). If the first paragraphs are compelling to readers, they will read on.

17. Ask for the order! Present the call to action (read on, buy, enroll, order, etc.) and include a hyperlink early in your message. Recipients who don't need or want further convincing shouldn't have to weed through the rest of your message to figure out how they can act on your offer. And repeat your offer and links late in the message, too, for those who will read to the end.

18. Be prepared. Planning and writing your follow-up messages ahead of time will make your life easier and demonstrate to recipients that you are rock-solid and ready to help them. Timely, meaningful responses may help to deepen the relationship with your clients and prospects. Don't forget a follow-up to those who did not respond (see #37).

19. Proof on screen and off. Be sure you proofread your message in hard copy and on screen before you send a single message out. Make sure everyone who needs to sign off on a message (customer service, fulfillment, legal, IT, etc.) sees it and has a deadline to give you their okay.

20. Be all things to all people. When you're sending an HTML message, be sure to prepare and send a plain text version as well. This way, everyone will be able to read the message, even those who can't view HTML. This can be tricky; make sure your vendor can handle what is usually called "multi-part messaging" and knows how to deliver to AOL and other popular email clients.

21. Test your message and system. Once everybody has approved the message to be sent, send a test message to yourself and others who use different email clients and browsers. Make sure all the images are there, check the line wraps, proof your copy and test each link.

22. Give them a choice. Even people who can view HTML messages may prefer to receive plain text. Giving them this choice upfront will cut down on the enormous headache of "resends." If you can't offer both text and HTML, default to plain text (and look for a system or vendor who can handle both).

23. Make updating easy. Your customers and prospects should be able to update their profiles, including what email format they prefer to receive. This way, you are assured that the information in your database is as up-to-date as possible and your recipients feel as if they have ownership over their personal data.

24. Don't get attached. Avoid sending attachments as part of your email message. Instead, use links to drive recipients to a web page so they can see (and download) the information you want them to have. Many email systems filter out attachments or limit their size to avoid destructive viruses and gobbling up memory. Those on dial-up accounts may delete a message rather than suffer long downloads or won't download an attachment (particularly if the sender isn't recognized). Plus, links allow you to track click-throughs.

25. Communicate, don't overwhelm. A good rule of thumb is to email each recipient no more than once every other week. Of course, if they have agreed to more frequent communication (a weekly newsletter, for example) then go to it.

26. Make your message interactive. Initiate a dialog by inviting your audience to respond through hyperlinks, email addresses and telephone numbers. Permission marketing is really about building relationships. Can you think of a relationship that wouldn't benefit from true dialog? Just remember to hold up your side of the conversation by responding appropriately to questions or concerns (see #37).

27. Rich Media doesn't take riches. Rich Media email is no longer the exclusive province of wealthy marketing departments. Technology has advanced to the point where smaller companies can now take advantage of streaming audio and video. Consider whether your product or service offering could be enhanced with these technologies (and whether your email system and audience can support them).

28. Tuesday's email is full of grace . . . The best time to send an email message is late in the day, so you're not part of the morning clutter (remember, when it's noon in Manhattan it's not noon everywhere). The best days are Tuesday through Thursday for B2B communication and Saturday and Sunday for B2C.

29. "From" is as important as "To". Many recipients want to know who the sender is before opening an email. Like the subject line, the return address name can instantly communicate quality or spam to the recipient.

30. De-dupe first. Cleaning your list of duplicate email addresses is essential if you don't want to annoy recipients. If you're sending the same email to several different lists or list segments, make sure you don't have the same recipient's email in several places.

31. Measure twice, cut once. To avoid mistakes, be absolutely sure you have the correct group or email list segment selected before you click the button to send your message. You can't pull back the offer of pantyhose to your male readers or discounted meats to vegetarians.

32. Test, test and test. Test different elements of your message, such as subject line and offer, to samples of your database. Since about 90 percent of responses occur in the first 48 hours, you can modify your message to build the most effective offer before rolling out to your largest selects. Email technology makes it easy to know what's working (and what's not) in a very short amount of time.

33. Keep on tracking. Track and measure the results of your campaign and apply those results to later campaigns. If you learn that most recipients click through to the first one or two links in your message but not those further down, try rotating links to see whether it is the content or simply a short attention span that earns those click-throughs.

34. Automate, mate! Make sure you can handle the bouncebacks and opt-out requests with as little manual intervention as possible. As your list grows, these list updates can become very, very time consuming. If you are sending more than 1,000 messages a month it's likely that a good email marketing system will pay for itself just by handling these kinds of changes automatically.

35. Make contact easy. Be sure your email and web pages give email addresses and phone numbers that recipients can use to contact you. Email reply links (sometimes called "mailto") are nice, but some recipients might not have their email clients configured to support this feature and want to be able to spot an email address they can type in or a phone number they can call.

36. Identify yourself! In addition to providing a link to "opt-out" in every message, it's also a good idea to incorporate your identity in the header or footer of your message so that recipients are reminded they have signed up for your email communications. A simple message that says, "You received this message because you signed up to receive additional information from ABC Company," will be appreciated by recipients.

37. Take ownership. Make sure that if you have given your customers and prospects an email address for information requests, comments and orders, that someone "owns" the responsibility to regularly check that email in-box, write timely replies, process confirmations, etc. And having a back-up person doesn't hurt. This can be easy to overlook when new email addresses or "aliases" have been created. More than one email marketer has been foiled because no one was officially charged with taking care of the "info@yourcompany.com" emails.