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Smart emailing

*12 steps to improve your emailing results
through creative optimization*

Why an emailing improvement checklist ?

As interactive marketing professionals experience, email marketing results tend to decline more and more over the years. With more than 35 emails received per day (source : ECTAS Q3 2006 Media, Marketing and Retail Survey), the average European consumer has a lower and lower attention while opening his email box. According to the Forrester's Q4 2006 UK Internet User Study, over half of United Kingdom online consumers delete promotional emails without reading them.

These facts are strong drivers of change for any email marketing strategy, using more sophisticated approaches and techniques than we used in the past to achieve the same result as before.

Among the top email marketing trends, I advise to investigate these key factors of success:

- Invest in more targeted email lists if you don't have your own. Focus on building your company email list with care. Many of your clients don't want to be on your email list. But that's an opportunity for you to communicate only with the ones clearly expressing an interest for your products, services, solutions or whatever. Don't miss it.
- Invest resource in list hygiene, making sure your email list is clean and delivering reasonable results. Remember this task will pay off in the long run.
- Invest time in email, multichannel and ROI analytics to track your campaign results on a contact basis. If you don't have the skills or the time needed, ask some emarketing professional to help you setup the process into your online presence.
- Invest in more sophisticated email marketing features, for instance one-to-one emailing is slowly becoming standard.

This said, the rules of Permission Marketing apply more than ever to our business. You can take advantage of each of your email marketing message to build a relationship with your potential or current client, based upon trust. And one of the best way to achieve this, is to create a clear communication with an easy perceived value for the client. On the other hand, unclear offers, bad look and feel, and all email design usability mistakes may harm your results, as well as your brand.

So, please will find below these 12 steps checklist to help you achieve this aim through creative optimization.

kephri.net emailing improvement checklist

1. Use of software-generated creatives

It is common to use software such as Adobe Dreamweaver or Photoshop (using slices technology), Microsoft Office or Frontpage to produce creatives for emailing (.htm or .html files linked with images).

Using this software “as is” to make the production creative will lead to poor email usability and look and feel problems across leading emailing clients like Lotus Notes and Outlook Express, whatever version.

A better approach would be to work with a qualified website coder or webmaster to produce simple, but working HTML 4.0 code (using exclusively tags like <table>, <td>, <tr> for page layout) or basic XHTML with embedded CSS (including exclusively tags like <div> or for page layout).

These are industry standards, and simply copying & pasting HTML content from your website will over time deliver poorer quality emails, given the changes brought by Web 2.0 standards.

2. Subject

A subject line needs to be as quick and appealing as a newspaper headline. Grabbing the eye within a customer’s mailbox is becoming more and more difficult.

That’s why a good subject line :

- ✓ Is short (not more than 35 characters)
- ✓ Defines instantly the purpose of the communication (acquisition, retention) or remembers several words of previous email subjects (e.g. in case of retention campaigns like newsletters)
- ✓ Provides the client with a clear course of action to look for inside the email : the use of action verbs like “Receive”, “Try”, “Send” are highly recommended because they give the recipient the belief they will be able to interact with your company, while trying to sell them your value proposal by opening and actually reading the email
- ✓ Delivers trust, using either your company, brand, or product name
- ✓ May contain an incentive
- ✓ Avoids any spam-filtered word
- ✓ Uses only standard characters (from a to z, commas, dots)
- ✓ Uses as few articles and transparent words as possible (transparent words like : good, internet, email, best, deal, etc...)

3. From line

From lines are often underrated in terms of importance though they are an essential part of the creative's overall success, tightly linked with the subject line.

In order to start a relationship, you need to start the discussion. That's why the sender has such an important job in attracting the recipient.

Typically a good from line :

- ✓ Is very short (not more than 4 words)
- ✓ Remembers the previous email sender if there was one in case of retention
- ✓ Often works less well with company or brand names than with real people's names (except for world-class leading companies or brands)
- ✓ Takes advantages of CRM to use the closest and latest possible contact point to the client (especially while working with indirect sales channel)
- ✓ Delivers trust, using a familiar name to the recipient
- ✓ Avoids any spam-filtered word
- ✓ Uses only standard characters (from a to z, commas, dots)
- ✓ Never forgets that From line is a pair between the displayed text (e.g. "Brad Smith") and the displayed email address (e.g. "brad.smith@company.com")

4. Link between Subject and From lines

Normally, a prospective client will only have these two universal items to assess whether they should spend time reading your emailing or immediately erasing it.

On the same horizontal line in every emailing client, these two sets of texts works like a pair together.

Let's take an example to demonstrate how this relationship can be easily improved to create a more consistent, and efficient creative :

Example 1

Subject : "Discover the range of our products"

From : "Example Company" – emailing@examplecompany.com

Example 2

Subject : "Reduce network downtime costs with S 300 range of products"

Sender : "Example Company" – emailing@examplecompany.com

Example 3

Subject : “Learn how to cut network downtime costs with S 300 hardware and James”
Sender : “James Smith – Example Company” –
james.smith@engineering.examplecompany.com

These examples are gradually better and better. The combination of placing the value proposition in the subject line and making the message more personal by using a real name on the from line in example 3 will tend to deliver more impact and better results.

Also note the use of the subdomain in the displayed email address, to give the recipient the feeling he started a relationship with the engineering department of the company, thus building both more credibility as a teacher, and more affinity as an Information Technology professional to the eyes of the recipient.

5. Location of logo / brand

As your brand delivers and builds trust, you should place your logo at the top left of your email (while keeping its size small).

All emailing studies shows that click-rates are higher when the email sender identifies themselves at this location with the use of their corporate / product identity.

6. Use of images

You should keep in mind these basics while placing images :

- ✓ Only use standard images file formats : JPEG, GIF, PNG
- ✓ Avoid as much as possible transparent colours embedded in the image (like transparent GIF)
- ✓ Avoid using images as a background colour to the whole creative page at once
- ✓ Use 72 DPI images, not above to optimize file size, and not below to deliver high-quality images for the screen
- ✓ Never use images if you could communicate the same message with several words. Instead, use images with care to create a clean layout and visually distinguish the main areas of the message
- ✓ Never use image map areas (with the following HTML code : `` or the `<map>` tag), most email and Internet clients renders them in a different way
- ✓ Never use images located on your website to be sent in an emailing, make them hosted by your Emailing Service Provider (ESP), and sent at once with the broadcast
- ✓ If possible, use alternative image tags (the HTML “ALT” tag) so that readers can understand and read the overall creative, even if images are blocked in their corporate network

7. Ratio of text to images

Generally speaking, B2C emailings contains more images than text, while B2B emailings contain more text than images; even though good copy combines the right mix of both.

That's easily explained by differences in email client technology used at work or at home. Business-to-Business users are often using client technology such as Lotus Notes or Microsoft Outlook, which does not display images and design eye-candies as well as B2C clients like Windows Live Mail.

As a rule, follow these basic guidelines:

- simple layout, with a few images only (with only basic HTML and nested tables) for B2B
- richer, more complex layout (using XHTML and CSS 2 technologies) for B2C

8. Number and type of links

It's hard to assess the relevance of each link, especially because this is highly dependent on the creative layout (one column, two or more columns, letter, newsletter, varied cell blocks, postcards...), but the industry consensus is: results tend to decline after 10 links within any emailing. Once again, profusion can harm your Return On Investment.

There's also a strong difference between B2B and B2C here, because B2C emailers rightfully tend to include a lot of links in order to satisfy most customers at once, whereas B2B emailers tend to include fewer links because they already target a much smaller, better known customer base.

Finally, the number of links differs a lot between acquisition or retention emailings. For instance in a loyalty newsletter, you could have 30 links and it will still be fine, as your first purpose is mainly informative, not transactional.

The second issue is about the type of links : there is a strong debate within the email marketing industry about whether a link should be text or image. But there is one, much more important question : how do you ensure you're using links to help the reader know what you expect from them?

By using the right link type.

And here we come to the difference between a link and call-to-action: you should expect much more, in terms of customer interaction, from a Call-To-Action than from a link.

A link is a text-based link pointing out, most often, to a second layer of information which is normally some free and generic part of your website (like a corporate information page).

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A Call-To-Action is either a text link or an image button, to a specific landing page on your website (or specific micro-site), with an expected funnel of subsequent interactions between your company and your client in the whole sales interaction process.

All these levels should be tracked with great care in order to correct conversion bottlenecks as soon as possible and at every stage of the conversion funnel.

So, be sure to use each link type according to the desired marketing goal : either inform at first level (text link) or create action in a marketing ROI logic (CTA).

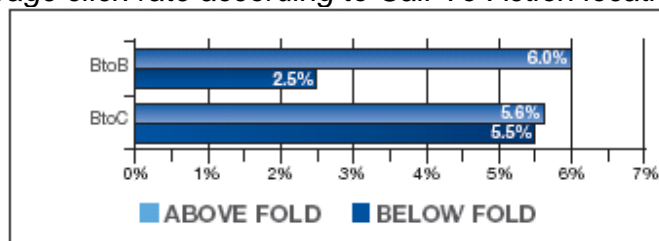
You can see below several examples of Call-To-Actions :



9. Location of call-to-actions

While one emailing should not contain too many Call-To-Actions to prevent confusion, the best location to place these is obviously above the fold, in the top two inches of the email, especially in B2B.

Average click-rate according to Call-To-Action location



Source : Silverpop White Paper, Email creative that works, 2007

10. Use of personalization

User personalization

Personalization about the recipient is both possible and recommended within both the subject line and the first sentences of the email.

Content personalization

Content personalization is now flexible and available within most advanced ESP solutions, through the use of one-to-one, dynamic content areas.

For instance, Harte-Hanks has delivered a newsletter with as many as nine different dynamic zones generating over 40 000 possible combinations. Results are high, open rates are five times and click rates are 3.3 times the same static newsletter.

11. Overall size

The whole emailing package should not be more than 50 Kb (Kilo Bytes). The bigger the email in a client's mailbox, the longer to load the email and the more intrusive you appear. The longer it takes to load the email, the greater the decline in open and click rates.

12. Overall text length

Consider Internet copywriting rules carefully : get straight to the point, use as many shortcuts as possible in your creative, and repeat only the most important information several times.

Three or four short paragraphs should be enough to communicate your main message, because you want to insert your links or Call-To-Action as high and early as possible within the email.

If not, you need to shrink the copy using several tips. For example:

1. Divide your information into several layers, or parts, providing more and more detailed information in each layer. Then, select only the first layer to include in the email, and place the remainder on your website.
2. Insert a column and place secondary information in small rectangular areas either at the left or right of the main text message.
3. Include a navigation bar at the top of your email, reflecting some of your website content which will reduce the need for explanatory text .

Feel free to contact me for any question related to this document.

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