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Case Study

Jan 26, 2007

How to Improve Email Deliverability: 3 Steps Tested by Real-Life Mailer

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SUMMARY

When considering how important deliverability is to an email marketer's overall success, the adage "Showing up is half the battle" comes to mind.

Simply put, you cannot take your delivery rate for granted because each ISP has its own rules when it comes to bounces. In fact, according to data from MarketingSherpa's latest Email Marketing Benchmark Guide, 25% of business-to-consumer marketers surveyed said they've seen a significant increase in bounce rates.

By altering their delivery methods, see how a leading techie career-based Web site - extremely dependent on email to drive every aspect of the firm -- exceeded their expectations when they set out to increase the number of people receiving their daily messages.

CHALLENGE

"We assumed that deliverability was successful unless we saw otherwise," says Ed O'Neill, Director of Technical Services for Dice. "What we were never able to explain is that we had peaks and valleys in the performance of our campaigns, and we couldn't really point the result to something specific. We thought, 'Well, maybe it just wasn't that great of an ad or it was a bad week and people didn't read their email.' "

For Dice, email is a huge chunk of what drives their main revenue channel; employers and staffing firms pay an advertising rate based significantly on the exposure that email drives to the site. With an average volume of a half million techies per day receiving their Jobs Alert newsletter, O'Neill suspected last spring that some email was not being received.

CAMPAIGN

To start, O'Neill and his team conducted an audit, resulting in evidence that approximately 10% of their email wasn't reaching its intended audience. With nearly all of the company's 200 employees dedicated to marketing and sales, O'Neill didn't have the staff to tackle the issue alone, so he went looking for help outside. Here are the three strategies he took:

Strategy #1. Pinpoint the right solution

O'Neill didn't rely on sales pitches or product demos to make his decision in terms of which vendor to trust with upgrading deliverability. Instead, after doing extensive industry research, he focused on two companies and ran in-house "proof-of-concept" tests on their systems.

"If the first two didn't show what we needed to see, I would've gone on and done a proof-of-concept with a third competitor and then a fourth and so on until I found the right fit," he says.

Six key points he looked for:

- Ability to consistently validate delivery
- Ability to identify deliverability problems and take immediate corrective action
- Ability to track trends by ISP, campaign or type of communication
- Cost-effective operational recover

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- Substantial cost savings due to system consolidation and aggregation
- Support Linux on their Intel hardware

Ultimately, O'Neill went with one of the first two vendors considered.

Strategy #2. Implementation & transitioning

Dice's previous email program used 15 different mail servers, which made campaign monitoring and management complex, expensive and impractical. In addition, there was no way to effectively track deliverability, resolve bounced email or handle high email volumes.

It's worth noting that O'Neill didn't just jump in with both feet. First, he and his team administered a transition phase where they established a final baseline for the performance of the old system. After a weeklong installation procedure, the new bells and whistles came on and a monthlong pilot began.

Adding tracking systems to the old multiserver system would have been an overly complex endeavor. "It would have taken an army of 'admins' to correctly add those services across 15 platforms," he says. "After we turned it on, we wanted to see a 5% improvement in deliverability. We were already seeing a rate of 85% and 90%, so the bar was set high."

Strategy #3. Manage bounces

O'Neill set up the system so every 5,000 bounces would roll into about 20 categories, such as mailbox full, marked as spam and blacklisted. Separate categories were created to show what percentages of those types of bounces derived from techie favorites such as Yahoo! and Gmail, as well as AOL, Hotmail and others.

"The post-campaign analysis is designed to allow the marketing team to identify deliverability effectiveness, negative feedback and positive results, such as good landing page conversions," O'Neill says. "The idea was to take the blinders off and to say goodbye to best-guess analysis."

RESULTS

The upgraded program accomplished Dice's primary goals -- and more, improving deliverability by 6% (equaling 30,000 recipients). According to O'Neill, the system paid for itself in the first 90 days, and HR projects that it will equate to cost-savings of more than \$1 million over the next three years.

"It would take a tremendous amount of marketing dollars to develop 30,000 new job-seeker customers or members," he says. "You have to remember that the techie crowd is among the earliest adapter groups to the Internet, so they are more particular about the messages they receive. Acquiring such a large group, which was saved by the system, would certainly be expensive."

Since Dice began transmitting email via the system, they consistently deliver more than 95% of their messages. O'Neill has also seen a marked increase in speed of delivery. "It used to take six hours to send a half-million Job Alerts. Now, it takes less than an hour. In fact, because each message is unique, we can't generate them fast enough to outrun [the new] server."

O'Neill and his marketing team also have time to monitor email campaigns more effectively and react immediately to any deliverability issues that arise. "Today, if a message bounces back, for example, we know right away why it didn't get to the recipient and can make immediate adjustments."

On the subject of ISPs, O'Neill advises marketers to learn as much as they can about each email service's various deliverability requirements.

Useful links related to this article

Note: Would you like some one-on-one advice to improve your delivery? A Delivery Clinic, featuring expert consultants, is being held as a part of MarketingSherpa's Email Marketing Summit in Miami March 4-6th. More info;

<http://www.sherpastore.com/Email-Summit.html?1153>

Creative samples from Dice's deliverability efforts:

<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/dice/study.html>

Message Systems - the email deliverability/tracking software provider Dice

uses:

<http://www.messagesystems.com>

Habeas - also provided software for the project:

<http://www.habeas.com/>

Dice

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