PREVENTING AND AVOIDING EMAIL FATIGUE

Best Practices for Keeping Email Performance on Track
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Email marketing continues to be the most cost-effective strategy for building and maintaining relationships with customers. According to the Direct Marketing Association, email returned $45.06 for every dollar spent on it in 2008. That’s a remarkable return on investment, and far better than other channels available to marketers. Yet the promise of that golden ROI can also tempt marketers to misuse or push the limits of the medium. Sending too much email, or irrelevant email, can lead to email fatigue – where recipients unsubscribe from your mailings or mark your messages as spam. It’s a problem that’s likely to become more acute in the years ahead. The DMA has projected that ROI for email will decrease to $37.99 for every dollar spent on it by 2013. As such, what can email marketers do to ensure that their campaigns and programs continue to perform well and deliver healthy ROI?

Don’t: Treat Email as a Broadcast Medium
Never lose sight of the fact that email is a direct marketing channel. It may deliver remarkable results for the price, but dialing up the volume or frequency of emails may be the wrong way to go if your objective is to retain subscribers and optimize deliverability and effectiveness. Targeting too broad an audience with irrelevant content and incessant emails can quickly lead to email fatigue, or worse, damage to your brand reputation. Unfortunately, many marketers fail to recognize the symptoms of email fatigue until they’ve already lost a considerable number of subscribers. In truth, many marketers reason that email is terribly easy and cheap – and so they’ll send blast emails as long as they are generating enough response to justify their efforts. But if email is not used carefully, the initial cost and ease will backfire in the form of lost value for the brand. If the customer tires of the communication and opts to find another provider, the opportunity cost may be far higher – after all, anyone may be able to afford mass emails, but can you really afford to degrade your brand?

Don’t: Send Irrelevant Messages
Email fatigue is the result of two things: irrelevance and volume. Put yourself in your customers’ shoes for a moment: You’ve ordered from an online retailer a few times during the course of a year, and now that you are on their general subscriber list, you are receiving weekly, or even daily, emails from them. In the beginning, you open each one, but since most of the emails aren’t of interest to you, and they come so frequently, you start

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to ignore them. Whether or not you are still interested in their products, you are becoming disengaged with the brand because of the irrelevance of their messaging – not the quality or usefulness of their products, necessarily. After a while, you have to delete a chunk of email from this company whenever you check your inbox. And eventually, you decide that the time has come to unsubscribe or hit the spam button and take care of the problem permanently.

Don’t: Send Excessive Volumes of Messages
Cadence – the frequency with which you send messages – can be just as important as the relevance of the content. Consider our example above with the online retailer, and ask yourself: what exactly is the appropriate response for re-engaging with shoppers? A daily email? Weekly? Monthly? Occasional interest demonstrated through a couple of purchases a year does not indicate a desire for daily contact through email, though it very well might demonstrate an openness to the occasional special offer, or perhaps a monthly message. Consider the needs, desires and preferences of the customer, and tune your email accordingly as their needs change over time.

Do: Ask For Permission – Again And Again
Many marketers wrongly believe permission is permanent, when that’s simply not the case. Permission is not evergreen, nor is capturing it once adequate for all purposes. A customer may express interest in receiving communications from you, but it is important to note that these preferences may change over time. To avoid losing potential revenue, marketers should continually refresh permission in order to keep pace with the ever-evolving needs and preferences of the customer. The best way to do this is to build in an interactive component into your mailings in which you prompt a response from the customer to continually solicit and eventually fine-tune your messaging just for them.

Do: Establish Performance Benchmarks To Accurately Gauge Results
So, how can marketers detect email fatigue before it sets in? Simply put, look no further than the results of any particular campaign. The metrics are available – email affords the unique ability to look at deliverability rates, click-throughs and actual sales. Pay special attention to these metrics and act upon them instantly. It’s important to remember that email fatigue is relative to what’s normal for your particular company and product category. So the first step is to determine your benchmark based on your average click rates over time. Be mindful that rates vary according to different audiences and different types of email communications (newsletter, product sell, transactional). A steadily declining average click
rate is a sure indicator that your content, offer, and/or mail frequency needs close scrutiny. A sudden drop-off suggests something went particularly wrong and warrants immediate investigation.

**Do: Cull Unresponsive and Inactive Recipients**

What specific rates might signal a rise in email fatigue? Taking into account seasonality and your own benchmarks, a drop-off of 10 percent or more would suggest the onset of email fatigue. You should be specifically concerned about customers who have not opened or clicked after three to six mailings. The longer the mail cadence – monthly versus bi-weekly, for example – the more concerned you should be about their inactivity. If your re-engagement efforts fail to prompt a response after several attempts, you should consider removing inactive customers from your list, or moving them into the lower-priority segments of your list.

**Do: Work To Understand Customer Preferences**

In addition to examining aggregate trends, email marketers should look at the performance of specific segments, particularly their most high-value and most loyal customers. As click activity slows or stops, those customers should be targeted for specific re-engagement messages and offers. Of course, what you say to formerly brand-loyal customers would be different from those with more limited relationships. But in both cases, your objective should be to solicit feedback on their needs and preferences so you can adjust messaging to prompt renewed engagement. Secondly, continually survey your customers and find other ways to prompt interaction. The key to avoiding email fatigue is to recognize that permission isn’t eternal, preferences aren’t static, and customer needs aren’t set in stone. Build mechanisms into all of your communications for customers to tell you about their current needs and how your content can be made more relevant to them. And, of course, act on what your customers tell you.

**Do: Segment Your List**

Studies have repeatedly shown a direct correlation between the level of engagement and the propensity to hit the spam button – and too many spam complaints could jeopardize delivery of your email even to those who are still actively engaged with your brand. First, segment your list based on name source and level of engagement. The biggest mistake email marketers make is sending the same message at the same frequency to everyone. Names acquired through email appends, list rental, and/or co-registration aren’t likely to see the same value in your brand as those customers who have been buying from you all along. So don’t treat them the same. Similarly, customers who once exhibited high open and click
activity but now don’t shouldn’t be sent the same messages at the same frequency as others. Find out what’s changed with their needs and/or preferences. Not doing so is tempting a total disengagement from your brand.

**Do: Work To Build Trust In Your Brand**

Building trust in your brand, obviously, is critical. Yet how exactly do you go about convincing clients, customers and prospects that your brand can be trusted? It’s important to leverage all the technology and best practices available that can help you create a reputation for using email responsibly. One important avenue available to email marketers today is authentication. With growing adoption of authentication technologies, including Sender Policy Framework (SPF) and Domain Key Identified Mail (DKIM), email marketers are gaining visibility into the anti-spam efforts undertaken by ISPs. With authentication comes accountability. In the new trust environment for email marketers, it will become easier to use techniques such as segregation of IP/domains and subdomains to improve deliverability rates. Large enterprises, especially, will be able to mirror their email origination to their business structure – segregating mail types (i.e. class of sender, class of mail) by division or business unit. Organizations getting this right will benefit greatly because consistently tying brand to sending sources provides predictability to your customers, and helps to ensure against spoofing and identity theft. The cumulative effect over time helps to build and maintain a solid reputation as a trusted brand.

**Do: Embrace IP/Domain Segregation to Control Risk**

For large enterprises, service providers and affiliate marketers, domain segregation is also very important to managing the risks associated with taking on new clients, or incorporating new lists or unknown data sources. The idea is to take action to isolate and manage risk before damage can be done to the specific delivery, or your brand reputation. Today’s email origination and campaign management tools enable you to do this by categorizing senders by risk profile and setting sending rules by risk (class of sender/mail). The more sophisticated tools also allow you to modify sending rules in real time based on delivery results, and then isolate results by sender in order to recalculate reputation and re-categorize recipients to drive future sending rules. Again, done right, the effect over time is to prevent or reduce email fatigue, and maintain a strong brand reputation.
CONCLUSION: THINK LIKE A CUSTOMER
In order to continue to succeed in their email marketing efforts, marketers need to think beyond the immediate email campaign and put themselves in their customers’ shoes. Remember, the key to success is to keep your recipients interested and engaged. By making a dedicated effort to stay attuned to customer needs, employ best practices and leverage the right technology solutions, you can avoid the pitfalls of email and brand fatigue in your campaigns. You can deliver against revenue objectives while building brand-loyal customer relationships for the long term. It’s no secret that trusted brands enjoy higher delivery rates, and fewer false positives. With better placement in the inbox, image and link rendering improves. End-users have less clutter in their inboxes, so they’re more likely to read the messages they receive. With a trusted brand reputation, your email campaigns and programs ultimately perform better. You get higher response and conversion rates, with positive implications for your bottom line and your return on investment.
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