

# Marketing Effectively by E-mail

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 10/19/2007

E-mail should be an essential part of any Internet marketing strategy. If you have someone's e-mail address, you can send them information directly, much as you would in a direct mail campaign—except the cost of mailing is free. Even so, that's only an advantage if the recipients have agreed to accept your messages. It is absolutely *crucial* to get permission first. Also, remember that e-mail is a double-edged sword:

- It allows you to build a rapport with your customers as you maintain regular contact with them.
- It should deliver only requested information. Never send unsolicited e-mails, or *spam*.

## What You Need to Know

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### How often should I send e-mail to customers?

There is no prescribed frequency, but probably no more often than weekly, unless you're sending a daily news update. Because e-mail is a fast, simple, and cost-effective form of communication, it is tempting to use it at every opportunity. Unless the information you send is valuable, though, you run the risk of annoying and alienating your customers—exactly the opposite of what you want to do.

### Should my newsletter be free?

It depends on the focus of your business. If you are publishing information, it is hard to see how an advertising-only business model can be successful. However, if you are using the information you send to help sell some other product or service, it is highly unlikely that anyone will be willing to pay for it.

### What constitutes *spam*?

Spam is the name given to mass-distributed, unsolicited e-mail (much to the chagrin of the manufacturer of SPAM luncheon meat, which inspired the name). The Internet version of spam is a major problem, since it is easy to buy a database of millions of e-mail addresses and send unsolicited messages to each one of them. If you want to be seen as a reputable business, don't send spam! Given pending legislation in a number of countries, it may well become illegal.

## **What are the approaches to soliciting e-mail addresses?**

An “opt-in” approach requests a consumer to give you his or her e-mail address so you can send e-mail. However, the “double opt-in” is becoming the prevailing practice: A person receives a request to subscribe to a series of e-mail messages, then replies to the messages’ sender to verify that the response did in fact come from the originating e-mail address. This ensures that the originating e-mail address was not maliciously created by a third party.

## **Must I buy software or can it be rented?**

Very often it is better to rent software or use a distribution service. There are a number of organizations that offer professional e-mail management services, and a Web site that describes leading providers appears below.

## **What to Do**

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### **Determine the Information Need**

The first step in any e-mail strategy is to isolate the information needs of your target market. What sort of information would it find useful: information about new products and special offers? information about trends within your industry? opinions? Determine what sort of information would make those in that market want to give you their e-mail addresses.

### **Define Your Scope, Format, and Schedule**

Once you have defined an information need, you must make clear what the scope of your e-mail communiqué will be. If it is to be, for example, a newsletter publication, what exactly will a person get by subscribing? Unless you are delivering very time-sensitive information, a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly publication is usually sufficient.

### **Make the Subscription Process Easy**

Getting people to subscribe is vital to the success of your e-mail strategy. Consequently, a prominent box should be on your Web site encouraging people to subscribe. Also include subscription details

in every mailing that you send. Don't ask too many questions in the subscription process, because it discourages people from signing up.

Many successful e-mail newsletter providers only ask for the e-mail address of the subscriber. That makes it a very easy and quick process for the potential subscriber. You can always ask for more information later, once you have established a stronger relationship with a given subscriber. As a rule, the more valuable your information is to subscribers, the more information you can ask of them.

## **Make Unsubscribing Just As Easy**

It is equally important to ensure that the unsubscribing process is simple. People can get frustrated and angry quickly if they find it difficult to cancel a service. Some might think you have started spamming them.

## **Tempt People with a Free “Teaser”**

If you plan to offer a commercial service and charge people to subscribe, it is a good idea to first offer free e-mail messages that contain brief summaries of what the paid service includes. It may also be good to offer a free trial period, so that the subscriber can get an understanding of what you have to offer—and an appreciation of it.

## **Decide Between Plain Text or HTML**

There are two basic format options you can use when delivering an e-mail to your subscriber base: plain text and HTML. Plain text is just like a standard e-mail and is the simplest and easiest to produce. HTML is more sophisticated and resembles an e-mail version of a Web page. It will deliver more impact and color, but is more expensive to produce, and a number of older e-mail systems have difficulty receiving and reading HTML. If you decide to use the HTML option, it's best to offer a plain text version, too, or a significant number of people may be unable to subscribe to your service.

For plain-text e-mail, keep the line length of text between 65 and 70 characters to avoid breaking lines, which makes the layout look very ugly. Keep paragraphs nice and short; five to six lines is ideal. Use capitals for headings. Because plain text e-mails do not allow the use of bold or different sizes of letters, capitalizing is the only way to denote emphasis. Use a non-proportional font such as Courier or Arial, since it remains constant regardless of the e-mail package being used.

## **Remember That Brevity is the Spice of E-mail Newsletters**

Think of what you are doing in delivering a publication: You're trying to get people to read something that will make them take action—to buy your product or service, for example. The scarcest commodity today is people's time. Nobody will read an e-mail that goes on and on, so focus on punchy headings and short summaries. Limit articles no more than 500 to 600 words. The entire e-mail should not exceed 1,500 words, unless you have a dedicated audience that you know is willing to read more. So keep things short, and always present some call to action.

## **Ensure That You Include a Strong Subject Line**

The subject line is what subscribers see first when they download e-mail. Because people are so busy, they tend to scan the subject line; if it's not interesting, they delete the message. However, if you are sending out a continuing publication you may wish to feature its title and date in the subject line. In the body of the e-mail itself, it's good to have a table of contents near the top, to let readers know what to expect and look for as they continue.

## **Include Hypertext and E-mail Addresses**

It's a good idea to use hypertext to link to your Web site to encourage subscribers to get more information, purchase your product, and remain involved. However, when including a hyperlink, always use the full URL. For example, don't use "www.mycompany.com"; instead, use "http://www.mycompany.com." Some older e-mail systems will not automatically turn the URL into an active link unless you include the full address. Also, if you have a URL that is more than 65 characters long, put it in angle brackets. Otherwise, a number of e-mail systems will break the URL onto two lines and render it unusable. If you are including an e-mail address, insert a "mailto": before the e-mail address itself; this will turn it into a link to the subscriber's e-mail system. For example: "mailto:dirk@mycompany.com."

## **Don't Forget the Basics!**

Every reputable e-mail message should contain the following items:

- Subject line (title) and date
- Subscription and un-subscription information
- Copyright and privacy policies (or links to them on a Web site)

- E-mail contact details (telephone and address may also be included)
- Links to the related Web site

Also include brief information about the publication, its schedule, and scope.

## What to Avoid

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### **You Use “Bait and Switch” Techniques**

Make very clear to potential subscribers exactly what they are subscribing to. If your forte is to be special offers, tell them so. Don't pretend that you're going to send “valuable updates” on a particular industry and then just send special offers.

### **You Fail To Meeting a Real Need**

Ask yourself this question: “Why would anyone want to read this?” Too many e-mail mailings are full of useless, repetitive, dubious, or outdated information.

### **You Don't Meet Your Publication Schedule**

If you say you will deliver an e-mail every Wednesday, do it! Being late risks losing credibility and subscribers.

### **You Have Cumbersome Subscription and Unsubscription Procedures**

Make it difficult for individuals to subscribe and they just won't bother. By the same token, if you make it difficult for people to unsubscribe, they'll become irate with good reason.

## You “Spam” People

Never add people to subscription lists against their will or without their expressed permission. Sending unsolicited e-mail is a would-be “get rich quick” strategy. It will damage your long-term reputation—and it won’t make you rich, either.

## Where to Learn More

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### Book:

Baggott, Chris and Ali Sales. *Email Marketing By the Numbers: How to Use the World’s Greatest Marketing Tool to Take Any Organization to the Next Level*. Wiley, 2007.

### Web Sites:

Clickz Experts: [www.clickz.com/em\\_mkt/em\\_mkt](http://www.clickz.com/em_mkt/em_mkt)

Directory of professional e-mail management services:

[http://directory.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/E-mail/Mailing\\_Lists/Hosted\\_Services](http://directory.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/E-mail/Mailing_Lists/Hosted_Services)