

How to improve your email relationships

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In the first of a series of three guides to email marketing, Volker Wiewer, CEO of digital direct marketing agency eCircle, discusses the importance of maintaining meaningful email relationships.

The online interaction between you and your customers is a relationship like any other. It requires time, effort and consideration, all delivered with a personal touch. Making the first move isn't enough – constant attention is key if you want to extract the maximum from your new acquaintance. Beyond that, the correspondence must be convenient, and delivered in a way most appropriate to the recipient. Essentially, the tricks of fostering effective email relationships can be broken down into four simple steps.

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Personalisation

The benefits of getting this first stage right are endless. We all recognise the difference between receiving a mailer addressed 'To the Homeowner' and one that addresses you by name. We've all been distracted, amused or entertained by a viral that applies our name cleverly, or by communication that features aerial shots of our home. It's now possible for organisations to personalise communications with their customers at a number of stages for little or no extra cost and you will notice the results immediately. Everyone responds better to marketing that feels like it was truly meant for us.

Furthermore, personalisation doesn't just mean greeting your customers by name at the start of the email. It's an opportunity to build up knowledge of each individual customer and thus keep them happy at every stage of the customer lifecycle. Make your email more relevant by using personalisation and segmentation techniques such as: using your customer's name in the greeting; sending a birthday email; sending them content based on where they live etc. We all like to be made to feel special. If your customers are important to you, then make that clear through the way you communicate with them.

Say thank you

If a customer walks into a store and makes a purchase, they will be automatically thanked for their custom. It makes sense – thank you for choosing us, thank you for becoming our customer, thank you for spending your hard-earned cash with us. However these basic manners don't seem to have transferred to the online world and it's staggering how many organisations forget to say 'thank you'.

If your chief concern is one-off purchase, then feel free to drop your online manners. But if you are going after genuine customer loyalty and brand advocacy then it's key that you follow up the initial contact with a simple but effective 'thank you'. And of course, the degree to which you personalise your gratitude will play a part in how successful it is. A generic 'thanks for your custom' is a start. A 'thanks for buying this particular product, have you checked out this similar one? See you again soon' could make the difference between a flirtation with your brand and a long-term relationship.

Make the content relevant to your customer

If a consumer grants you the opportunity to communicate with them on a regular basis, then that is probably because it is relevant to their lifestyle and interests them. But as soon as the relevance dwindles, or they become less interested in the content of your correspondence then they will terminate the relationship. Consequently your content should be dictated not by you, but by the recipients. Always ask your customers what information they would like to receive and listen intently to the answer.

This approach addresses a number of challenges. It makes your customer feel important and valued. It means that your communications are informed and insightful. And it means that your message is far more likely to be heard. You want people to look forward to receiving your email so give them good reason to do so by sending them correspondence which is highly targeted to their interests. Luxury store Harvey Nichols now has a number of different newsletter templates to different segments of their database according to their customers' preferences. Using eC-messenger, they identify store preference, gender, age, and interests to segment their database further for future campaigns. This has worked excellently to increase the brand loyalty, boost restaurant bookings and drive more customers in-store.

Give them a reason to come back

As clichés go, it's one of the oldest, but actions really do speak louder than words. Supporting your gratitude with a gesture can be very effective. Offering a gift or discount is definitely something you should consider as a way of rewarding your customers for their loyalty. Marketers are often guilty of going after the new prospect whilst leaving behind potentially loyal customers. A unique Christmas email campaign by one of our clients, Tourism Ireland, cleverly engaged their users in the shape of an advent calendar where customers were invited to open a door every day for 24 days. They sent a daily reminder about the calendar to remind them to open the next door, delivering snippets of personalised information each day, tightening the bond with their users. The results spoke for themselves with opening rates of up to 72 per cent and click rates of between 72 per cent and 97 per cent the nearer it got to Christmas.

Using your email communications as a way of demonstrating your gratitude and continued consideration for a new customer means you can really extract maximum value from a channel that already cost-effective by its very nature. Professional email marketing software automates many of these steps so that the additional cost of individualising communication with your clients becomes less and less of an issue for many companies.

All relationships need work, and an email relationship is no different. By breaking the process down into these four simple stages, digital marketers can ensure that their email marketing works harder and really resonates with recipients. Start by making the consumer feel like an individual not just an inbox, apply the same manners to your online communications as you would to your real-life interactions, pay attention to what the consumer wants to see and finally, reward them for their loyalty. Utilising the basic tools of any digital marketing campaign will ensure your communications are relevant, meaningful, effective and the basis for a beautiful relationship.