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Guest comment: Best practice email marketing

Added: Feb 24, 2009

In their bid to find the 'next big thing' email marketers can often overlook some simple steps that could ensure a better return. Volker Wiewer, CEO of eCircle, presents a best practice guide to help get the most out of the medium.

For far too long, email marketers have been happy to stick by the false belief that the junk mail tag only applies to the offline communications that consumers receive, when in fact, any form of marketing that is mistargeted, badly composed or difficult to respond to can – and should be – classified as junk. The consumer's day is crowded and to ensure cut-through, email marketers need to ensure they employ some basic best practice steps.

This may sound like common sense but you'd be surprised how many companies slip at the first hurdle over these simple mistakes. My first tip is to use your companies name as addresses for more attention. It amazes me how many companies don't do this – possible as a tactic to remain informal and personal. But this will only ensure your email is sent straight into the junk folder. Rely on your good name and use your brand as the deliverer address; that way you are legally on the safe side and you will pop up as a familiar name in your targets inbox.

Once you've got the address and title right and the individual has opened your email you can move onto thinking about the best possible content. Pictures are a great way to enhance the performance of your communications but only if they are relevant to the content. Be careful with this, as irrelevant pictures can actually have a negative impact on your communications and your brand. It is also wise to design your emails assuming that not everyone will be able to see the pictures. Automatic image suppression is the digital creative director's worst nightmare, but it's a fact of life, so make sure your message gets through with or without the pictures.

Marketer's often make the mistake of limiting themselves to one channel of communications. Just because you are sending out the message via email doesn't mean that your multi-channel customers want to reply to you that way. Where possible feature phone numbers, postal addresses, website links and anything else that will make it easier for your customers to talk back to you.

Another often-missed opportunity is acknowledging that some people simply prefer reading in a browser rather than a preview window. Again, this is about giving the consumer the choice, and making sure that you make it as easy as possible for them to receive your message. Integrate a link to the web version in as prominent a place as possible.

Companies spend huge amounts of money generating fresh leads for their campaigns but neglect to highlight to customers that they can forward the message on. A recommendation from your audience is what every marketer wants. A link within the email as oppose to someone manually forwarding the email on also lets you track how many people it's passed onto. What better way to prove the success of your campaign than having it supported by your customers?

Finally if your emails are part of regular communications make sure your users can link through to update their own data. This will ensure you don't lose valuable customers if they change email address or even allow them to tailor the emails they are subscribed to better, which will give you a higher level of engagement. This approach also means you are far more likely to avoid the dreaded unsubscription. If you give your audience the chance to say 'this isn't quite right for me, but here's what would be really useful, thanks!' then you reduce the chances of them saying 'Unsubscribe me'.

In essence, the key to getting email best practice right is to remember the point of your email communications. You want to reach your target audience with a specific message. So once you start forgetting the audience or the message, you will start running into trouble, and risk falling foul of the spam tag. Target your audience correctly, engage with your audience, make it easy for them to respond and keep the lines of communication open - and everything else will fall into place.

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