

Best Practices in E-mail Design

Introduction

You have your mailing list and have decided on your promotion. All that remains is to design your e-mail to get your message out to your customers in an effective way. As the owner of small business, you may be on a first name basis with many (most) customers, but people communicate in different ways. What may work for one customer may leave another wondering, “What is this and how does it relate to me?”

Despite these differences, there are certain principles that remain universally true when designing an effective e-mail campaign.

Branding

Your brand is the visual personification of your company, its identity. It’s important that your e-mail designs stay true to this identity that you have built up for your customers. One basic way in which this is done is ensuring you’re using your company’s logo in your communications. Other ways to ensure a consistent brand experience are:

- Use of your domain e-mail address, Example: yourname@websiteaddress.com
- Use subject lines that speak in familiar terms to your customers, are 60 characters or less, and if possible, personalize it! Example: “Joe, here are your May specials from House of Golf”
- Use copy, images, and colors that fit in with your brand. If you offer an atmosphere at your company that is casual, and your message is draped in formality, odds are your subscribers won’t get it – or take the time to read it.

Layout

Simple, is quite simply the best approach. Your message needs to be easy to read, and your call to action clear. What is it that you would like your recipient to do? The answer to that question must be arrived at quickly, or you’ll lose their attention. The average e-mail Inbox is a competitive place and only the strong (and direct) survive.

- Outline, in advance, what you would like to communicate; then prioritize your list.

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- Place your most important content at the top of your message and on the left hand side. Start with your call to action (Click here for 20% off), or your value proposition (This week's featured topic is hair care.)
- Balance your amount of text (copy) and images. Your images should enhance the message you'd like to deliver, not be the sole manner in which you communicate them. Make sure that key messages such as your call to action and your headlines, are rendered in text.

Images

There are many e-mail services that block images by default. Unless your subscribers have actively changed their settings to view images, yours will appear as empty boxes in their message. This is why it is important that key messages are rendered in text.

- Avoid large images that dominate your message; this is important not only for when images are blocked, but when they're not. Asking your subscribers to scroll endlessly over a large image, particularly when on their mobile devices, can be a one-way ticket to the trash folder.
- Remember that many of your customers will be using a preview pane in their e-mail. This means that important text should be placed toward the top and to the left and images should be used sparingly in these areas. If images are blocked, this ensures your subscriber can still get the point of your message and they can then make the decision to open it, and/or unblock images.
- Use an ALT_TAG on all images, large and small. An ALT_TAG is a label that is attached to an image that describes what it is, or what message is delivered within.

Formatting text

Color and space are an excellent way to highlight key points in your e-mail copy and can be used to draw attention to certain sections of your e-mail you want to be sure that your subscribers read. Other contrasting elements can be employed such as:

- Underline
- Italics
- Bold font

When using these elements to format your text, also remember to keep things simple and not combine too many of them at once, or throughout your message.

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Tips for preparing content

One of the most daunting tasks can be preparing to get your content ready for your e-mail message. Images have been selected, a layout chosen, now what to say?

- Keep it short. Use as few words as possible to make your point. In general, a newsletter should not exceed 700 words.
- Do your homework. Review marketing messages and newsletters that you receive carefully. Which of these do you pay the most attention to and why? Get out there and shop the competition and see what they're doing. Observing and learning from the practices of others can be an excellent source of ideas and inspiration.
- Know your audience. Ensure that the content that you plan to include is *relevant* to your subscribers. Consideration should be given to their needs and preferences. If your message is interesting to them, they will open it. If they open it, you have an opportunity to achieve your goal.
- Your subscribers like to hear about new products or deals, but your messages can (and should) offer much more in terms of industry insights, how-tos, and current trends. This adds perspective for your audience and gives you an opportunity to provide additional value.
- Include links or a call to action. Be certain that each person who reads your e-mail is clear on what you would like them to do next: click, call, sign up or buy now.

Testing

The hard work and careful planning is done, now it's time to ensure that it pays off with a well-executed e-mail. Always incorporate a plan to test your e-mail prior to distribution.

- Proofread. Your message must be free of spelling errors and poor grammar. Be sure to spell check and re-read your copy and complete any final edits. A second set of eyes from a friend, family member, or business associate can help you catch things you may have missed.
- Verify your links are working, and routing to your intended destinations.
- What does your e-mail look like in Yahoo! Mail, Gmail, and Hotmail? Maintain accounts at these providers and distribute the message to yourself first to observe how it comes across. Make any necessary adjustments after you see what your customers will.

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Conclusion

E-mail continues to be one of the most successful targeted marketing channels available to businesses. When done effectively, e-mail marketing enables small business owners to deliver professional and targeted messages with minimal investment allowing them to compete with their larger competitors.

E-mail services, such as those offered by Web.com, enable small businesses to quickly and easily create e-mail campaigns with little or no technical knowledge, to help improve sales and customer satisfaction.

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