

Email deliverability: The good, the bad and the ugly





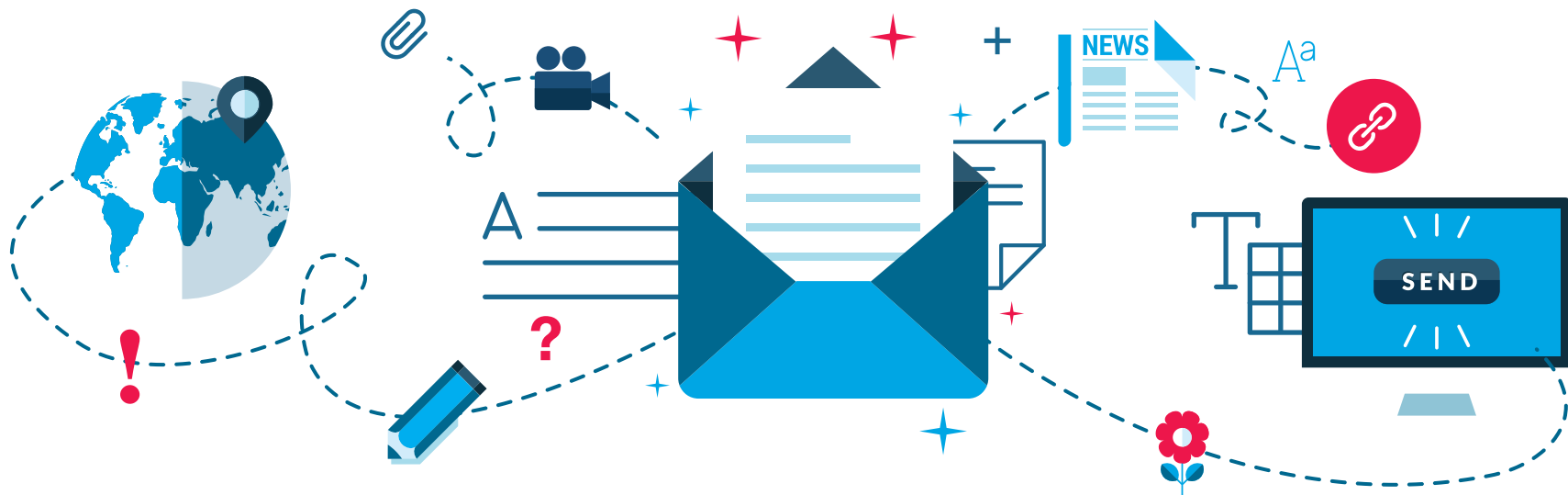
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Introduction

When it comes to email marketing and deliverability, it can sometimes seem like the Wild West. With so many best practices and tips out there claiming they will help make the most of your email campaigns, it's no wonder marketers are confused. In fact, the 2015 Experian Data Quality Benchmark report found 78 percent of marketers have had email deliverability problems in the last 12 months – up from 67 percent in 2014.

Deliverability is the cornerstone of a successful email marketing program. If your emails aren't making it to the inbox, it doesn't matter how targeted your audience is, how relevant your content is or how compelling your offer is. With 36 percent of companies naming email as their most important communication channel for in 2015, it's important to understand the various things can affect your email deliverability. Let's explore the good, the bad and the ugly behaviors that can determine the fate of your email campaigns.





The good

There are a number of things that will positively effect your sender reputation. Strong open rates, high click-through rates and email authentication are examples of things that will give your sender reputation and your email deliverability a boost.

Open rate

Open rates are an indicator of the health of your email list, and marketers should monitor this closely. If users aren't opening your messages, ISPs can become suspicious of your sending habits. High open rates seem to have a direct correlation to you your inbox deliverability because the ISP can see that users are engaged and want to receive your messages.

While measuring open rates is important, this is simply one of many different metrics that you should use to gauge campaign success. Some email clients and mobile apps will automatically open your emails, or block images, which can skew your open rates either positively or negatively.

Open rates are important because they show you're reaching valid email addresses. While they should not be considered the only indicator of success, open rates certainly a way to gauge the health of your email list and something that helps improve your deliverability.

If you feel your open rates are lower than you'd like, consider doing some testing to see how your list responds to variations in subject lines, sending frequency or list segmentation.

1. Subject line testing

Testing subject lines is an easy way to learn what messaging resonates with your audience. Personalized subject lines have shown a 26 percent increase in transaction rates according to Experian Marketing Services.

2. Frequency testing

Keeping a steady frequency of relevant campaigns throughout your customer lifecycle is a great way to ensure users stay engaged with your messages. You don't want to set up the expectation of a regular email cadence, stop sending for a while and then bombard your users with messages again, all while sending them content that is not interesting and relevant to them. This could cause them to start complaining which could potentially do catastrophic harm to your deliverability.

3. Segmentation testing

Marketers can segment their email list based on an endless number of variables. Consider segmenting based on campaign performance, engagement metrics, geographic information or customer demographics and comparing performance to see what works for your audience.



Click-through rate

Another way to understand if you currently have a positive reputation, and are positively impacting your deliverability is a strong click-through rate (CTR). Click-through rate is the number of people who click on links or other calls to action in your emails divided by the total number of messages sent.

If users are opening and engaging with your emails, you are sending truly relevant, engaging content. Relevancy is one of the most important factors in improving or maintaining your sender reputation and deliverability.

Similar to open rate testing, you can test different aspects of your email to increase your click-through rate. Here are some tips for improving your CTR.

36% of organizations name email as their most important communication channel for 2015.

- Experian Data Quality Benchmark report, 2015

1. Make CTAs more engaging

Instead of using a generic call to action (CTA) like “Click Here,” try something more engaging and descriptive to encourage users to click through. Examples include “Free Trial,” “Shop Now” or “Get started!” There are endless CTAs to test, so find what your users respond to.

2. Reserve prime real estate

CTAs don’t have to be placed at the bottom of an email. Reality is, not everyone is going to have the time to read through your entire email. Try placing CTAs closer to the top of your email so they catch the reader’s eye. Additionally, don’t rely on hyperlinks – showcase your call to action with a button or graphic that users should click on.

3. Make sure emails are mobile-optimized

Experian Marketing Services reports that 50 percent of all emails are now opened on mobile devices. To ensure a seamless mobile experience, make sure all emails and landing pages are optimized for mobile users. Keeping the click-through process as simple as possible for users on smaller screens will help improve your CTR too.



Authentication

Have you ever received an email that appears like it's from your bank, PayPal or the IRS but it turned out to be fraudulent? Most of us have seen these questionable messages in our inbox. Authentication is a way for marketers prove that their email is legitimate and for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to control spam.

There are a three types of authentication methods with varying security levels that marketers can explore: SenderID, Sender Policy Framework (SPF) and Domain Keys Identified Mail (DKIM). SenderID and SPF are fairly easy to implement but are not the most secure level of authentication. They simply require a file on your server that can be cross-referenced by the ISP to verify the legitimacy of an email. DKIM actually embeds code that verifies your server into the email itself, making it harder to forge. DKIM is more secure, but this authentication type is also tougher to implement.

If large portions of your list include major domains like Gmail, Yahoo!, AOL and others, you want to make sure that you are authenticating your emails with at least SPF and DKIM. Email authentication makes your marketing campaigns more reputable, which will help improve your overall deliverability rates.

DMARC, or Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting and Conformance, is an additional way for email senders and receivers to coordinate to combat phishing and email spoofing attacks. For an email sender, DMARC allows them to indicate that their emails are protected by SPF or DKIM. For an email receiver, DMARC tells them whether to place the message in the inbox, junk folder or block the message entirely, keeping end users safe from fraudulent or harmful emails.

If you are mailing through an email service provider, campaign management system or a marketing automation platform, your service provider is likely providing authentication on your behalf, but it is key for marketers to understand the importance of authentication and how it can affect deliverability.

The bad

These are things that negatively affect your ability to reach the inbox. Deleted unread messages, incorrect HTML coding and missing legal information can cause challenges for deliverability and negatively affect your sender reputation.

Deleted unread

Deleted, unread messages are emails that make into the inbox but aren't being opened or read. ISPs are monitoring for these types of messages. If a user simply deletes a message without taking time to read it, they are not engaged and your message is not relevant to them. When ISPs see that users are not engaged with your emails, they will begin questioning your legitimacy and may decrease your inbox deliverability.

If you notice your emails are never being opened by a certain contact, there is a high risk that you are hitting a spam trap. While the only way to be 100 percent certain that you are not hitting spam traps is by using confirmed opt-in, there are major risks to continuing to mail to addresses that are not opening your emails. Monitoring your open and click-through rates closely will help mitigate some of this risk.





Incorrect HTML

Emails come in two formats: HTML and plain text. Incorrect HTML or plain text emails with different copy are tricks that spammers have been using for ages. Any variations between the two versions of your email are a red flag for ISPs.

Poorly coded HTML emails will negatively affect your email deliverability. Examples of bad HTML coding include messages with errors that contain decoy links, messages that contain mostly images with little text and broken tags. These things will certainly catch the attention of ISPs.

Similarly, marketers use plain text emails because some browsers, email clients, and mobile devices cannot handle HTML messages. Not having a plain text version, or having a plain text version with copy that is significantly different from your HTML version could increase the likelihood of getting your messages sent directly to the spam folder. Many email marketing platforms offer functionality that will translate your HTML coding into a plain text version at the click of a button.

Missing legal

Missing legal information is a direct violation of the CAN-SPAM Act. CAN-SPAM establishes requirements for emails sent by businesses, gives recipients the right to opt-out of receiving your messages, and defines penalties you may face for violations. Each CAN-SPAM Act violation can constitute penalties of up to \$16,000, so it's important that your business strictly adheres to the requirements.

A few critical pieces of information that must be included in your email are:

- **Who you are** – The “From,” “To” and “Reply-To” information in the header of your email must be accurate and clearly identify where the email is coming from.
- **Where you're located** – Your message must include your physical mailing address. This can be your street address, a PO box that is registered with the U.S. Post Office or a private mailbox
- **Identify your message as an ad** – Do not be misleading. You must clearly disclose that your message is an advertisement.
- **How to opt-out of receiving future email from you** – Your messages must include a clear way for recipients to opt out of receiving email from you in the future. It must be conspicuous and easy to understand. You can provide a return email address, a preference center or another easy Internet-based way for users to opt-out of your messages in the future.

For more information on the CAN-SPAM Act and tips for making sure you stay compliant, check out the Federal Trade Commission's CAN-SPAM Act Compliance Guide.



The ugly

Hard bounces, complaints and spam trap hits are some of the worst ways to negatively affect your email deliverability. These are things that can certainly cause deliverability issues such as getting blacklisted, or blocked. Your email marketing campaigns will be severely impacted if you don't monitor and correct these issues as quickly as possible.

Hard bounce rate

Hard bounces are emails that fail to get delivered, typically due to a non-existent, or invalid email address. Your hard bounce rate is the percentage of sent messages that cannot be delivered. High bounce rates will negatively impact your sender reputation and can cause email deliverability issues.

ISPs care about hard bounces for a number of reasons. First, it's a drain on their resources. They don't want to waste their energy on dealing with bad emails. Additionally, too many hard bounces are clear proof you're not following list hygiene best practices.

If you are seeing a high bounce rate after deploying an email campaign, you should consider using email verification software to clean up your list before sending again. Email verification solutions will identify which addresses are invalid so you can remove them from your database.

78% of organizations have had email deliverability challenges in the last 12 months.

- Experian Data Quality Benchmark report, 2015

Complaints

Are people marking your messages as junk or spam? These complainers can get you into big trouble, but if you're seeing a significant number of complaints, there is likely a reason. If a user is looking to unsubscribe and this information isn't easy to find, they may start marking your messages as junk and sending you to the spam folder rather than continuing to look for the unsubscribe link.

Another way to cut down on complaints is to make it easy for users to communicate their preferences to you. Creating a preference center where users can adjust the frequency or type of messages they receive from you is a simple way to allow users to "opt-down" instead of opting-out of emails from you entirely. Allow them to set the frequency or define the types of messages they want to receive.

If you still are struggling with complaints, analyze your database to see if you can draw conclusions or themes. Perhaps your list isn't responding well to the day or time you're sending, or they don't find the campaigns relevant. As mentioned before, try segmenting your list based on demographics or other criteria. Complaints are extremely damaging to your sender reputation and email deliverability, so marketers must identify the reason and find a solution quickly to avoid major issues.





Spam traps

Hitting spam traps is extremely detrimental to your sender reputation and deliverability. Spam traps don't click and open emails, and they certainly don't sign up for your newsletters or loyalty programs. Too many spam trap hits will undoubtedly get you blocked or blacklisted, and can do irreparable harm to your email program if you don't do something about it.

There are three different types of spam traps to watch out for.

- **Pristine traps**, also known as honeypots, are addresses that are created specifically to catch illegitimate emails and identify spammers.
- **Recycled traps** are old or abandoned email addresses that ISPs shut down and turn into traps.
- **Typo traps** are emails with misspelled domains like yahooo.com or gmial.com. These can be innocent mistakes by your users or your employees collecting addresses at point of sale, but like pristine traps, watch groups (e.g. Spamhaus or Spamcop) pay close attention to these.

When marketers find themselves blocked or blacklisted, we often hear them say, "My competitor must have gotten me on this list! We weren't doing anything wrong!" This is an email marketing myth. Your competitors cannot get your emails blocked. Only your own bad behavior and sending habits will land you on a blacklist – that's why it's important to follow best practices and keep a close eye on your sender reputation.





Tips for getting out of trouble

If you find yourself in trouble, don't panic. Following email best practices will help rebuild your sender reputation and have you reaching the inbox again in no time. Here are four tips to help get your email marketing program back on track.



Track your sender reputation. If you're not reaching the inbox, you'll never understand how your email marketing strategy is performing. Carefully monitor your sender reputation and understand what is influencing it to make sure your emails are being delivered. Organizations can visit www.senderscore.org to check their sender reputation. If your sender score is 90 or above, your reputation is good and you shouldn't be experiencing deliverability challenges. If your score is between 80 and 50, there are some areas for improvement and ways you can improve your deliverability. If your score is below 50 you will need to make some serious changes to your email marketing strategy.



Maintain a permanent home. Avoid jumping from one domain or IP address to another. To ISPs, this is an indicator that you may be a spammer and they will block your email messages. Think of your IP address like your credit score – you will build good “credit” with ISPs by maintaining a good sender reputation and mailing from a permanent home.



Be selective with your lists. When it comes to email lists, bigger isn't always better. Purchasing email lists or adding old addresses into your current database can cause irreversible damage to your sender reputation. The idea that each email address in your database has a corresponding, fixed revenue number attached to is wrong: invalid or fake addresses will actually end up costing your organization money as opposed to generating it! Sending to those bad addresses will cause your sender reputation and deliverability to take a nose dive, negatively affecting the good email addresses that actually should have a revenue number attached to them.



Confirmed opt-in. We get it; confirmed opt-in can be a scary thought for email marketers. Not only do you have to collect valid email addresses, you have to send a message asking, “Are you sure you want to receive our emails?” It's like being back in grade school and sending your crush one of those notes that read, “Do you like me? Check yes or no.”

Many people probably aren't going to double opt-in, meaning your list is going to shrink, and that means you're leaving money on the table, right? Not exactly. Confirmed opt-in email lists are going to be the highest quality, most profitable addresses in your marketing database. These are customers who really want to hear from you, so they are going to be extremely valuable to your organization.



Conclusion

Email deliverability is extremely important to a successful email marketing program. According to the 2015 Experian Data Quality Benchmark report, 78 percent of companies have experienced email deliverability challenges in the last 12 months. It's clear that email is still a tough channel for marketers to execute well. Keeping close track of your sender reputation and campaign deliverability is a critical piece of an email marketing strategy. Email can sometimes seem like the Wild West, but there are a lot of resources out there to help marketers capitalize on the good, and avoid the bad and the ugly.



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