



Published: September 29 2008

Your essential email campaign checklist

By David Baker

The standards of how you put value on your email database, how you protect it, and how you build loyalty through relevant communications have evolved. Find out what your campaign is missing.

There is no denying the value of email marketing to a business. Depending on which analyst projection you read, the return on investment for email marketing can be as high as 57:1. But email as a marketing tool has expanded from the promotional email and email newsletter to a more widely used function of the business. By using it to facilitate interactions with your website, customer support, shopping cart, event and partner channels, email has become an enterprise asset, and managing these programs can be even more of a challenge.

There are several trends in the email space, but only a few have helped drive the evolution of the channel. One is the emergence of the publisher business. Marketers have realized that an opt-in email address has value to a business, outside of a pure transactional measure. Many in the space have sought out creative ways to monetize their email newsletters through advertising and/or built out their email portfolio to support new email advertising products.

As such, the business has evolved and so have the standards of how you put value on your email database, how you protect it, and how you build loyalty and value through relevant communications. Engagement has new meaning.

Take a look at your email marketing checklist.

The approach

Email acquisition has gone through an evolution of bad practices, bad approaches and a reality check that it's more difficult to close a sale through an anonymous email from a third party. With the emergence of niche newsletters, email as a lead generation and acquisition vehicle has changed. It's easier to insert ad media in an established, very focused newsletter. Lists are more mature these days and that allows for more focused approaches to campaigns. But if you think you will have cause-and-effect from an ad to a transaction through a third-party email campaign, you may be setting yourself up for failure. Email is a great retention and lead fulfillment channel, and the acquisition stage should be looked at through a longer lens.

Phase I: Get readers to opt-in to you, so you can then re-market to them for pennies.

Phase II: Welcome them to your brand, business and promotional strategy. We call this lead incubation. Remember, each opt-in subscriber has two values to your business: sales/profits and views/impressions. We do know through various tests that if you acquire someone through an email channel, they have a 20 percent higher response value going forward than other channels (such as search, media and web).

The issues

The challenge with any acquisition program is the simple mechanics of file suppression and putting the right type of program together. In the past, the most difficult aspect was choosing the right list or publisher, and it was hit or miss. But the emergence of performance networks has shifted some of this responsibility to the networks to find the right publisher for your offer.

If you go with a very aggressive sweeps or viral program, you risk growing the file of one-time subscribers that will ultimately degrade the delivery value of your file over time, increasing opt-outs and spam complaints. I recommend you incubate any new acquisitions through programs like these for a period of time and take a hard stance on how or if you will keep them on file if they don't respond after a given period of time.

The other challenge is list suppression with many acquisition sources (lists). Companies like Unsub Central and Lashback provide these file suppression services and reputation checks that protect you through an ongoing process that may use many publishers or affiliate networks.

Segmentation

Everyone must build a simple segmentation schema for their email database. It starts as simple as product- or interest-based segmentation and then evolves to a more behavioral view and financial view of your subscribers. Here are a few key tenets to keep in mind as you're going through this exercise:

1. Don't segment unless you have a great hypothesis to test against and some thoughts on how to build action around these. I typically use product segmentation to measure variances in performance, and behavioral segmentation for triggers and action plans.
2. Make sure your segment sizes are significant. If they aren't statistically valid, you risk having meaningless results or variances that are useless in evaluating the effects of your efforts.

Permission

Most have adopted the double opt-in method, and I don't disagree with this, yet you should consider how you are using preference or member centers and how to build this into the enrollment process and subscription management. It's safe to go this route, but risky if you take a global opt-in stance on your existing file (re-opting in your database) as you risk losing a large portion of your email database through opt-in attrition.

Targeting

I'm a firm believer in using trends in consumer or business email to drive targeting and timing. There are very discrete times of the year when consumers are in their inbox. You must leverage these times to tie your message and brand to these themes.

They could be lifecycle events (life stage: had a baby, purchased a house, started a new job, graduated from college), or they could be seasonal (back to school, holidays). Your challenge is to be creative and target appropriately. Your message can easily get lost in the flood of emails on Valentine's Day or Memorial Day if you aren't creative in your offering, promotion and message.

Don't forget the social media aspect and the trends of your consumers in these environments -- they are great precursors for activity trends and when networking is most prevalent. Companies like Rappleaf can provide social media overlays to your database to give you a better view of high-value customer segments and involvement with various social media tools and environments.

Personalization

We know that if you target email based on site behavior and personalize from that data, it drives 30-40 percent increase in response and conversion. We also know that event-triggered messaging drives a 40 percent improvement in response and reach. Leverage these events and this will drive the 20 percent improvement most need to grow their business.

The challenge is to decide how much personalization you really need.

There are three key reasons to personalize:

- 1) To drive familiarity (we know you)
- 2) To provide context (we know why you subscribed and what you are interested in)
- 3) To provide functional value (how to log into the site, account update information).

The more personalization, the greater the technical task to implement. One caution: If you are even remotely worried that you can't pull it off technically or process-wise, don't do it. There is nothing worse than misrepresenting your company to a loyal customer.

Timing

As I mentioned in the targeting section, timing is key. Not just what day of the week, but building a timing schedule that balances with the way your consumers manage themselves.

If you are consumer-focused and targeting women (for instance, mothers), you'd think that mid-day during the week would be ideal, but is it? Do they shop during this time, or are you just serving as a notifier and the real shopping event is on the weekend or at night when the kids are asleep? Think hard about timing. It's a variable that is very hard to test and best to map to online personas for your most valuable customer sets. Since it evolves so quickly and may have seasonal trends, look for trends in domains to determine your effects (AOL, Hotmail, Yahoo) and you may find a few nuggets.

Cadence

How much email to send? The only way you can test this effectively is to develop a control group and expose them to different volumes of email and see the impact. Less response in high-frequency segments doesn't always mean that email is not effective. It could be that your new member experiences didn't set it up properly, or your portfolio of email communications isn't working well.

So, cadence isn't the root of email value or whether they value your brand connection, it's only a condition to use to validate the relevance and value of email and other marketing stimuli.

Testing

I'm a big proponent of testing, but it's often not done well, or the results represent such small incremental gains that it's not worth the effort. I recommend you begin by breaking down what part of the "needle" you need to move.

Increase reach? Response? Conversion? Retention? Improve product migration?

Each requires a different variable to test and the dimension you must test within. Balance your testing approach with your approach to segmentation and make decisions on where the testing will give you the greatest results. Variables to test for email include: creative experience, subject line and timing, cadence or messages, promotion/discounting, viral and social incentives, landing page/path conversion.

Optimization

This is a hard thing to encapsulate into a paragraph, but optimization is taking the 5-10 things you learn through the year and applying them to your program. Here are a few non-traditional email optimization efforts you should test, optimizing by:

- Top performing email domains -- AOL, MSN, Yahoo
- Timing and creative
- New member/customer communication streams
- Event mailings tied to key business events
- Responder/non-responder segments. It's essential that you escalate non-responder segments (those that have not responded through email or have not purchased) and build some type of incentive/motivation to become active. It's the only pulse you have of this email address.

ESPs

There are many Email Service Providers (ESPs) at many different cost levels. Balance your needs for reporting, campaign management, list management and asset management, and this will tell you which type of vendor will work best for you.

There are several tiers of vendors: enterprise level, mid-market and small business. Marketing Sherpa and Jupiter have nice reports that showcase what these vendors offer, but I'll warn you, it's really hard to discern the differences among them. I rely mostly on the ESP's willingness to really partner with me, and then look at TCO. Email has become somewhat of a commodity, and a 25 percent decrease in delivery costs goes a long way. While price shouldn't be the only factor in evaluating vendors, with less variance between what you'll really use in these platforms, look for better financial fits. But remember, service is a value-add, and with lower CPMs come lower expectations for service.

Web analytics

It's becoming increasingly important to know what your email subscribers are doing after they click through to your site. While not everyone can afford Omniture or Core Metrics installations, Google Analytics is the poor man's tool for campaign measurement. It's very easy to set up campaigns in Google and track paths and do optimization. I highly recommend you balance these tools with your ESP to get a better view of the customer experience and what email really drives.

Monitoring

Pivotal Veracity and Return Path have the best tools for monitoring delivery, but there are some other pretty cool tools for seeing what your email looks like in multiple email environments. While it's not something you'll do all the time, it does beat having to do your testing in your own MSN, Yahoo and AOL account. The Email Experience Council has a list of partners you can source, or you can always look through Deliverability.com.

List suppression

More companies are looking for methods to save time in managing file suppression for acquisition and/or retention when there are many businesses involved. Unsub Central is the only email-specific partner that focuses on this as a main business with advanced data encryption and many other services. Using a service like this helps you comply with federal CAN-SPAM laws across many businesses in a very accountable manner.

Reporting

It's just that... and what does a report tell you? How many people opened an email and how many clicked through, yes. But does it really tell you how well you are doing? Consider a few other types of reports that may help you get a better feel for the value of your program. One is total reach: How many have you "touched" with a measurable impression during a certain window of time? This is a better advertising view to see who's engaged, how it changes by seasonality, and how it might skew based on high-level customer segments. Wouldn't it be nice to know that during January-March you can reach 75 percent of your high-value customer

segments with email?

It's also critical that you break out responder and non-responder, customer and non-customer segments when doing baseline analysis. It's less important to see performance across the entire population of your email address as it doesn't lend itself to actionable standards. By breaking them out into discrete groups, you can make decisions about what to tweak to move the needle and support a better executive-level discussion of where to invest.

Conclusion

While email is an easy channel to get in motion, it's quite complicated to improve over time. By taking some of these suggestions and building actionable steps, you can improve any program. Just remember: Baby steps in important areas are better than wholesale changes to the entire program.

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