

Online Marketing: SPAM / Mass-Email Marketing

By Aaron Turpen

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By Aaron Turpen of Aaronz WebWorkz

I'm undoubtedly broaching the most controversial subject for Internet marketing. The title of this article shows the fine line between a morally criminal way of thinking and a viable and useful marketing tool. Sending SPAM (officially called UCE or Unsolicited Commercial Email) is wrong - I will go into the reasons for this later. However, sending commercial email for advertising is an effective and low-cost way to market your business or products.

Email marketing will probably be around for as long as the Internet is alive and supports email protocols (or any similar type of communication). Contrary to what some would say, it also has its place. Advertising is a form of communication. However, just like any other form of advertising, there are rules governing this medium as well.

No matter what country you live in, some sort of free speech law probably governs you. No matter which country you're in, however, that free speech law does not give you the right to take over the local newspaper and force them to print whatever you want printed on the front page because of your right to free speech. They are under no obligation to pay for your free speech. The same applies to the Internet. With email, the people receiving the email or that person's ISP (and most likely several others along the way) are flipping the bill for your message. This is akin to walking into the newspaper and demanding they print your words for free.

In addition to all of these moral issues, there are legal ones to consider as well. There are several laws governing the way that you are allowed to advertise anything anywhere in the United States and elsewhere. Since government is

just a large committee of people making decisions (in most places), it is always one step behind when it comes to technology under the law. However, since the Internet is really just a large cooperative of commercial and private networks, it is a little more dynamic in its dealings with "perpetrators." One network can effectively ban whomever they deem a miscreant and others will eventually follow suit as the offender moves through the different networks to try and bypass the blockage.

With all of the hype and hysteria surrounding the use of email as a marketing tool, why do people continue to use it? Well...because it's effective. People wouldn't spend the money to send junk mail through the post if it wasn't effective and they wouldn't spend millions on a 30-second commercial during the Super Bowl if it weren't effective as well. If you follow some simple guidelines and use the email marketing tool wisely, you can reap great rewards.

If you are selling a product or service which rarely leads to residual sales to the same person or entity (i.e. they buy it once and will probably never ask for it again - coffins are a good example), then you can use email marketing effectively. Why? Because you aren't building a business name (aka "branding" your business) or consumer trust. You are just making one-time contacts and make more money by contacting en masse instead of by specifically targeting customers. You aren't building lasting relationships through your business.

There is nothing wrong with this business approach. For some types of businesses, it is just a fact of life. Customers don't need your product or service more than once. There are still some rules of etiquette which you should use when email advertising, however. Your incentive for following them? Less negative feedback and possibly higher return on your sales: more respect = better chances of success.

The first rule to follow is to make sure that yourself or the company you're paying to send out the emails includes a short note to the recipient that explains where their email came from. A hyperlink will suffice for this if you don't personalize your mails from a database. Make sure that you include the EXACT location they used to sign up for whatever list they are on. Not only does this give them a way to get off of that list, it also serves as a reminder as to how they signed up to receive your emails in the first place. If they opt-out of the list, then you're better off for having an unresponsive customer off of your list. Win-win.

If you're purchasing your list from someone else, get all

of the information before you buy. Where did the list come from? How were the addresses culled? How targeted is this list to your expected market? Has anyone else used this list before? What is their guarantee as to the validity of the emails on the list? Some of these questions make sense from a marketing and business standpoint as well as a moral one.

The next step is choosing how to convey your message inside the email. If you visit www.scambusters.org, you'll see a huge list of Internet scams in all categories of "business." Everything from buying swampland in Florida to sending used credit cards to be used as paint scrapers instead of "filling landfills with environmentally nasty plastic" - yes this con has actually been used. Why do I bring up these scams? Because most of them have been perpetrated using unsolicited email at one time or another. Make sure your sales letter/email doesn't sound like one of them. Nothing enrages SPAM-conscious email readers more than a get-rich-quick scheme or any other senseless hype.

My next piece of advice is for you to get to the point. Whether you're sending email advertising using text email, HTML, or even Flash-embedded email to get the user's attention, KEEP that attention. Don't waste their time babbling on. Get to the point of your letter. You don't have to be blunt or unimaginative, but don't write a treatise on your great product either. People don't want you to waste their time. Some people pay for their online time by the minute, others are busy working or running a business, while still others may be hogging up the family phone to get to their email.

Everyone on the Internet has received one form of SPAM or another. The best rule you can follow is: if you received your email, would you respond to it? Would you really care about the product? Why not test this theory? Open up a free web-based email account somewhere and send your email to a test group - people you know personally and who won't hang you for using them this way-of five or ten people. Then wait a couple of days and ask them if they got an email about such-and-such product. If they remember getting that email, you're doing a good job. If they remember it and are mad or have bad things to say about it, then you need to rethink your strategy. At this point you can let them in on your scientific prodding. Be prepared to duck and run at this point.

In closing, I hope that this series of articles has been useful in some way. Remember that marketing is 80% of your business. Also remember that proper marketing, using both imagination and ethics, can carry you further and can help solidify your business better than anything else ever will.

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