

Avoid the 10 Fatal Mistakes that Will Destroy Your E-Mail Marketing

Efforts

By Kevin Richardson

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By Kevin P. Richardson
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Pony Express ran day and night, summer and winter. Riders carried mail and news over a dangerous 2000-mile route between St. Joseph, Missouri, and San Francisco, California.

They were loyal, serious about their work, and determined to improve communication across the United States. The Pony Express riders' heroic delivery of mail and news captured the hearts and the imagination of people all over the world.

Wow. Talk about taking communication seriously.

I wonder how many of us are THAT committed to crafting marketing messages delivered with the same sense of enthusiasm and urgency?

Are you making the grade?

There is only a handful email newsletters that I really wait for each week. Those publishers put considerable thought and effort into creating something that I find valuable and worth my time.

There are many reasons why the rest of the newsletters arriving in my inbox just don't hold the same attraction. Most fall flat for several reasons. If your newsletter

isn't read -- you've failed -- you're deleted.

Now I'm going to share with you the ten major -- and even fatal -- e-mail marketing mistakes that could sidetrack or destroy all of your hard work in short order.

Recognizing these pitfalls can help you make the most out of your email marketing and make sure your e-newsletter makes the cut.

Beware of these 10 Fatal Mistakes

1. You're trying to do it all yourself.

Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. Chances are, publishing e-mail newsletters isn't exactly in your job description. Get help. You might only need a few hours of coaching to get you started.

However, if you are considering an e-mailing to thousands of people, then consider using an e-mail marketing firm.

According to Kim MacPherson, president of Inbox Interactive and author of "Permission-Based E-Mail Marketing That Works!", most organizations shouldn't attempt to go it alone ... at least not for the first few months.

"The worst 'brand killer' that will turn people off right away is the homespun looking e-mail, and unless you have experience creating professionally designed e-mails, they're going to look homespun," she says.

But realistically, smaller organizations usually can't afford to hire a full-service firm. If you have a limited marketing budget, then think about using a third-party service to help with mailing list management and email distribution.

"If you absolutely must start in-house due to budgetary constraints," says Kim, "check out do-it-yourself deployment software solutions that are Web-based such as 'gotmarketing.com' and 'roving.com' because they also offer templates for novice newsletter designers."

2. You're not using helper technology.

When your mailing list is small, sure you can send out a few dozen or a hundred emails using your good old email program.

(Just remember not to paste all the addresses in the "To:" field! Use the "BBC:" field or set up a mailing group to protect recipients' privacy.)

Once your list grows beyond a hundred names or so -- and if you're not using an email marketing firm or using one of the Web-based software solutions such as roving.com -- then you really have to start using software to automate list management, as well as e-mail creation and distribution.

This type of software makes it easy to start and manage your online newsletter. Features you should look for are automatic list management, subscription and removal, automated mailing, e-mail personalization, list segmentation, and HTML and text email support.

Search the Web or the Downloads.com site <http://download.cnet.com/> for various bulk emailing packages such as Group Mail Free, Gammadyne Mailer, Mailloop, and others

3. You're overachieving -- or underachieving.

So you're really fired up about your new email newsletter and you put out two issues in the first month. They're packed to the rafters with valuable information for your readers. And then -- nothing. You've set too high a goal for yourself to achieve, coming right out of the gates.

Has this ever happened to you?

Or on the flip side, you get so tied up in making your "product" perfect that six months pass and you're still waiting to get it out the digital door. Again, not good.

In both of these cases, your stride is off. Like a marathon runner, you need to pace yourself. And remember that even top athletes require practice and professional coaching. Just starting out, you can't always do it on your own. (See number 1.) Don't hesitate to seek assistance if you need it.

For one-person operations and small organizations considering an e-mail marketing program, Kim says she suggests starting slowly. "Outsource at least in the beginning if you can, building an email database gradually," she says. "Think about what types of information you'd like to have about each subscriber so you can market to him or her individually at some point. Test different formats and offers frequently."

4. Your messages are unfocused.

"I just have so much to say I can't fit it all in," you tell me. Well, if your e-mail is trying to accomplish too much, you'll accomplish nothing. You must be laser-focused in your email communication.

If you're writing to tell us about some terrific news, do it and then stop. You want to tell me about or sell me on a new service you're offering? Do it. But don't bury that message under a heap of other fluff.

Resist the temptation to cover a half-dozen items and water-down the impact of your message. Decide in advance what you want to accomplish with each email message: build the relationship, tell the latest news, sell a product, ask for my help, offer thanks, or whatever. One objective. One email message.

5. You're always talking about you. Not me.

Let's face the truth. Every time we open an e-mail, we try to discover "what's in it for me?" If you haven't made this clear in the first few lines of your email -- and you're only babbling on about YOU -- then I'll probably hit delete within three seconds after opening your message.

"You have to create and send something that has true value and is relevant to your audience," says Kim. "Don't make it 'all about me' -- spin it in such a way that it shows the benefits to your audience so that they will look forward to their emails from you."

As a reminder, tack this sign over your desk:

"W I I F M ?"

(What's In It For Me?)

6. Your email packaging and layout is poor.

If your email newsletter or email messages aren't easy to read, they won't be. You'll need to have a consistent layout from issue to issue. In text emails, use white space as a design element to separate text blocks.

A table of contents helps to organize and outline the issue if you have several items of information to present.

Changing your format from issue to issue can be confusing for the readership.

Let me explain what I mean.

Imagine if your local newspaper ran the comics on the entertainment section one day, with the wedding announcements another day, and in the business section the next -- how would you know where to get your fix of "Dick Tracy" or "Mister Boffo"?

And remember that not everyone appreciates receiving HTML-formatted email. So if you're not going to give people a choice of receiving text vs. HTML format, then stick with text.

Subscribe to a handful of newsletters and see what you like and dislike about their formatting. Adapt the best ideas to create your own e-mail layout. Look outside your industry for other examples.

7. You're not asking for a response.

Gee, it's great to send an email out-of-the-blue to a long-time friend and catch up on old times. But in business, when you send an email to a current customer, patient, or prospect, your aim should be to start or continue a dialogue that strengthens your business relationship.

Get them to respond; encourage them to do something. Present them with an "offer." Refer them to your Web site to a special page on a topic that would really interest the recipient.

The form of "offer" doesn't always have to mean selling something. Ideas for an offer in a medical practice newsletter might include:

- * Have them call and schedule an appointment for a mammogram.

- * Send an email to an autoresponder to receive a special report you've written on estrogen replacement therapy or the chickenpox vaccine.

Just move them to "do" something and you'll be strengthening your relationship. Don't expect them to guess what they should do next. They'll do nothing.

8. You've made an email faux pas -- or two.

Oh, please tell me you didn't buy one of those CD-ROMs with 20 million e-mail addresses for \$49. Don't even think about it.

Opt-in email lists are the only way to go. If you want to send email to your current patients or customers then ask for their permission and their email address.

You can do this quite easily on your Web site through a simple CGI script (common gateway interface) running on your Web server. Don't forget you can also have patients sign up when they're in your office by filling out a pre-printed index card with their name and email address. Enter these into your database and keep the cards in a safe place.

Another faux pas is not providing a way for recipients to unsubscribe to your mailings. Just because they're your patients doesn't mean they have to receive your digital words of wisdom forever. Each email message should spell out the ways that someone can unsubscribe.

9. You're ignoring monitoring, feedback, and testing

The only way you'll know if your email marketing is effective and profitable in some way for your medical practice is by measuring the results. Look at the size of your subscriber list. Is it expanding or contracting?

How many readers have clicked on a hyperlink in your email to visit a special "landing page" on your Web site? This is called "measuring click-throughs." It will really show you how effective your email "offer" was and if you answered the question: "what's in it for me?".

When patients visit you in the office, listen carefully to their comments about your emails. Ask them what they liked and didn't like -- and what they'd like to receive in the future.

Test frequently. Try new e-mail formats, subject lines, offers, and content to see what works best, and how you can continually improve your product.

Remember that your email is but one of dozens if not hundreds that your patients will receive each week. Make sure it's the best that it can possibly be.

10. Your subscriber list isn't growing.

Alarms should be going off in your head if you aren't increasing your subscriber base each week. First, you need to find out why people are unsubscribing, if that's a major problem. Send them an email and ask them.

Then start working on building your mailing list. "Collect addresses everywhere -- on site, within your ads and on your web sites. Offer something of value if you can," says Kim.

Put signs up in your office. Include a mention of the newsletter in your newspaper advertisements. Send post cards to your patients to announce your email newsletter.

Encourage them to sign up and to tell family and friends about your great product, too. Who knows when someone will be influenced to become a patient because of your email marketing.

Email is a powerful tool for doctor-patient communication. And it's here to stay. If you're not using email marketing to build your medical practice, what are you waiting for?

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