

Writing Email Messages That Get Results

By Mark Richards

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Mark Richards
mark.richards@deerfield.com

Deerfield.com <http://www.deerfield.com/>

Introduction

The general Internet-connected public is inundated with email messages every single day, some of which are useful and relevant to them, and many (perhaps most) of which are not. Trends in commercial abuse of email communications channels have resulted in a highly de-sensitized email user base; one that expects a large percentage of received emails to be nothing more than garbage.

So what does this mean to organizations with a legitimate need to email their customers in order to communicate useful information to them? Quite simply, it means that these organizations must understand a fundamental set of dynamics relating to the public's consumption of email messages. And they must understand the traits of truly effective email messages.

Writing Effective Email Content

This section will articulate several best practices which, when properly employed, have the ability to make your email campaigns more effective and thus positively influence your organization's bottom line.

1. Write a compelling subject line

The first challenge is writing a subject line for your email message that compels the user to read the remaining content.

A good subject line effectively communicates the content of an email message and provides immediate insight into its intrinsic value. The subject should also convey a sense of honesty, which will typically mean avoiding the use of hyped-up subject lines. From your perspective, the phrase "FREE, FREE, FREE" may well represent the nature of the offer you're making to a customer, but chances are good that the customer will immediately be wary of your intent. Emphasize your points with words, not exclamation points and dollar signs.

Exaggerated, over-the-top email subject lines are also likely to get you caught in the vast web of email filters deployed across the Internet. Avoid using a subject line that might cause your email to be perceived as spam; otherwise your customers may never see it.

2. Re-establish contact with your customer

A significant percentage of email messages sent from companies to their customers make the fundamental mistake of assuming that the customer will recognize them as the sender, and will

therefore recognize their genuine intentions.

Usually when a customer receives a new email message, they will immediately ask themselves “Is this from someone I know?” It is therefore critical to convey a sense of familiarity quickly; this is often best done within the subject of the email message, or within the opening paragraph.

3. Personalize your email message

The opening salutation of your email message provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to the recipient that you know who they are. Email messages that do so immediately gain a level of acceptance that is otherwise impossible to obtain.

Message personalization can be as simple as including the name of the recipient in the salutation. If, for some reason, this information is not available when you send the email message, consider using a salutation that reflects the customer’s relationship with your organization. For example, “Dear [product] user” clearly establishes the company-client relationship in the mind of the recipient.

4. Keep the message content brief and to the point

Many of those who receive email regularly are busy people, and this is especially true during business hours. When these people receive lengthy email messages, they are simply more prone to push it aside, sometimes with the intention of returning to it later.

The most effective email content is not only reasonably brief, but also effectively communicates the key benefits and points early on. Strive to have the first paragraph of your email message convey what the key benefits of your offer are and why the reader should be interested.

5. Establish good email etiquette guidelines

Your organization should strive to ensure that the email message content developed for delivery to customers follows common email etiquette guidelines.

For example, you should never write email messages (including subjects) in ALL CAPS. It’s also wise to avoid sending email attachments to customers unless you’re confident that they will be well received. Attachments can be burdensome for the recipient to download and provide additional risks related to virus contamination. Further, attachment file formats are not typically universal.

6. Focus on a single subject

Since you don’t wish to contact your customers via email very frequently, it may be tempting when developing email message content to tell the customer about everything you’re doing at the moment; the hot new product you just released, your 2-for-1 sale on ski jackets, that award your company just received, etc. Resist this temptation!

Never forget that, in general, your readers are busy people with short attention spans. They will likely have sufficient time and interest to digest only a single message from you at a time. If you find that you need to communicate with your customers more frequently, consider developing a newsletter campaign, which provides a better format for delivering multiple messages.

7. Demonstrate benefit and value

It’s often not enough to simply tell your users what it is you’re offering them; you must also let them know how your product or service will benefit them should they decide to pursue it. Don’t assume that your customers will try to figure this out for themselves.

You should also strive to provide something of value as an incentive for customers to read (and act on) your email message. Items of value might include highly targeted product discounts, valuable information (industry articles, etc.), or product updates.

8. Include a call to action

Once you have your reader's attention and have effectively involved them in whatever message you're attempting to convey, you should tell them exactly what it is you want to them to do.

Make sure that your request is focused and actionable; simply asking them to visit your new product website is not specific enough. Instead, tell them precisely what action they should take. Invite them to sign up for your company newsletter, for example, or download an evaluation version of your new software product.

9. Effectively manage your campaign results

Once you begin communicating with your customers effectively via email, you'll normally find that the number of inquiries into your company's sales departments will increase. These customer inquiries are often where the real sales opportunities lie, and it's absolutely critical that you manage them effectively.

Here are some guidelines for effectively managing customer inquiries:

- q Be prepared to track all customer correspondence in and out of your organization, and make it accessible at a moment's notice
- q Monitor the communications your employees are having with your customers to ensure that they're maximally effective
- q Develop an internal knowledge base that improves your ability to respond to customer inquiries quickly and accurately
- q Develop a plan to distribute inbound email workload effectively throughout your organization

Email customer relationship management software is very useful in allowing organizations to manage the sales inquiries resulting from their email marketing efforts.

Managing Your Contact Database

Just as it is important to develop effective email messages for distribution to your customers, organizations must also take great care in managing their contact database so as to protect its inherent value.

Here are some tips for ensuring that your email campaigns retain their potency.

1. Make sure you have permission to contact your customers

The most effective email campaigns are those that employ opt-in strategies for maintaining their contact database. At the very least, this means asking your customers whether or not you may contact them via email. You may also wish to confirm your customers' opt-in intentions via email.

2. Don't over-use your contact database

There's no tried-and-true formula that can tell you how often you can send emails to your hard-won audience before they start asking to be removed from your database. This will largely depend on the usefulness of the emails you send, the tolerance levels of the recipients in general, and possibly even the nature of the industry you're in.

The most effective strategy for maintaining a database of receptive customer contacts is to pay close attention to what your customers tell you after each email marketing campaign. Chances are good that if you're exceeding their tolerance for email communications, your customers will let you know.

3. Provide easy, clear un-subscribe instructions

Often referred to as “opting out”, your customers must be allowed to easily un-subscribe from your customer contact database. Instructions for doing so should be included with every marketing email message you send, and the effectiveness and accessibility of the un-subscribe process should always be checked prior to initiating an email marketing campaign.

Don't be tempted to make your customers jump through hoops (i.e. by forcing them to call your company or complete complex forms) to un-subscribe from one of your mailing lists. The risk of making your customer angry far outweighs any benefits associated with your ability to contact them via email.

Also, provide a simple way for your customers to change their email address. Don't risk losing contact with a customer who enjoys receiving your email newsletters just because their email address changed.

4. Cater the message format to the recipient

Most organizations have a strong preference to send newsletters and other marketing emails in HTML format, simply because HTML provides a richer visual communications experience.

However, not only might some of your readers dislike receiving email messages in HTML format, their email client may not be capable of viewing it properly.

The best policy is to ask your newsletter subscribers what email message format they prefer. Another option is to employ email marketing software that can deliver multipart/alternative email content, which will display plain text content when the recipient's email client can't render the HTML content.

5. Be wary of sweepstakes acquisition methods

Sweepstakes that hold the promise of prizes and freebies are often a mixed bag. You may very well increase the size of your contacts database quickly, but often this will be at the expense of the quality of the database.

Carefully target sweepstakes prizes to attract customers that will be interested in your company's offerings. The goal is to avoid signing up subscribers primarily interested winning a free prize, and who then quickly unsubscribe.

Conclusion

Email marketing can be tricky business. When used correctly, it can put you in closer touch with your customers. When abused or used without the correct processes and software in place, it can turn your customers against you.

If you follow the advice provided in this document, you'll be well on your way to communicating effectively with your customers via email.

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