

Top Ten Success Secrets of Email Marketing

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Web Digest
For Marketers

www.wdfm.com

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a savvy 21st century marketer, you're looking to use the Internet more effectively to reach your prospects, customers, and clients. 93% of U.S. Internet users consider email to be their top online activity, according to Jupiter Research.* This statistic confirms what you probably knew intuitively, people are living in their Inboxes.

Email is a fast, inexpensive, and effective way to target and address your various audiences, especially when compared to direct mail, outbound call centers, and other traditional marketing channels. What follows is a compilation of best practices of email marketing drawing on not only my experience, but some of the most successful industry practitioners. You'll also get a clear picture of trends and patterns to aid you in mapping your email marketing strategy.

EXPLANATION

***SUCCESS SECRET #1:
Building Your List—Be
selective about who is
added to your list or
you'll create more work
for yourself.***

If you want to build an email list of existing customers, be sure to obtain their permission first instead of adding their names without telling them. Give your customers a value proposition that makes them want to be on your email list. For example, offer them an additional three-month warranty on a product in exchange for receiving product updates by email. This approach gives you the opportunity to strengthen the bond between you and your customers. If you add an email address without permission, recipients might complain and possibly abandon the relationship with you altogether.

When building an email list of fresh contacts, many companies think bigger is better, so they make a mad dash to build the largest email list while jeopardizing the quality of the list. This is called GIGO (Garbage In/Garbage Out), and it can backfire on you. Be sure to build a list of qualified names out of which a certain percentage will turn into prospects. Out of those prospects, a certain percentage should turn into conversions. When done right, catalogers and retailers enjoy higher sales results because their offers are sent to the right audience. High-tech or professional services firms avoid wasting time, resources, and money following up on useless contacts.

To further qualify new contacts, many companies and email publications require individuals to confirm their initial request to get onto an email list by replying to a confirmation email. This is called "double opt-in", and it can slow your acquisition rate by 50% or more, but typically makes for a much more qualified and responsive email list.

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Asking a new contact to take a single action to get onto your email list is called “single opt-in”. This approach grows your list faster than double opt-in, though the list may not be as responsive and as rich with qualified prospects.

Remember, once permission is granted for your email communications, relevancy and timeliness determines whether or not a recipient views your emails as spam.

DO'S

- Collect email addresses from registration cards, point-of-sale, customer service, and sweepstakes. For prospecting purposes, gather email addresses from your website, online white papers offered, from visitors to your trade show booths and from sales calls. Be careful: Just because you already have a person's email address for one reason or another doesn't necessarily mean you have permission to start sending all sorts of email campaigns to them. In all cases, give people an expectation of the value they will receive in return for handing over their email address to you.
- Post a privacy notice on your registration page at your website. People are understandably suspicious of any site they come across on the Internet so it's best to address their concerns up front. As reported by eMarketer, IMT Strategies found “93% of US internet users consider it very important that the site display a statement of how it will use personal information.”
- Show prospective subscribers a sample of what they are signing up for at your website. “The link to see our sample newsletter is clicked on 25-30% of the time,” says Wendy Cole, eMarketing Program Manager for Hewlett-Packard.
- Keep your registration page simple by asking for minimal information. You can always get more information later using surveys and incentives once an individual is added to your email list.

DON'TS

- Don't make it difficult for people to stop hearing from you by email. Make it easy for a person to leave (“opt-out”) of any or all email communications. For example, people may still wish to receive your product updates but not your company news. If it's difficult to be removed from your email list, recipients can complain to their ISP or self-appointed spam police who in turn can have you blacklisted. Being blacklisted means the recipient's ISP will automatically filter out any inbound email containing your name or email address.

- Don't promote your company or services through the renting, sponsoring, or bartering of email lists without performing a background check of the list owners and asking how they obtained their email addresses. You could be guilty by association if you are perceived as doing business with a spammer. Furthermore, spam laws are currently getting tougher in this area. Monitor the latest developments in legislation by visiting www.spamlaws.com.

HEADS UP!

Pre-checked opt-in boxes: Some online subscription forms have the "check" box for receiving email communications pre-checked. While this speeds list growth, some U.S. courts and legislative bodies do not consider this practice as being truly an "opt-in" choice. Your list grows faster employing this practice, but the people who passively join your list in this fashion may not be as qualified as those who proactively check the box. Be sure to comply with the laws that pertain to you.

EXPLANATION

**SUCCESS SECRET #2:
HTML vs. text? No
contest...its HTML for
higher response rates.**

The first time I emailed an offer in HTML, response rates more than doubled.

HTML emails are much more inviting to read. HTML helps direct the reader's eye where to go next and where to put one's attention. What's more, a good graphical layout communicates a better brand impression. HTML also lets you track open rates, click-throughs, and pass-along (recipients who pass your email communication along to friends/colleagues). All text email does not allow for tracking.

With each passing year, more people prefer the friendlier "look" of HTML, with the possible exception of Information Technology professionals.

DO'S

- Make certain your HTML email is easily understood when it is opened and read without the graphics appearing. Some corporate email servers do not pass emailed graphics to the PC clients on their networks. Furthermore, people often read their emails offline, and most graphics only appear when there is a live connection to the Internet.
- Keep experimenting with HTML formatting. Try different background colors. Try one column vs. two and two columns vs. three. Try putting key copy points and links in bold type.

- For long emails, consider inserting a hyperlinked Table of Contents or Index at the top of your email so recipients can quickly click and jump to where they want to go.
- You can conceal unsightly and unusually long web addresses in HTML through masked links. An extremely long web address can be embedded and hidden while the reader only sees the simpler address displayed in your email communication.

DON'TS

- Don't use too many graphics. As most of you are painfully aware, dial-up connections take too long to download large email messages; try to keep your communications to 20K-60K in file size. If your audience is known to use greater bandwidth such as cable, DSL or high speed Internet connection, then you should be able to increase the total file size of your email message with no negative feedback.
- Don't eliminate text-only email communications. Chandra Bodapati, CEO of eGrabber, a leading provider of data entry automation tools, says over 40% of his company's 90,000 subscribers prefer receiving their newsletter(s) in a text-only format.

HEADS UP!

It's in your best interest to give the recipient a choice between HTML or text versions of your email communications; that choice gives the subscriber a better sense of control. According to Gartner research analyst Adam Sarner, "Response rates increase when users are in control and feel they have a relationship with you."

EXPLANATION

In the recipient's mind, you have to be known for sending high-quality messages; otherwise, you will be ignored or recipients could unsubscribe or complain.

As of August 2003, 50% of email is now spam. This is according to Brightmail, one of the largest spam filtering companies with clients such as Verizon and Earthlink. It's no wonder that the most common Inbox activity is delete, delete, delete.

Your name in the "From" field represents your brand and reputation for sending messages that directly appeal to the recipient. The "Subject" field represents the timely and relevant proposition.

***SUCCESS SECRET #3:
Relevancy—Make
certain your emails are
extremely relevant and
valuable to the
recipients.***

DO'S

- Get the first and last name of your subscribers, when possible, so you can later address them by name in the subject header and/or the body of the email. People like to receive personalized communications because it doesn't imply a mass email distribution.
- Use your website's registration page to ask recipients what content they want to see. Check out a good example of this practice by subscribing to IBM's customized weekly eNewsletter at <https://isource.ibm.com>.
- Encourage your existing subscribers to register all of your products in their possession. In turn, you can send them relevant product updates, tips and offers in the future.
- Personalize offers based on the customer's previous buying patterns and requests from your customer service agents. Hewlett-Packard emails 120,000 unique versions of its Newsgram newsletter to over eight million subscribers. HP's eMarketing Program Manager Wendy Cole says the Newsgram is configured to start with content about HP products the recipient owns so each subscriber sees the most relevant content first.

DON'TS

- Don't overuse the first name of the recipient in the body copy of the email. After awhile, it comes across as too contrived.
- Don't ask for too much personal information on your registration page. This can be seen as being too intrusive and can turn people off, and may cause them to abandon the sign-up process all together. Get deeper and more personal information as they get to know you better.

EXPLANATION

Whether you're building a house list in order to send offers, or starting an email newsletter, you are essentially getting into the publishing business. The challenges of publishing deadlines and production may not be familiar to you. So take it slow at first. You can always increase the frequency of your email communications later.

How often should you send? As often as your subscribers want to hear from you. See how cataloger Lands' End handles this at www.Landsend.com. After you subscribe to their email newsletter, they give you the option to select your content, frequency, and format (HTML vs. text). With the frequency option, they allow you to select "weekly, twice-monthly, or monthly".

**SUCCESS SECRET #4:
How Often to Send
Email? Start off slowly.
Get the kinks out by
sending monthly or
quarterly before going
weekly depending on
your business.**

DO'S

- Map out the publishing process. Assign specific tasks and deadlines to each member of the team. Look for prior experience when assigning tasks.
- Do a dry run. Before you publish in public, do it privately to make sure everything runs smoothly.
- Be sure to:
 - Check for proper grammar and spelling.
 - Check that all links are working correctly.
 - Allow enough time for internal approvals.

DON'TS

- Don't wait until the last minute to produce email communications. Build up your inventory with offers and "evergreen" content ready for deployment. "Evergreen" content is not time sensitive so it can be scheduled and produced months in advance of its usage.
- Don't send too often. In many cases, too much frequency can depress response rates and increase unsubscribes.
- Don't send overnight, advises President and COO Michael Mayor of NetCreations (an email list management firm that sent approximately 300 million emails in 2002). Spammers often send their messages after midnight. You don't want your email to get lost in the morning clutter.

EXPLANATION

**SUCCESS SECRET #5:
Email Length—Keep it
short and packed with
value.**

People are overwhelmed with the number of email messages they receive daily. In addition, they are inundated with direct mail, telemarketing, print magazines, and TV ads and will only pay close attention to what is immediately important. Your enemy is the delete key; make every word and graphic work hard to deliver value to the reader.

When I meet subscribers to my Web Digest For Marketers at trade shows and ask them what they like about my email newsletter, they typically appreciate the brevity of the reviews. Why? Because small chunks of information are more digestible than a 2,000-word article.

When it comes to straightforward offers, shorter is usually better. When it comes to informational and educational content, readers typically have a greater attention span.

DO'S

- Present your information in small packages. Use bullet points, check boxes, and put lots of "air" around each unit

of information. The “look-and-feel” should say “Come on; I’m easy to read.”

- Watch members of your target audience, one at a time, peruse your email on-screen. Say nothing at first and simply watch their reactions as they absorb your message. You will probably find what’s obvious to you is not so obvious to them. When they’re finished, then ask your questions.
- Prepare offers and content so exciting that even you get enthusiastic.

DON'TS

- Don’t forget to print out the email you’re preparing to send. Many recipients do exactly this. For emails longer than a few pages, consider embedding a link in your email to your website where the recipient can read the entire communication.
- Don’t use long URLs. In the text-only version of a communication, a URL will break apart when it auto-wraps to a second line. Only the first line will be a live link and probably lead the visitor to a nonexistent web page.

EXPLANATION

**SUCCESS SECRET #6:
Content—Give them
something they can’t live
without.**

Whether you’re preparing editorial or commercial content, make sure it is distinctive and can’t be found anywhere else. Industry news and analysis, useful insights from your experience, or product tips are examples of content that can jump off the screen and into the minds of your readers. Make your content so good that your readers pass it along.

Newsletters from Hewlett-Packard feature creative ways to get more out of your HP printers, scanners, computers, and the like. Timely reminders to replace toner or extend your warranty supplement helpful product updates and tips. This approach earns HP tens of millions of dollars each year. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings are realized because recipients tend to use lower cost email and website technical support in place of the more expensive call centers.

With the help of integrated customer service programs, you should actually be able to predict what content your customers want next. This proactive approach to anticipating customers’ needs can only help strengthen your relationship with them.

DO'S

- Subscribe to all competitive lists and see what is being done. Typically, you will notice a type of editorial that is not being offered in your space. That editorial hole has your name on it. The founders of consulting firm Future Now, Inc. saw that there was no newsletter that dedicated itself to conversion rates. Thus, they started the GrokDotCom, which now regularly feeds their firm with new clients.
- Develop your own voice or distinctive style. People like reading the words of other real people more than plain old “corporate-speak” that tends to be dry and impersonal.
- Use humor when appropriate; it humanizes the copy and warms up the reader. We all need a good laugh whether it's in the B2C or B2B space.

DON'TS

- Don't talk about yourself too much. People really don't care unless you're a big celebrity.
- Don't just feature links to articles on other sites written by other people. This is helpful content, but by itself doesn't brand you as strongly as if you create your own.
- Don't talk down to your readers. This is a common mistake in copy tone when imparting wisdom or experience.

EXPLANATION

SUCCESS SECRET #7:
Design—Don't turn your email into a visual circus; remember...less is more.

It's uncomfortable staring into a screen for long periods of time to read documents. You want to offer your readers an inviting “look-and-feel” that's attractive and easy-to-understand at a glance. Make your emails look like an oasis when compared to the sea of chaos found in the rest of the recipient's Inbox.

DO'S

- Make the focal point of your email message obvious. Consciously decide and design where you want your reader's eye to travel.
- Remember, many people don't scroll. This means you need to pull your best offer or content up into the “first screen”, “above the fold”.
- Design emails to be viewed in the Preview Pane. You have five inches or less in which to squeeze your best content or offer. Be careful not to try and squeeze everything but the kitchen sink into this space, obviously resulting in an unattractive email. Design your logo so it has optimal visual impact (for branding purposes) without taking up so much “screen real estate” that it crowds out the value you have to offer thereunder.

Reinforce navigational cues by stating the wanted action, such as “Click Here”, “Go” or “Buy Now”, etc. Don’t assume the reader knows to click on an embedded link or graphic.

DON'TS

- Don’t overdo the use of moving images; use them sparingly or not at all. You don’t want to turn your email into a three-ring circus where readers are confused as to where to put their initial focus.
- Don’t use too many exclamation points or red type. The spam filters don’t like them, and the jury is out on the effectiveness of the color red.
- Don’t use “reverse type” for your copy. Except in a small graphic element, it’s extremely hard to read white letters on a colored or black background.

EXPLANATION

Get the most mileage out of your email marketing efforts by tracking everything you can, and then improving on those results.

SUCCESS SECRET #8:
Test everything—Test your subject header, your content, your offer, your pricing, your call to action, delivery days and times.

Improving your results online is a very attractive proposition because you can do it faster, cheaper and often more efficiently than in offline media. Business Week Online reports that according to AMR Research, “finely targeted email marketing campaigns can garner 7 to 12 times the response rate of comparable snail-mail direct-marketing efforts.”

Some firms find sending email on Mondays works best for them, while others discover it’s better to send later in the week. Much depends on your target audience and the purpose of your email messages.

When using email campaigns to acquire new contacts or sales, NetCreations President and COO Michael Mayor observed in October 2003 that high-tech and B2B communications seem to perform better when released earlier in the week. Campaigns targeted to small businesses seem to do best towards the end of the week. Mr. Mayor advises mailers to avoid sending on weekends.

To increase response rates of email campaigns to existing contacts and customers, simply ask them how often they would like to hear from you.

DO'S

- Consider everything you do as a test. Even a successful campaign is a test on its way to providing more input to you for the next campaign.

- Benchmark yourself. When launching and testing a new campaign, direct marketers establish what they call “the control”. The control is that effort which drew the best response. Thereafter, they always try to beat the control; you should do the same.
- Benchmark your competition. Track the competitors in your field that are known to be smart and savvy marketers. If you see them doing the same thing over and over, it means it’s working for them. You should incorporate their best practices into your knowledge base.
- Use “split copy testing.” Send one offer worded in a certain way to part of your list and the same offer worded differently to another part of your list and see which does better. Try to do it at the same point in time so results reflect similar market conditions.

DON'TS

- Don’t take anything for granted. Over the years, I’ve found any number of basic assumptions to be proven false after testing.
- Don’t assume test results speak for the ages. I’ve noticed things that didn’t work five years ago perform well now, and vice versa. Revisit old assumptions and test them again from time to time.

HEADS UP!

In order to optimize your email campaigns, it is critical to employ “split copy testing” (mentioned above), also known as “parallel testing”. The speed of email gives you the power to test the marketplace in minutes, hours, and days rather than weeks and months. This competitive advantage is often lost for lack of the right tools and software. Many email campaign applications cause testing to be extraordinarily complex and confusing; it’s no wonder many organizations test modestly or not at all. When reviewing these applications, be sure to examine closely the ease of use and depth of all testing capabilities.

EXPLANATION

There are many compelling reasons for marketers to consider using multimedia in their email campaigns. Recent statistics show multimedia ads on websites draw above average click-through rates. This is probably because they’re more dynamic and possibly more involving.

**SUCCESS SECRET #9:
Multimedia Emails—
Know your audience
before you venture in.**

The majority of computers in use are capable of playing multimedia presentations. Furthermore, broadband usage (which is needed to play multimedia productions more easily) has increased dramatically. There are 39 million U. S. households connecting via broadband to the Internet. This is a 49% increase from May 2002 to May 2003 according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

Just because multimedia emails are technically feasible to produce and distribute, does this mean you should jump in now? Not necessarily. Your particular audience may or may not want to see multimedia playing in their Inbox. If you give your recipients something they're not ready for or want, you could seriously damage your relationship with them.

Certain market niches may be more apt to accept and want multimedia emails, such as gamers and people in high-tech industries.

DO'S

- Ask yourself if multimedia emails really add to the experience or if you're just showing off. If you're demonstrating how to better use a product readers have already bought, you might well be justified.
- See if your competitors are sending multimedia emails. You might want to do likewise. If they're not sending multimedia emails, you might gain a competitive advantage by being the first. Just be careful. There may be a good reason why your competitors haven't done it yet.

DON'TS

- Don't assume your audience wants multimedia. Ask them first, or try a small test. Better yet, send them a link back to your website where they can test drive your multimedia presentation. If you get a lot of click-throughs and positive feedback, you may have a winner.
- Don't jump into multimedia production without a storyboard. A storyboard shows the production team each scene (with copy) and how each scene bridges to the one before it and the one after it. Without a storyboard, your multimedia presentation can look disjointed and not make sense.

HEADS UP!

In an interview I conducted with Forrester Research analyst Jim Nail in October 2003, Mr. Nail thought marketing budgets would be better spent on database marketing rather than on multimedia productions.

**SUCCESS SECRET #10:
What to Expect After
You Hit “Send”.**

EXPLANATION

It’s always exciting monitoring the launch of an email campaign using your on-screen console because it’s happening in real time. It’s like watching election returns. In both cases, you’re watching people vote. In your case, people are voting with their mouse for your offer, your content, your product upgrades, etc. Some feedback you’ll like, some you won’t, and still other feedback will be unexpected. Open rates tell you the success of your subject header and “From” fields. Click-throughs tell you how interesting your offer or content is to the reader.

Every time my Web Digest For Marketers is released, I see which offers from my advertisers work best. I also see what content readers like and what they ignore which helps me develop the basis for next year’s editorial calendar.

DO’S

- Expect to see at least six kinds of responses as soon as you hit the “Send” button.
 1. Valid responses: These most important, non-automated replies are from real people requesting specific information or action on your part.
 2. Hard bounces: These are abandoned email addresses. Delete them from your email list.
 3. Soft bounces: These are typically mailboxes that are full and can’t accept any new inbound emails. Leave these email addresses on your list for the time being. If the same soft bounces occur regularly, then delete those addresses as well.
 4. Spam filter rejections: These messages tell you your email has not been delivered. You will probably receive more and more of these notifications as recipients institute controls to cut down on spam, which is growing rapidly. According to Jupiter Research, the number of unwanted email messages per email user will increase from 2,551 messages in 2003 to 3,639 unwanted messages in 2007.* In some cases, you can manually interact with these emails so your message is delivered to the recipient.
 5. Spam filter messages: Pay attention to these messages because they tell you why your email has been filtered out. Some spam notifications will actually give you their rating system and show you the words that sent you over the allowable threshold. You may want to avoid some of these words in the future in order to stay under that threshold.
 6. “Out of office” replies: Be prepared to receive many of these replies, especially around holidays and the last two weeks of August.

- Reserve judgment on the success of your email campaign for at least a few days. Many people do not read email communications immediately. Recipients often put new emails in a “read” folder for review days later.

DON'TS

- Don't feel bad when people unsubscribe. No matter how valuable your email is, people are bound to do so. Follow how many people unsubscribe from one campaign to the next. If the number suddenly increases above your average, pay attention, because there was probably something that people didn't like in that last communication. Think of unsubscribes as a way to keep your database updated and clean.
- Don't use the word “Free” in your copy too often or at all. Spam filters hate that word. If you must use “Free”, embed the word in a graphic because the spam filters cannot read words embedded in graphics.

HEADS UP!

Every time you send out an email campaign, be prepared to receive hundreds or even thousands of live and automated responses in return. You can handle these replies using your personnel, which can be costly. You can also have your email campaign application handle some or all of these responses. Be sure to closely examine this aspect of your email campaign solution before you commit to purchasing it. See how effectively both automated and live responses are routed. This is critical.

CONCLUSION

The key theme throughout all of these secrets is that you should take nothing for granted because email marketing changes at an incredible velocity. While you're building solid customer relationships, you simultaneously have the opportunity to generate substantial revenue and savings. I urge you to share these secrets with other members on your team. Use them as a catalyst for mapping out your near-term email campaigns.

While planning your upcoming communications, your long-term interests will be best served by integrating your email marketing efforts into all of your customer acquisition and retention programs.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Integration

As both Internet marketers and users become more conversant with the medium, it's in your best interest to knit your online efforts seamlessly with your offline efforts.

You want to create a complete customer experience through as many channels as is appropriate. The tracking of behavioral patterns on your website might trigger a special offer sent to that person via email. Your customer service agent might collect information on the telephone and then follow up by email or postal mail.

By integrating your online and offline efforts early, you will open up a substantial lead on your competition.

Segmentation

Technology and the Internet, in particular, allow a marketer to economically slice and dice smaller and smaller segments in the marketplace. Typically, the smaller the segment, the more relevant and fitting the communication and level of service. The email medium is especially good at targeting niche segments.

Your mission is to identify profitable niches in your respective marketplaces and cater to them accordingly, using email and whatever other channels you deem advantageous.

Anticipation

People don't always know what they want next. One way to delight a prospect, customer or client is to live in their shoes and walk ahead a few more steps than they have. Project what their needs are going to be from that vantage point and then fashion your email marketing accordingly.

Get Going Right Now

The implications of email marketing are far-reaching. The sooner you get started, the sooner your learning curve begins. As an email marketer since 1995, I can tell you that the more experience you have in the email marketing trenches, the greater your competitive advantage.

About the Author

Larry Chase is President of Chase Online Marketing Strategies, a consultancy and publishing firm he founded in 1993. He publishes the popular Web Digest For Marketers, the first email newsletter about marketing on the Internet. This newsletter currently serves over 45,000 subscribers weekly.

Mr. Chase's best-selling book, "Essential Business Tactics for the Net," (published by John Wiley & Sons) has been translated into three languages and is now in its second edition. Because of his decade-long experience in the Internet business, he is a favored source for media outlets: Business Week, The Wall Street Journal, Advertising Age, DM News, The New York Times, CBS, and ABC. Scores of corporations and associations worldwide have asked him to speak at their events and strategy sessions.

Mr. Chase came to Internet Marketing from Madison Avenue where he was an award-winning copywriter. IBM, Xerox, AT&T, Volkswagen, and Chivas Regal were some of his favorite assignments.

For more information, please visit www.wdfm.com or contact Mr. Chase via email at larry@larrychase.com.

About the Sponsor

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