



DELIVERABILITY:

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Wouldn't it be great if you could take specialized email marketing classes in business school, or could seek the advice of an army of senior email marketers in your own company?

Such institutionalized guidance may evolve as the channel matures. But for now, the pursuit of email marketing knowledge remains a largely hands-on endeavor, with all the associated joys and perils of being first. Today's email marketers are exploring largely uncharted territory, often armed with little more than conviction, a few key details, and the mistakes of predecessors to guide them.

For an increasing number of marketers and the executives who oversee their programs, the benefits of email marketing—low cost, speed, measurability and the ability to customize their message to each recipient—are too compelling to ignore. And yet, they must mitigate the risk of working in what still is an immature and evolving medium.

Mistakes in email can damage a brand and prove costly to the bottom line. Every day, email marketers with limited on-the-job training unknowingly irritate recipients, invoke the ire of ISPs, wind up on black lists, stumble over legalities and fracture best practices. Some are able to get their bearings and go on to greater success, while others misapply traditional thinking, only to exacerbate their woes.

In this Silverpop white paper, we'll share some of the easiest and most important things email marketers can do to successfully navigate the swirling currents of deliverability and ensure that customers get their messages. Let's begin with a question:

True or False:

Having the right email service provider, or ESP, dramatically will increase your deliverability.

Answer: True—but not for the reason you might think.

Some marketers believe ESPs have friends at the ISPs who help get their email through. In reality, ISPs are more concerned with keeping their customers happy than in helping you to get messages to your customers. Top ESPs rely on technology, best practices and expertise—not friendly ISP relations—to ensure deliverability. While great ISP relations are essential, they are a byproduct of a history of superior emailing practices.

What You Can Do

All the technology in the world won't get your email delivered if your lists are no good. Spammers' lists are littered with invalid and out-of-date information. One way ISPs ferret them out is by watching for mailings with a high percentage of undeliverable mail. Assuming you have the basic technical configurations and expertise in place—e.g., RFC-compliant headers and good connections management—the single most important thing you can do to protect deliverability is to practice good list hygiene.

Keep Lists Clean!

A hard bounce is an ISP's way of telling you that an email address is permanently undeliverable, and no amount of re-sending will resurrect it. But if you persist, you may succeed in getting your entire mailing shut down as spam. ISPs hate bounces, and they're watching yours. To help yourself stay in an ISP's good graces, you should strive for a hard bounce rate of no more than about four to five percent. Most marketers find it's not cost-effective to try and go much lower. Hard bounce rates exceeding seven percent are cause for concern, and should be addressed immediately.

You also should have a plan in place for removing soft bounces—valid addresses that have been returned as temporarily undeliverable due to circumstances such as overflowing inboxes or swamped servers. A good rule-of-thumb is to scrub from your list any address that has consistently soft-bounced at least three times over more than a 21-day period. If you're calling out and only getting echoes, it's usually best to move on.

If you really want those people back, consider other means, such as using a data-append service to locate a current email address, or contacting them via direct mail or telephone. Thank them for their business, remind them of the value they receive from your emails, and instruct them on how they can continue to get your messages.

Keep Lists Fresh

To keep bounces at a minimum, be sure to email everyone on your list at least once every 90 days. Email addresses “churn” at an incredible rate. People move, change jobs, switch ISPs, forget passwords and email accounts. Addresses go bad, and marketers who wait four months to send a message may suddenly find their five-percent monthly bounce rate has skyrocketed to a “spammer-worthy” 20-percent.

To protect the rest of your list from high bounce rates and abuse complaints, you should quarantine and re-solicit any addresses you haven't mailed to in six months.

Use Your Brand

Make sure recipients recognize your messages. Put your brand in the “from” field and subject line, and make sure your brand and logo are viewable in an email preview pane. Proper branding of your emails helps ensure that even if recipients don't remember opting-in, they are more likely to opt-out rather than report your email as spam. Also, email image-disabling is increasingly common, so know how your email will look with the graphics disabled, paying particular attention to whether your opt-out link still functions in a text environment. It's also a good idea to test your content through a spam filter, such as SpamAssassin, to flag any potential content problems before you send.

Test Your True Deliverability

Sometimes ISPs don't even bounce undelivered messages. One of the ways they contend with suspected spam is by “black-holing” messages instead of bouncing them back to the sender. As the term implies, email simply disappears down a “black hole” and is discarded. It is estimated that ISPs routinely black-hole a percentage of email equivalent to two- to three-times a sender's reported hard-bounce rate.

In order to get a true picture of your deliverability, delivery service providers such as Pivotal Veracity and Return Path can “seed” your mailing with pristine, functioning email addresses that should be receiving your messages. The percentage of seed addresses that don't receive your mailing provides a much more accurate window into your deliverability.

Tip!

Are you inadvertently ignoring ISPs? Many times smaller businesses don't realize they need to set up an abuse@yourdomain.com mailbox in order for ISPs to be able to communicate information, such as bounce codes, back to a mailing's origin. If you don't have an appropriate mechanism for accepting an ISP's messages, you'll not only look like a spammer, but you'll have no way of knowing what ISPs are trying to tell you in order to address problems and ensure continued deliverability.

Deliverability Vocabulary

White List:	A list of “good emailers” kept by a very few ISPs.
Black List:	A list of “bad emailers” kept by numerous anti-spam activists.
Authentication Standard:	A system that allows a receiver to verify that senders of messages are who they purport to be.
SPF:	“Sender Policy Framework,” a widely-used authentication standard supported by AOL.
SenderID:	A newer authentication standard used by Microsoft.
DomainKeys:	A newer authentication standard backed by Yahoo!.
DKIM:	DomainKeys Identified Mail, a new authentication standard merging technology from Yahoo! and Cisco.
SpamCop:	A commonly used black list.
Spam Haus:	A commonly used black list.
SpamAssassin:	A popular spam filter.
Black-Holing:	An ISP practice for dealing with suspected spam whereby messages are neither delivered nor bounced.
HoneyPot/Spamtrap:	An email account set up by an ISP to catch unscrupulous mailers.

What an ESP Can Do

Email is a dynamic, ever-shifting environment. A good ESP can greatly aid deliverability by providing superior technological capability and know-how, and by continually monitoring, diagnosing and solving deliverability challenges—such as ISP filtering practices—as they arise. Because top ESPs oversee deliverability for hundreds of customers, they not only substantially lower the cost of tracking deliverability, but also are able to spot trends much faster than an individual managing email for a single company.

Deliverability Begins at Home

In the early years when email was just ramping up as a communication medium, many companies found they easily could implement their own email programs. But as the technology gained momentum, and marketers jumped on its huge potential for attracting and retaining customers, an exponentially higher number of messages started pouring through internal servers. Marketers’ demand for new and more sophisticated features, coupled with rising challenges to deliverability, strained technological infrastructures and resources. Soon companies were forced to make a critical decision: should they continue to handle email development and execution in-house, or should they set aside a portion of their budget to farm the work to an outside vendor?

An increasing number of companies are choosing the latter approach, and turning to outside providers for their email services. While a great email service provider can be an invaluable partner for email marketing success, marketers must do what ESPs can’t. As we’ve seen in this Silverpop white paper, good deliverability begins at home.

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