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221 Email Marketing Do's and Don'ts:

Best Practices Reference Guide

By Megan Ouellet, Director of Marketing • Listrak, LLC • November 10, 2008

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Companies across all industries are devoting more of their time, resources, and budgets to email marketing. Email typically costs less than other direct marketing channels and the return exceeds all other initiatives. This year, the average return for every dollar spent on email marketing was $45.06. Compared to non-email Internet marketing's return of $19.94, direct response newspaper advertising's $16.86, non-catalog direct mail's $15.55, telemarketing's $8.61, and catalog marketing's $7.28, it is easy to see why companies are ramping up their email marketing programs.

In order to achieve the highest ROI, email marketers must get savvy and revise their strategies. For example, monthly email newsletters that were sent out to the entire subscriber base are being converted to targeted weekly mailings that only contain the information that is most relevant to each subscriber. Targeted emails nearly double the click-through rates of bulk emails so if you aren't already using advanced tactics like dynamic profiling and dynamic content to segment your lists, now is the time to start.

Listrak, an innovator in the email marketing industry and the email service partner to companies like Waterford Wedgwood USA, The Islands of the Bahamas, Hitachi, and Motorola, has put together a list of the top 220 email marketing do's and don'ts. This best practices reference guide will help you whether you are just getting started with email marketing or if you are a seasoned veteran.

It's important to note that everything on this list does not apply to every email that you send. If you need help or have any questions, our experts are available to discuss your strategies, requirements, and processes.

List Acquisition

Do	Ask for permission before adding subscribers to your list.
Do	Build your own lists and collect data at every customer touch-point, both online and offline.
Do	Keep the opt-in process quick and simple – only collect the profiling attributes that are most important to your business.
Do	Let your subscribers know you won't sell their information to a third party – post your privacy policy online.
Do	Allow visitors to opt-in to your email lists from every page of your web site, not just your home page.
Do	Provide sample emails so your subscribers know what to expect and the benefits they'll receive.
Do	Offer subscribers choices – such as text only or HTML versions of your message or allow them to choose their own frequency.
Do	Confirm the email addresses of new subscribers by sending a welcome message or using the double opt-in subscription method.
Do	Include a coupon or special incentive in your welcome message as these messages have the highest open and click-through rates.
Do	Be sure the welcome message has the right branding in place and that it contains a link to your privacy policy, an unsubscribe link, and other CAN-SPAM requirements.
Do	Ask new subscribers to add you to their list of safe senders on the sign-up thank you page.
Do	Make the subscription process memorable so subscribers remember signing up for your emails.
Do	Remove invalid email addresses from your lists immediately.
Do	If renting a list, de-dupe the list by running it against your in-house list and remove any subscribers who have previously opted-out of your mailings.
Don't	Purchase lists – unsolicited messages have the highest complaint rates and could ruin your reputations.
Don't	Pre-check the opt-in box to add subscribers to your list automatically.
Do	Track the source of your new subscribers so you know where they are coming from and how they are hearing about your business.
Caution	Use sweepstakes, contest, or free offers to build your list as some recipients will only be interested in the offer, not in receiving messages from your company on an on-going basis.
Do	If using a sweepstakes to capture subscribers, include an unchecked check box participants can select to join your lists.
Do	Focus on the quality of your subscribers, not the quantity.
Do	Understand the value of each email address.
Do	Encourage your subscribers to send your emails to their friends using a Forward-to-a-Friend (FTAF) link in all of your messages.
Don't	Automatically add the FTAF recipients to your lists – instead, include an easy way to subscribe to your email lists in the forwarded versions of the email.
Do	Ask Listrak's email marketing experts to create and help you implement a successful list acquisition strategy.

For more information read Listrak's white paper Increase ROI with List Management Tactics

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List Management

Do	Remove distribution email addresses from your lists, such as webmaster@company.com.
Do	Remove email addresses with the word "spam" in them.
Do	Use list hygiene to correct any misspelled, invalid, email addresses that bounced, such as bob@alo.com or steve@gmailcom.
Do	Use a list appending and ECOA service to keep your lists up-to-date.
Do	De-dupe your lists to ensure subscribers only receive one copy of your email messages.
Do	Pay attention to your message bounce reasons and handle accordingly.
Do	Remove subscribers who generate an invalid hard bounce immediately.
Do	Monitor subscribers who generate a soft bounce to see if messages are delivered within a few delivery attempts - if not, remove them from your lists so you don't damage your reputation.
Do	Monitor feedback loops and remove any subscribers who reported your message as spam.
Do	If former complainers try to re-subscribe to your list, use the double opt-in method to reconfirm their subscriptions - if they complain again, ban them from your lists.
Do	Ensure your lists do not contain spam traps or honeypots by removing inactive subscribers.
Caution	Rely on subscribers to update their profiles in your preference center as the data might not be complete or up-to-date.
Do	Use dynamic profiling to capture user data, such as product interests, time emails are being opened and read, etc.
Don't	Use separate lists for each segment of your audience.
Do	Keep one master list and use dynamic content to segment your audience to send targeted, relevant messages.
Do	Use an email marketing solution that is integrated with web analytics to capture the data that occurs after the click.
Do	Monitor your lists and measure fatigue.
Do	Reach out to your inactive subscribers with special offers to try to re-engage them.
Do	If you cannot re-engage inactive subscribers, ask them to reconfirm their subscription to your list before it expires.
Do	If you still don't hear from the inactive subscribers, either remove them from your list or segment that group so they no longer receive your messages.
Do	Give your subscribers an easy way to opt-out of your email list.
Do	If you have multiple lists, use a global suppression list to ensure you do not continue to mail to recipients if they opted-out of one list but belong to another.
Do	Monitor unsubscribes so you can notice any trends, such as subscription source, domain, topic, or time email was sent.
Do	Analyze your lists by domain to catch any issues.
Do	Partner with Listrak as our experts will help you manage your lists for maximum exposure, retention, and response.
	For more information read Listrak's white paper Email Marketing Best Practices: Inactive Subscribers - Re-Engage or Remove

Email Design

Do	Design for the inbox - know the limitations of each email client.
Caution	Use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) as support varies among email clients.
Do	If CSS is used, be sure to use inline styles only.
Don't	Use Meta tags.
Don't	Use form elements.
Don't	Use Java, JavaScript, Frames, ActiveX, ASP, PHP, Cache Busters, or Dynamic HTML.
Don't	Embed Flash or other rich media files into the message.
Do	Link the email message to a landing page containing Flash and rich media files.
Do	Use title tags in URL links.
Do	Use tags instead of to align text.
Do	Use valid HTML and close all tags.
Do	Review all HTML code prior to deployment.
Do	Ensure all personalization and dynamic content code is correct prior to deployment.
Do	Remove all unnecessary HTML code.
Caution	Try not to format messages wider than 600 pixels.
Do	Keep the message under 40k.
Do	Keep important messaging and main calls-to-action above the fold in the top 300 pixels.
Don't	Use rowspans or colspans.
Do	Use tables in the HTML code for spacing and layout.
Caution	Be careful when using multiple nested tables as they may not render correctly.
Do	Try to use both text and images in the message instead of making the message on big image.
Do	Keep the images in .gif or .jpg format.
Do	Store images on a web server and ensure image links contain the full URL, not just the local reference.
Do	Include height and width parameters for all images.
Do	Use alt tags for all images.
Do	Use background colors in both the body and tables.
Don't	Use image maps.

For more information read Listrak's white paper HTML Design and Rendering Tactics for Improved Email Deliverability and Increased Response

Email Design, Continued

Caution	Format fonts without CSS, or with inline styles if CSS is used.
Don't	Use invisible text by matching the font color to the background color.
Do	If the message contains background images in table cells, be sure to also include background colors for Outlook 2007 users.
Do	Ensure the message contains pass-along functionality to keep formatting in place when the message is forwarded.
Do	Include a browser link to a web version of the message in the email's pre-header.
Do	Include important messaging, such as your offer, a brief statement summarizing your message, and/or the safe sender message, in the email's pre-header.
Don't	Attach documents to the email message.
Do	Link documents to the message.
Do	Run messages through Spam Score prior to deployment.
Do	Test emails in different email clients prior to deployment.
Do	Test all links in the message prior to deployment.
Do	Use a third-party rendering service, such as Return Path's Campaign Preview or Mailbox Monitor.
Do	Keep message design simple and clean and easy to read.
Do	Include a text-only version of your message.
Do	Use graphic designers who are knowledgeable and experienced with email marketing to design your HTML templates as many web designers are not aware of all of the best practices for email marketing.
Do	Write clear calls-to-action and keep the offer visible above the fold.
Don't	Distract the recipients from completing a call-to-action by including too many different offers, graphics, etc.
Do	Provide a consistent look between your HTML emails, landing pages, and web site.
Do	Use templates to ensure emails remain consistent across your organization.
Do	Contact Listrak's design experts to review your messages for errors, format customized templates, or provide full service email design and deployment to ensure your emails render correctly across multiple ISPs.

For more information read Listrak's white paper HTML Design and Rendering Tactics for Improved Email Deliverability and Increased Response

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Branding

Do	Include your company name in the From address of your messages so recipients know that the message was sent from a legitimate sender.
Do	Use your own domain alias, media domain, and bounce domain so recipients only see your company's name and branding aspects.
Don't	Use the default domain alias provided by your ESP as it ties your reputation to every other company using it.
Do	Ask Listrak's experts for help setting up your DNS server to ensure it's configured properly.
Do	Keep your brand identity in front of your audience with daily or weekly emails that are relevant to their needs.
Do	Keep your logo at the top left corner of the email message.
Do	Use the same fonts, navigation, and design aspects so your emails have the same look and feel as your web site.
Do	Create templates with lockable fields to ensure proper branding remains in place no matter who creates and deploys the message.
Do	Monitor what emails other members of your organization are sending and put standards in place to ensure consistency.
Do	Remember that your brand is more than just your logo and corporate look – it's your corporate voice and personality.

For more information contact Listrak's email marketing experts today.

Relevancy

Caution	Send one version of your message to your entire subscriber base.
Do	Understand how cultural shifts influence your subscribers and target your content around meaningful messaging.
Do	Automate capture of pertinent customer data using a behavioral tracking tool such as dynamic profiling.
Do	Capture as much subscriber data as possible - even if you don't use it today you could use it tomorrow.
Do	Segment your lists by many different attributes, not just one, as you'll be targeting smaller groups with information that is even more specific to their needs.
Do	Integrate your email marketing solution with CRM and web analytics to increase the amount of data you have access to.
Do	Use an email marketing solution that has an integrated geo-tracking tool so you can map the locations of your most and least active subscribers to use for corporate event planning, sending target offers to customers in certain locations, etc.
Do	Create a single HTML template and use dynamic content to fill in the correct content on the fly.
Do	Change your graphics as well as messaging for each dynamic content "recipe."
Do	Include a generic email to send to subscribers who do not fit into a specific segment.
Do	If you are not using dynamic content, you should at least use profiling filters to segment your list.
Do	Create cross-selling campaigns based on new products that complement purchases your subscribers have already made.
Do	Remember that relevant messages do not rely on a sending schedule - you can send emails more often as long as each message contains information that is important to each individual subscriber.
Do	Relevancy isn't just about the messaging - it's also important to reach your subscribers at the right time so use your data to figure out your ideal sending schedule.
Do	Keep emails short and to the point.
Do	Work with Listrak's email marketing experts for relevancy strategies, individualized applications, and measured results.

For more information read Listrak's white papers Improving Relevancy of Email Campaigns: Simplify Data Capture with Dynamic Profiling, Creating Relevant Email Campaigns with Dynamic Content, Dynamic Content Strategy Guide: Five Essential Campaigns, Email Frequency: How Relevancy Tactics Change the Rules, Geo-Tracking Through Google Maps: Increase Email Campaign Relevancy, and How to Make Your Email Campaigns More Relevant

CAN-SPAM Compliance

Do	Include a free opt-out mechanism that is available through a single web page, replying to the email message, and through an unsubscribe button.
Don't	Make the unsubscribe process long and confusing, or require unsubscribers to log in to a preference center using their user names and passwords.
Do	Only require unsubscribers to enter their email addresses to opt-out of your lists.
Do	Honor all opt-out requests within 10 days.
Do	Include your valid postal address and return email address on all email messages.
Do	Write a valid subject line and header (routing) information.
Don't	Use false or misleading transmission information.
Don't	Use deceptive subject lines or headers.
Do	Clearly identify the sole sender of the message.
Do	Clearly identify the message as an advertisement or solicitation.
Do	Comply with the sexually-explicit labeling rule, if applicable.

For more information read Listrak's white paper New CAN-SPAM Rules for 2008

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Reputation & Deliverability

Do	Understand how your ESP calculates your deliverability rate as the measurement differs among ESPs.
Do	Know that reputation is the key to deliverability.
Do	Monitor your reputation closely.
Do	Monitor feedback loops at Sender Score, MxToolBox.com, and Spamhaus.
Do	Monitor your partners' reputations.
Do	Remember that any unwanted message is considered spam, even in the recipients opted-in to the list, so protect your reputations by sending relevant emails.
Don't	Use a shared IP address.
Do	Use a dedicated IP address and unique domain alias.
Do	If sending more than 100,000 email messages, use a pool of dedicated IP addresses.
Do	Realize that your reputation is not dependent on each individual message - ISPs look at your entire sending history.
Do	Recognize that your reputation is completely in your control.
Do	Understand that each ISP has a different threshold it must reach before blocking messages - the threshold is determined by monitoring the reputation factors over a period of time.
Do	Know what ISPs look at when determining the sender's reputation : user complaints; length of time the domain has been operating; volume and size of messages, numbers of bounces, invalid addresses, and emails sent to spam traps; mail server settings; third-party reputation lists including blacklists, blocklists, and accreditation services; and the configuration of emails including heading, links, images, content, authentication, etc.
Do	Know that ISPs look at the email envelopes, which contain the message's header and the sender's IP address, host name of sender's IP address, envelope header From or Return Path address, and reply-to and From addresses.
Do	Know that ISPs also look at the body of the messages, which contain the email text, images, and links to external web sites in either plain text or HTML format.
Do	Keep spam complaints low by sending relevant messages at the right time and by always including an easy opt-out mechanism.
Do	Employ good list management and hygiene techniques.
Do	Honor unsubscribes immediately.
Do	Manage bounces correctly.
Do	Follow list acquisition best practices.
Do	Properly brand your messages.
Do	Configure servers properly.

For more information read Listrak's white papers Outlook for 2008: Essential Email Marketing Deliverability Guide and How Reputation Impacts Deliverability

Reputation & Deliverability, Continued

Do	Set up DNS records correctly.
Do	Use an MTA that allows you to tweak sending rates.
Do	Adhere to the rules set by ISPs as well as your ESP.
Do	Maintain infrastructure isolation and transparency.
Do	Include a friendly reminder in the pre-header or footer.
Do	Authenticate your email messages as it validates your identity and protects your brand, reputation, and deliverability while providing your recipients with a higher level of trust and security.
Do	Check out the DMA's Email Authentication Help Center and Authentication Checklist.
Do	Check out the ESPC's free Sender ID testing tool.
Do	Understand how the three different authentication tools work and implement all three.
Do	Know that SPF is an IP-based authentication tool that allows domain name owners to publish which IP addresses are allowed to send email from their domain – it cross-checks the sender's IP address against the domain name in the From address in the message envelope to validate.
Do	Know that SIDF is another IP-based authentication tool that is similar to SPF, only it validates the identity of the sender by cross-checking the sender's IP address against the Purported Responsible Address (PRA), which is the visible From address.
Do	Know that DKIM is a cryptographic authentication tool that requires senders to store public keys in their DNS records while providing matching private keys in their outbound email servers so ISPs can match up the keys to confirm the sender's identity.
Do	Use an accreditation service as an extra line of precaution to protect your identity through third-party verification of your good sending habits.
Don't	Think you can simply gain accreditation to fix deliverability or reputation issues as you must have a good reputation to begin with and you must maintain a nearly flawless record in order to preserve your status.
Do	Know what the requirements are for accreditation: permission-based list acquisition strategy; published authentication records; complaint levels lower than industry standards; established, high-standing reputation; well-maintained infrastructure, incorporated list maintenance and bounce management; strong security networks; and unsubscribe mechanisms available on all email messages.
Do	Understand that accredited emails bypass some ISP filters and are more likely to be delivered to your recipients' inboxes.
Do	Check out Return Path's Sender Score Certified to gain accreditation.
Do	Certify your company as you'll have tokenized proof of your good reputation.
Do	Check out Goodmail's Certified Email program.

For more information read Listrak's white papers Outlook for 2008: Essential Email Marketing Deliverability Guide and How Reputation Impacts Deliverability

Reputation & Deliverability, Continued

Do	Know what the qualifications are for certification: proof that you follow email marketing best practices; proof that you only send permission-based emails and not prospecting or unsolicited messages; very low complaint rates; private domain name; established opt-out and privacy policies, at least one year of business history and six months' history using a private IP address; and company headquartered in United States, United Kingdom, or Canada.
Do	Understand that the recipient is still in control and may choose to have certified emails delivered with images turned off even though most ISPs will automatically deliver certified messages to the inbox with images on.
Do	Ask Listrak's deliverability experts to analyze your sending procedures and help you implement reputation and deliverability best practices.

For more information read Listrak's white papers Outlook for 2008: Essential Email Marketing Deliverability Guide and How Reputation Impacts Deliverability

Metrics & Reporting

Don't	Rely on horizontal or vertical benchmark reports to determine the success of your campaigns – only use them as a guideline.
Do	Create your own historical benchmark guides using your own data.
Do	Understand how your ESP calculates delivery, open, read, and click-through rates.
Don't	Assume each ESP calculates the rates the same – the industry still lacks standards.
Don't	Measure your success by looking at the open or click-through rates only.
Do	Know if your ESP counts unique or total clicks in their results.
Do	Understand that the delivery rate provided by most ESPs does not include emails that were delivered to the junk mail folder – you need to use a delivery monitoring service to figure out your actual deliverability rate.
Do	Understand that unsubscribes are a common part of email marketing but you must monitor them closely to determine which ones are in your control and which ones are unavoidable.
Do	Use an email marketing solution that is integrated with web analytics to tie conversion rates back to specific email campaigns.
Don't	Assume that all subscribers that do not open your messages are inactive as some might be reading your emails in the preview pane without triggering the one pixel image that tracks responses.
Do	Monitor your abuse rate and remove complainers immediately.
Do	Monitor your bounces closely – remove hard bounces immediately and remove soft bounces if the message is not delivered within a set number of delivery attempts.
Do	Track your messages by domain so you quickly notice any deliverability issues.
Do	Track results by segment.
Do	Capture and save each link your subscribers click on in your email messages.
Do	Use an ROI calculator to help you figure out your return.
Do	Contact Listrak's email marketing experts for help monitoring your metrics and results.

For more information read Listrak's white papers Email Marketing Email Marketing Metrics: Looking Beyond Open and Read Rates, Email Marketing Campaign Development: Optimize Management, Tracking, and Analysis, Email Marketing Metrics: Optimizing your Goals, Benchmarks, and Statistics, and Using Google Analytics to Increase Reporting Capabilities of Email Marketing Campaigns and Boost Relevancy and Response

Managing the Opt-Out Process

Do	Include the unsubscribe link at the top of the email.
Caution	Bury the unsubscribe link in the email's footer where it can easily be missed – if the recipients can't opt out quickly and easily they'll report the message as spam instead.
Do	Implement a single click unsubscribe process.
Do	Include a way for subscribers to opt-in to your lists again in case they unsubscribed accidently or changed their minds.
Do	Set up a valid email address subscribers can reply to in order to unsubscribe from your lists and monitor it closely.
Do	Remove unsubscribers from your lists no later than 10 days; or better yet, immediately.
Do	Remember that your opt-out mechanism must be able to process requests for at least 30 days after the message was deployed.
Do	Always use a suppression list to monitor unsubscribes.
Do	Work with Listrak's email marketing experts for help managing your opt-out process.

For more information contact Listrak's email marketing experts today.

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Miscellaneous

Do	Write compelling subject lines.
Do	Test to see what type of subject lines capture their attentions – a recent study showed that subject lines with 70 characters or more had higher open rates, but you should test to see what works best for your audience.
Do	Try to personalize the subject line with the recipients' names or other specific attribute so your message stands out in the inbox.
Do	Brand your subject line with your company's name to help ensure recognition.
Do	Perform A/B split tests on EVERYTHING – subject lines, images, calls-to-action, headlines, content – everything!
Don't	Only rely on email to communicate with your customers - use a combination of traditional channels and new media.
Do	Use your email marketing to enhance your direct mail campaigns and social networking channels.
Do	Plan all of your email campaigns well in advance determining the type of communication you want to send, goal, segmented audience, targeted content, design, number of emails per campaign, and delivery schedule.
Do	Ensure that you have the proper resources in place to handle the additional traffic, calls, and sales that emails generate.
Do	Set realistic goals.
Do	Integrate your email marketing solution with other tools using APIs to leverage your data.
Do	Get creative with your email marketing campaigns – reach out to web visitors who abandoned their shopping carts, reward your most active subscribers with special offers, etc.
Do	Link your message to optimized landing pages containing specific and useful information – not just your home page.
Caution	Look for sponsorship or advertising opportunities in your email messages – but be sure to follow the new CAN-SPAM rules.
Do	Sign up for Listrak's mailing list so you remain up-to-date with all of our white papers, case studies, webinars, podcasts, and other free educational materials on email marketing best practices.
Do	Watch Listrak's product video.
Do	Request a free Listrak demo account.
Do	Contact Listrak's email marketing experts with any questions.

For more information contact Listrak's email marketing experts today.

About Listrak

Listrak is an Email Service Partner to world-class organizations such as Motorola, The Islands of the Bahamas, eMarketer, Bernard Hodes, Boston Symphony Orchestra, PR Newswire, Wolfgang Puck Fine Dining, and L'Oreal. Our hosted email marketing software allows permission-based marketers to manage, send, track and grow their email marketing investment. We deliver email marketing intelligence through our intuitive web-based application. Leading marketers have come to rely on this intelligence to better manage email in their multi-channel marketing mix.

Listrak helps companies, agencies, and associations better manage customer relations in their marketing campaigns. Its web-enabled interface helps marketers engage their customers using an advanced profiling and dynamic content engine. Listrak also offers a diverse range of professional services through its account managers, graphic designers, and technical engineers to assist clients with design, content, deliverability, integration, advanced features, best practices, and all other campaign development tactics.

To learn more about the many ways Listrak can strengthen your email marketing campaigns, or to sign up for a 20-minute web-based tour, visit www.listrak.com.