



# The Art and Science of Email Marketing

By Megan Ouellet, Director of Marketing • Listrak, LLC • October 25, 2007

**I**n order to craft an effective email marketing campaign, you must carefully balance the needs of your audience, the message you want to communicate, and the technology that allows you to manage the interaction. In order to increase your response rate, you must be sure that your email has all of the correct items in place - appealing subject lines, exciting graphics, inspiring content, clear calls-to-action and tempting offers. Art is all about form and content, and like art, your emails must inspire your audience to perform your end goal.

However, unlike art, there are certain guidelines that have been tested, measured and proven that you must follow in order to ensure your messages reach your audience. This is the science behind email marketing and it includes things such as acquisition strategy, customer segmentation, relevancy, and deliverability.

Listrak has put together the following white paper to help you learn how to combine engaging message tactics with established procedures to create email messages that are meaningful and important to your audience.

## Emotions verses Evidence

Art is a combination of creativity and skill in a chosen medium or form. It is an appealing and thought-provoking expression of the artist's beliefs and desires that he or she wishes to communicate with the world, and it evokes an intuitive, emotional understanding from its audience.

The same can be said for email marketing. You must develop creative email campaigns that connect with your subscribers. You must use attractive graphics, engaging content, and alluring offers to capture the attention and interest of your audience. And your emails must be compelling enough to persuade the readers to take action.

However, where art might take decades or even centuries for the audience to notice and appreciate it, emails only have a matter of seconds. And while great art is always open for interpretation, emails must be clear and concise and drive the readers to perform a specific goal. This is the science behind email marketing.

Science is about discipline. It is the system of acquiring knowledge through study or observation, and it is based on reason, logic, and fact. It uses rational theories and proven formulas to create the same results and conclusions time after time.

It is important for email marketers to follow certain guidelines, regulations, and best practices when crafting their email campaigns. You must track your results and build benchmark reports so you have indisputable proof of your campaign performance. And you must continually test your campaigns to find what works best for your recipients.

Like a masterpiece, the art and science need to work together to create effective email campaigns. An artist needs to know that combining equal portions of blue and yellow paint creates green paint. But if he only adds half as much yellow paint, he gets teal, while a quarter amount of yellow paint produces aqua. Similarly, email marketers must use the correct combinations of creativity and technology in order to build a successful email campaign.

## Creative Components

The creative components of email marketing include the features of the email that the recipients see. They are responsible for gaining the attention and trust of each subscriber and tempting them into taking action on your offer. These items include such features as the:

**Subject Line:** The subject line is incredibly important as people use it as gatekeepers. The wrong subject line means that your email will be deleted or even reported as spam before the message is opened.

The art of the subject line is the ability to make it stand out in a crowded inbox while compelling the reader to open the message. It must grab the attention of each recipient and communicate the purpose of the message in an inspiring fashion that makes the reader want to learn more. Crafting a good subject line takes creativity and imagination as the author must convey a lot of information in a few short words. However, there are some guidelines and best practices that marketers must follow in order to ensure the emails are opened and not deleted.

According to a recent study by the Email Sender and Provider Coalition, 69% of email recipients make the decision to report the email as Spam based solely on the subject line. Even if the recipients have opted-in to your list, they could still mistakenly report your email as spam. To prevent that from happening you should use the following best practices.

The science of the subject line includes proven formulas, such as this one by Return Path. Return Path found that click-through rates for email subject lines with 49 or fewer characters were 75% higher than those with 50 or more characters. Other best practices include using the recipients' first names, inserting your company name and offer, and adding a time limit or expiration date.

You do not have to use all of the components in each subject line. In fact, you should test the different components to see what works best for your audience. After all, crafting the perfect subject line is a science so you must test to see what produces the highest open rates.



Consider the emotional value  
of your subject lines

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**Offers and Calls to Action:** The first thing that the recipients should see when they open your email is the reiterated offer from your subject line and the call-to-action. You have less than three seconds to capture the interest of your readers, and if the offer and CTA is not visible immediately you will lose them.

There is an art to creating tempting offers as you must make your audience feel that there is a value to what you are offering and that they are getting a great deal on it. You must choose your words carefully, noting the impact and implication of each and every word. For example, the offer "1/2 off" and "Last day to save 40%" produce different feelings and reactions, and it is important for you to understand the emotional value of your messaging. Even though the first offer is for a greater discount percentage, it brings to mind a bargain basement sale full of old items that the store is desperate to get rid of because no one wanted them. The second offer is much more appealing as it implies that the items will only be marked down a limited time before they return to full price. Your readers will be tempted to take action and purchase the item immediately so they do not miss out on the opportunity.

The same is true for the call-to-action button. A very common CTA is the command "Click Here" as it is simple, straightforward, and universally understood. But that does not mean that it is good; in fact, quite the opposite is true. If your call to action includes action words, such as "Act Now!" or "Yes - Tell Me More!," you will be generating excitement and interest, and you will be creating a very clear path for your readers to follow. Even better calls-to-action inform the reader what to expect on the landing page, such as "Registration Options Available Here".

The offer and CTA should be repeated, both in text and image form, throughout your email message; however, it should not be the only way for your readers to get to your landing page. You should also include links in the content as well as the full URL address. Giving your audience options is the best way to increase your click-through rate.

Like the subject lines, you should perform an A/B split test to see what works best with your audience. This scientific approach will give you the data you need to take the guess work out of your emails. Testing is easy – simply select a portion of your list, such as 500 names, and split them into two groups. Send group A one version of the offer and call to action and send group B a second version, then send the rest of your list the version of the email that generated the most responses.

It is important to remember to test only one section of the email at a time. If the two versions contain different subject lines, images, offers, and calls to action, it will be impossible to determine what individual part of the email worked the best.

*Content:* Many ISPs deliver messages with the images turned off so you cannot rely on graphics to connect with your audience. You must use a creative headline and content that is easy for your recipients to scan through quickly while giving them a reason to spend more time reading and reviewing your message in detail.

For the content to engage the audience, it must be emotional, active, and straightforward. The art of writing content is to author enticing messages that can stand alone without needing images to convey emotions. You must choose your words carefully, noting the impact and implication of each and every word, and you must articulate clearly and concisely so your readers are not distracted or confused. Most importantly, you

must provide information that is relevant and important to each member of your audience. That is the science.

The science of writing the correct content has to do with delivering the right message to each individual recipient. This is accomplished using preference centers and subscriber data, such as gender, location, age, title, hobbies, purchase history, wish lists, and clickstream data. Instead of mailing out a generic, one size fits all email to your entire list, segmenting your list by preferences allows you to target specific groups to send messages that apply to them directly. Many email marketing solutions, such as Listrak, have automated segmentation features such as profiling filters and dynamic content tools as these tools can practically double your click-through rates.

Preference-based email marketing begins with the quality of your list. While there are some cases where purchasing a list could generate some traffic to your website, a much better approach is to ask your customers and website visitors at a specific point in the sales cycle if they are interested in subscribing to your email list.

Acquiring personal information from your customers is an art form unto itself as it takes skills and finesse to make strangers feel comfortable enough to share their data with you. One way to help build trust is to have a privacy policy stated on the opt-in form. This lets your customers know that you value them and that you will not sell their private information to outside vendors. Another way to build trust is to state upfront what your delivery schedule is and allow your subscribers to select how often they hear from you. Giving your subscribers control over their accounts will greatly increase the effectiveness of your email campaigns as you will only send emails to those subscribers that want to receive the information.

You want to be sure to gather the right data that is relevant to your offerings without requiring too much personal information, and it is not always easy to tell how much is too much until it's too late. Marketers often collect information such as job title and income level, but they do not ask subscribers for their product preferences as they prefer to send out information on all of their products to their entire subscriber base so everyone may take advantage of their offers. This is a mistake as bigger isn't always better. It is essential that you maintain a preference center so you can target your subscribers with the information that is most important to them. To learn more about email marketing segmentation, read Listrak's preference center case study with VinterActive.

It is also important to remember that list acquisition isn't limited to your website. In fact, studies have shown that customers are more likely to opt-in, and to share even more personal information with you, if you ask them face-to-face while handing them a paper form – especially if they just turned down a sales offer. Asking the right questions at the right time is pure science, but it is different for every company. You must analyze and tweak your list acquisition strategy carefully until you find the right combination of questions and timing to capture the biggest audience possible.

Finally, you need to monitor your list with a list hygiene tool that automatically corrects any misspellings, such as john@yahoo.com or sam@gmail.cmo. These tools greatly decrease the number of bounces, which impacts your overall reputation and, therefore, increases your deliverability.

Preference-based email marketing is also the key to creating relevant email messages. Recent studies show that targeted messages that are relevant to customers may increase net profits averaging 18 times over more general broadcast communications. There are a number of things you can do to

make email campaigns more relevant to the recipients, and if you have a preference center built into your list acquisition strategy, you have already accomplished the first step.

Relevant emails are messages that make the reader feel like you know them. They are personalized with the subscribers' names and they are customized specifically for each member of your audience with information that he or she cares about the most. Relevant messages help build an intimate relationship with your subscribers, and the emotional bonds are the art. For more information, read Listrak's white papers "How to Make Your Email Campaigns More Relevant" and "Email Marketing Best Practices: Creating Relevant Email Campaigns with Dynamic Content."

*Images:* While an email marketing best practice is to offer subscribers a choice between receiving plain text or HTML messages, the use of graphics in the HTML version will greatly increase the emotional aspect of your emails as long as you choose your images wisely.

Like all great works of art, the right image grabs hold of you and expresses feelings and emotions. The graphics you choose for your emails must convey to your readers that their lives will be happier, more exciting, and better if they take advantage of your offer. Before you send out your emails, scrutinize each graphic and ask yourself what the image says to you and how it makes you feel and only send images that express the right emotions.

There are several technical issues that you have to be aware of when using graphics. This is the science of images. According to a study by the Email Experience Council, 21 percent of emails reviewed appeared completely blank and an additional 28 percent showed content but were missing the graphics. Even if your recipients have set their inboxes to download

your images there could still be issues as you could be using a unique identifier in the address of each email sent, which will prevent your images from getting through. To ensure your emails are rendering properly you must test the emails in different email clients prior to sending the message to your list. It is the only way to know for sure what your images will look like to your audience.

**Deliverability:** While your deliverability is not a creative aspect that your subscribers can see in the email message, if you do not have the correct items in place it will prevent your subscribers from seeing your messages at all! Delivery is still the number one area of concern for email marketers, and with so many factors that can affect it, it is something that you must closely monitor to ensure your email reaches your subscribers' inboxes with all of the design aspects and linking features in place. Eight out of 10 marketers struggle with deliverability issues but few know what to do to monitor and solve the problem.

Listrak has published a white paper on this topic entitled "How Reputation Impacts Deliverability." It includes all of the technical and scientific facts that you need to ensure your reputation with the major ISPs remains strong and that your messages are getting through to your audience.

## When to Mail

There is one final piece to creating successful email marketing campaigns. Even if you have all of the above components in place, your messages will not work if they reach your subscribers at the wrong time. A recent study performed by Listrak of 3,000 email campaigns sent to 28 million subscribers in June 2007, it found that the best time to send email messages was Monday–Thursday between 9:00 and 11:00 am and 1:00 and 4:00 pm as a majority of subscribers are

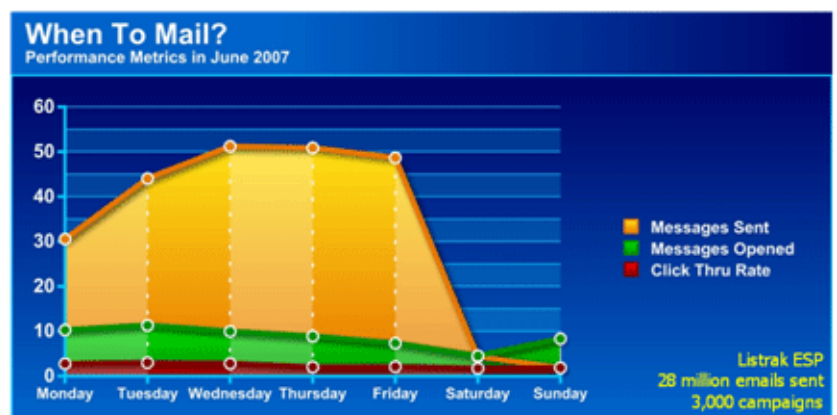
in front of their computers monitoring their inboxes at these times. It also found that mailers that considered changes in time zones showed a higher open and click through rate than mailers that sent their messages to their entire subscriber base at once.

Part of your list acquisition strategy should be to allow your subscribers to select the time they wish to receive the messages and then sticking to that delivery schedule. However, if you already have a list but do not have this data, you can obtain it easily through a simple survey or through testing different delivery times to find what works the best.

Be sure to send your emails out at a consistent day and time so your subscribers know when to expect your messages. This will help you achieve the greatest open and click through rates.

## A Balancing Act

In order to create inspiring email campaigns, you must balance the art and the science of email marketing. Messages must be creative in both form and content but they must be delivered correctly to be effective. And results must be closely monitored after each email send so you can separate emails that underperform to those that give you the highest ROI.



## About Listrak

Listrak is a leading provider of hosted email marketing software, allowing 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 software 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 personalization engine. Listrak's world-class support and professional services assist clients with enterprise integration. Its clients include L'Oreal, Motorola, Jeep, Pearle Vision, PR Newswire, The Islands of the Bahamas, and the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

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](http://www.listrak.com).