

By Chip House, Vice President of Privacy & Deliverability, ExactTarget

1. Get and Confirm Permission

Receiving permission from your subscribers is the crux of a successful email program. Capturing an opt-in and confirming it with a follow-up email is the best practice to ensure you only add recipients that want your email. To find out if you are sending something that is unwanted, look at your email from the eyes of your recipients. Will they anticipate receiving the email? Does it contain information that interests them? If the answer is “no,” then you should not send it. It is likely to get filtered due to complaints or content and will cause harm to your deliverability, as well as your brand and profitability over time.

2. Send Highly Valuable & Highly Relevant Emails

As the inbox gets more crowded with spam, your users are looking to your email to provide them with relevant content – the content they expected when subscribing to receive your email in the first place. The age of email blasting is over. Begin capturing data on your subscribers via surveys or during sign-up. Over time you will be able to send more relevant content, which lessens the chance that your email will be interpreted as spam by your subscribers.

3. Set Content & Frequency Expectations

Nothing can trigger subscriber dissatisfaction like continued emails that do not meet subscriber expectations in terms of content or frequency. Did you promise valuable, informational content, but continue to send only product pitches? Did you promise a monthly newsletter, but send weekly promotions? A recent study* shows that 65% of men and 56% of women define spam as “email from a company that I have done business with that comes too often.”

4. Use a Service Provider with a Good Reputation

Commercial email is getting more difficult with the advent of the CAN-SPAM Act and the increase in ISP filtering. Staying up-to-date on current legislation and policies of ISPs and anti-spam groups is difficult to do on your own. Reputable service providers such as ExactTarget dedicate significant resources to managing ISP relationships, monitoring email deliveries, and evaluating current email laws. If you do not have similar resources or an in-house expert, outsourcing could be the best way to get your messages delivered.

5. Use a Recognizable, Short, and Consistent “From Address”

Before even opening your email, a user has to recognize you, your company, your publication, and remember that they requested your email. This leads to many users accidentally reporting email that they opted-in to receive as spam or deleting it all together. The email “from address” is the first thing email recipients look at when deciding if they should open a message. It is important to keep this in mind with all email applications, but especially when mailing to AOL since their application only shows the email “from address” (info@xyzcompany.com) rather than the friendly “from name” (XYZ Company). If your email address looks like this (iqytchg@cz.upc.net) you are likely to receive a high number of spam complaints that could result in your email routing to the bulk folder or being blocked completely.

6. Ask to be Placed in the Address Book or Safe Senders List

AOL 9.0, Yahoo, Hotmail/MSN and Outlook 2003 all remove their email filtering techniques when the sender's email address is in the recipient's address book. This is another good reason to keep the same address over time. Once your "from address" is in a subscriber's book, your emails will continue to reach the inbox with images and links intact.

7. Maintain List Cleanliness

One sure way to get your message blocked is by "looking like a spammer." Most ISPs use list quality filters to detect when a sender is attempting to deliver email to a large number of invalid addresses. These messages "bounce" back to the originating server, which is why they are called bounces. Filtering can start at a bounce rate of just 10% at many ISPs. Even a good, permission-based list will see bounces over time. Per Return Path, an average email list will lose 30% of its names each year due to subscribers changing email addresses. To stay clean, monitor your bounces on a regular basis and remove bad addresses from your list.

8. Promptly Remove Unsubscribes and Respond to Complaints

No matter the quality of your opt-in efforts, some subscribers will not want to receive your email any longer. Nothing will cause more problems for your deliverability than ignoring unsubscribes and complaints. It is also important to manage your reply email address so that manual requests can be removed and complaints can be monitored. Monitoring your complaints closely is an effective indicator of how clearly you informed your subscribers regarding content and frequency when they opted-in to your publications.

In the age of CAN-SPAM, it must be easy for users to manage their subscriptions or unsubscribe. A profile management form allows a user to select the publications to which they want to subscribe to or be removed from. This enables you to stay in compliance with the 10-day unsubscribe removal period mandated by CAN-SPAM, while still offering another option besides unsubscribing from all of your communications.

9. Use ISP Inbox Testing

Setting up an "ISP Test List" can be a fast and easy way to find out if your email will pass through spam filters. You can do so by simply setting up email accounts with the major ISPs such as AOL, Hotmail, Yahoo, etc. Before sending to your entire subscriber list, send to your "test list" and make sure your email reaches the inbox of each ISP. If it lands in a bulk folder or is blocked all together, you are then able to investigate and make the appropriate changes.

10. Avoid "Spammy" Words and Phrases

Systematically scanning email subject lines and body content (also called content filtering) is the most widely used filtering method among ISPs.** Avoid overly promotional words and phrases, multiple exclamation points, all capital letters and other text often used by spammers.

*DoubleClick, 2003

**Jupiter Research

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