

HOW TO CONTROL YOUR PERMISSION-BASED E-MAIL MESSAGING ENVIRONMENT

Prepared by Silverpop Systems, May 2002



You want to use permission-based e-mail communications to build a trusting relationship with your customers and partners, knowing that people prefer to buy from those with whom they have a perceived relationship. Strong customer relationships lead to increased customer loyalty, which can lead to growth of customer lifetime value. However, customers are raising the bar for companies who wish to develop an effective dialogue.

Toward that end, you need to manage your company's e-mail communication practices with the key reference points below in mind. Following these points will minimize your risk of spam and maximize your investment in permission-based e-mail, as part of your overall marketing and communications strategies.

Note that these recommendations apply not just to specific individuals, but also to all departments and divisions across every organization.

SPAM DEFINED The Coalition Against Unsolicited Commercial E-mail (CAUCE, <http://www.cauce.org/>) approaches the spam issue as follows: "...many define spam as unsolicited electronic mail sent in bulk. Others believe "bulkness" is irrelevant, it is merely a matter of whether the message sent was solicited. Still others debate the importance of whether the message was commercial in nature. Due to the nature of Internet e-mail technology, each e-mail message, whether it is bulk or not, whether it is solicited or not, whether it is commercial or not, costs the recipient more than it costs the sender in terms of both money and resources. These are facts that make the definition of spam very tricky. " Others define spam as one or more unsolicited messages, sent or posted as part of a larger collection of messages, all having substantially identical content.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS If you don't get permission before sending large-scale e-mail communications, you can be instantly labeled a spammer and can be open to legal recrimination in some states (a fine of \$500 per message sent in one state), AND may fall into the dreaded MAPS (Mail Abuse Prevention System) RBL (Realtime Blackhole List - <http://mail-abuse.org/rbl/>).

According to Jeanne Jennings in a recent ClickZ article, "...twenty-six states have some type of anti-spam law on the books... Both this Congress and the last have discussed federal legislation, but so far nothing has been passed by both houses. The FTC recently cracked down on 'deceptive e-mail marketing.' [And] consumer activists and anti-spam organizations are calling for active opt-in as a requirement for commercial e-mail. Industry associations and big companies are lobbying for opt-out, which they define as any message containing an unsubscribe link (no need to get permission to send it, as long as there's a way to unsubscribe)."

One of the most notable online privacy bills, introduced recently, would force companies to obtain permission from users prior to collecting and sharing their data. The bill would define financial, medical, ethnic identification, religious affiliation, sexual orientation or political information as sensitive data. Prior to collecting, data companies would need users to opt-in. For more information, see <http://www.spamlaws.com>.

PRIVACY Develop a Privacy Policy. This applies to your e-mail communications as well as your other online and offline activities. Post a link to the policy on major e-communications, notably programs like newsletters and promotions. In attempting to opt individuals in to your list, as well as in your policy, specify that you'll keep the information private. Be up-front about what you're going to do with the information your new customer provides. When asking if you can send future emails about "related" products or services, use an opt-in approach as opposed to a "negative option" opt-out.

ANTI-SPAM Develop an Anti-Spam Policy. Make sure that it's clear what you're committing to. As mentioned above, post a link to the policy when appropriate. Use a solution provider that has a strong anti-spam stance, and one that knows and works ongoing with major ISPs.

Appoint a management-level internal "owner" to champion these policies and monitor adherence across the organization.

LISTS In building your opt-in database, don't bother with lists (CD-ROMs and third party sends) that offer cheap promises: costing pennies per thousand and containing millions of addresses. These typically are called "spam" lists, which include databases of names harvested without the recipients' consent. It takes time and money to develop good third-party opt-in lists. Be willing to pay reputable list brokers, managers, owners and networks a little higher price for higher quality lists. Ask to see the datacard, which shows the list's make-up, source(s) and other relevant information. Also, remember that acquired lists must be used for their original purpose.

Make sure the list does not contain the following recipient names: info, root, admin, administrator, support, sales, abuse, postmaster, hostmaster, dnsmaster, marketing etc. These are addresses for specific purposes, not for receiving email. Finding these names in your list probably means the list is very dirty.

Be wary of purchased lists that contain "pop" or "mail" as part of the domain name for a recipient. While in some cases this is legitimate for

very old addresses, more likely a spammer has done a "best guess" search on an ISP's mail server to see which addresses bounce and which don't. Do not explicitly exclude addresses with multiple sub domains, since some may be legitimate. Names like corp.bigcompany.com or development.biggercompany.com might be valid, but major ISPs typically don't do that. When in doubt, send an e-mail to the postmaster at the sub-domain, asking if their users normally would provide their addresses with the sub-domain.

For reference, "harvesting," or scavenging, involves the collection of e-mail addresses, typically through automated programs run across newsgroups, chat rooms, user directories, Web forms (e.g., guest books, registration forms) and even AOL profile lists. All of this is accomplished without the e-mail address owners' knowledge.

LOW RISK/HIGH RETURN OPT-IN OPPORTUNITIES Take advantage of all touch points for opting in new customers. The best opportunities are those where there is some affinity or reference point. These also are the type of opt-in scenarios with the lowest perception of spam, as they enhance the chance that the prospect will see relevance in your offer. These vehicles may be online or offline and include company and partner Websites, other partner channel activities, conferences and conventions, seminars and webinars, e-billings/billing statements, announcements, promotions, loyalty program communications and customer service/support interactions.

OPT-IN When attempting to get prospects to opt-in to your lists, use a compelling, relevant call-to-action and spell out very clearly what you are offering and what it is that you want the user to do. Specify that you'll keep the information private. Make sure your opt-in lists consist solely of subscribers who have given you permission to send them specifically the type of message that you will be sending them. Submit to the "one-subscription, one-list" approach. Once an individual opts-in to a list, addresses should not be added to other lists without fully verified consent of the address owner. It should never be assumed that subscribers to a list about yard maintenance want to be added to a list about home maintenance. You may want to promote other lists in your e-mailings, but never automatically subscribe an existing customer to a new list. When asking if you can send future emails about "related" products or services, use an opt-in approach as opposed to a "negative option" opt-out.

PERSONAL PREFERENCE PROFILES AND INTEGRATION

Once the individual has opted-in, offer a personal preferences page where the recipient can control what communication options (i.e., newsletter, announcements, promotions, financial news, etc.) he/she subscribes to and how often he/she receives those communications. Provide easy access to this profile page through all e-mail communication programs. Allow list members to access, modify or delete their personal information at any time. Make sure that the data behind the profile is integrated between the e-mail communication solution and the company's core information database(s) for smooth real-time updates. Also, to maximize control over relevance and timeliness, integrate information captured through e-mail communications with those same core information database(s) and systems (i.e., CRM and/or SFA).

DOCUMENTATION Keep a record of how and when people opted-in to your list, so that if someone accuses you of sending spam, you can easily point to the time and date that they requested to be added to the list. This is a very important record to have. If your account becomes listed on an anti-spam block list, this information can help to have you removed from the list.

DATA MAINTENANCE You spend a great deal of time building your lists. Protect your investment and update your database often. The cleaner your list is the more likely you are to be messaging to the right people, which further minimizes your company's exposure. Out-of-date e-mail addresses can be a big problem with as many as 30% of individuals changing their addresses during any given year. Make sure to remove addresses that bounce from your list. Repeated attempts to send to these ("hard"-bounced) addresses can cause your account to become blocked. Sign-up with an e-mail change of address service (EOCA), such as Return Path (www.returnpath.net), or Silverpop can facilitate this for you.

OPT-OUT Provide customers with clear notice of their ability to opt-out of specific e-mail communications. Make it easy for them to opt-out... the fewer clicks, the better. Honor all customer opt-out requests, and do so immediately. This means that, if a customer opts-out completely and you don't hear from them for a period of time — say six months — you cannot just send a blind e-mail to them again. You may, however, continue other forms of marketing and communication in the hope of luring them back. If the customer opted-out of a specific type of communication but remains opted-in to others, you may continue with those opt-in communications only. Also, offer an alternative method for unsubscribing (e.g., an e-mail address to which messages may be sent for further contact via e-mail or telephone) for those who are unable or unwilling to follow standard automated procedures.

Depending on the frequency of your communications, the following tip may be appropriate: In an attempt to keep the customer from leaving your list altogether, you can give the customer the option of getting less frequent communication from your company. On your unsubscribe page, offer a less frequent digest version. Offering multiple categories, as mentioned above in the personal profile section, can help minimize total churn as well.

The Direct Marketing Association (DMA) has other suggestions at <http://www.the-dma.org/library/privacy/part1>.

SUPPRESSION FILE Maintain an in-house suppression file of individuals who have requested not to receive any solicitations or communications from your company. This file should be maintained, not only across, online but also offline communications. You should run any consumer-focused prospect or third party lists against The DMA's (EMPS) E-mail Preference Service suppression file. An order form and subscription agreement may be obtained at www.the-dma.org/preference.

RELEVANCE Timeliness and Consistency are Key. Whether trying to get someone to opt-in to a list or messaging to someone already on a list, these three factors are critical to the success of your e-mail communication programs... and to minimizing any perception of spam.

As much as possible, disclose up-front the list's subject matter and the anticipated frequency of messages.

1. RELEVANCE According to IMT Strategies (2001) lack of relevance is the number one reason why recipients opt-out of messages. Leverage the data you have captured in building individual profiles to ensure message relevance. Put in the subject line the company name and/or the name of the communication for which the individual opted-in. This will increase relevance and the chance the person will read the e-mail. Make sure you include a paragraph at the TOP of the document telling the recipient why they have received the message and how to opt-out.

2. TIMELINESS Timeliness of messages is the number two reason why recipients opt-out of messages, according to IMT. Your best bet is to let your customer tell you how often they would like to be communicated with. Barring that knowledge, industry experts point to once or twice monthly as ideal, depending on B-to-B or B-to-C, the nature of the company's messaging and the industry. Weekly can be appropriate for more news-rich communications as well as product promotions, like in retail, hospitality and travel segments.

3. CONSISTENCY Consistent look & feel and messaging reinforces the relevance and bond that is developed with each subscriber. It also reinforces the company's brand image, or identity, that has been so carefully developed.

Six Resolutions from the CRE

The Council for Responsible E-Mail (CRE, <http://www.interactivehq.org/>) lists six resolutions designed to safeguard receivers from getting consistently unwanted, erroneously labeled, or intentionally deceptive e-mail. Each resolution, paraphrased below, complements the next and should be taken into consideration as a collective entity.

- 1.** Do not falsify the sender's domain name or use a non-responsive IP address without implied permission from the recipient or transferred permission from the marketer.
- 2.** Do not falsify the subject line to mislead readers about the content of the email message.
- 3.** E-mail marketing messages must include an option for the recipient to unsubscribe from receiving future messages from that sender, list owner, or list manager, or valid and responsive contact information of the sender, list manager, or list owner.
- 4.** Inform the respondent upon online collection of the e-mail address for what marketing purpose the respondent's e-mail address will be used. (Inform either online or via e-mail.)
- 5.** No harvesting of e-mail addresses with the intent to send bulk unsolicited commercial e-mail without consumers' knowledge or consent. (Harvest is defined as compiling or stealing e-mail addresses through anonymous collection procedures such as via a Web spider, through chat rooms, or other publicly displayed areas listing personal or business e-mail addresses.)

6. Do not send bulk unsolicited commercial e-mail to an e-mail address without a prior business or personal relationship. (Business or personal relationship is defined as any previous correspondence, transaction activity, customer service activity, personalized marketing message, third party permission use, or proven offline contact.)

Also, to ensure that you stick to these guidelines and deliver on what your promise, make a creative brief for each major e-mail communications program. The Brief should include objectives, strategies, tactics, audience profile, timing, responsibilities and resources needed. Make sure all primary stakeholders sign off, then move forward with the creative and copywriting/content based on the Creative Brief's direction. A campaign, or program, checklist should follow the Brief's direction as well.

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