25 Essentials for Exceptional Email Campaigns

Load and send? Batch and blast? Those direct marketing concepts are ancient history in the modern email environment. Today's email marketers must navigate their way through a complicated landscape of shifting customer expectations, challenging new technologies, evolving government regulations and other issues old-school direct marketers never had to face.

To help you face these challenges head on, we've compiled a handy list of 25 essentials you can employ that will greatly improve your email marketing initiatives. While 25 may sound extensive, keep in mind that missing any one of these can affect your ROI, secure your position on blacklists, or damage your reputation with clients and prospects. And while many of the essentials on this list seem obvious, the list itself serves as a good reminder of the many nuts and bolts mechanics that you should maintain in order to keep your email campaigns performing at their highest levels.

1. Permission is not optional

When you send unsolicited email, you hurt your brand, your campaign and your sender reputation. Don't use "stealth" methods to collect email addresses such as pre-checked boxes on site registration forms. Use a proper, two-stage opt-in process that requires confirmation before the address goes into your database. Ask subscribers who have been on your list for more than 12 months if they want to continue receiving your email and retain all the permission data on each subscriber.

2. Manage your sender reputation

Don't get on an ISP's bad side by sending too many emails too often or by generating a high number of spam complaints. ISPs will block your emails, shunt them to oblivion in the bulk folder and won't bother to tell you what you did wrong. Here are some valuable tips for managing your sender reputation:

- Honor unsubscribe requests within the ten-day window dictated by CAN-SPAM laws.

- Stay off blacklists by monitoring, resolving and learning from spam complaints. If you're delivering relevant content in formats that recipients want, you'll minimize those complaints.

- Use a double opt-in process and unique IP address.

- Check out the free Lyris ContentChecker™ for Email and Deliverability Do's and Don'ts Guide to help you with your efforts.

3. Clean and analyze mailing lists

A "dirty" list – one with too many unsolicited, incorrect, out-of-date or duplicated addresses – hurts your campaign performance and your company's delivery and sender reputation. "List hygiene" means cleaning out bad addresses, which reduces undeliverable emails and helps you spot problems fast. Review your list to see who hasn't opened or clicked for the last six months. Provide them with a compelling offer to re-engage. If that doesn't work, try changing the frequency with which you contact them to test if that makes an impact in how they engage with you.

4. Be prepared for churn

While good email marketing will keep your list engaged, the reality is that you need to continually use opt-in strategies to keep it viable. Not only should you have subscriber retention programs in place, but you'll also need acquisition programs

since as many as 30% of email addresses churn each year. See the Bionic List Building Guide for more ideas.

5. Focus on list quality over list size

Growing your mailing list is important, but don't do it at the expense of quality. While it may look impressive to have a large list, quality names should be your highest priority. Make sure your company has defined its target audience and focus your efforts on adding names that fit this target. You may not have a large number of names in your database, but careful targeting will mean you have a list of high-value prospects and customers that result in higher response rates and greater success.

6. With opt-ins, establish and build trust

An opt-in is a statement of faith from your subscriber. Respect that by asking only for the most necessary information at registration. If all you really need is a name and email address, ask only for that. If you need a bit more – say city or state if your product isn't available everywhere or size of business for routing leads – ask for that as well. To keep from scaring prospects away, keep the request for data to a minimum. You can always use subsequent email campaigns to qualify and fill in more detailed information.

7. Respect recipients' privacy

Respecting the privacy of your email recipients and subscribers is a good business practice and will also help you avoid legal and ethical problems. Include a short, simple email privacy statement within your opt-in form and link it to the full policy statement on your Website. Define your contact strategy, the format in which you'll share content and if you can, give the subscriber options on format and frequency. Adhere to the policy and make sure that if you change it, you give your subscribers an opportunity to opt-in again.

8. Give recipients what they want and need

Your subscribers expect control. If you don't give them what they want, they'll go elsewhere. Let them decide the email format (text or HTML), contact frequency and content preferences, if they'd like to receive additional information beyond what they opted-in for. Then segment your lists to reflect those choices. It's always more effective to contact someone on their schedule and under their terms and get a higher response rate than to try to force a schedule or terms on an unwilling recipient and risk their unsubscribe.

9. Design for the Inbox

Poor design and improper formatting frustrate users. If they can't easily navigate your email or find the information they want at a glance, your messages will fall flat. Your email has to stand out in a crowded Inbox. Here are some tips for designing for the inbox and optimizing deliverability:

- Be sure to test sample messages to see what performs.

- Put your company name in the "from" line for fast recognition.

- Add a "grabber" subject line – 50 characters or less.

- Use teaser text and HTML colors and layout rather than an image so readers can get an immediate "preview" of your email even if images are disabled.

- Put the important content – the offer, call to action, newsletter contents etc. – at the top of the email for immediate viewing. You only have seconds to make your case, so make the most them.

Read our free Email Design No-No's for Non-Designers Guide for more ideas.

10. Check your email mechanics

Don't forget to check your email mechanics on a regular basis. Some of the best campaigns fail because simple items like response links, the unsubscribe process, co-registration or images fail. It takes time, but each email execution is valuable. Don't frustrate your subscribers or waste your money by sending out an email that doesn't have its most basic items working.

One of the best and simplest methods for making sure that the mechanics of each and every email campaign are optimized is

to create and consistently utilize an email development and deployment checklist. To help you with this effort, reference the 10-Point Email Tune-Up Guide for further information.

11. Test for correct rendering of emails on all email clients

HTML emails – with pictures, colors and graphics – can look or function very differently when viewed in different email clients. Here are a few ways to test for the correct rendering of your email messages across numerous clients before deploying your campaign:

- Send a sample email to an account with each of the major providers – such as AOL, Earthlink, Gmail and Yahoo! – to spot bad links, poor rendering or other formatting issues.

- Do the same for any email client that allows the receiver to use a preview pane or review without images – such as Outlook 2007.

- Use an email service provider that helps you see how your email is rendered across clients.

- Design the header of your email to provide the desired outcome regardless of email client. For instance, if you know that there's a good chance your image-rich header will not be viewable in most email clients, use an Alt Tag that "sells" the idea or offer your image header is conveying.

See the Email Design No-No's for Non-Designers Guide for more information.

12. Test for delivery and spam filters

Emails that are well targeted with great creative and compelling offers don't do your company any good unless they're actually delivered. Test your content against spam filters and see how many of your emails are blocked. If you aren't pleased with the results, optimize your email for Inbox delivery by creating good headers (as above), writing content that doesn't look like spam and cultivating good ISP relations. If your current email solution doesn't have a component to help you avoid spam filters, consider finding a solution that will

analyze and determine the deliverability of your content. For starters, use the free Lyris ContentChecker™ for Email to help you determine if your content is going to cause your email message to get hung up in spam filters.

13. Provide administrative functions in each email

Give subscribers the tools they need to manage their subscriptions, contact you, forward information to others and get more information, right in the email. Reputable email marketers respect their customers' time and include this information in a clearly marked section, usually at the end of each email. Don't make them hunt for it.

14. Test something every time

Testing is a classic way for direct marketers to refine their efforts to get the best results. If each of your email campaigns doesn't include a testing component, you're missing out on an opportunity to improve your ROI. Some elements you may want to test include:

- Subject lines

- Offers

- Deployment date or time

- A new list, or segment your existing list to compare one segment against another

Your results will provide new ideas for more effective campaigns and help you get rid of offers, lists or creative that aren't working.

15. Define your email value proposition (EVP)

Without a clear value proposition, your email won't hit your recipient's "internal Inbox" – the barometer in the mind of each recipient that tells them whether your email message is worth their time. Give your subscribers clear reasons to open your email messages every time by establishing and sticking to your own EVP. An EVP should:

- Be unique to your company and tie back to your company's business and/or marketing objectives.

- Clearly define the value your email message brings to subscribers.

Define your EVP much like you would a positioning statement and make sure that it concentrates on how it will directly benefit your subscribers. Use your EVP as a measure when you review your content, creative, frequency and segmentation strategies. Most importantly, make sure that the content you offer to your subscribers is in keeping with the expectation you set with them when they opted-in and that the content continues to be relevant and valuable to that specific audience.

16. Segment lists for better results

Use the information you collected when your subscribers opted-in to divide your list into relevant segments, and then deliver distinct, targeted messages to each of those segments. Beyond that, you may also want to segment your lists based on email and Web behavior such as which links recipients clicked on or what actions they've taken on your Website. Doing so will make your outgoing emails more meaningful to your subscribers, which results in improved response and conversion rates. Segmenting also helps you understand results and trends based on demographics and other audience-specific factors.

17. Personalize for greater relevance

Personalization uses recipients' own information to create highly relevant and valuable email messages. This is more than putting a recipient's name on the top of the email – it's about creating content that specifically addresses the recipient's behavior and interests such as buying history, hobbies, geographic location, format etc.

18. Be prepared for mobile devices and social media

The reality in today's wired environment is that your email messages will be viewed on mobile devices – and your carefully designed HTML email will look like gibberish on most of them. This is particularly true in business-to-business marketing. Be aware of this and design your email messages

accordingly. Or offer subscribers a mobile version. For information on executing email on mobile devices, see the Mobile Marketing How-to Guide, which was developed for email marketers.

Social media is another powerful tool on the rise. On its own, it can be used to message to your target much like email marketing, but by combining social media and email marketing, you have the opportunity to gain exponential response and ROI. Define your social media strategy, determine your social media vehicles (LinkedIn, Twitter etc.) and, as part of your execution plan, leverage your coverage in the social sphere to feed your email initiatives. You'll not only gain further reach, but also engage prospects and customers in a more meaningful dialog. For a practical guide to combining social media and email, see the Social Media Marketing How-To Guide.

19. Integrate email into your complete marketing mix

Email marketing works best when part of an integrated marketing plan. You'll get a higher ROI when you incorporate email into your complete marketing mix including PPC, social media marketing, mobile, traditional direct mail, telemarketing and trade shows. For instance:

- Design keyword-rich landing pages that will help with your SEO efforts, fulfill the offer within your email campaign and provide deeper information into the product or service you're offering.

- Promote newsletter content across multiple marketing touch points and post email information to your Website.

- Use social media to increase opt-ins to your email list.

- Remember mobile marketing. Consider using your email to promote a mobile campaign or offering your email to those who are already subscribed to your mobile alerts.

20. Deliver value continuously

Subscibers' needs change over time. Your emails will compete with new and changing sources of content or offers that will affect your value proposition. Survey your recipients occasionally

to learn their needs and interests and pay close attention to the response metrics that indicate whether your emails are getting stale. Analyze each deployment for revealing statistics on factors such as subject line, offer, links clicked, segmenting etc. By soliciting feedback, watching trends and staying in touch with the needs of your subscriber base you can re-tool your email campaigns to deliver consistent value while staying true to your EVP and the expectations you established with your subscribers.

21. Focus on goals, not process metrics

Email campaign success should not be measured by counting open and click-through rates alone. Instead, establish objectives before each campaign and then measure performance against them. Metrics like number of transactions, demos initiated or white papers downloaded as a direct result of your email campaign are generally better markers of success than clicks or delivered emails. These measurable, goal-focused metrics will tell you if your email program is successful or needs refinement.

22. Use advanced automation

The simple "load and send" method of deploying emails doesn't work anymore. You need to employ a whole range of advanced technologies – behavioral segmentation, detailed reporting, API database integration, dynamic content, triggers and more – to drive improved results and ROI of email campaigns in today's marketing environment. For example, use triggers to send specific content to recipients based on their unique email actions.

Review every available report from your email marketing tool to gain the most robust picture possible. Choose an email marketing tool with strong analytics and a full suite of services. Then learn how to use them and put them to good use.

23. Tie into Web analytics

You may think that your Web analytics aren't related to your email campaigns, but think again. The truth is, tying the two together can mean much more successful email initiatives. For instance, when determining the best content to offer in your email message, take a look at the content most viewed or downloaded on your Website. Check out landing pages or shopping cart abandonment stats to determine how to overcome these issues with email. Make sure you don't silo analytics from other important areas when you're working on email campaigns. All of this information used together can provide better and more robust ROI tracking, more effective targeting of prospects and much more. See the Web Analytics Wizard Guide for more information on this topic.

24. Allocate necessary resources

Many companies started using email marketing because it was more cost-effective than postal mail, but that's all different now. The landscape – from ISP relations to technological innovation and government regulations – is more complex than ever. Your organizations must allocate adequate budgets, resources and know-how to do the job right and achieve your ROI goals. Educate your team and key stakeholders about the resoures you need and make sure that your email solution provider has a full range of services in list management, content development, delivery and analytics.

25. Know the laws affecting email marketing, and comply

In the U.S., email marketers must follow email and privacy statutes in 36 states and also comply with CAN-SPAM, the federal email law. In addition, the E.U., Asia and Australia have their own anti-spam laws, as do most countries with an email presence. Adhering to these laws is critical – the consequences of breaking them can be dire. At a minimum be sure to:

- Have an attorney with appropriate expertise review your email and privacy policies.

- Audit your practices across all departments that manage email (not just marketing) and train everyone to follow correct procedures.

- Conduct regular audits of your privacy policies and email practices to assure that you are in compliance with all current laws and best practices.

Key Takeaways and Tools

It takes a commitment to develop strong, targeted email campaigns that foster excellent customer relationships and achieve high ROI. The 25 essentials in this guide are cornerstones to delivering maximum ROI from your email marketing efforts. You can also find a treasure chest of free guides, tools, webcasts and best practices in the Lyris Resource Center to help you navigate the complex world of email marketing.

Lyris HQ™ can be your partner in email marketing and integrated online marketing success. We've taken the online-marketing tools you already rely upon – email marketing, deliverability tools, content cration, Web analytics, search marketing, social media marketing and mobile marketing – and combined them into a world-class integrated marketing suite. For more information on Lyris solutions, visit www.lyris.com.

About Lyris

Lyris HQ provides a single online marketing platform for the integrated products today's digital marketer needs: email marketing deliverability tools, content creation, Web analytics, search marketing and mobile marketing.