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A Beginner's Guide to Successful Email Marketing

“You’ve got mail.”

Do you remember hearing that? It’s one of those legendary pieces of Internet history formed when the road was still being paved and we were foraging our way through the wilderness of what was the original World Wide Web.

Although times have changed and AOL no longer sends CD’s in the mail, we can still thank them for introducing us to email and our addiction to it.

These days, we’ve replaced that message with Tweets, likes, and status updates, but that doesn’t mean that our affinity for email is any less. In fact, because of the noise that is social media, one could argue that the inbox has become our virtual dojo, our place of solitude amongst the chaos.

This is why, as an entrepreneur, I believe that building successful email marketing campaigns has never been more important than it is now. But there’s a problem; most people don’t know how to do it right. So in the interest of furthering best practices and helping you succeed as a business owner, let’s get back to the basics and talk about [how a great email campaign is built](#), from the ground up.

You’re in their house

People are inundated with interruption, pitches, and advertisements everywhere they look, and though you might think yours is special, there’s a high probability that to the reader, it looks the same as the rest. This is why it’s important to remember where you are, and use your good manners as a result.

Getting into someone’s inbox is like being invited to their home for dinner. If they ask you to take your shoes off, you respectfully do so. It’s the same with email marketing, so before we begin I’d simply like to remind you to be

on your best behavior at all times and remember...you're in their house.

Phase I: Getting Permission

Of course, no email campaign was ever built without getting permission to get started, so first we'll need to focus on building a sizable email list.


There are many ways you can do this of course. Some prefer to give something away for free while others simply offer a newsletter or product updates.

I can't tell you which is the right or wrong answer in this case, but I can tell you that it's important to have a clear purpose when asking for an address. This is where a strong call to action comes into play, and copywriting is super important.

- What do I get when I give you my email address?
- Are you going to spam me?
- How often will you email me?
- Will I get discounts?
- Will I get a first crack at your beta?
- Will you send me relevant offers or more junk?

These are the kinds of things you'll need to address if you want to be successful in phase 1. Simply posting "enter your email for updates" isn't going to get anyone excited to do so. Instead, consider sharing specifics:

FREE catalog and e-mail sign up




Since its debut in 1974, the Crutchfield catalog has set the standard for accurate, helpful presentations of electronics.

[Sign me up for the free catalog](#)

E-mail me exclusive offers, the latest deals and expert reviews

Your e-mail address

[Sign me up](#) 



6 WAYS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

FREE EMAIL SERIES

You'll also receive updates when I post to the site every
Monday and Thursday.

NAME:

EMAIL:

SUBMIT

Your email address will never be shared,
and you can opt-out at the touch of a button.

Note the Clear and Concise Call to Action in the Examples Above

Take a look at the examples above and you'll see that the first tells me I'm getting a free catalogue and a series of reviews and special offers, while the 2nd tells me exactly when I'll receive the newsletter updates. This is a far more specific, and effective, way of doing business.

A quick look at my own practices tells me that the offers I subscribe to most often are for:

- Email Series' (i.e. [6 Ways to Change the World](#))
- Free Downloads
- Free White Papers or eBooks
- Update Lists (New Issue Notifications, Product Updates, New Releases)

Lastly, and Amazon does this really well, your customers make great candidates, so don't forget to integrate some form of registration or email subscription as part of your purchasing process. Just remember to treat these

addresses with special regard, which we'll talk about in phase 2.

Get Whitelisted

While almost all reputable email service providers work very hard to make sure that your emails are not blocked by major ISP's, they can't control whether or not your emails hit the inbox or the spam box. Although most will help you by providing a quality score to help you determine availability, getting whitelisted is the most effective way to ensure that your emails get delivered properly.

Essentially, getting whitelisted is equivalent to being marked as a friend, and the best way to achieve this is by being added to the recipient's address book. The best way to do this is by providing instructions to do so at the top of each email, especially on the initial thank you and first follow-up email.

Furthermore, here are instructions from some of the more popular online providers:

- [AWeber](#)
- [Mailchimp](#)
- [Constant Contact](#)
- [Campaign Monitor](#)
- [Blue Sky Factory](#)
- [Emma](#)

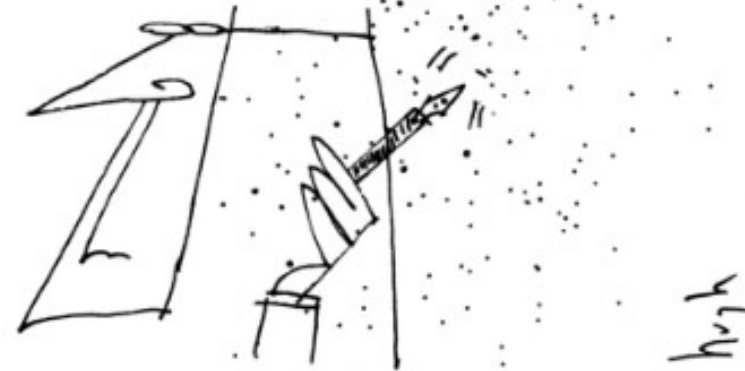
Phase II: Playing the Numbers Game

Manage Expectations with Follow-Up Efforts

Email marketing is all about expectations, and it's up to you to set them. If your call to action is strong, and your follow-up is consistent, then you can count on a positive campaign. However, if you promise to send one email per week and instead send them daily, then you're setting yourself up for failure. On the contrary, if someone is expecting daily updates or critical product updates and you don't deliver, then they are likely to be just as upset in that case too.

i have a pen.

→ fountain pen.
i must create now.
yes.



Fountain Pen



Because I asked, I expect [Hugh MacLeod](#) to email his cartoons daily.

This is why the first follow-up email is so crucial to the success of your email marketing efforts. Almost all email service providers give you the option to create an autoresponder sequence, and it's imperative that you take advantage of it.

The initial follow-up email should be sent immediately as a way to introduce yourself and detail what you plan on doing with your new subscriber's email address. It's better to be long-winded and detailed than it is to be quick and unobtrusive, but if you can pull off quick and concise then more power to you.

From here, it's simply a matter of living up to their expectations.

When to Pitch

If you're going to get in the habit of pitching often, try to put yourself in the reader's shoes. Ask yourself if your messaging is consistent with the expectations you've set. As I said before, Amazon does this well because they send relevant offers based on my buying habits. Those that send blind offers are far more likely to lose permission to keep doing so.

amazon.com

Recommended for You

Amazon.com has new recommendations for you based on [items](#) you purchased or told us you own.



[The Little Big Things: 163 Ways to Pursue EXCELLENCE](#)



[Fascinate: Your 7 Triggers to Persuasion and Captivation](#)



[Sherlock Holmes \[Blu-ray\]](#)



[Alice in Wonderland \[Blu-ray\]](#)


Notice how Amazon recommends products based on my prior buying habits.

Another option to consider is the value you're providing. While Amazon can provide value in an offer, you might have to provide it with a newsletter or in linking to blog posts or other forms of media content.

Again, each business has different needs, and there aren't any hard and fast rules as to how often you can pitch or provide content, but remember that an email list is a permission asset and it's better to err on the side of caution than to play it loose and reckless.

What's in a Newsletter





The Sprouter Newsletter is a welcome addition to my inbox because they provide value through insights, updates, and new content. Each email is prefaced with an introduction, and includes a list of great posts, local events, and hot startups.

While we're on the topic of content, let's talk about the difference between a good newsletter and a bad newsletter.

The first sign that you've received a bad newsletter is that you don't recall ever asking to receive it. Typically, this happens when a business either fails to maintain a regular email routine or uses poor form and manually adds me to their list after receiving a business card or personal email.

I find that the most compelling newsletters are those that do a great job of mixing messaging and updates. For example, while the email might contain a list of product updates and images, it's balanced by a personal message or friendly update.

As a rule of thumb, try to use your newsletter as a way to further your relationship with the reader/customer rather than to pitch them. Save the pitch for unique updates, offers, and announcements.

Using the Autoresponder

As a marketer myself, one of the issues I run into most often is that I forget to talk to my list until I have something to sell. Obviously, this is not ideal.

This is where an [autoresponder](#) can save you, and why I recommend scheduling content to be delivered on a consistent basis over the course of several months.

For example, Copyblogger offers a newsletter titled "[Internet Marketing for Smart People](#)," and it contains a dozen plus great pieces on how to market better as an online entrepreneur. I can't remember when I signed up, but I do know that I've received an occasional email at least once per month over the past 6 months.

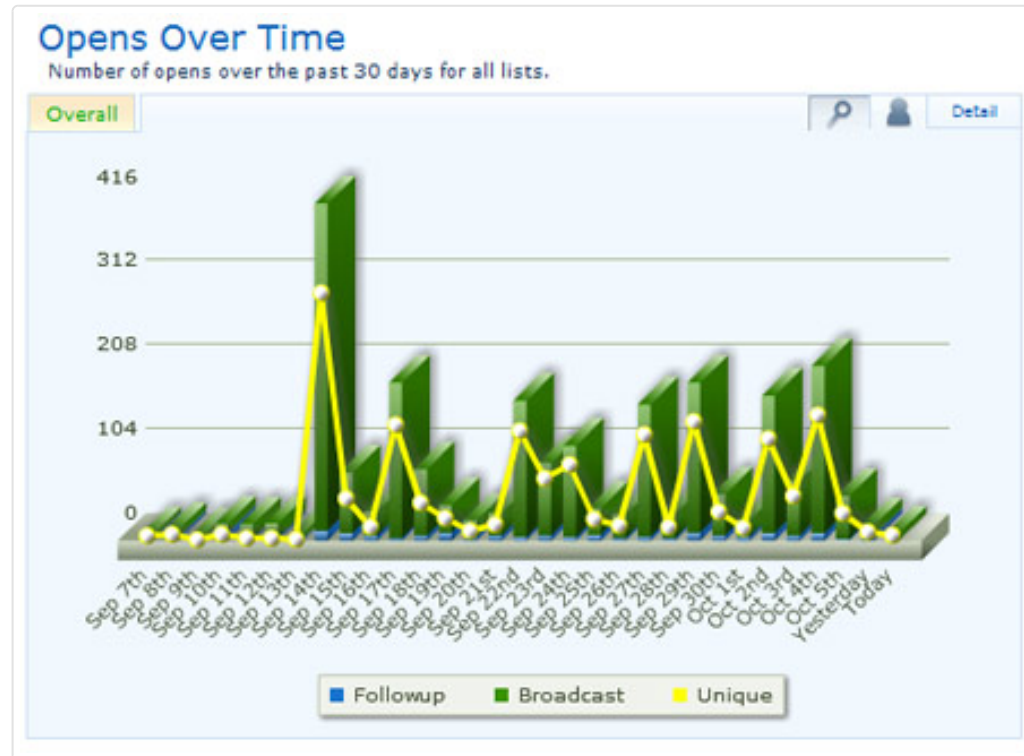
The benefit of that is when you do need to announce a new product or sale, you can count on the fact that you've already been in touch, having built a relationship over several weeks/months, and are much less likely to annoy your readers. Of course, it's important to schedule your autoresponder sequence on specific days so that you

know when you can afford to send an email. More than one per day and you're probably mailing too much.

If you find yourself asking "will this email be one too many?" then it's probably one too many.

Phase III: Segmentation and Analytics

Analytics



Notice the detailed daily statistics for open rate on a recent AWeber campaign.

We've talked before about the importance of [analytics in web copy](#), and email is no different. Every service provider I've ever worked with provides complimentary analytics.

Though they're all important, the 3 most important to me are open rate, click through rate (CTR), and unsubscribes.

Your open rate will tell you how well you've built your relationship; if the number is low, it means that people have

started to delete upon receipt, which means you need to work harder on providing value and/or managing expectations.

If your CTR is low, it means that your message is either not targeted enough, or simply not getting through. In this case, focus on improving your copy.

If your unsubscribe rate is high in relation to your opt-in rate, then you've passed the point of building value and writing good copy...you've got some serious work to do. If this is you, try to examine when people are leaving and take action based on those leaks.

If they're leaving after a certain autoresponder email, then re-work it. If they're leaving after marketing messages, then re-work the way you present offers. If they're leaving early on in your funnel, then you need to fix your original call to action so that it's in harmony with what you're sending.

Email analytics are critical in that if you're paying attention, they'll give you very specific clues as to what you're doing wrong. Of course the key variable here is "paying attention."

Segmentation

If you're unfamiliar with the term, segmentation is the practice of splitting up your email list into more targeted groups.

For example, the following are ways to segment a larger, more unified list:

- Customer List (in comparison to leads)
- Product Updates (in comparison to a customer list)
- Newsletter
- Daily Email List (in comparison to weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, etc)
- HTML (yes, some people prefer the option for text)

In dividing your list in this manner, you give yourself the ability to send more targeted communication. Some customers want both product and sales updates, while others might only want to hear about new versions. If you don't give them the chance to choose, you risk losing them all-together. Since customers make the best buyers,

it's fairly obvious why you want to keep them subscribed to your customer email list.

With segmentation, you can send a broadcast only to those that didn't open your last message (ask them why), or to those that showed interest (a 2nd pitch). You can also split test messaging amongst different groups in order to refine your best practices.

As you can see, segmentation isn't rocket science, but it is work, which is why most don't take the time to do it right. If you do, you'll immediately separate yourself from the pack.

The Value of Your List

In the future, we'll talk about more advanced techniques, such as measuring the cost of lead acquisition, but for now know this: your email list is one of your most valuable resources, and if you learn how to treat it right, the cost of doing so will pay for itself.

If you can imagine that each person on your list is worth a set value, say \$5, then you can understand immediately how losing several hundred could be dangerous to your bottom line.

What do you think? How has email marketing served you best? What practices help you to keep your numbers growing and your readers engaged? Share in the comments.

About the Author: *Nathan Hangen is an entrepreneur, author, and co-founder of the [Fountainhead Society](#).*

Comments

[Add your own comment](#)

Alex

Oct 11, 2010 at 10:03 am

Great breakdown on operating a successful email campaign. Personally, email campaigns are most effective when I can finally get to chat with the customer one on one via email. I try to avoid the auto-response if possible because I hate to receive automated responses myself.

[Reply](#)

Wesley Verhoeve

Oct 11, 2010 at 10:36 am

Very useful post Nathan! The frequency and “only send when I have something to sell” items are especially valid for what we do at Family Records. It’s a difficult thing to balance.

[Reply](#)

Nathan Hangen - Digital Emperor

Oct 11, 2010 at 6:37 pm

It sure is, especially when you forget that the last email you sent might have been for a recent sale or special. That’s why I love AR’s.

[Reply](#)

Nathan Hangen - Digital Emperor

Oct 11, 2010 at 6:36 pm

Alex, that’s a great point. It’s a tough thing to scale, but if you keep someone designated for that task, it’s much easier to manage.

Email is a great place to build relationships.

[Reply](#)

ajc @ 7million7years

Oct 11, 2010 at 10:24 pm

It's probably a side-issue, but it's good to have an immediately recognizable identity.

For example, your 2nd e-mail opt-in form HAS to be Chris Guillebeau's. Instant recognition!

[Reply](#)

Nathan Hangen - Digital Emperor

Oct 12, 2010 at 4:39 am

Ah, good point! Was curious if anyone would catch that one :)

[Reply](#)

Beverley Ireland-Symonds

Oct 15, 2010 at 12:36 am

Thank you – this is a very useful blog particularly for anyone who hasn't tried an email campaign

[Reply](#)

ForexWill

Oct 19, 2010 at 11:24 pm

Thanks for this article, very well explained and easy to follow. Thanks

[Reply](#)

Mickey Wong

Oct 28, 2010 at 10:37 am

Very good article, Nathan, and I'm enjoying your musings on your blog.

Might I add that getting subscribers to whitelist you should be an integral part of your opt-in process and email marketing.

As the Email Experience Council stated in their Best Practices for Email Deliverability and Inbox Placement report, "The best deliverability comes when the subscriber (and not the ISP) whitelists you as a sender they trust".

It's even more important to get whitelisted considering Gmail's Priority Inbox, which places you in the "Important and unread" section if you're in the recipient's Contacts. Not forgetting also Yahoo! Mail and Windows Live Hotmail where users can sort mail only from senders in their Address Book or Contacts.

The best place to start asking subscribers to whitelist you is on your site's thank you or confirmation page immediately after they sign up. And also on post-order confirmation pages so important emails, such as receipts, aren't lost in customers' junk folders. Then continue reminding them in email campaigns, including in the initial thank you and first follow-up email.

The language used when asking people to whitelist you is also an important consideration. More tech savvy folks understand what "whitelist us" means. You'll get the message across better to other folks by using every day language such as "Add us to your address book". It also helps to give them a good reason to do so. An ethical bribe usually works, such as a free report.

As well as providing text instructions, it's a good idea to use screenshot images and videos showing subscribers how to whitelist, what to expect and exactly what to do.

Here's a huge time-saver tip:

Use a whitelist instructions generator like WhitelistNow.com – <http://www.whitelistnow.com>. It saves you from having to write out pages of detailed whitelisting instructions, plus saves you from having to update them every time email providers make a change.

With WhitelistNow, you can add video as well as text instructions on your site. It also has a nifty feature that lets

subscribers whitelist you with just a couple of clicks.

The role of email service providers is to get mail to the ISPs. It's then down to the ISPs to decide where that mail ends up – in the inbox or junk folder or not to deliver it at all. If you're whitelisted in people's Address Books and Contacts then your mail will end up in their inbox. So, ultimately, it's the responsibility of marketers to ensure their mail isn't junked... by making sure subscribers and customers whitelist you.

[Reply](#)

John Murphy

Jul 11, 2011 at 9:49 pm

This is a great guide to email marketing, a subject that is frequently overlooked when talking about affiliate marketing. I particularly like your views on studying your statistics – they really tell you a lot. I posted an article on my own blog that complements what you are saying and would love to get your comments. The link is:

<http://tinyurl.com/6cb4g6z>

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