Email Marketing 101

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Congratulations, you're thinking about starting or improving email marketing programs. Done correctly you will find that email is an inexpensive, highly targeted marketing tool that drives leads, sales, and creates good brand awareness for your company.

What is Email Marketing?

Email marketing is a means of sending a prospect or customer a message over the Internet. These emails can be simple text messages (TEXT), provide links (RTF), or have images and photos in them (HTML).

Most emails direct the viewer to click on a link which takes them to a Web site or landing page (a page on a Web site that was created specifically for the email.) Once on the site or landing page the customer is asked to either: fill out a form for more information, purchase an item, or call you.

As we noted above email marketing programs are generally inexpensive to create and run, they also can be implemented quickly, and increase the impact of other marketing efforts such as direct mail.

The real beauties of email marketing however are the ability to personalize for your customers, track results, and easily test and modify your messaging to improve your ROI.

Getting Started

The first thing you'll need to do to start an email marketing campaign is to build a list of contact information including (at a minimum) your customer and prospect first and last names, company names, and email addresses (of course!) Set this list up in a standard spreadsheet program like Excel using a different column for each field (first name, last name, company name, email address, etc…).

You should be able to export your current customer data from most standard contact databases in a usable format. For those customers that are missing data you should immediately start collecting the missing fields by asking for them when they buy from you. Another opportunity to build your list is to ask them to sign up for an email newsletter, or have them answer a survey.

Sending an Email Blast

One obvious, though not ideal, way to send an email campaign is to place all of the email addresses you have into the BCC field of your email program. Then you simply type in your message, add your links and a picture and hit send. We would not suggest this! Why? Essentially, you will lose out on almost all of the great benefits of email (tracking, personalization, easy modification) and you can run into SPAM issues with your provider depending on the content of the email and the size of the list. You'll also need to track and manage people who unsubscribe to comply with CAN-SPAM laws.

Instead, once you have a list of customers or prospects check out one of the two following Web sites: *www.campaigner.com* or *www.constantcontact.com*. Both of these companies provide simple to use email programs that provide all of the benefits we've mentioned above, they take care of CAN-SPAM issues for you, and you can easily upload and manage your email lists. At last check they both offer free trials and programs that fit any budget.

The Email Content:

You will need an email plan in order to be successful. You should have a strategy in mind before sending the first message. What is the goal of campaign? Who will you target? How will you grab their attention? When will you send it?

Next comes the creation of the email. Your customer's first impression of the campaign will be the subject line. This is the line that typically appears in your personal email inbox. Your customer will decide if your message is worth viewing in a matter of seconds – if they do, this is called the "Open" and/or "Open Rate". To grab their attention you need a compelling subject line. Be mindful of the wording in order to avoid spam filters and what the recipient perceives to be spam. To see sites that list SPAM trigger words simply Google: spam trigger words

Also, when possible make sure that the sender of the email is a name they recognize (a person or a company).

One of the best ways to grab you customer's attention is to use personalization – their name and/or company name. In fact, we have found that depending on the audience and offer, you can improve your open and click through rates by 5 – 20%! Include personalization in the subject line, in the copy even in the call to action. For example, a subject line with personalization could be: John, buy your calendars before November 30th and get 10% off

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Once they have opened your message the goal is to get them to take action or 'click through'. You will often see this benchmarked as a "click through rate". To get a high click through rate use a compelling headline that grabs their attention and re-enforces the subject line. In your copy remember to personalize and be perfectly clear about 'what is in it for them'. Keep the offer focused and convince them to click through to your site.

Make it easy for them by including links at the top and bottom of the email that take them directly to your site. In general, don't ask them to take more than one action and make sure that the links and the site are working before the email is sent!

While the copy is important, the design can also make a significant difference in the results of your email. As with most Marketing, photography improves results. Set images near your links for even higher click through rates. Animated images can also help generate better results. The term the 'fold' relates to where your email begins to scroll. Be sure to have at least one link and call to action 'above the fold' as many busy professionals don't scroll down.

Test, Test, and Re-test!

The best part of email marketing is the ability to easily test your efforts, get immediate feedback, make improvements, and improve results. For example, if you have a list of 500 names you could test two different subject lines to 100 names each and see which one had the highest open rate. Then you can send the best performing email to the balance of 300 names plus the folks that didn't open the under-performing email.

You can also test; design/ layout, offers, days of the week, time of day, frequency and more! You can get as 'into it' as you want. For example, while one subject line may outperform another, the percentage of people who clicked through and/or purchased might tell you to send the lower performing subject line!

For Example:

Subject line 1 - John, buy your calendars before November 30th and get 10% off Sent to 500 people. Open rate was 20%, Click through rate was 5% 7 sales.

Subject line 2 - John, click for your end of year calendar special Sent to 500 people. Open rate was 30%, Click through rate was 4% 3 sales.

Clearly subject line 2 outperformed subject line 1 but the real ROI came with the first email!

How do you get all of these metrics? The providers we mentioned above will have them for you in easy to read charts. All you have to do is track where your sales are coming from!

Not only can you see how many people took action, you'll be able to see exactly who responded so you can place some timely follow-up calls!

CAN-SPAM

If you are sending promotional emails you should be aware of the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003. Your customers must have the opportunity to be removed from your list or opt out. The opt-out information should include an email address or website and your postal address. This should be included on every promotional message and is a part of most provider programs. For further information visit the FTC's website: *http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/buspubs/canspam.shtm*.

Hints

- Make your Web site landing page look like your email to improve conversions (sales, requests for more information etc…)

- Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday tend to be better days to send email blasts. If you have customers on both coasts consider the time zone differences and stay between the hours of 11am and 2pm. (Test this – your customers may be different!)

- Flash, Audio, & true video are all stripped out of email by most servers and will significantly hurt your delivery rates. You are better served 'faking' the appearance of these elements and then delivering them on the clicked through landing page.

- You'll know everything you need to know about your emails effectiveness in 48 hours. Almost all emails are dealt with within 96 hours of sending.

- Homegrown lists are best. Purchased lists can be very expensive and have significantly lower results. Be very comfortable with this technology and know how to test before you purchase lists.

- After your customer has placed an order or requested information be sure to have a 'thank you'/ acknowledgement note appear!

Links:

www.marketingsherpa.com
The best source on the Web for online marketing information

www.campaigner.com
Email blast/host service provider

www.constantcontact.com
Email blast/host service provider

http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/buspubs/canspam.shtm
CAN-SPAM Act