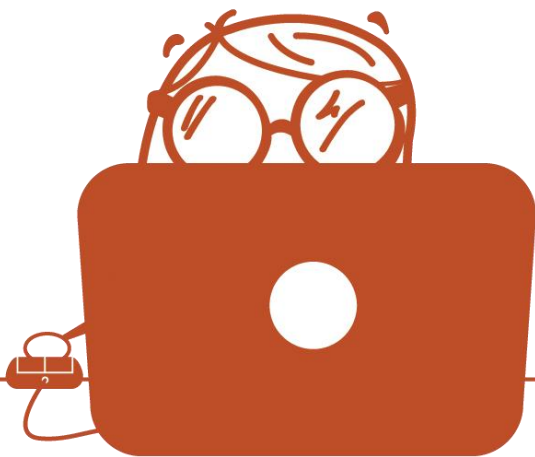# How to Get the Most Out of Your Email Marketing

You're in charge. Now what?

Your official title might be VP of Communications, Marketing Director, or even Marketing Coordinator, but you've also been given the dubious distinction of official email marketer for your company. Now in addition to all your other job duties, you're trying to figure out how to make exciting emails. Depending on where you work and how big the company and your marketing team is, you may have to do everything from planning an email blast, to writing the copy, to handling the actual design, scheduling the email, and tracking success. Maybe only a couple of these key responsibilities are on your actual to-do list, and you can delegate to a designer or assign scheduling to the IT team. No matter what your actual role entails, there are a few tips you can follow to make your email marketing more effective.

"One recent study shows that 93% of consumers interact with brands through their emails."

Whether you're a marketing geek like me who gets super excited about schedules, content planning, and copy writing, and who actually relishes the opportunity to optimize your company's email marketing campaigns, or a reluctant anti-hero who is tasked with saving your brand's blasts from the brink of disaster, you have to understand how important email marketing is in today's online marketplace. Customers engage with companies through email marketing more than any other media- more than Facebook, more than Twitter. One recent study shows that 93% of consumers interact with brands through their emails. Here's another stat to chew on. According to Social Media Today, "Consumers who make purchases through marketing emails spend 138% more than those who do not receive email offers."

Now that you know how important email marketing is to your business, I'm going to walk you through what to do, and what not to do, if you want to make your e-newsletter the best it can possibly be. Don't panic. Most of it is common sense. It'll be second nature in no time.

First things first- know your customers.

Reading online articles about "email marketing best practices" and "how to do email marketing" can be helpful. It's important to keep up to speed on the latest email marketing tips and tools. Email marketing is always evolving as spam filters get more sophisticated, new email marketing software hits the market, and as customer behavior changes. There are definite patterns and guidelines you can use as a starting point for producing your brilliant email

marketing campaigns. But these pearls of wisdom I'm offering you are just that, a starting place.

Every customer base has its own quirks and preferences, and you're not doing your job if you're blindly following advice from "email marketing experts" instead of doing what's best for your loyal customers. A/B tests are your best allies. A/B test to see what happens when you send your messages on different days, at different times, or with different subject lines. Do you get a better conversion rate if you offer 40% off a product or advise your audience that they can save $20? The difference in results may surprise you, even if the savings are the same.

Once you start A/B testing you'll have data to make decisions, and cold hard facts to back you up when quarterly reports are due and the CEO wants to see improvement. A couple of words to the wise on A/B testing, it's easy to get carried away. Be ready to take action with the results of your A/B tests … don't let your hard work be in vain. If you're not prepared to change how you're doing things based on the numbers, don't bother spending your time creating and sending multiple versions of emails or wading through the results.

Avoid testing more than one variable at a time. When you try to test more than one variable at the same time, your results get muddy, and you can't be certain which variable caused any changes you see, which makes it hard to take definitive actions based on your results
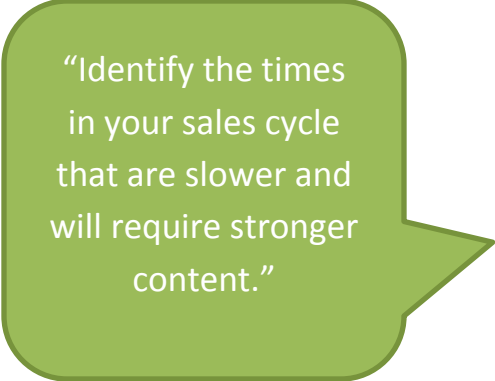
Plan your content

Don't just recycle old news because you don't know what else to put in this week's newsletter. Plan ahead. Maybe you don't send your emails weekly, or maybe you're tied to an awkward schedule; it might make more sense for you to plan quarterly or monthly. Planning in advance can be tricky, and you may have to stay flexible so that you can make adjustments based on inventory, revenue goals, or unforeseen circumstances, but it's worth the trouble.

The benefit to planning ahead is that it gives you time to create strong content or to figure out how you can incorporate existing content from other marketing campaigns into your email marketing. You can also use email marketing as a tool to ramp up sales during slow periods if

you can predict them using year-over-year trending by scheduling sales, product launches, or special promotions during slow times. Promotions, sales, and coupon codes generally yield high click through rates, high conversion rates, and they're usually the most frequently forwarded emails. However you can't offer sales and discounts in every email, or you'll train your customers that they should always wait for bargains and never pay full price. You need to mix things up a bit.

When you're creating your plan, think about new products, planned sales, and any other special promotions you're already scheduling for social media, print campaigns, or other marketing pushes. Pencil those in first. Now look at the spaces that are leftover that you need to fill. If your sales have a set end date, add "last chance to save" or "last week of sale" messages to your calendar too. Identify the times in your sales cycle that are slower and will require stronger content. Here's the point where the planning process gets a little more creative. If you're stuck for content, seasonality is a good place to start. Mark every holiday on your calendar so that you can plan around them. In the fall, create an email featuring all of your black and orange products for Halloween or highlight products in your favorite team colors for game day. Show off your most gifted products during the holidays or your staff's holiday wish list. Schedule a one week sale on pink and red items for Valentine's Day or a New Year's special on organizational products for those who vow to finally get their act together in 2013. Since you're planning ahead, you have time to create special product categories, talk the purchasing team into ordering extra stock or take new photos of an existing item to make it seem fresh and new.

> "Identify the times in your sales cycle that are slower and will require stronger content."

Be sure to plan some content that makes your customers feel valued. Customers who have subscribed to your email list should be treated with care. Odds are good that these are your most loyal customers. They are your repeat customers and your brand evangelists. Show them they're special. Consider giving them sneak peeks of upcoming products (*but don't give them too much advance notice, if they like what they see, they may hold their orders!*). Create interactive content like polls and contests just for them.

You could also give these valuable customers exclusive discounts, coupon codes, or special offers once in a while that can only be redeemed by your subscribers. I know, I know, you can't

do that because then the codes or discounts will go viral. I've been there. But I've got news for you. You can use SheerID to verify that anyone who tries to redeem the offer or use the coupon code is actually on your email list. It's an email marketer's dream come true. If your company offers new customer discounts, offering the occasional exclusive discount to your subscribers can go a long way towards pacifying your existing customers and preventing them from feeling like new customers are more important to your company than they are. Exclusive subscriber offers also give your readers one more reason to open your emails and to stay subscribed.

Create your email

The Subject Line

So your calendar is all filled in, and the content is bullet proof. You're working on the first actual email in the queue. If you want to know how to get customers to open emails, the secret to success is a great subject line. You only get one shot to make a good first impression, and your email is competing with every other email in your customer's inbox for their attention. What makes a good subject line?

- **It's short and sweet.** In an ideal world, you're subject line is under 50 characters. If you can make it catchy, good for you, just don't try to get too clever. Make sure it makes sense. You may even want to try writing a succinct subject line you feel good about before you write the body of your email instead of leaving the subject line for last. Then you can use the subject line as your guide when you're laying out the body text.

- **It's honest.** Don't get sneaky and try to reel people in with a misleading subject line. Keep it relevant to the content that is actually in the email. Nobody likes the old bait and switch. Lead with your strongest piece of news, and include incentives whenever possible like the percent or dollar amounts that your customers can save on products in the email.

- **It won't get trapped in a spam filter.** Be mindful of using words like "free," "no obligation," "guarantee," "win," "cash," or "act now." Please don't write in all caps, you're not only raising the risk that your email marketing will be doomed to the junk mail folder, you're being rather rude. Don't use extra !!!!!!!'s or $$$$$$$$$$'s. Be sure you use spellcheck; misspellings can get you flagged as spam. Try to re-read your message as if you were an outsider with no knowledge of your company or the products you sell.

☑ **It inspires action.** Using action words in your subject like "learn" or "save" can improve your open rates. Create a sense of urgency with phrases like "limited offer" or "ends soon". Try A/B testing a subject line that includes an action word (otherwise known as a verb) with a subject line that doesn't and see which one works better for your audience.

The Body

That carefully crafted subject line might get someone to open your email, but now it's up to the body of your newsletter to keep them from trashing it. How can you inspire your customers to take action after reading your e-newsletter?

✉ **Offer strong content.** If you've planned ahead, you already know what's going in your email, now you just need to type it up and lay it out. Can you guess what I'm going to say? That's right. Keep your content short and sweet. In every A/B test I've ever done except one, the shorter email had a higher conversion rate. A good rule of thumb is to aim for 400-500 words. Of course, you could be the one exception to the rule, so it won't hurt my feelings if you do your own A/B test to see if a longer or shorter email performs better for you. In fact, I encourage it. If you wrote your subject line before your content, don't forget to include the highlights you promised.

✉ **Include a strong call to action.** Ah, the CTA. Your designers probably hate the ugly "Learn more" and "Buy now" buttons you keep insisting on adding to all their landing pages and email designs, but that's not a good enough reason to stop using them. No copywriter or editor wants to admit this, but the truth is, the people who are reading our carefully crafted email messages aren't exactly hanging on our every word. The truth is they're probably just skimming the content, looking for that one thing that initially caught their attention in your subject line. The call to action needs to be bold, clear, and preferably, above the fold. Don't let your designers convince you to hide it within an image that may or may not load, or worse yet, skip it altogether. In this case, usability trumps aesthetics.

✉ **Use images wisely.** Gorgeous photography, engaging graphics, and a talented designer can be some of your strongest assets, but you still need to be conscientious about how you're using images. Keep in mind that images take a

long time to load, and they can be blocked by some email clients. Use compelling graphics and images; just don't rely on them too heavily. Ideally, you don't want your email to be one huge image. Include live text that will load even if you're images don't. Use alt text. You may also want to consider making a text only version for mobile subscribers. No matter which version you send, include a link to a web version of your email, and make sure the link is updated and working correctly before the email sends.

<u>Create a sense of urgency.</u> Here's where you have to walk the fine line between creating content that compels customers to take action NOW and sounding like a spammer. Being an email marketer is like being a tightrope walker. Catch phrases like "Last chance", "One week only", "while supplies last", and "limited time offer" are sure to perform well, until you over use them. They're the big guns in the email marketing spaghetti Western. Save them for when you really need them.

<u>Make it easy to unsubscribe.</u> I know, I know. I can't fathom why your ungrateful customers would want to unsubscribe from your perfectly constructed e-newsletter either. Your subject line is witty, your content is compelling, and your graphics practically sparkle- what more do they want from you? Try not to take it personally; your emails just may not be their cup of tea. In that case, let them leave. Incorporate an unsubscribe link into your footer if your email service provider doesn't automatically generate one. Most do. When it's feasible, take your un-subscribers to a landing page where they can opt out and give them the option of signing up for fewer emails or segmented emails in addition to unsubscribing from all emails. Offer them a chance to explain why they are unsubscribing - you may learn something and improve your retention in the future.

<u>Check your links.</u> Then double check them. Make sure your tracking codes are correct, and your landing pages are live. Avoid that sinking feeling that you get in your stomach when you realize there's a problem with your links *after* you've already hit send.

<u>Now check for typos.</u> Then check again. Recruit a fresh set of eyeballs to read the email slowly and carefully to make sure nothing is spelled incorrectly and that the text makes sense. Believe me, your customers are going to notice it even if you didn't, and nothing makes the email you've slaved over look more unprofessional than a glaring spelling error or grammatical mistake.

<u>See how it looks on a smart phone</u>. If you're reading the same marketing articles I'm reading, you already know that 70 million consumers check email on mobile devices in the United States. That is a lot of emails. Optimize for mobile.

How Not to Send Your Email Marketing Messages

You've got the complete package- a succinct subject line, mind-blowing content, and a body a supermodel would envy (if she cared about email marketing at all). What could go wrong? Well, you're not out of the woods quite yet. Here's some email faux-pas to avoid:

DON'T hit send on a Friday or Saturday. Think about when you're sending your emails. The day of the week and time of day that you send your emails really does make a difference. In general, mid- week is the best time to send marketing emails- think Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. Test it for yourself, and see if those days also work best for you. Be mindful of bank holidays, when people might be out of the office or on vacation.

DON'T schedule your email to go out at 3AM. Unless you're marketing to Japan, you'll probably have the best odds of success if you send between 8AM and 1PM. Don't send your masterpiece in the middle of the night unless you want it to get swept into the trash while someone drinks their morning coffee and cleans out the inbox to get ready for their day.

DON'T bombard subscribers with emails. One of the biggest reasons people unsubscribe is that they're getting branded emails too frequently, and frankly, they feel spammed. Don't send too many emails. If you've got enough content to support a weekly email, go for it, but unless you're running a daily deals site, your customers probably don't want to hear from you more than once a week.

DON'T get too busy to analyze your results. Your own email is overflowing, your phone is ringing off the hook, and you're putting

out more fires than the local fire department while simultaneously herding more cats than a vet tech volunteering at the humane society. Plus, you still need to create next week's email. Why should you close your inbox, shut off your phone, and take an hour to get up close and personal with your analytics? Data is going to help you evaluate what's working, deprioritize what's not working, and give you cold hard facts that you can use to make decisions about upcoming emails and impress your CEO next time you want to negotiate a raise. When you're really tight on time, be sure to at least keep an eye on your conversion rates, spam reports, and opt-outs, even if you ignore everything else. If an e-newsletter's conversion rate is unusually low, that's a red flag, and you're going to need to go into analytics and dig deeper. If your opt-outs or spam reports suddenly skyrocket, those are also red flags.

DON'T ignore customer behavior. Open rates are fluky and it's best not to stress about them. Instead focus on trending. Creating a trend report for your emails lets you see patterns you might otherwise miss and establish what's average for your own list, making it easier to identify the superstar e-newsletters and the flops. Once you see what's consistently working, you can incorporate those elements into your e-newsletters on a more regular basis. You'll also see what to avoid.

DON'T play fast and loose with lists. Keep your lists squeaky clean. Remove anyone who unsubscribes; it's not only good business etiquette, it's the law. Take caution when purchasing email lists. Don't forget to remove email addresses that bounce. They'll hurt your sender score.

And there you have it. The **DOs** and **DON'Ts** of getting your own email marketing campaign started. All you need to do now is find an email marketing system that fits your business needs (like ConstantContact, MailChimp, or Vertical Response, to name a few) and create your email marketing strategy, including new customer or customer appreciation discounts with SheerID's verification services.

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About SheerID:

SheerID is an innovative technology company, whose flagship platform offers instant, accurate identity verification, enabling retailers to offer exclusive, targeted discounts and special offers online. We have developed a verification gateway that allows immediate, online proof of identity. Our solution is instant, seamless and accurate. We protect both the offered discount and margin. For more information contact us at info@SheerID.com or call us Toll-Free at 855-SheerID (743-3743).