

Email Marketing

15 common mistakes (and how to avoid them)

By Joseph Myers

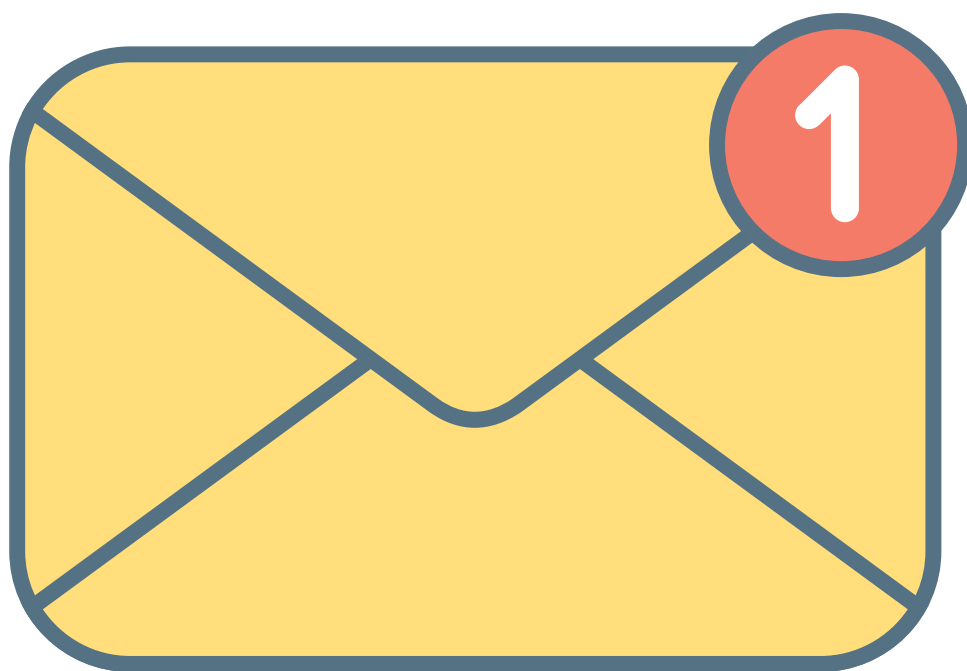


Photo: Getty Images by Алексей Белозерский

To err is human; to forgive, divine. So said English poet Alexander Pope three centuries ago, giving us a sentiment that still rings true, and might even be more relevant now in the realm of business, considering that so many companies are conceiving ways to make and fulfill promises to audiences. Audiences can often feel overwhelmed with the amount of outreach that comes their way, especially when the pitches arrive via email.

We live in a time when information can reach us so rapidly that the process of consuming everything might leave audiences wondering who has their best interests at heart, which path they should take to secure a prosperous future for themselves and their loved ones and—as a result of deliberating over those two—who deserves their precious allotment of time. Brands and businesses play a crucial part in helping audiences—whether they're customers, prospects or consumers—make some of those decisions, and those in sales and marketing roles often function as gatekeepers in guiding them. But, because audiences can easily decide to go elsewhere, how can marketers tasked with devising and implementing email campaigns maintain momentum and win enduring interest from the masses? “Having a talented workforce” and “generating creative ideas” come to mind as solid answers, but “avoiding common mistakes” might prove a more practical reply.

It is obvious that anyone who has secured even a few sales has a gifted team and novel contributions to make to a respective customer or prospect, but there's always room to get better, meaning a star-studded staff and an abundance of inventive ideas have pretty much become ho-hum aspects of helming a business. As Allison Mezzafonte, strategic consultant and advisor for Sailthru, New York City, contends, email marketing offers the most direct line to a consumer that a brand can obtain. Because just about every business is using the channel, though, there are questionable shortcuts and outright mistakes that are happening with email marketing, but the missteps are certainly not insurmountable. Yes, it can be tough to accept that even the best-designed email campaigns won't always land, but it is a far better fate, for example, for an email to have found its way to an inbox and simply not appealed to a recipient than for it to have landed in the spam folder. Therefore, as Mezzafonte says, if people are willingly handing over their email addresses, they

are essentially inviting businesses to connect with them, meaning that senders must craft their efforts with great care to deliver something unique and valuable.

In the hope of helping businesses in the promo industry get more out of their email campaigns, we connected with Mezzafonte; Shelley McConnell, president of Printpal Promotions and Printing, Arroyo Grande, Calif.; RJ Hagel, manager of global marketing for Goldstar Pens, San Diego; and Scott Ziegler, senior vice president of product management for Validity Inc., Boston. Together, we identified 15 common email marketing mistakes and offered tips and advice for avoiding them. These are broken into three sections—as you'll see in a bit.

October will mark the 49th anniversary of email's formal designation as a universal form of communication. Given the staggering number of businesses aiming to power the world, offer amenities and enrich lives, email long ago became the heir apparent to the title of significant commerce generator, and though other forms of interaction have also proven productive in building economic connections (notably LinkedIn and its 675 million users), nothing has yet pushed itself forward to succeed email as the most trusted and inviting channel through which to conduct business. According to a 2019 study by the Radicati Group, there are more than 3.9 billion email users worldwide, with that total expected to swell to 4.4 billion come 2023. In fact, email analysis lends itself to a plethora of statistical jewels, especially with respect to email marketing. Here are some of the more telling finds from recent looks at email's scope:

- 912,909 legitimate emails reach inboxes each second (Internetlivestats 2019)
- More than 60 percent of customers, particularly those who are 25 or older, prefer to receive contact from brands via email (Adobe Email Use 2017 – US Report)
- 72 percent of consumers say that email is their favored method of communication with companies with whom they do business (Marketing Sherpa 2015)
- 70 percent of consumers deem email their top preferred channel for receiving commercial messages (CG Selections National Email Research 2017)
- 87 percent of B2B content marketers use email marketing for lead nurturing (CMI B2B Content Marketing Research 2019)
- 61 percent of companies generate more than 10 percent of

“It shouldn't be foreign to anyone that everyone wants a piece of the pie, but it could very well be the integrity of your call to action that determines how big your slice becomes.”

- RJ Hagel, manager of global marketing, Goldstar Pens



sales from email (Econsultancy Email Marketing Census 2018)

- Email is almost 40 times better at acquiring new customers than Facebook and Twitter (McKinsey & Company 2014)

Add to these figures the Direct Marketing Association's December 2018 conclusion that email campaigns possess a return-on-investment percentage of around 4,400, and the Gigaom Research finding that marketers consistently rank email as the top digital marketing tactic for awareness, acquisition, retention and conversion, and one can see that calling on email marketing leaves one in a potentially very good position to thrive. However, the ubiquity of email means that for every list of positives surrounding its effectiveness and renown, we could also find a chronicle of its shortcomings that stem from nagging mistakes that can turn audiences against the medium and quickly designate someone as a risky partner with whom to do business.

While it is possible to produce a far lengthier compilation of misfires, the 15 errors that we'll get into serve as a solid set of traps to sidestep, with our experts offering their feedback on why people still fall for them, how to avoid them in your own email marketing and what the future could hold for email. That last part is crucial to consider, particularly if businesses are willing to make even more diligent attempts to have email mes-

sages possess additional integrity as we all adjust to expected advances in the marketplace and try to proceed in the face of uncertainty—namely, the alterations COVID-19 has been causing businesses and their customers and prospects. Twelve of the mistakes come from a YesData study, while the remaining trio owes its inclusion to Business News Daily. The former divided its analysis into three sections, dubbing them Before You Send, As You Send and Common Mistakes to Avoid, while we chose the remaining three because they offer keen insights akin to those offered from the larger group.

BEFORE YOU SEND

In an article titled "Are You Missing the Email Opportunity?" Mezzafonte notes in her conclusion that "The best thing about email is also what makes it so overlooked: It's stable, safe, and it's been around a while." The previously mentioned statistics make apparent how much esteem consumers and buyers give to email, so one might wonder how it could ever be something someone would ignore. As Mezzafonte sees matters, businesses often fail to prioritize email because it seems secondary to the core business. In contemporary business dealings, that mindset could register as a tragic flaw when a company is considering its

brand's reach and ability to differentiate itself from competitors.

"What's important to remember is that email can be extremely effective at supporting the core business when it's done right," Mezzafonte said. "In order for email to be effective, resources need to be allocated accordingly. For commerce brands, that means [putting an emphasis on] personalization and understanding the consumer journey."

That journey often calls for simplicity, with consumers eager to give their support to campaigns that have content that is easily appreciated and worth revisiting with each subsequent venture. Too often, though, campaign organizers make these sorts of mistakes:

- 1. Sending to web-based email addresses such as Gmail, Hotmail and Yahoo**
- 2. Having their domain flagged as a spammer**
- 3. Having a poor email server reputation**
- 4. Failing to keep a mailing list healthy and current**

The YesData study marked all of these as Before You Send choices that can jeopardize the likelihood of having messages hit the necessary inboxes. Regarding mistake No. 1, the report explained that such providers have adept spam filters that often reject mass emails, and that having a prevalence of such web-based domains on a mailing list could earn someone spammer status or a batch of complaints from recipients. Lead capture forms' filters can offer a solution to these problems by preventing sign-ups from such domains, as could periodic inspections of lists to determine how many, if any, web-based addresses are present.

"There's no doubt that email is an enticing way to stay in front of customers, but too often, in engaging in grab-all techniques as it pertains to gaining interest, oversights can occur, so I think no matter what role you hold in the commercial world, you have to be diligent about choosing who is receiving word of what you're about and what you could do," Hagel said. "I'll always believe that email should be one channel of a larger campaign to attract people, so when you give it its moments to draw them in, I think the emphasis should be on pull marketing, because they want the safe, thought-out connection that a well-designed campaign typically provides."

The fact that YesData called the first quartet of mistakes the "Before You Send" section reveals that the study's compilers know that, when people go to analyze what might be keeping them from resonating with customers, those frustrated parties



Photo: Getty Images by erhuif979

will likely find themselves needing to admit they have been making these miscues for years. In other words, while the latter mistakes are just as harmful, the initial ones make plain that some campaigns often lack basic netiquette that's easy to overlook. These mistakes are the marketing equivalent of thinking you could hit a 95-mph fastball with a loaf of French bread. Simply put, if you're failing right out of the gate with the underlying mechanics and understanding of how emails get delivered, a long road awaits.

"There is a fascinating world of deliverability out there," explained Ziegler, whose company recently unveiled a modification to its Return Path platform, called SmartSeeds, that analyzes the four ways people engage with email. "A huge part of that obviously depends on the elementary steps and appreciating so many aspects of what's involved in them, including having proper list hygiene."

Ziegler and his peers have won regard for their expertise in assisting B2B email campaigns, and take email marketing mistakes quite seriously. As he sees it, companies must always study and respect how people interact with data, so avoiding being your own worst enemy is among the top priorities for email marketers.

"This world of email marketing can be pretty complex," he said. "It's realistic and even healthy to know that not everyone will want what you have, but there can never be a moment where you're OK with having even the tiniest possibility that something didn't even reach someone. Just think about the embarrassment involved in saying, 'If you didn't receive blah, blah, blah from us, check your spam folder.' It doesn't have to be that stressful when you're marketing something."

AS YOU SEND

Through the development of personas surrounding how people take in email—specifically "engaged," "loyal," "potential" and "disinterested"—Ziegler's company, Validity Inc., is helping thousands of brands beat the odds and become contenders for consumers' attention. Regarding the initial four mistakes, aids like MX Toolbox and SenderScore.org can join Validity's services as Before-You-Send solutions. However, even if marketers have mastered the pre-send phase, there are still a number of potential pitfalls in the next phase, the As-You-Send period.

"As a strategic consultant, I find that email is one of the primary ways in which I receive and consume news," Mezzafonte said. "I like being able to pick and choose which emails I receive and look forward to opening them in the morning to catch up with what's going on in the world."

Picking and choosing are wonderful elements of email consumption, and in a perfect world, every well-constructed message, in terms of wording and possible benefits, would find its target. When outreach is fortunate to meet its intended audiences, though, it can still have elements that may make email providers do an about-face and suppress the content.

"No matter who you are, I'd say email figures to be a part

of a layered plan to tout how you're contributing to your given markets," McConnell, whose distributorship calls on health care, education, and travel and hospitality as its top end-buyer markets, explained. "There is so much competition out there, so along with being detailed, you have to know just how much you can include in what you're sending to people. Because since there's so much enthusiasm for securing business, if you're adding way too much or not thinking everything through, you might make the acquaintance of spam filters."

With an active client count of 350, McConnell certainly must take care in conducting email marketing, so when she sends materials, she is diligent about not making any of these mistakes:

5. Including too many pictures

6. Using an excessive amount of links

7. Placing spam keywords in the subject line

8. Failing to follow CAN-SPAM guidelines

The first two of these support the less-is-more mindset that might best serve email marketers. Since spammers and hackers think fondly of the practice of using images to transmit viruses, email providers often automatically block or request permission to load email images. As YesData notes, servers see each picture as an opportunity for something wrong to occur, so too many images could send your campaign to the spam folder. "We're all looking to drive engagement and gain click-throughs, so you can't let an abundance of images or links interfere with either goal," Hagel said.

He agreed with the notion of never sending more than four links per email, a guideline that YesData offered as a way to steer clear of spam folders. It's also a good idea to avoid subject lines containing words such as "Limited time," "Act now," "Free" and "Amazing," and to brush up on CAN-SPAM directives. As YesData explains, a pretty steep fine could await senders whose emails A) have a subject line that tricks or misleads recipients, B) come from something other than "a valid, real-world" mailing address, C) do not have a return email address to which people can reply and D) fail to include an opt-out explanation. And it pays to get these things right.

"Email can provide the long-term stability and consistency that so many other channels—social media, for example—do not," Mezzafonte said. "Email puts the power directly in the hands of the business, creating a direct line to customers, which is where it should be."

With great power comes great responsibility, and senders also have a responsibility to avoid the remaining four mistakes from YesData:

9. Sending messages at the wrong time

10. Pushing out correspondence too late at night or too early in the morning

11. Sending messages to email seeds and spam traps

12. Composing outreach to catch-all addresses or many people who use the same domain

The first two might be hard to swallow as practices to avoid, because inspiration could strike at times that are normal for you but not for audiences, and because you might be highly enthused about your campaign. But heed the warnings not to overindulge and take someone's time and attention for granted.

Regarding the last two YesData points, adhering to them goes a long way to being at the center of the email ecosystem, something that the team at Validity Inc., in particular, considers of vast importance for businesses. That's because they adhere to Ziegler's earlier point about proper list hygiene, and a related point about marketers' roles in helping clean up the state of inboxes. Hagel also considers those things vital aspects of where email is heading.

"I definitely believe that email marketing could see a wave of activity as [businesses] think about how they're going to sell, especially because of the changes we're taking on due to the pandemic," he said. "That in-person experience that so many of us value is a changing aspect of business, which could even be a difficult topic to talk about during these times. We are going to have to look for ways to maintain trust with our customers, and an email marketing campaign, with all of the proper boxes checked off, could be a reliable answer to the question of how to do so."

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

As far as the mistakes that Business News Daily covered in a July 2019 piece, many of them dovetail with the YesData points, but there are interesting lessons to gain from addressing its content. From a look at 10 gaffes that often trouble businesses, these three stand out as other errors to avoid going forward:

13. Failing to optimize for mobile

14. Neglecting analytics

15. Missing a clear call to action

Committing the first mistake here could come to be the ultimate facepalm-inducing practice in the contemporary business world. Mobile communication only figures to rise as more consumers make use of the limitless amounts of information available to

them through their phones. As Business News Daily notes, emails optimized for mobile show consideration for the audience's time and usage preferences. According to Campaign Monitor, 70 percent of the time, emails that fail to account for mobile formatting are deleted in under three seconds.

"That would be a definite example of failing to read the room," McConnell said of improperly formatting emails for mobile devices. "I don't think, given the heavy competition out there, that anyone wants to be known for having a lackluster mobile reputation."

Analytics also help shine a light on where businesses should head with their email marketing tactics. And one could argue that not consulting data combines with failing to optimize for mobile as the most head-scratching practices out there.

"Sales totals are obviously great to look at, but they're definitely not the only figures that should concern people," Hagel said in giving a nod to analytics. "Something that can appear so basic, though, can go overlooked because people are looking for that next possible person to help. However, you want to know who is taking the content from your campaign outreach and then moving over to your website to learn more. Having that curiosity is crucial because what you learn can be repeatable, or you could find out that maybe you need a different approach or a revamped set of prospects."

As businesses expand their services or modify how they handle existing offerings, developing thorough, yet not overpowering, calls to action must occupy considerable chunks of email marketing discussions. Once businesses have cleared the preceding hurdles, what's left but to invite audiences to engage more directly and comprehensively with their services? The trick, as Hagel touched on earlier, is having admiration for pull marketing and confidence in what one is offering should people accept those calls.

"It's great to be able to start conversations and have the satisfaction of being able to say you reached out to a good amount of people, but what vocabulary are you using in your call to action, and what's awaiting them if people go all in on it?" he said. "I'm not saying that if you offer multiple services that you shouldn't tout them, but it might serve people better to be a minimalist in the beginning so as to spark interest, and then hold a we-also-offer follow-up via email or a phone call. It shouldn't be foreign to anyone that everyone wants a piece of the pie, but it could very well be the integrity of your call to action that determines how big your slice becomes." [pm](#)

WHO WE ARE



Promo Marketing provides engaging and authoritative coverage on industry trends, sales and marketing strategies, and the latest news for promotional products distributors and suppliers. Our goal is to connect our readership with cutting-edge solutions and provide stories of success that will drive the future goals of their organizations. Our magazine, website, e-newsletter and multimedia content offer a one-stop shop for information and insight into the promotional products industry.

NAPCOMEDIA

NAPCO Media, Promo Marketing's parent company, is a leading B2B media company specializing in creating community through content via integrated media programs, video services, marketing services, events and event management, custom content, eLearning and market research. NAPCO Media has rapidly expanded its portfolio to include NAPCO Video Services, NAPCO Events, NAPCO Marketing Services and NAPCO Research.