

- Electronic Mail Systems

Email marketing: how to do it right

The traditional mailing list is still one of your most powerful promotional tools. Nik Rawlinson explores how to make it work for you

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Ray Tomlinson sent the world's first email in 1971 – and more than 50 years later, the medium is as popular as ever, with 4.5 billion users worldwide in 2024. According to ONS figures, it's the one thing Brits do online more than anything else.

One reason why email remains such a success is its universality. Email works equally well on smartphones, tablets and desktop computers, and it doesn't rely on proprietary apps.

For businesses, email is also one of the most direct ways to reach an audience. You have full control of your message and the means of its delivery; there's no need to game an algorithm or jump through arbitrary hoops to make sure your content is seen. The only barrier to entry is that you'll probably want to engage a third-party service to manage your mailing list – but aside from their platform requirements there are very few gotchas to worry about. That's why, while social media and influencers may be on the rise, email is going from strength to strength. Analyst Statista predicts that email marketing revenue will hit \$12.3 billion worldwide this year, and reach \$17.9 billion by 2027.

Sign up with an ESP

If you want to use email for marketing, you'll probably need to sign up with a specialist partner. Regular business email services aren't designed for mass mailings; if you blast out thousands of messages to customers and subscribers you could be sanctioned.

Work with an email service provider (ESP) and you'll benefit from tailored hardware and software that's designed to handle large volumes of email. Established players such as Mailchimp, Aweber and HubSpot also give you the benefit of a trusted reputation: email providers around the world know that these services have robust policies and measures in place to prevent abuse, so they'll let your messages through to their intended recipients, whereas mass mailshots from unrecognised senders are more likely to be bounced or junked. When choosing an ESP, ask specifically about delivery rates, and look for a provider that can promise close to 100%.

Like web hosts, ESPs typically offer a range of service tiers, where the amount you pay depends on the size of your mailing list. Aweber's Plus tier costs \$20 a month (billed annually) for up to 500 subscribers, \$30 a month for up to 2,500, \$50 a month for up to 5,000 and so on; Mailchimp Standard starts at £16 a month for fewer than 500 subscribers, rising to £36 for up to 1,500, and £48 for up to 2,500.

Many ESPs let you get started for free, with an introductory month or a free tier with limited features. These vary widely between providers; with Mailchimp's free plan, you can send up to 1,000 emails a month, but your contact list can't exceed 500 addresses. Aweber's Free plan also caps your contacts at 500, but you can send up to 3,000 emails in total. If you're running a small or solo business, you may find that a free plan does all you need, at least in the short term. Before you wed yourself to any provider, however, try exporting both your contacts and your email archive; this provides reassurance that you can easily migrate between services or refer back to past messages as needed. That applies particularly if you're trying to build a community around a newsletter, rather than just sending out sales promotions.

Fortunately, the data portability requirements of GDPR and similar regulations mean the process is usually quite simple. For example, Substack is a relatively new player, founded in 2017, but it has some big-name publishers already. If you want to move there from Mailchimp, you simply need to export your Mailchimp audience as a CSV file to Substack and create a campaign archive page in Mailchimp, which you can refer to in the Substack dashboard to complete the import.

Work within the law

An ESP can also help with compliance. Unless your mailshot recipients are strictly localised to one region, your messages and list management need to comply with a variety of regulations, which is more of a challenge than you might imagine. For example, GDPR and its UK equivalent have been widely discussed in these pages and elsewhere, but what do you know about Australia's Spam Act of 2003, Brazil's Lei Geral de Proteção de Dados Pessoais or Japan's Act on Specified Commercial Transactions?

An email service provider can provide legally compliant sign-up forms to embed on your website, and a water-tight mechanism through which recipients can unsubscribe. Ideally, it will also allow you to implement double opt-in, whereby new subscribers receive a link by email that needs to be clicked to confirm their sign-up – protecting them from being signed up for unwanted spam, and ensuring you aren't sending it.

If you're embedding your sign-up form on your own website, be sure to post details of any cookies involved, with instructions on opting out or deleting them. Your data collection and emailing activities will need to be covered in a published privacy policy.

You should also be aware of UK regulations (tinyurl.com/354ukemail) dictating that when you collect a customer's details, you must get additional permission if you want to send them other offers or promotions. Your messages must also indicate who you are, that you're selling something (if, indeed, you are), and any conditions.

Don't add subscribers without permission

On the subject of sign-ups, it hopefully goes without saying that you should never add individuals to your mailing list without obtaining their active consent. Be wary of buying in mailing lists: the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) warns that, when making calls or sending texts or emails, "you can only use [bought-in lists] if all the people on the list have specifically consented to receive that type of message from you. Generic consent covering any third party will not be enough" (see tinyurl.com/354ico1).

If you're marketing to other businesses, however, then the rules are different. As the ICO explains: "The PECR [Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations] rule on direct marketing by electronic mail does not apply to corporate subscribers. For example, this means you can send B2B direct marketing emails or texts to any corporate body. You do not need their consent under PECR to send such messages."

However someone ends up on your mailing list, you should always provide an easy mechanism to unsubscribe – and honour such requests. Doing so doesn't just keep you on the right side of the law, it can be beneficial to your marketing efforts. You won't harm the goodwill you've been building, and you won't be wasting money and resources sending messages to people who don't want to receive them. There's also less chance of recipients reporting your emails as spam – an important point, as too many reports can lead to email hosts blacklisting your material, or automatically categorising it as junk.

Become a subject expert

We mentioned above that email marketing is a huge business, and that means your audience is probably receiving a considerable volume of promotional messages from all over the web. Your challenge, therefore, is to ensure that they open and engage with your emails.

The obvious approach is to ensure there's something in it for them. If you're announcing new products, advertising a sale or offering a discount, the benefit might seem obvious from your side of the fence.

But most of your subscribers probably aren't looking to make an immediate purchase. They might only open such emails once in a blue moon, when they're feeling flush or in need of something specific that you offer.

You have a better chance of attracting your subscribers' attention if you can establish yourself as a subject-matter expert. Even when your email recipients aren't intending to spend money, they'll be engaged by the promise of valuable information.

As an example, the screenshot on the following page demonstrates subscriber growth for a weekly niche-interest newsletter, covering significant historical events in the local region. The value for the reader is in the content of the newsletter itself, rather than any discounts or product promotions – the list itself has never (yet) been used to directly sell a product or service – while for the publisher, the goal is to drive traffic to an associated website. As the number of subscribers has grown, the newsletter has maintained healthy levels of engagement, with open rates that are almost always over 60%.

Indeed, the newsletter's content reaches a far wider audience than the subscriber base would suggest. Thanks to readers forwarding and sharing content, the 16 December issue actually reached almost twice as many readers as there were subscribers on the list. One summer issue reached three times as many readers as it was originally sent to.

Access to this sort of information is another benefit of signing up with an ESP. The precise range of metrics available will depend on the platform, and in some cases on the tier to which you sign up. Mailchimp's Standard and Premium tiers go beyond basic metrics to explore customer lifetime value, purchase likelihood and inferred demographics. Similarly, while Aweber's Lite plan includes message analytics, the Plus and Unlimited tiers roll in advanced reporting and analytics.

Even if you don't pay for a service, look for audience tracking, showing your subscription numbers and how many of your emails are opened. Many providers rank your audience so you can see who most reliably opens your messages; these will be your most engaged subscribers, whom you may want to target with exclusive offers or additional content, as we'll discuss later.

Set and monitor targets

Taken on their own terms the newsletter figures above are very positive, but whether or not you want to emulate them will depend on your specific goals. If you're trying to grow sales, readership numbers alone are no measure of success.

That's why it's important to set clear targets at the outset, and gauge your marketing programme's results against those metrics over time. Once you can see what effect your activities are having, you can tweak the formula. Two powerful tools in your outbox are A/B testing and segmentation.

The former lets you try out different approaches to see which is most effective, while the latter allows you to tailor content to different subgroups within your subscriber list.

With A/B testing you produce two versions of a campaign and send each to a subset of subscribers. The difference between the messages could be no more than a different subject line, but you can also use A/B testing to try out different layouts or running orders – or entirely different offers. The key is to see which contributes most effectively towards achieving your goal when it lands in your guinea pigs' inboxes. Then, send that version to the remainder of your list.

A/B testing usually requires a paid account with your ESP. It's included in Mailchimp's Essentials plan (£10.33/mth) and above; Zoho Campaigns offers it in the Standard (£2.40/mth) tier; while Aweber (which calls it "email split testing") offers it in the Lite package (\$12.50/mth) and above.

Segmentation works similarly, but it's not intended for trying things out. Rather, it's about tailoring content for different segments of your mailing list. It's up to you to work out how to divide up your readership: if you publish sign-up forms on several external sites, you could start by tagging subscribers based on source, or you could survey them directly to find out their interests. Alternatively, you could play a longer game of iterative A/B testing to discover what sort of emails different people actually open.

You'll also need to decide just how finely you want to segment your address book. It may be tempting to define a large number of small groups for precise targeting, but this can be fiddly and resourceintensive. It can also make it difficult to gauge assess your outcomes: Adobe's cloud team advises that "you do want statistically meaningful segments... so try to avoid segmenting so much that you're left with just a handful of people in each segment" (see tinyurl.com/354adobe).

Don't forget your call to action

You probably know what you want your subscribers to do when they've finished reading your email, but it might not be obvious to them. Don't be shy about signing off with an unambiguous call to action. This could be an invit-

ation to buy something, to make an inquiry, or to forward your email to their own contacts. If you have nothing to push at that particular moment, perhaps invite discussion by posing a question – and always include a link to your online store or social channels.

Don't save your call to action for the end of the email, either – many subscribers won't read that far. If you publish a newsletter via Substack, the editor will check that you've added subscription buttons – and if you haven't, it will offer to add them itself. These will appear twice in the resulting email: around two paragraphs into your content, and again in the footer. These buttons are dynamic, so people who've already subscribed will instead see an inducement to switch to a paid subscription.

There's an art to writing a concise yet effective call to action. Think about what would make you respond in a similar situation: you can play on people's fear of missing out by promoting a short-term offer, or create a sense of scarcity with a capped deal available to only (say) the first 50 customers. Don't make subscribers feel exploited, though. Offer something of real value, and be honest about its availability or you risk damaging the reputation that your marketing programme should be developing.

This is another situation where A/B testing and segmentation can be effective, allowing you to test the most engaging calls to action, and to vary your offer based on what you know about your subscribers.

The road ahead

Perhaps the biggest recurrent challenge in email marketing is generating a never-ending series of interesting and engaging messages. This is an area where many businesses are increasingly drawing on AI: as well as creating new body text, AI tools can help marketing teams to repurpose existing content for the platform, or compile curated lists of content with which to engage defined audience segments.

It's hard to predict what other technologies may come into play in the future, but one thing is for sure: as Salesforce says in its latest State of Marketing report, "when it comes to sheer volume of sends, email remains an effective digital channel... in fact, customers say that email is among their preferred channels to interact with brands" (see tinyurl.com/354salesforce). So, old-fashioned as it may seem, don't think of email marketing as an idea that's on its way out: if you're not already using it, it's high time you started.

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