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6 questions to ask before sending an email campaign?

Part 1: **http://tinyurl.com/jch-html01**
Part 2: **http://tinyurl.com/jch-html02**

The tips here focus on planning, strategy, and common sense but there is still work to be done. Follow my tips here and keep experimenting and you'll see all your statistics go up. FYI, this is part one of two. I've got three more questions that I'll post later this week.

Question #1 - "Am I sure I want to send this email?"

Format, time between emails, and goal planning can all affect how many people your message reads. Make sure now if the right time and what you're sending is the right message. Ask yourself…

- What's the goal or desired outcome of this email?

- Should this email be text or HTML?

- When was the last email sent for this list?

- Is the content written already?

- Does this email contribute to a cohesive marketing plan?

Question #2 - Will my email get to the (right) recipient?

That is to say, did the email end up in your recipient's inbox? An incorrect address (hard bounce) or a rejected mail for another reason (soft bounce) is beyond your control.

The other component of deliverability is the spam rating of your email. There are many ways to avoid being spammy, some of them are common sense (avoid words like "Viagra" in your subject line) and others might suprise you.

How HTML Code Affects E-Mail Deliverability - ClickZ
http://www.clickz.com/3490146

> *Using outdated or incorrect code is a major reason why email[s] … are blocked or delivered to bulk or junk mail folders.*
>
> *Make sure your email designer/programmer is familiar with W3C standards. Before distributing an email, run the message through an HTML validator.*
>
> *Most of these problems can be solved by validating your template code*

Make sure you validate your code. You can copy and paste the full code of your email into the W3C validator here: http://validator.w3.org/#validate_by_input

Keep it simple: when I code emails I keep the elements to a minimum (**html**, **head**, **body**, **table**, **tr**, **td**, **p**, **b**, **i**, **span**, **a**, and **img**).

Most Common Span Filter Triggers - MailChimp
http://www.mailchimp.com/blog/most-common-spam-filter-triggers/

> *TYPING IN ALL CAPS = SCREAMING AND IS RUDE. Don't type in all caps in your emails, please. Who does that?*
>
> *…the rest of the detections on that list basically mean that the senders sent way, way too many images, and not enough readable text. Spam filters can't read images. Spammers know that, so they often send spam that's nothing but a big, ginormous image. And spam filters know that, so they in turn block email that they can't read.*

Spam checkers look for an image to text ratio (each spam checker is different). when you're trying to keep your content concise, this means that your images must be minimal.

To check the deliverability of your email try one of the two free options below:

Fast (there are a few checkers out there, this one seemed to be the toughest):
http://spamcheck.sitesell.com/
Slow (makes you save files as .eml format but could catch problems that other scanners don't):
http://www.mailingcheck.com/download-spam-checker/

Question #3 - Will the recipient open the email?

Check out MailChimp's list of common open and click-through rates (keeping in mind that these are for lists where the recipient has indicated that they want to receive the email):

Email Marketing Benchmarks by Industry - MailChimp
http://www.mailchimp.com/resources/charts/email-marketing-benchmarks-by-industry/

As an example, let's take Education and Training:

- **Open: 21.59%**

- **Click: 4.77%**

- **Unsubscribe rate: 0.25%**

This is for each campaign. You're losing a quarter of a percent of your list for each campaign, just over a fifth even open the email, and not even 5% take action on those mails.

So, how do you break the curve and get better open rates? The benchmark link above sums it up: "don't sell what's inside - tell what's inside."

Just be honest. Tell your recipients what they are getting. Being a little more specific:

Change Up Those Subject Lines - MailChimp
http://www.mailchimp.com/blog/change-up-those-subject-lines/

> *It's not easy thinking of new subject lines when you're sending daily or weekly emails. Maybe it's impossible, and you have to save the good ones for special occasions.*

You can't win them all but that doesn't mean you have an excuse to stop trying:

Improve Your Email Open Rates - Email Marketing Reports
http://www.email-marketing-reports.com/email-open-rates/improve.htm

> *Short-term efforts: subject lines and other headers; timing; frequency*

> *Long-term efforts: improve overall strategy and approach; refine sign-up procedures and targeting; get people to add you to their address list*

The answer no one wants to hear: **work harder**. Tweak the timing (what day and what time) and frequency (how often) while you improve your campaign with each and every email.

Need a few more long-term strategy ideas?

[Improving Your Email Open Rate - MailChimp](http://www.mailchimp.com/articles/improving_your_email_open_rate/)
http://www.mailchimp.com/articles/improving_your_email_open_rate/

> *Poor list quality, bad content…*

The only thing that really guarantees a consistently high open rate is great, relevant content. It doesn't get any more straight forward then that. Send out junk and expect junk statistics.

Question #4 - Are you getting your message across clearly, honestly, and effectively?

Since you have a goal in mind, make that goal the target for your whole message. Do you want people to sign up for a conference? Make sure that comes across clear as day in your email. Are you informing your existing clients to a change in your website or procedures? **Be straight-forward** and make sure the important stuff comes before anything extemporaneous.

Jacob Nielsen, the king of pragmatism, weighs in:

[Transactional and conformational emails - Jacob Nielsen](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/confirmation-email.html)
http://www.useit.com/alertbox/confirmation-email.html

> *Users frequently told us that they were too busy to deal with certain email messages, and that they considered any fluff in messages a waste of time. People just want to be done with most email, and quickly move past anything that is not absolutely essential. It has long been a strong usability guideline to be brief when writing for the Web; email writers must be even briefer.*
>
> *In most cases, the From field should show a recognizable brand name… The main differentiator [between effective and ineffective subject lines] was the degree to which the subject line explicitly related to a customer-initiated transaction.*
>
> *In general, you should write a message according to the users' priorities, starting with the information they're typically looking for.*

With your goal in mind, how do you give your recipients what they need to make this happen? Don't waste everyone's time with fluff in your message; cut to the chase and people will remember that your emails are informative and brief. Remember Strunk and White: **OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS**.

[Email Checklist - Seth Godin](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2008/06/email-checklist.html)
http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2008/06/email-checklist.html

Is any portion of the email in all caps? (If so, consider changing it.) Is it in black type at a normal size? Could this email be shorter? Do I have my contact info at the bottom? If I had to pay 42 cents to send this email, would I?

Don't write like an advertiser, **write like yourself**. Watch out for too many colors, too many images, and anything that detracts from your message. You have something to say so don't dilute your message.

One more thing to think about:

[3 Million Emails for $500 - Seth Godin](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2005/06/3_million_email.html)
http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2005/06/3_million_email.html

Email marketing is not about what you can get away with. Email marketing is about treating people with respect so that they will listen to what you have to say. So you can build your brand. So you can tell your story.

You're being given the opportunity to present yourself to anyone willing to open your email. **Don't squander that permission**; it's hard to gain back once you've lost it.

Question #5 - Is the next step for each email clear?

The best thing you can do for your business is to make the purchase decision easy to make and easy to complete.

If you want people to buy your product or service, **make it easy to do so**. Include links to the products, make sure everyone knows what they need to do next, include a "zoom to checkout" option.

Here's a quick case study on the king of the next step for emails, ProFlowers (take notes):

[E-mail Strategies and Tactics Exposed: An Insider's Look at Exceptional E-mail - eMarketing and Commerce](http://www.emarketingandcommerce.com/story/e-mail-strategies-and-tactics-exposed-insider%E2%80%99s-look-exceptional-e-mail)
http://www.emarketingandcommerce.com/story/e-mail-strategies-and-tactics-exposed-insider%E2%80%80%99s-look-exceptional-e-mail

By leveraging data and customer intelligence across channels - including Web and e-mail - [ProFlowers] has built a highly effective e-mail program that drives acquisition, conversion and purchases. Here's how:

- *e-mail acknowledges a recent Web site visit & provides an additional incentive to purchase…*

- *offers additional recommendations to consider*

- *prompts a user to share the offer with a friend*

- *creates a sense of urgency (respond within 3 days)*

People can't buy directly from an email so you're going to need a place for them to go: a landing page. This is a special page created for a particular campaign. It's the page people first see on your site when they click on a link from your email. You want your click-throughs (links clicked from an email) to end up as conversions (the people who actually fulfill your goal - buy, contact, fill out a form, etc.)

Here's a big introduction to landing pages, how to make them, and how to use them:

[Landing Page Tutorials and Case Studies - Copyblogger](http://www.copyblogger.com/landing-pages/)
http://www.copyblogger.com/landing-pages/

> *A landing page is any page on a website where traffic is sent specifically to prompt a certain action or result.*

Read through as much of that as you can stand… **your sales depend on it**. Here's one more:

[5 Tips to Designing the Ultimate Landing Page - Copyblogger](http://www.copyblogger.com/seal-the-deal-part-ii-5-tips-to-designing-the-ultimate-landing-page/)
http://www.copyblogger.com/seal-the-deal-part-ii-5-tips-to-designing-the-ultimate-landing-page/

> *Scrutinize your competition's design and organization flow of their landing pages…Put your most critical landing page elements in the upper 300 pixels of the page…Be obvious and use standard usage conventions…Make sure your page loads quickly*

No one ever said **effective** company email marketing was an easy job. You might create a whole template and one or two landing pages for each email you send out. That's a lot of work but very worthwhile in the end.

Question #6 - What else can I try?

I'll say, right at the beginning of this one, **if you're not spending the bulk of your time improving your content, constructing effective landing pages, and working on your open rates, this section won't do anything for you**. If, however, you're doing great but need MORE, take a look at a few things some people are doing.

How about animated GIFs. Did I seriously just recommend that?

[Animated GIFs in Email - MailChimp](http://www.mailchimp.com/blog/trend-watch-animated-gifs-in-email/)
http://www.mailchimp.com/blog/trend-watch-animated-gifs-in-email/

At first, I thought "oh…please, no" but I saw these creative uses and thought twice:

[Most Inspired Use of Animated GIFs - The Retail Email Blog](http://www.retailemailblog.com/2008/01/design-hall-of-fame-2007-inductees.html) (the Land's End campaign)
http://www.retailemailblog.com/2008/01/design-hall-of-fame-2007-inductees.html

Should you use them? I'd say try them out but watch the file size. Also, make sure it's useful or funny or interesting… but hopefully I don't have to tell you that at this point.

How about videos in email? Not many clients will allow an actual email to be embedded (major security concerns) but there are a few options if you have a compelling video you want to share.

[Video email update: can you embed them? - Email Marketing Reports](http://www.email-marketing-reports.com/iland/2008/09/video-email-update-can-you-embed-them.html)
http://www.email-marketing-reports.com/iland/2008/09/video-email-update-can-you-embed-them.html

- Put the video up on a website.

- Take a screenshot of the video player in action.

- Display this screenshot image [in the email] and link it to the web page where the actual video is available.

Now, let's get a little more ambitious. If you're using Twitter, LinkedIn, and/or Facebook, use your email to gain more friends and followers. If your short on ideas and just want to keep in touch, this is a non-invasive way to invite people to connect even better.

[Using Email to Make "Friends" - Smith-Harmon](http://www.smith-harmon.com/blog/2009/04/using_email_to_make_friends.php)
http://www.smith-harmon.com/blog/2009/04/using_email_to_make_friends.php

In order to receive any information on the special offer, you need to click through to Perry Ellis's Facebook or Twitter pages. Once there, you are able to view a variety of special offers, including promo codes, new arrival information and more.

Last but not least, here are a few tweaks to work into your next email template. Try them out and see if your stats improve.

[Enticing Subject Lines Are Not Enough - MailChimp](http://www.mailchimp.com/blog/enticing-subject-lines-are-not-enough/)
http://www.mailchimp.com/blog/enticing-subject-lines-are-not-enough/

- Pre-header information for email previews (The very first readable text that appears in your email will also appear in the summary line in certain email programs; make sure yours is clear, informative, and useful)

- List your intentions right away, numbered list, table of contents (Have three things to say? Bullet point them at the beginning)

- Big, bold headline (have one great thing to say? SAY IT LOUD)

A few great, recurring email marketing resources:

- http://www.mailchimp.com/blog/
- http://www.retailemailblog.com/
- http://www.email-standards.org/
- http://smith-harmon.com/blog/