

Kick Your Email Marketing Program Up a Notch

In the words of Emeril Lagasse, "Let's kick it up a notch." While trying not to take the analogy too far, email marketing and cooking share a few things in common. They are both easy to do, but to do them exceptionally well requires time, quality tools and expertise. They also require that a number of ingredients work well together to produce the best result.

OK, so enough with the cooking analogy. In this month's article I will suggest a number of activities that email marketers should consider deploying as part of their program - to help "kick it up a notch." Some of these suggestions are fairly easy to implement and others require advanced tools and techniques. But no matter what resources and tools you have available, establish a roadway (or recipe) that outlines the time frame and steps necessary to take your program to the next level.

The following are a few key ingredients in your efforts to kick your email marketing program up a notch:

Design: Improving the design and layout of your email is one of the easiest improvements you can make that can deliver an immediate huge return. Design and layout are critical to pulling your reader through the email and motivating them to take action. Your email marketing communications are also a key brand touch point of your company and should directly reinforce your company's brand personality and essence. We highly recommend that you utilize the services of a designer experienced in the email marketing environment.

Personalization: Studies have shown that the greater number of personalization elements to an email, the higher the response rates. At minimum of course, personalization can mean addressing a recipient by their first name. Ultimately, however, true personalization means delivering emails that are tailored to the specific profile and preferences of each recipient. The types of personalization may vary in approach based on whether you are sending a newsletter, announcement or ecommerce email, but improved results are generally the outcome.

A simple example can be illustrated by the approach of a regional hotel company that operates five hotels and regularly emails previous guests (who've opted in of course). An email template can be created that includes mail merge variables such as logo and name of the hotel last stayed at; name, contact information and scanned signature of the specific hotel general manager; photo of the hotel or amenities; subject line; specific offer; based on satisfaction rating and type of room stayed in; and more. Obviously the amount of energy expended toward personalization has to be weighed against your available resources and the expected return. But consider starting with one or two personalization elements and add additional variables when and if feasible.

Testing: The ability to test variables is one of the greatest benefits of email marketing. It is also an activity that is rarely deployed. If you can muster the energy, we recommend testing at least one variable in each email campaign or newsletter issue (assuming one or two distributions per month). Test variables can be design/format changes, subject line elements, time of day/day of week, use and style of graphics, copy style, amount of copy, offers and more. Of course, don't just test for testing sake. Testing should form a key foundation of your overall improvement program and help move you forward toward your end goal. The simplest approach to testing is to split your list into two random but equal groups ("A/B splits") and test one new variable against an existing constant.

Profile/Demographic Segmentation: If you have more information than name and email address on your customers and email subscribers, why not use it? If you haven't collected information, perhaps this is the key ingredient currently missing from your program. For example, if you are an online retailer of bicycle apparel, parts and accessories, capturing demographic information such as sex, age and biking preference (road, mountain or both) would enable you to conduct fairly targeted campaigns. Using this data you could

develop customer profile segments (i.e., males over 40 who ride mountain bikes) who then receive emails with specific products, offers and messaging that appeals to this demographic profile group.

Behavioral-Based Segmentation: Targeting email recipients based upon actions they've taken ("behavioral-based segmentation") is probably the dream of many email marketers. Why? Quite simply this approach probably portends the single greatest opportunity for dramatic improvement in results. Examples of behavioral-based segmentation include sending emails to recipients who have or have not opened an email or series of emails, who have clicked on a specific link, who have visited specific pages on your Web site or who have purchased a specific type of product. Sound daunting? Actually it is not that difficult to implement, but it does require some strategy and a little extra effort. Consider getting started with a simple program such as sending a follow-up email to recipients that did not open your most recent email or who clicked on a specific link.

Web Site Activity Tracking: Open and/or click-through statistics can sometimes provide a misleading or incomplete picture of your email results. By using Web site action tracking (a line of code placed on each Web page you'd like to track), you are able to connect the dots all the way through to purchase or other desired actions. This complete picture is particularly critical when conducting split tests.

Automated Trigger-Based Emails: Trigger-based emails can be generated when a recipient takes an action such as opening an email, clicking on a link or submitting a form. Additionally an email can be triggered if a customer or subscriber's profile changes or matches a particular demographic. Triggers can be used for a variety of scenarios such as to automate sales lead notifications, confirmation emails, send thank you messages for completing a survey or to send a follow-up offer to a recipient that clicks on a specific link.

If you are looking to kick your email program up a notch, the key is to not feel overwhelmed by the technology or perceived complexity. Pick one of the activities from above that you and your team can easily implement - and just get started. Or to complete the cooking analogy, select your ingredients and start creating that masterpiece of a dish!