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Mobile Is Key to Improving your Email Marketing

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Research from Forrester predicts that by 2017, 78% of email users will access their messages via a mobile device. As evidence of this trend, the mobile email open rate over Cyber Week increased 50% over the same high-traffic period in 2011.

Merchants, unfortunately, are not keeping up. Only 29.5% of MCM Outlook 2012-13 respondents said they have a mobile commerce site. What's more, just 13.4% claim their ecommerce sites are optimized for mobile devices, and 47.3% said they are not using m-commerce at all.

And that is going to be a problem, given that we live in a world with more than 1 billion smartphones in use. Consumers and B2B buyers, who have traditionally checked emails only on their desktops, have become mobile-savvy and are opening, reading and responding to emails on their smartphones and tablets.

But if your ecommerce site is not ready for your mobile customers, chances are your emails are not there yet, either.

Merchants face several hurdles with their 2013 email marketing campaigns.

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While several issues revolve around reaching an increasingly mobile audience, some of the age-old problems still exist. For example: Which subject lines will help boost open rates? What sorts of offers will increase clickthroughs? Which segments will be the most responsive?

Here are the key trends in email marketing.

Going mobile-first

For many merchants, more than 20% of their emails are now being read on smartphones and tablets—and for some it's in excess of 40%. Because email engagement is typically multifold higher on tablets than on smartphones, focus on making your emails tablet-friendly by using larger headlines and deck copy, and then by making calls-to-action easy to tap by avoiding image, button and link crowding. Once you've mastered that, you can move on to the smaller screen and make smartphone-friendly changes to your email marketing program.

When people read emails on a mobile device, they are often multitasking and may have only a few seconds to read your email. Make your message strong and singular so recipients can decide immediately if they want to act on it. If the message is complicated, recipients will think to themselves, "I'll deal with this later," and they never do.

Think about the content, other than your main message, that you're including within your email. Is it absolutely necessary? You need to decide both what you want to communicate, your bottom line message, and what you want the recipient to do. But limit the amount of copy, because if your message contains too much, it is not going to stand out on a small screen.

As for the technicals, limit the width of images to 300 pixels, headlines to 30 points and body copy to 14 points. You also need to maximize white space to 10 points to accommodate the touchscreen capabilities of the smartphone—and to keep readers from tapping on the wrong links.

Triggers/transactionals

Trigger and transactional messages are low volume, but offer a great return on investment. If done right, they can generate 25% to 40% or more of a retailer's email revenue, while representing less than 5% of volume.

Adding more triggered messages to your email program generates a growing stream of revenue from emails that are close to "set and forget." Start with im-proving your welcome email by moving to a series that incorporates offers and helpful content. Then add birthday, purchase anniversary, bounceback, product review requests, recommendations and other emails that are based on demographic or behavioral data.

While promotional batch-and-blast campaigns may appear to be your highest revenue-generating email programs, it's those smaller, behind-the-scenes, highly targeted emails that are helping to increase your response rates and your conversion rates, while building the relationship your brand has with your consumer.

Triggered campaigns have gotten smarter. Merchants have seen huge successes in creating automated, targeted campaigns that are built around browsing activity and previous purchases, and preferences based on wish lists. They attack low-hanging fruit, because they allow you to use customer data you probably already have on hand.

While the distribution lists on a daily basis may be small, the metrics will be high and, over time, you'll see a huge return on the investment made upfront for a campaign that will run by itself in the background. But don't let these campaigns go forgotten. Remember to check their results quarterly against your benchmarks. Test offers, messaging, designs, products and timing, as well as characteristics used to trigger the emails, the subject lines and more until you reach your sweet spot for each triggered campaign.

Welcome, browse-based, back-in-stock, anniversary, birthday and other emails that are sent in response to subscriber actions produce outsized results because they reach subscribers at the right time with the right message.

Upgrade your triggered messages by creating triggered series campaigns that send multiple messages over a determined period of time. An example is sending three abandoned cart messages: at 24

hours, two days and five days after the visitor abandoned.

Start the message series with a friendly reminder and offer assistance in completing the order. The next message could alert customers that their carts will be cleared if they don't order within a certain time limit. The last message could say their carts will be cleared today, but include an offer to help close the sale.

Triggered messages are proven to drive more engagement and sales, since you already have the subscriber interacting. But don't push it: Remember to test the right email tolerance for your subscribers.

Calls to action

A sometimes forgotten piece of email design is to compel your recipient to do something: "Click Here," "Sign Up," "Buy Now," "Shop Today." Add this powerful copy to body text, subject lines and images to create a sense of urgency.

Still batching and blasting

Batch-and-blast email marketing is not dead. And that may be a good thing for merchants who blast promotional emails to their entire customer bases. By some estimates, revenues generated via batch-and-blast emails still represent 60% to 70% of total email revenue.

While segmentation adds value to an email marketing campaign, there are certain events that really are relevant to everybody. Holidays are a great example. No matter what a customer's household income or the time of day the message is opened, a holiday will resonate with the email recipient.

Also, it doesn't matter how good technology is—there are just some consumers for whom you won't get good segments.

Segmenting

Although batch-and-blast works for mass, segmentation is key when it comes to increasing response rates. Segmenting

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also improves your inbox deliverability, reduces spam complaints and the hitting of spam traps, and heightens your subscriber engagement. That is crucial, as today's ISPs factor these metrics into safe-sender scoring based on the engagement levels of subscribers. So if you are not segmenting your lists to make your email marketing more relevant, you should be.

Frequent communication can numb the reader to your offers. Your highest response will typically come from your newest responders, while the response rate for older responders will trail off over time. Creating a new cell of older customers will definitely improve the response rate on the newer segment—but let's do more than that. Create a strategy to revive the activity on that older cell. Start by giving them a rest. Then, send them a special and see if you can't generate a little more sales activity on their part—and renewed confidence in your brand.

Social tie-ins

When sending an email, make sure you are giving the recipient plenty of options to connect with you. MeritDirect and Penton Media recently collaborated on a B2B initiative to include links to social outlets embedded in Penton's outbound email. That gave recipients the ability to share with their connections, maximizing the reach and overall ROI of the email effort.

Remember, however, that you do not necessarily have to close a sale on the initial email. Give recipients the opportunity

to sign up for a free newsletter, to follow you on Twitter, or to download a whitepaper so they can learn more about your company, your product or service.

Use your Facebook presence to encourage email sign-ups. A perfect example of how to use Facebook to fish for sign-ups can be found with shoe retailer Crocs, which decided to embed an email sign-up directly on its fan page.

This campaign not only gave Crocs the names and emails of more than 2,000 people per week who "Like" them on Facebook, but by including a 20%-off welcome coupon after sign-up, it was able to create a prospective client.

One last item to consider: Don't forget the email marketing basics. We are all so caught up in the social media revolution that we tend to forget about some older tools that can be effective. For example, "Forward to a Friend" was a hot topic about five years ago, but that trend, while still effective, is fading. But marketers be warned: Consumers are twice as likely to forward an email to a friend than to tweet or post information from a promotional email.

In-store address capture

Email wasn't around when the Song-Beverly Credit Card Act was passed in 1971, but it means that merchants today

cannot collect personally identifiable information during a credit card transaction. So if a merchant in California wants to collect email addresses at the POS, and a credit card is being used, the merchant is subject to a $1,000 fine per violation.

Fourteen other states have PII rules of some sort that are a little softer than California's law. So merchants with bricks-and-mortar locations should check with their legal teams before they implement any sort of in-store email address collection strategies.

Even if you do get the green light to ask for a customer's email address in-store, you may need to incentivize store associates to collect that data. And remember that the customer is more likely to give you his or her email address if there is some sort of benefit, such as discounts, newsletters or exclusive offers.

Merchants are making the in-store email collection process digital. For example, they are allowing customers to enter their email addresses via a PIN pad. In some cases, the POS has a touchscreen that allows the customer to punch the info right into the register. Some merchants also use kiosks and tablets to collect this information.

And the days of putting a business card or a form into a fish bowl are coming to an end. That's because of the time lag from email address collection to email address entry—and in 2013, customers expect to receive a welcome email immediately.

Subject lines

Subject lines may be short, but they are life or death for your email. You have just a few seconds to grab the reader's eye and get either an open or a delete, so make those 50 or fewer characters work hard for you. Be clear and to the point, and try to avoid being cute or catchy.

Don't be afraid to personalize the subject line. Personalization is not just about first name—you can personalize with the product left in the shopping cart or a local venue where your event is taking place. This type of approach will increase your open rates and is definitely something you want to test.

In fact, you should be testing subject lines continuously to learn what motivates your audience. Start by summarizing your key offer (for example, "Take 20% off our best-selling item") and test different elements such as first-name personalization, number of offers mentioned, long copy (over 50 characters), short copy (under 35 characters), and more.

Also consider reviewing previously used subject lines to find trends. Do certain product names pull better than others? Do words like "sale" or "discount" perk up response? Never stop testing.

And there are scare tactics, too: "Only a few hours left" or "Today only" can usually boost an email's open rate because readers don't want to miss out on a great deal.

Flattery also works with customers. For those who are your regular shoppers, try sending an email with the subject line, "For our best customers."

Headers and preheaders

Many email clients such as Outlook, Gmail and the iPhone, display preheader text after the subject line in the inbox. With the prevalence of email preview panes and mobile devices, consumers may see only the top 50 to 100 pixels of your email. As a result, your email's header and preheader have an exaggerated importance. So, to help ensure that as many consumers as possible see your offer, make sure that it appears above the header in HTML text (as many as 50% of consumers have images turned off).

Preheader text is the very first piece of content within an email message. In the past, preheader text was used for a "view as a webpage" or "having trouble viewing" link. Marketers, however, have come to understand the dramatic lift an email program can achieve by using this real estate for offer-related content. Emails that use the first line of preheader text for offer-related information generate a 19% higher open rate than those that utilize this space for format issues or add to safe-sender list information.

Similarly, navigation links in the header (e.g., products, locations, etc.) can account for up to 20% of all clicks in an email. Consider using your website's most active primary navigation links in the header of your email.

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Hygiene

A clean list is a deliverable list, and a deliverable list keeps ISPs happy. Happy ISPs don't report you to third-party monitoring services, so your mail remains deliverable. And we all know that getting to the inbox is essential to the response rate.

Before you press send to transmit your message, make sure your list is as clean as it can possibly be. Have "remove" requests been removed? Have bounces been scrubbed?

Data is paramount in a prospecting environment. Make sure you have done due diligence on the list source and have

selected your audience carefully. There are a lot of dubious list sources that can harm your online reputation and email delivery. Make sure the company you are dealing with is reputable, and do not be afraid to ask questions.

When cleaning your list, make sure you verify domain names, fix typos and eliminate profanity. Also use suppression files your vendor has built to weed out known bounced emails, opt-out requests and known spam traps. Have your service bureau contact the Internet service providers to confirm that the email addresses are valid.

Reactivate

Dormant customers have reached out to you in the past, so don't neglect them. An estimated 30% of email addresses churn on an annual basis. That's why the majority of your inactives are simply due to your sending emails to accounts your customers no longer read.

Define criteria for inactive subscribers, such as not opening for 60 days, and trigger an email when those criteria are met to let the subscriber know he or she is missed. These programs can not only reactivate someone who has been ignoring your brand, but can also drive sales.

You should try a win-back program to

Review emails in preview pane mode. Do you know what your email looks like sitting in an inbox?

see if you can bring these former customers back. For those who don't respond, utilize an Email Change of Address service to reconnect you with the guaranteed deliverable, preferred email addresses of your customers.

Cooking.com's re-engagement email campaign is being used for members the site has not heard from in at least a year. The response rates for this campaign are higher and revenue 180% higher than the performance of a standard broadcast mailing.

These emails are going out only to customers who have not opened an email from Cooking.com in 12 months. Instead of putting an offer in the subject line, Cooking.com is using a friendlier vernacular such as "Come back, we miss you," to get customers to open.

Testing

Testing is the hallmark of a great email marketing program—it's hard to imagine how you can be responsive and relevant to subscribers without it. And if you're not testing, you're leaving lots of money on the table.

Not convinced? Check out whichtestwon.com, which shares case studies of A/B tests that routinely generate lifts of 20%, 40% or more from small changes to copy, text or image size, button color and other elements.

Review emails in preview pane mode. Do you know what your email looks like sitting in an inbox? Do you know the difference between an email sent in Gmail versus an email sent in Outlook? If not, you'd better start figuring it out.

Some statistics show that about 25% of desktop traffic reads emails in preview pane mode only. Emails come in all different types of layouts, depending on the service your client is using. So make sure all your important information and calls to action are visible in the preview pane of the email.

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