

E-mail Deliverability: Increase Your Chances of E-mail Getting Through



Be sure your e-mail messages stand out so they won't get tossed out.

By David Crooke

Making sure your organization's e-mails reach the intended recipients is key for effective e-mail marketing. There are many ways an e-mail can be derailed on its journey from your organization to targeted constituents. A filter could misclassify it as spam before the constituent ever sees it; constituents could misinterpret it as spam and delete it; or, constituents could simply overlook it in an inbox clogged with junk e-mail. Here are a few tips to ensure your e-mails get through:

Check the Content

Keep the following points in mind when creating e-mail messages:

- Use a concise subject line to catch the reader's eye so your e-mail stands out in the recipient's inbox, which probably is packed with both legitimate e-mails and a growing volume of spam. Limit the subject line to 40-60 characters so that it shows up completely in the in-box list.
- If you send an e-mail newsletter or other ongoing communication, always start each subject with the same prefix (for example, "MyOrg e-News:").
- Don't use sensationalized headlines or overuse capitalization and punctuation; doing so will make your message look like spam to both humans and automated spam filters.

- Choose both a display name and e-mail address for the "From:" line that accurately identify your organization. The name should also be concise (20-30 characters). Avoid using an individual's name, as most spam appears to be from individuals. Also make sure that your organization has people available to read and answer any replies to that address.

An excessive ratio of links to content is typical of spam.

- Be conscious of current spam themes, including mortgages, medications, and pornography, and avoid using words that might be associated with them.
- Format content with some graphics to make your message more appealing. However, avoid sending a flashy e-mail composed solely of images — again, features typical of spam.
- Include prominent calls to action with multiple links (but no more than 10-20). An excessive ratio of links to content is typical of spam.
- Provide a plain-text version, even if it's just a paragraph and a link to Web site copy.
- Use a spam checker which

alerts you if your e-mail contains elements likely to trigger today's spam filters. Run e-mail messages through the checker, then view and correct potential spam violations.

Test the E-Mail Message

Set up test e-mail accounts with some of the biggest e-mail providers and Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Yahoo and Hotmail are free; the most important for-fee ISP is AOL because it is the largest (AOL users constitute a quarter of most nonprofit e-mail lists) and because the e-mail software it supplies to members is proprietary. Then, test your message two ways:

- Send an e-mail to your test accounts, logging in and checking that the e-mail has been delivered to each account and isn't being misclassified as spam.
- Look at your e-mail in a range of e-mail clients. This is especially important when using a new design style or letterhead for the first time. Set one of your test accounts to receive the plain-text version of the e-mail so you can check that as well.

Consider the Timing

People who read their e-mail frequently tend to do so at certain times of day and on certain days of the week. When they do so, a recent e-mail is more likely to grab their attention than one that's a

day or two old. Time e-mails to arrive in the early morning hours for the start of people's e-mail reading day (this also makes for faster delivery since ISP servers are less busy at this time), or to arrive in the late morning to be read over lunchtime (a peak time for Web traffic for many nonprofits).

Be Consistent

Communications are more likely to be read and less likely to be mistaken for spam if they're expected and have a consistent appearance. (This doesn't preclude ad hoc e-mails in response to current events — a powerful outreach tool.)

- **Send newsletters** on a regular schedule — for example, on the same day every week at approximately the same time.
- **Always use the same "From:" address**, and use a consistent element in the subject line.
- **Use a consistent style, layout, and appearance**, with a letterhead that brands the organization.

Handle Challenge-Response Systems

A growing trend in spam filtering is the use of a challenge-response system (a tiny fraction of Internet users currently employ one, but its popularity is increasing). The first time an e-mail is sent to one of these recipients, the e-mail will be held from delivery and a "challenge" message will be sent back to the "Reply-To:" or "From:" address, with a task designed to be comprehensible only to a human so that it can defeat spammers' attempts at automation.

Typically, this requires clicking on a link and transcribing a word on a Web form. Once the task has been completed, the original e-mail is delivered, as are all subsequent ones from the same source (another reason to use the same "From:" address in every e-mail).

How your organization handles these challenges depends on the lifetime value of an e-mail address.

Limit the subject line to 40-60 characters.

In a typical nonprofit e-mail file, this value is great enough that it's worth having a staff member spend 60-90 seconds each to respond to these challenges.

Stay Up-to-Date

Although these techniques won't guarantee e-mail delivery 100% of the time, they'll help ensure that the vast majority of your e-mails will get delivered. Remember, too, that the Internet environment for e-mail marketing is changing rapidly. Look to your e-mail software provider to update you frequently on technology changes and best practices to keep the e-mail flowing. ■

Resources

Allen, Nick, "Using E-mail & the Web to Acquire & Cultivate Donors," *Nonprofit World* Vol. 21, No. 1.

Bhagat, Vinay, "Online Advocacy: Mobilize Supporters to Take Action," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 6.

Bhagat, Vinay, "The New Marketing Model for Nonprofits," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 6.

Frenza, JP & Leslie Hoffman, "Fundraising on the Internet: Three Easy Strategies," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 4.

Roufa, Mike, "Can Nonprofits Really Raise Money On the Internet?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No.3.

These resources are available free on-line at www.snpo.org/members.

David Crooke is a founder and chief technology officer of Convio (www.convio.com), a leading online Constituent Relationship Management (or eCRM) company serving the nonprofit sector.

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