



Beyond the Single E-mail Message: Running Effective E-mail Campaigns



Use these keys to maximize your e-mail results

By Vinay Bhagat

With 71% of people in the United States using the Internet, more organizations are moving communications with their constituents online for a variety of purposes: regularly scheduled newsletters, ad hoc or time-sensitive updates, and campaigns to drive fundraising, membership, or advocacy. But today's Internet environment isn't the same as it was a year, or even six months, ago.

As constituents become overloaded with e-mail messages, organizations must plan and execute e-mail campaigns with new approaches that address the challenges of today's wired world to inspire the greatest response rates. From deciding how many e-mails to send to whom, to determining which messages will get the best response, strategic e-mail campaign planning and execution are key. Here are a few techniques to increase your results:

Design an Effective E-mail Campaign

An e-mail campaign is a unified series of messages targeting a specific audience to support a specific goal. Goals for an e-mail campaign might include the following:

- **Recruit** new donors from a pool of e-mail subscribers or activists.
- **Renew or upgrade** current members or donors.
- **Motivate** advocates or e-mail subscribers to respond to an advocacy alert.

- **Encourage** donors to sign up as volunteer fundraisers.

As with direct mail, organizations typically need to send more than one message to drive a response. After an initial e-mail communication, however, it is important to suppress people from the mailing list who have already responded before sending follow-up e-mail messages.

For example, if your first e-mail targets 1,000 people and generates 50 responses (in other words, a 5% response rate), then the next e-mail should be sent to the 950 people who didn't respond. Continuing to ask the 50 respondents to take action when they've already done so runs the risk of annoying and alienating people who've already provided support. The best e-mail marketing software today allows an organization to configure e-mail campaigns (versus individual e-mails) that automatically cull respondents from the list so they don't receive additional e-mail appeals or calls-to-action for the same campaign.

Test the Message for Greater Response

Just as with postal mail, the messaging and presentation of e-mails can affect response rates. Despite emerging best practices in crafting e-mail campaign messages (for example, making a single ask in each e-mail), every organization still needs to test the effectiveness of its messaging, use of images, and subject

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View your e-mails as a unified series of communications.

line copy to optimize response rates. One strategy to increase response rates is to conduct an A/B test.

A common (but sometimes cost- and time-prohibitive) practice in direct mail, A/B testing is the technique of creating two test e-mails with a different single element — such as the message or subject line — in each one. Each message is sent to different “test cells,” or groups of constituents, made up of a random sample from an organization’s target list. The message that gets the best response is the one that should be used for distribution to a wider audience. The latest e-mail marketing tools make it easy to run

online A/B tests to enhance the performance of a nonprofit’s e-mail campaigns.

Measure Results

Measuring results is critical to determining campaign effectiveness. Look not only at the response rate and other key metrics (such as e-mail open rates and click-through rates) for each e-mail in the campaign series, but also at the cumulative performance of the campaign while it’s underway and at its conclusion.

Continuing the example above, if the second e-mail sent to the revised target list of 950 generates 30 responses (a 3.2% response rate), the cumulative response rate from the campaign would be 80/1,000 or 8%. Rather than averaging the response rates on each individual e-mail (showing a 4.1% response rate), you know that the campaign has drawn 8% response from the campaign after just two

related e-mails.

Measuring results on the campaign as a unified series of communications, in addition to viewing each e-mail separately, gives you a much more accurate assessment of how the campaign is working and what results you can expect on future campaigns. Be sure to use e-mail marketing software that automatically tracks responses at a campaign level, making this type of analysis simpler.

Be Open to New Approaches

With people and communications moving online, e-mail campaigns today require new approaches supported by advanced e-mail marketing software. As nonprofits grow their e-mail files and continue to step up use of e-mail marketing, expect to see more best practices and analysis techniques from the world of direct mail applied to online direct-response marketing. ■

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.

Crooke, David, “E-mail Deliverability: Increase Your Chances of Getting Through,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 23, No. 2.

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

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

Vinay Bhagat is the founder and CEO of Convio (www.convio.com), a leading online Constituent Relationship Management (or eCRM) company serving the nonprofit sector.

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