



15 Tips

to Optimize Your E-Mail Messages

Nonprofits scored high in a recent e-mail study. But are you doing all you can to reap the highest response rates?

By Raj Khera

In a recent study of e-mail marketing, nonprofit organizations performed well. The number of people who received the e-mail messages nonprofits sent (delivery rates), opened those e-mails (unique open rates), and clicked on links in those messages (click-through rates) was higher than average.¹ (See “Glossary and Study Results” on page 30 for more details.)

The research also highlights approaches that can help you get the results you want from your e-mails. To assure that you’re maximizing your efforts, follow these tips and best practices:

1. Never purchase, trade, or borrow an e-mail list. This is the cardinal rule of e-mail marketing. E-mail sent to people who haven’t specifically requested to receive your mailings (opted-in) is almost always regarded as spam.

2. If you haven’t e-mailed your subscribers in a while, ask them if they want to continue receiving your messages. Many will choose not to opt-in, but those who do are reaffirming that they want to receive your e-mails. You’ll have a smaller but very receptive audience.

Most people will open your e-mail a day or two after receiving it.

3. Remind subscribers often to let you know when they change e-mail addresses. Make it easy for them to inform you of changes. The result will be less bounces caused by changed e-mail addresses.

4. Include lots of connecting links, and give people several links to get to the same material. For example, if you have three supporting articles for your e-mail,

you could link to them each two or three times. The first link may appear in your opening text, the second in an index, the third could be in a summary of the article. Make it easy for your readers to click through to other articles. This study shows that messages containing a high number of links receive better click rates.

5. Remind people that they subscribed. Include a standard heading at the top of all your e-mails. A short note such as “Thank you for subscribing to our newsletter. Here’s our latest issue” can make a big difference in reminding people that you’re sending them something they requested.

6. Take care in creating your subject lines. If your subject line contains words that are frequently used by spammers, there’s a good chance your e-mail will be deleted without being read. For instance, “FREE” or “!!!!!!” will cause your message to be flagged as spam. In addition, recent studies show that shorter subject lines result in higher open rates. But if you really want to give your open rate a boost, try personalizing your subject lines.² If you gather information about people when they subscribe, you can use it to send targeted messages with modified subject lines. For instance, if you know certain subscribers are interested in policy issues and your e-mail includes something about policy, mention that in their subject line.

7. Make signing up and unsubscribing easy and visible. Put your form, or a link to your form, on

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Are you still struggling with manual lists of donors, donations and bidders for your fundraising auctions?



Make things easier on yourself and your volunteers, and EQUIP them with the tools that will allow you to focus on raising funds instead of generating lists. Download a free demo of The Auctioneer's Assistant today at www.equipsoftware.com. Mention this ad for a 10% discount when you purchase The Auctioneer's Assistant.

your home page. You may only want to ask subscribers for their e-mail address, name, and perhaps one or two other questions to target your mailings, such as their interests or demographics.

Glossary and Study Results

Bounce rates measure the number of e-mail messages that don't reach their designated recipients. E-mail messages may bounce if the receiving server is temporarily down, if the e-mail is flagged as spam, or if people change their e-mail addresses without notifying you. Generally, an e-mail message that bounces due to the receiving server being down will eventually be delivered.

Click-through rates measure the percentage of e-mails containing links that people click on. In this study, the average click rate for all industries was 3.64%. Nonprofit organizations earned a slightly higher average click-through rate of 3.82%.

Delivery rates measure how many e-mails are delivered to the e-mail address you designate. This study shows that nonprofits' delivery rates outperformed most other industries for the first five mailings to a subscriber list. The average delivery rate for all industries, calculated as 100% minus the bounce rate, was 93.48%. Nonprofits earned a slightly higher delivery rate of 94.05% on their first five mailings.³ For the sixth and subsequent mailings, the average delivery rate for all industries increased to 97.6%, while nonprofits reported only 95.33%.

Unique open rates measure how many subscribers open your e-mail. It doesn't include how many text-based newsletters are opened, since that can't be tracked. Unlike total open rates, unique open rates don't count multiple e-mail openings by the same person. The average unique open rate for all industries was 22.92%. Nonprofits' unique open rate was higher than average at 29.09%.

8. Use double opt-in registration. There are two standard methods for online registration: single and double opt-in. With single opt-in, subscribers enter their e-mail addresses and are automatically registered. Double opt-in is the preferred method for e-mail newsletter subscriptions because it requires confirmation.

9. Place a link to your privacy policy near your list sign-up form. This policy should describe how you handle the information you collect and how people can contact you if they have concerns or questions. Your subscribers want to be assured that you won't rent or sell their addresses or other information to third parties without their consent.

Remind subscribers often to tell you if they change e-mail addresses.

10. Send a welcome message immediately when people join your e-mail list. Include a description of what they will receive, how frequently they will receive it, and how to unsubscribe.

11. Keep accurate sign-up records, including the Web site address from which people sign up and the date, in case you or your Internet Service Provider get spam complaints from people who forgot they subscribed to your list.

12. Include your organization's contact information in each e-mail. Give people several ways to reach you — by phone, e-mail, or postal (snail) mail. Then make sure you have appropriate staff on hand to handle phone calls and e-mails when you send a message.

13. Send your mailings regularly. Unless you keep in touch with your subscribers frequently, they may forget they signed up to receive your mailings. If you adhere to a schedule, your subscribers will begin to anticipate your messages.

14. Reply promptly to each inquiry or spam complaint. For spam complaints, include that person's subscription information with your response.

If you haven't used your list in awhile, ask your subscribers to opt-in again.

15. Keep in mind that about 80% of those who open your e-mail will do so in the first 48 hours. Decide when you *ideally* want recipients to read your e-mail and send it two days earlier. ■

Footnotes

¹MailerMailer, a provider of opt-in e-mail list management services, reported e-mail marketing use and trends by industry by analyzing over 135 million e-mail messages sent by over 2,000 of their customers. The report includes unique open rates and click-through rates by industry; open and click rates by day of the week; and the effect of personalized subject lines on open and click rates.

²The average unique open rate increased from 22.92% for all e-mails to 31.04% for e-mails with personalized subject lines.

³MailerMailer automatically records and purges undeliverable e-mail addresses from its customers' lists after their fifth mailing.

Resources

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

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

Bhagat, Vinay, "Beyond the Single E-Mail Message: Running Effective E-Mail Campaigns," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 23, No. 3.

These articles are available free at www.snpo.org/members.

Raj Khera is a partner in MailerMailer, a Web-based e-mail list management service that provides customers the ability to create and track opt-in newsletters and e-mail campaigns. For more information about MailerMailer or to receive a full copy of the "E-mail Marketing Use and Trends Report," visit <http://www.mailermailer.com/metrics>.