

## E-mail marketing – Crafting Creative

Written: August 2003

<b>About the author – Dave Chaffey, BSc, PhD, MCIM</b>	
<b>E-marketing trainer and consultant</b>	Clients include 3M, Barbican, Britvic, The British Council, Computer 2000, HSBC, Intel, Siebel, NCH and Tektronix
<b>Author of 6 best-selling business books</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Internet Marketing: Strategy, Implementation and Practice</i></li> <li>• <i>E-business and E-commerce Management</i></li> <li>• <i>Total E-mail Marketing</i></li> </ul>
<b>A marketing 'guru'</b>	Recognised by the CIM as one of 50 gurus who have 'shaped the future of marketing'
<b>Visiting lecturer at leading UK business schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Cranfield</li> <li>• University of Leeds</li> <li>• University of Warwick</li> </ul>

### Table of contents

Introduction .....	1
Before you start.....	2
Structuring the creative .....	2
Lead / opening / first paragraph .....	3
Body copy .....	3
The Close.....	3
Sign-off.....	3
The PS .....	4
Mandatory inclusions .....	4
HTML e-mail options.....	4
CRABS.....	4
References.....	5
Dave Chaffey – Contact details.....	5

### Introduction

Producing effective e-mail creative or working with agencies producing this creative presents a new challenge for marketers. But many of the challenges are not new, for example the limited time to achieve an action is not new. The need for a powerful opening and an appealing, relevant offer are not new. Constraints of cost and space are not new.

But there are many differences of course. As we saw last week, the behaviours of the prospects and customers reading our e-mail are quite different from direct mail. For instance, many users have set up their e-mail to have an auto-preview window to display the first few lines of the e-mail to help them decide on it. E-mail recipients are evaluating an e-mail compared to the tens or hundreds of others they are processing when going through their in-box. These factors mean that e-mail is a much more impulsive medium than direct mail. Most campaigns have the vast majority of responses within 48 hours. E-mail recipients tend to reply immediately they open the e-mail if the offer is relevant to them. As we produce our creative we need to key into this to encourage the responses we want.

We start by looking at some of the factors to consider before you start laying out the creative. I will then look at the options for structuring a typical e-mail and what additional options are provided by HTML e-mail. We end with a look at CRABS – a simple checklist to compare your creative against.

## Before you start.

As with any creative endeavour, it is easy to dive in and start laying out the e-mail. This is a summary of the main factors to consider taken from Dave Chaffey's one day CIM workshop on E-mail Marketing.

**1 Aims:** Number and types of outcome; cost per outcome; response mechanism. The typical response mechanism is clickthrough(s) to a landing page or microsite – a web response page or online form which can collect details from the recipient's as required. Although this is conventional practice, remember that in some cases, particularly for high value customers, the required response may be to get the recipient to reply to an e-mail – to start a dialogue with them. In others, we may want them to call us or to arrange a phone call. Whatever the response mechanism the best results are usually achieved if the creative is designed around the desired response and there are not too many response mechanisms.

**2 Targeting:** audience characteristics; database fields selected; personalisation. Here we decide on the number of different versions of the creative we send out, or to look at it another way, how many different parts we split the e-mail list into, each with a different version of the creative. Some versions can be automatically varied or mass-customised. For example, varying the recipients name in the salutation. Lastminute.com ([www.lastminute.com](http://www.lastminute.com)) are reputed to have over 900 different versions of their creative which are varied according to the interests of subscribers. These are varied by building up different elements or blocks of the e-mail each with different content and offers relevant to a particular type of person – for example Short city-breaks or long-haul destinations. In other cases a more simple split of the creative can be effective. Aberlour, the Malt Whisky brand ran a turn of the year campaign to increase product usage. The main split of the e-mail list was into two parts, with one set of creative for male subscribers and the other for their partners.

**3 Offer:** primary and secondary offer; number of offers per message. The primary offer clearly needs to be clear within the creative and details provided to demonstrate the relevance of the offer to the recipient. The secondary offer is used to help produce a response – remember that with e-mail we need to get the recipient to respond NOW! since recipients are less likely to return to the e-newsletter than the direct mail piece. The numbers of offers should be limited in a campaign-style e-mail to help achieve focus on the required response. E-newsletters typically have multiple offers.

Other issues to think about when planning your creative which have been referred to in recent E-marketing Insights columns include timing, integration with other media and the microsite creative. A further factor which is often ignored, but is one of the less lauded benefits of e-mail marketing is research or profiling. Information to be collected from respondents can be specified in order to better understand recipient needs and so improve list quality. This information should add to that collected to signup. View this members subscription form for Aberlour (<http://www.aberlour.com/members/join.asp>). It can be seen that here, the company is profiling the interests of its members. It could be argued that this information could be gained in a follow-up up e-mail rather than on initial subscription. This may increase subscription rates, although it all depends on the strength of the brand and the offer used to encourage sign-up.

## Structuring the creative

The creative for most e-mail campaigns is a variation on these major elements. Let's look at how to make each part of the e-mail work to achieve a more effective whole.

### Headline

This is the equivalent to the headline on a print ad or direct mail piece. It is usually in a larger font or a different font type. This is not used as often for e-mail, perhaps because our space for creative is more limited. However, a headline can be as simple as bold text which will only take up limited space. Sometimes the headline can be built into a graphic, but care should be taken here since many recipients will simply scan for text – they filter out text contained in images since they are conditioned to ignoring standard banners.

The headline should not repeat the subject line, but build on it, explaining more about the offer or setting the scene or the mood of what is to follow. For example, a Vodafone e-mail used a heading to detail the offer:

'Get your e-mails on your phone anytime, anyplace anywhere'.

Heal's, the furnishings retailer set the tone of a wine-based offer as:

'fine and mellow'

We will talk a little more about writing copy for the headline in next month's article.

## **Lead / opening / first paragraph**

The first paragraph must:

- Engage – when reading this, perhaps in the auto-preview window, recipients are deciding whether to delete or read further. So as for any creative, the opening needs to be powerful.
- Add detail to the subject line or the headline – repetition is less important in e-mail than in direct mail since it is processed so quickly – the recipient will remember the gist of the subject line, and it is always there at the head of the e-mail, so reinforcement is the main objective of the message here.
- Summarise the whole – the opening of an e-mail is often compared to the opening of a press release which typically uses an 'inverse pyramid' structure to summarise the main points of the e-mail message in decreasing order of importance, as briefly as possible
- Include a call-to-action – if the reader likes the offer or wants to know more, we shouldn't make them scroll down to find an elusive hyperlink – it should be there in the first paragraph. This is a mistake often made by e-mail 'newbies' – leaving the best until last.

## **Body copy**

As for a direct mail piece, the main body of the e-mail typically details the features and benefits of the offer in order to encourage a response. With e-mail, we shouldn't detail the offer in too much detail – the best place for detail is arguably the web site – we can encourage click-through to find out more. A common approach is to use a bulleted list in the main body to describe features and benefits. Some e-mails seem to take this too far though, with the e-mail becoming little more than a series of bulleted lists. Although most would agree that 'brief is best' when it comes to e-mail, we do need to make the body copy long enough to create engagement, set the tone and explain the offer – bullets alone are often not the best way to do this.

The body should also Explain and Instruct. Explain since you may have developed a great offer and method of redemption, but it may be too complex for the embattled e-mail recipient as they wade through hundreds of e-mails. Clearly explain how the offer works. Instruct is related to Explain – most of us seem conditioned to follow instructions – they make our lives easier. So the main body copy can instruct the recipient what to do next to receive the offer.

## **The Close**

Again as for direct mail, the Close should encourage Action, so the call-to-action should be repeated here. But, as we have said it should encourage action now, so the close will often include a secondary offer to encourage clickthrough or perhaps the offer will be time-limited, again encouraging immediate clickthrough.

## **Sign-off**

Sign-off can be personal or impersonal. It is best to be personal – from a named person – if the recipient knows an individual in your organisation such as an account manager or a customer service representative. Alternatively, if the company has a well-known

figurehead – the e-mail could be from them, but many would think this was false familiarity unless the copy is written to avoid this. An impersonal sign-off is often more appropriate for rented lists.

## The PS

The Post Script is a device often used in direct mail which is well known to capture attention and will often encourage action. The PS is not seen that often in e-mails, perhaps because e-mail is seen as more of a conversational e-mail and the PS adds an element of formality, or perhaps it is too overt a sign of selling. My view is that it can be used to good effect since our eyes are drawn to the PS, so it is a good mechanism for getting a key message across to the reader.

## Mandatory inclusions

This is what we need to include to be legally compliant. Currently that implies an unsubscribe mechanism, a privacy statement and a contact point (name and company address) that the recipient can contact if required. It is also good practice to include a 'statement of origination' – a short piece of text explaining why the recipient has received the e-mail – some recipients may have forgotten signing up to your e-communications and will consider your e-mail to be SPAM unless you include this.

## HTML e-mail options

All of the structural elements of an e-mail described above can be used for either a text e-mail or an HTML e-mail. But what additional options does an HTML e-mail give us to be more creative?

Images are an obvious additional option that HTML gives. Best practice for images suggests that:

- Images add personality to an e-mail and increase its impact, so use them!
- Recognising a known brand reassures the recipient so uses images and colour associated with the brand at the start of the e-mail to build trust.
- Human images can produce better results in online ads and e-mails.
- Product photos can also help response, particularly where English is not the first language of the recipient.
- Images can be used for call-to-action, but make sure that they say 'click me', i.e. they look like a button or associated text shows they are clickable.
- Using poor quality or irrelevant images such as clipart can cheapen a brand; ask whether you would use the image in any other media – if not then a better quality image needs to be sourced.

If we are sending HTML e-mails then we also have the option to use simple graphical elements to break-up our e-mail. We can use simple rules to divide the message into parts – this is often used for basic e-newsletters. We can use HTML Tables to show boxes or different background colours. The Lastminute.com newsletter makes extensive use of this option. Newsletters such as this also commonly use a two or three column format. This concept can also be applied to e-mail campaigns, with one major column and a smaller column to the left or right to support the main column.

HTML also gives the option to use text formatting such as bold and italics to make our copy stand out, we will look at these options, next month.

## CRABS

Finally I offer you CRABS! CRABS is a simple mnemonic for checking online creative originally coined by Paul Smith of Multimedia Marketing (See Smith and Chaffey, 2002). In the context of e-mail marketing CRABS, stands for:

- *Chunking* – Chunking means that paragraphs must be shorter than in paper copy. Think one or two sentences only. This helps *scannability*. Remember also that the first few words of every para are the ones that are first noticed as recipients scan.

- *Relevance* – With limited space, we have no room for fillers. Stick with what matters - the details of the offer and how to receive it. Of course the tone, style, language and offer also need to be right for the target audience. Within the copy avoid company jargon.
- *Accuracy* – Don't get carried away with your copy; don't set expectations so high that you overpromise and under-deliver.
- *Brevity* – Brevity goes with chunking and scannability. Write your copy, reduce the word count and then reduce it again Give yourself targets for brevity and beat them but remember what we said above about not making it too brief.
- *Scannability* – This is reading without reading every word, just picking up the sense of each paragraph from the keywords. The eye will pick out words at the start of paragraphs and those emphasised in bold and the type of Power words I will talk about next month.

A more detailed creative checklist is provided to delegates on the CIM E-mail Marketing workshop ([www.cimtraining.com](http://www.cimtraining.com)) as part of a review activity looking at different examples of e-mail creative – something we can't do in this article due to copyright.

## References

Smith and Chaffey (2002) E-marketing Excellence. Butterworth Heinemann. Oxford.

## Dave Chaffey – Contact details

Dr Dave Chaffey, Director Marketing Insights Limited  
>> Improving Performance through eMarketing Intelligence >>  
E-mail: [dave.chaffey@marketing-insights.co.uk](mailto:dave.chaffey@marketing-insights.co.uk)  
Phone: +44 (0)7740 181 590  
Web: [www.marketing-insights.co.uk](http://www.marketing-insights.co.uk)  
eResources and Books: [www.marketing-online.co.uk](http://www.marketing-online.co.uk)