

E-mail marketing – Getting noticed in a crowded inbox

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

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Introduction

How long does it take to delete an e-mail? 2 seconds, 1 second, 0.1 seconds? Whatever the answer, our behaviour and our customers' behaviour when going through new mail is that our finger hovers ruthlessly over the delete key, deleting on impulse.

A DTI survey in 2002 showed that the average UK Office worker spends 49 minutes a day working through their e-mail (BBC, 2002). Given this and with many business people now receiving over a hundred e-mails a day, so it is no wonder we are ruthless with the delete key.

The effectiveness of communicating through e-mail also becomes more challenging each day as the volumes of both commercial opt-in e-mail and unsolicited commercial e-mail (SPAM) increase.

This article looks at techniques for marketers to deliver their messages in the increasingly competitive in-box.

We will, of course, look at how we can best use the e-mail header information such as the subject line and from address to attract attention and engage. We also have to think about the creative - many e-mail users use a 'preview pane' or 'autopreview' which enables them to see the top part of the message body without 'double-clicking' on the header line to open the e-mail.

Another issue to consider is whether our e-mails ever arrive in the in-box. Increasingly SPAM filters are used by ISPs such as BTOpenWorld and online e-mail services such as Hotmail and Yahoo!Mail. These aim to trap spam by analysis of the e-mail header and body, but can also trap e-mails from the unwary e-mail marketer.

A further issue is whether our e-mail is displayed as intended – different e-mail readers and online e-mail services display messages differently – and our message certainly can't compete if it is gobbledygook. But, as with many aspects of e-marketing, a methodical approach will pay dividends by maximising the number of e-mails that are received.

What matters for in-box visibility

To engage as many of our e-mail recipients as possible we need to think about the environment in which they are using their e-mail reader. This affects whether and how the different components of our message such as the 'From' address, subject line and body or creative will be seen.

In Total E-mail Marketing (Chaffey, 2003) I suggest we need to look at two different types of constraints imposed on marketers by the e-mail readers' environment.

First, there are the technology constraints. For most marketers these are boring technical issues, but we can't unleash our creative talents if we don't know what the limits of the technology are. These are imposed by recipients using a range of e-mail readers and selecting different options for their configurations. Also, the location of access may differ – download speeds and display platforms differ between home, from work or even on a handheld device or phone. Secondly we have behavioural constraints arising from how e-mail users process and evaluate their e-mails.

Technology constraints

Many of the technology constraints which affect the way an e-mail is displayed are most relevant when HTML e-mails are being used. However, some also apply to text e-mails, so we will also highlight where this applies.

Screen resolutions

A general constraint on both HTML and text e-mail is the resolution of the screen. This may be selected by the user, or they may be using default factory settings. It is common for designers use high resolutions of 1280 by 1024 pixels (dots) or more. However the data below shows that most consumers are currently using lower resolutions

Red Sheriff data on screen resolution, Oct 2002. Based on 7m UK site visitors. Posted to the Chinwag (www.chinwag.com) UK Net Marketing discussion group by Martin Filz of Red Sheriff (www.redsheriff.com).

B to C

1	800x600	48%
2	1024x768	41%
3	1280x1024	3%
4	1152x864	3%
5	640x480	2%
6	1600x1200	1%
7	1280x960	0.4%
8	1400x1050	0.3%
9	1152x870	0.3%
10	960x720	0.1%

B to B

1	1024x768	50%
2	800x600	37%
3	1280x1024	5%
4	1152x864	3%
5	640x480	1%
6	1400x1050	1%
7	1600x1200	1%
8	1280x960	0.5%
9	1152x870	0.4%
10	1152x768	0.1%

So e-mail marketers should make sure that their e-mail supports a range of resolutions, but looks its best at 800 by 600 and 1024 by 768 pixels. For HTML e-mail it is best if a width of 550 or 600 pixels is used and this is often achieved through a header graphic or table of this dimension.

The resolution also affects the number of characters that can be displayed in the From address and Subject Line, so test how many characters are displayed at these resolutions.

E-mail readers

The user may be using a variety of e-mail readers in which the e-mail may be displayed. An indication of the wide range of choices is shown in by the Clickz article by Grossman (2002). It suggests, you should test e-mail creative for: Outlook and Outlook Express (>50%), Hotmail (c 25%), YahooMail! (20%) and depending on market other readers such as Lotus Notes, Netscape and Eudora. Incidentally, this data also shows that in the US, over 50% of this sample held three or more e-mail accounts, highlighting the importance of encouraging the recipient to opt-in with an e-mail address they access regularly.

Each of these different readers may display HTML in a different way, or they may not display HTML at all. The degree of support for HTML will also vary according to different versions of the readers. As a result creative should be tested in the 5 main readers and some e-mail marketers send out special versions for recipients using Yahoo! Mail or Hotmail. A survey in Autumn 2002 by Silverpop (www.silverpop.com) showed that nearly half of e-mails surveyed had some type of problem when rendering HTML, so it seems that many campaigns aren't thoroughly tested.

So, as we have said in previous articles, asking readers about whether they prefer HTML or text e-mails is a must.

Behaviour constraints

We also need to think how our e-mail recipients use their e-mail. Questions we can ask are:

- **How many read their e-mails from home and at work?** This can be assessed using the times of click-through from past campaigns or panel data of surfing habits. If you have a high proportion of at home readers it implies that many readers will be reading the e-mail over a slow dial-up connection and they may not see your graphics if reading the e-mail offline – here using Alt text tags within HTML is vital to preserve the balance of the e-mail. The size should also be limited to less than 30KB for fast download.
- **Which times of the day and days of the week do they read their e-mail?** This can again be assessed through click-through data or assessing response rates for e-mails sent at different times of the day and days of the week. Audience research indicates that higher levels of readership are likely in the morning (Online Publishers Association (2003) and mid-week. This will vary according to specific audiences, so testing is best.
- **How soon after receipt is e-mail read?** The majority of responses to e-mail campaigns are within 48 hours. This suggests that recipients tend not to return to their e-mail as they might for a direct-mail piece (although this is more the case with e-newsletters). The implication of this behaviour is that we need to get respondents to reply immediately following Opening and need to provide messages and offers which shout Act Now!
- **How do recipients configure their e-mail readers?** A straw poll of attendees to my CIM e-marketing workshops suggests that around half of us use a preview pane – a separate window below the list of e-mails which enables us to see the first few lines or header graphics of an e-mail. This then, is also important in the decision to delete or not. So we should review the creative in a preview pane to see whether these first few lines have the impact needed – sometimes all that can be seen in a meaningless header graphic. Some e-mail readers such as Outlook also enable the first two or three lines of the message to be displayed – so check this also – all these factors affect responsiveness.

The e-mail header

The e-mail header information is what first attracts attention in the in-box so spending time on this pays dividends. The header information summarises the content of each e-mail, the order from left to right is usually From, Subject and received date. Have a look at the subject line examples in the table above, taken from my E-mail example folder. Which

do you think would encourage Attention – Interest – Desire and Action – the challenge we have to achieve in a handful of words.

Some example e-mail headers

	From	Subject Line
1	Argos	Free Gift Voucher and Huge Savings.
2	Kangol	Win some kangol hair product.
3	VNU One to One	Better Post. Better Business. Everybo(dy wins)
4	lastminute.com	upgrade your life
5	Courtenay Com(munications)	Special Offers
6	house.co.uk	House.co.uk newsletter
7	Ed Thompson	CRM Update
8	SPSS Cust(omer Information)	Buy SPSS Base before March 31st a(nd save up to £495)
9	Ibmconference(s@pmp.co.uk)	Register now for free IBM brief(ing - Optimise and Win)
10	Brittany Russell	Wanna be hung like a horse?

Characters in brackets are truncated.

The oft-neglected 'From' address

In most cases the 'From' address will be the first item the recipient scans as they review their inbox. Given this, the importance of the 'From' address shouldn't be underestimated. The main aim of the 'From' address is to connect to with the reader – they should recognise you. There are a limited number of options to achieve this, with each best for a certain situation:

1. **Company name** (Example 1). This is usually the best option for e-mails from a house list since the company name will be recognised.
2. **Brand or product name** (Example 2). Mainly used for FMCG brands.
3. **Personal name** (Examples 7 and 10). Great care should be taken with this – for most B2C e-mails the recipient will not know the sender unless it is a well-known figure like Richard Branson or David Beckham. This may represent false familiarity, but it may help encourage the e-mail to be opened. For B2B e-mails this may be more relevant, but only if you can be sure the recipient knows the sender – which may be the case if it is an account manager or a well-known director of the company. The other argument for using a personal name is for variety – it may cause the reader to stop and think, 'do I know this person' – example 7 was from Gartner. As a general rule this can't be recommended.
4. **List owner** (Example 3). This is the best option for lists rented from a third party since they will usually know the list owner (e.g. 'Yoptin'), but the e-mail would appear as SPAM if sent from the person renting the list (e.g. Freeserve). Another alternative here is to co-brand the e-mail with the list owner and renter, e.g. 'Yoptin-Freeserve'.
5. **Newsletter name** (Example 6). If a newsletter has its own brand as in 'WNIM' this approach is common.
6. **Native address** (Example 9). This is usually in a format such as webmaster@company.com or sales@company.com. This is not advised since it appears as unprofessional and the name of the company which represents the brand is often truncated.

Powerful subject lines

Looking at the examples from the table above, we can draw out the following best practice guidelines:

1. **Make the first words count.** The first two or three words of the subject line are most important as a user scans through their inbox. These should be 'power words' such as 'Free', 'Win' or 'Save' and better still should be combined with specifics such as example 8 above. Other power words are 'exclusive', 'learn' and 'complimentary'.
2. **Don't save the best till last – Avoid truncation.** Examples 8 and 9 show the problem here. Aim for 30 characters maximum which usually only gives 5 or 6 words.
3. **Be direct. Be specific.** Examples 3, 6 and 7 are too general to attract interest. For newsletters in particular, the themes should be highlighted – you will have noticed that WNIM now does this!

4. **Use a teaser or a question.** Examples 4 and 10.

5. **Be creative.** Example 4. Lastminute.com devise a short, snappy subject line that attracts attention every week.

As we saw with the examples in WNIM 17, the only sure way to devise subject lines that encourage clickthrough is to test alternatives or to track what has worked from the past.

Evading the SPAM filters

'SPAM' originally refers to the 'spiced ham' tinned meat that US GIs contracted to SPAM during the Second World War – which they soon got fed up with. It has been said that today, SPAM stands for 'Sending Persistent Annoying E-mail. You will know it as the instantly identifiable 'Get rich quick' or 'Get large quick' offers which flood into your e-mail inbox. However, a recent correspondent to News Scientist (17th May) felt this wasn't necessarily bad.

'From Rod Harris

New Scientist readers are concerned about their e-mail boxes being bombarded with spam and the need for better filters (3 May, p24). However, they seem to have overlooked the benefits to be gained from all these spam messages. For instance, I have been accepting all offers made to me by e-mail since the beginning of this year, and my penis is now 43 metres long.'

We have seen that through using a 'From' address that is recognisable, we will not be classified as SPAM when the recipient scans their e-mail. It is also advisable not to SHOUT (use CAPS) or use too many exclamation marks since most recipients instantly associate these with SPAM. This sounds obvious, but I received this example from Dell UK in 2002:

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE ?? LATEST TECHNOLOGY - UNBELIEVABLE VALUE !!

But, there is also a major problem of our e-mail being classified as SPAM before it has reached the recipient. SPAM filters or SPAM traps are used by ISPs such as BTOpenWorld, online e-mail services such as Hotmail and Yahoo!Mail and personal software such as McAfee SpamKiller. These tools aim to trap spam by analysis of the e-mail header and body, but can also trap e-mails from the unwary e-mail marketer.

The table below shows typical keywords that are searched for. These are taken from the filters.txt which can be activated on Microsoft Outlook to put e-mails that fit these criteria into a separate folder.

The keywords on the right shouldn't give marketers too much concern, although I know that financial services companies limiting products to those over 18 have had problems, as have many companies based in Sussex.

The keywords on the left cause more concern since words such as free and promotion are part of marketers' 'lingua franca'.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject contains "advertisement" • Body contains "money back " • Body contains "cards accepted" • Body contains "removal instructions" • Subject contains "!" AND Subject contains "free" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject contains "over 18" • Subject contains "over 21" • Subject contains "adults only" • Subject contains "be 18" • Subject contains "18+" • Body contains "over 18" • Body contains "over 21"
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body contains "for free?" • Body contains "for free!" • Body contains "SPECIAL PROMOTION" • Body contains "order today" • Body contains "order now!" • Body contains "money-back guarantee" • Body contains "100% satisfied" • From contains "mail@" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body contains "must be 18" • Body contains "adults only" • Body contains "adult web" • Body contains "must be 21" • Body contains "adult en" • Body contains "18+" • Subject contains "erotic" • Subject contains " sex" • Body contains " xxx "
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Avoiding being a 'false positive'

A 'false positive' is when a legitimate opt-in e-mail is classified as SPAM and prevented from getting through to the intended recipient.

To avoid this we need to check for phrases such as those in the list above. However, the difficulty is that many spam filters do not publish the words they check against – the Spammers would quickly work around them. Many tools also use more sophisticated pattern matching algorithms rather than simply searching on keywords.

One tool which may help has been setup for legitimate marketers. This is a tool provided by E-mail broadcaster Lyris which is based on the Spam Assassin spam detection engine.

Lyris Content Checker: <http://www.lyris.com/contentchecker>

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Dave Chaffey – Contact details

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