Email Deliverability

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1. Introduction

Deliverability is the ability to deliver messages to the inbox of your subscribers. It is simple to describe and yet sometimes challenging to accomplish. Since email was first used for messaging, the factors determining whether an email will be accepted and where it will be placed have continued to evolve. This document will cover the key components of deliverability and how you can take steps to maximize success.

Factors Influencing Deliverability

There are a few key factors that influence deliverability. We will introduce them here and then explore them in more detail.

Data Quality

Validity, Accuracy and Permission

It all starts with the quality of the data you collect and maintain. Bad data leads to bad outcomes. Sending to addresses where the user is unknown or is not the one who signed up could negatively impact the way you are perceived by receivers and by consequence, the deliverability of your campaigns. Sending to users who have not granted permission is not permitted in many countries and in any case, could lead to complaints which damage reputation and degrade deliverability. Make sure you set expectations, obtain permission directly from the subscriber, know where the address originated, confirm it is a working address and then make sure it is the correct address before bringing it into your main email program. Maintain good database health by recording and analyzing the activity level of your subscribers across the life cycle. Change your message for those who are losing interest and clean your list of subscribers who are no longer engaged. Sending to too many unengaged subscribers can harm your reputation. Also remove addresses that have not been mailed for a long time as these could have become deactivated or spam traps.

Relevance

Analyze, Understand, Engage

Look at the data from your email program and learn from it to understand what your subscribers want. Then engage them with relevant content at the right time with the right frequency to encourage opens and click-throughs which help deliverability.

Reputation

Transparency, understanding and trust

Internet Service Providers (ISPs) make inbox placement decisions in part based on the reputation they attribute to the sender and the trust they place in them. This in turn depends on a variety of factors such as complaint rates, unknown user rates, spam trap hits and email authentication. Understanding how reputation works and following best practices is imperative. Reputation is what helps ISPs protect their customers and it is what can enable or prevent a sender from reaching the inbox.

Engagement

Conversation building

Engagement is key. The major internet service providers look at a lot of different metrics now but if your subscribers are not opening, clicking, responding, or otherwise engaging with your emails, then although you may be doing everything else right, deliverability could suffer. Even for the receivers that place less emphasis on engagement, it still informs your list management so you can speak differently to those who are losing interest and stop speaking to those who no longer want to listen. You may also be sending to addresses that have been abandoned or have turned into spam traps so it is important to look at the data as it relates to your particular messaging program.

That is why it is essential to set expectations, understand your audience, provide value, start a dialogue and continue the conversation at their preferred time and their preferred frequency.

Guidelines

Set proper expectations for what happens when someone signs up.

Send messages only to subscribers who have asked for them.

Send a message to welcome new subscribers as soon as possible.

Send content they have asked to receive.

Send from a place they expect with a subject that relates to their interest.

Send at a frequency that the subscriber expects and allow them to modify as desired.

Make it easy for the subscriber to unsubscribe from some or all of your messages.

Change your message for subscribers who are losing interest.

Follow local laws and regulations.

Stop sending to subscribers who have not engaged with your messages for a long time.

2. Permission

Send messages only to subscribers who have asked for them

The two main ways that someone asks to register for an email stream are:

- **Single opt-in** – requires no confirmation of the registration from the new subscriber. Address added to the general mailing list.
- **Double opt-in** (also called Confirmed Opt-In or COI) – requires that the new subscriber confirm their registration, typically by clicking through a triggered email. Only those addresses that click are added to the general mailing list.

Double opt-in subscribers have made an additional step to grant you permission, have removed the risk of a bad or falsified address and are asking you for your email. COI also provides digital proof of the sign up should there be any legal challenges in the future.

Single opt-in does not provide the protection from typos or bad actors and does not provide confirmed proof of the sign up, but it is simpler. Ideally, use COI. Alternatively – use COI for acquisition sources with higher risk and for international subscriptions.

Permission can be categorized in two ways, Implicit and Explicit.

- **Implicit** permission (also referred to as implied consent) means that there is reason to believe that you have permission to send someone email messages based on a prior business relationship. This is no longer acceptable in many countries and explicit permission is now becoming prevalent.
- **Explicit** permission (also referred to as Express consent) means that the subscriber has actively given their permission for you to send them messages. Be careful not to use pre-checked boxes as they are not permitted under most international regulations. Doing so may result in unexpected mail to those who did not realize the box was checked, and in increased complaints from unhappy recipients. Pre-checked boxes are not a form of explicit permission.

Check the regulations for the countries of your subscribers because they are not uniform and may change over time. For example, in the European Union under the General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR), consent for any processing of data must be informed, specific, unambiguous, and freely given.

Accepting the Permission

Just because someone wants to give you permission to send them mail, does not mean that the act of providing the address will be without error. To avoid that:

- Use a second text entry field to lower the possibility of typos (unless they copy and paste!)
- Utilize reCAPTCHA to prevent fake sign ups from bad actors and bots who want to give you unauthorized permission to send to someone else, or to a spamtrap.
- Reject the use of abuse@ and postmaster@ as they are reserved for managing email and not for subscribing to content.
- Discourage the use of other role addresses such as sales@, info@, etc. This complicates the promise/permission relationship because the address may not be specific to an individual.

For in-store sign ups, take precautions and pay close attention because they carry higher risk. This and other Point-Of-Service acquisition mechanisms such as phone calls and paper forms should be accompanied by some sort of documentation and, ideally, explicit messaging to confirm the sign up digitally.

Incentives for sales people to obtain sign-ups present the possibilities for mistakes, mis-use and misunderstanding. The address may be heard or recorded incorrectly. The customer may provide a false address. The commercial emails to come may be unexpected.

In Canada, under Canada's Anti-Spam Legislation (CASL) and in the European Union, under the GDPR, it is required to keep a record of the consent that is given. This is a good idea in general as an auditing practice.

Consult your company attorney to ensure you are following all applicable laws and regulations.

3. Expectations

Set proper expectations for what happens after someone signs up

Setting expectations is crucial to beginning a relationship with your subscribers. Let them know what they will be receiving, from where it will originate and how often it will arrive. This is true at the beginning of the relationship as well as throughout its lifespan. Continue to remind your subscribers what they can expect.

Setting expectations is also important for your subject line. A false or misleading subject line is a violation of the CAN-SPAM act in the United States. It can erode trust and cause subscribers to unsubscribe or complain if the content does not correspond properly with the subject.

4. Welcome

Send a welcome message as soon as possible

The message immediately following a sign-up typically has high open rates. Send a welcome message immediately to thank your subscriber and to reiterate the details of the subscription and its value. Describe how to change preferences or opt-out. This is an opportune time for a call to action. Consider sending a Welcome series to introduce the subscriber to the program and to provide additional information on the brand or loyalty program. Encouraging engagement at the beginning of the subscription helps to counter the risk of reaching spam filters with a new, unproven address. You can use the Welcome series to set expectations for content and frequency.   It provides a chance to make a good initial impression to begin the relationship.

When you send the Welcome series, be sure to use content that is consistent with the expectations set at sign up. Send at the frequency established during the sign-up process. The "From" address should be recognizable. The subject line should draw the subscriber's attention and match the content of the message. Include a pre-header to further describe the message but make it different from the subject.

5. Reinforce

Continue to set expectations, describe the program and its value

As you communicate with subscribers after the initial welcome or welcome series, it is important to continue to set expectations and to reinforce the value of the program.

- Show them how to adjust their preferences, if a preference center is available. If not, consider creating one.
- Along with the required parts of the email, such as the unsubscribe link and physical address, adding a link to your privacy policy and terms of service is a professional way to make the reader more comfortable with the communication.
- Consider including a statement about your purpose and reiterating expectations in terms of frequency.

6. From/Subject/Content

Send content they have asked to receive

Upon sign up, describe the content that the subscriber can expect to receive. Then proceed to deliver that content.

- **From address** – This should be an address that is recognizable and expected by the subscriber.
- **Subject line** – The subject should accurately reflect the content of the email, which should be consistent with what the user expects. In the United States, the use of a deceptive subject line is a violation of the CAN-SPAM act. It should have a call to action or otherwise attempt to engage the user to open it. The length should be under 50 characters as some email clients will truncate long subject lines. Mobile email clients have even shorter limits. If you do exceed these limits, include the critical content at the beginning. While specific characters and words associated with spam in subject lines may not always cause mail to be filtered, it is still recommended to avoid them. If the recipient associates the subject line with spam, they may be less likely to open it and may delete it or hit the spam button. If possible, test your subject lines on a sample of your audience and then choose the best performer for your campaign.
- **Pre-Header** – The more information you can provide to engage the user before they actually open the mail, the better the chances are they will open it. Include a pre-header that describes the content but make it different from the subject line.
- **Unsubscribe link** – For all messages that are not transactional or relationship, an opt-out link is legally required. Review your transactional and relationship program to determine if it is appropriate to include an opt-out link. The link must be visible and functional. If it is not a one-click unsubscribe, the form on the landing page must be functional. The entire process must be sufficiently easy to perform. If there are multiple programs, the user must be able to opt-out of all commercial email if they wish. Make it easy to unsubscribe. Consider placing the link at the top of the email as well as the bottom. If the recipient does not want the mail, it should be easier to click the unsubscribe link than to hit the spam button, which users unfortunately do as a way to unsubscribe.

- **Make the content compelling** – Encourage the subscriber to actively participate through surveys or feedback requests. Replying to an email enhances the sender's reputation and improves or helps to solidify deliverability.
- **Images** – Avoid using excessively large images and keep the image content to less than 1/3 of the overall content with text taking up at least 2/3. Make sure that the important parts of the message can still be understood with images disabled.
- **In case you forgot…** – Remind the subscriber that they signed up and what they signed up for. It helps to include a line of the form "You are receiving this message because you subscribed to …".
- **Physical address** – Always include the primary physical address. This is legally required.
- **Personalization** – Personalize the message to the individual recipient to help with engagement.
- **QA content** – Review the HTML to avoid errors. Coding errors can trigger spam filters or cause rendering issues in certain email clients. Use responsive design to optimize viewing on all email clients and tests. Pay attention to the mobile experience.
- **QA links** – Verify the functionality of all links. Erroneous links can also trigger spam filters or content blocks.

7. Frequency

Send at a frequency that the subscriber wants and allow them to modify as desired

Sending too much mail to a subscriber can cause fatigue, even if they asked for the content. It is important to align the frequency of messaging with the frequency desired by the recipient. Provide a mechanism for them to modify this. Keep in mind that it is recommended not to wait too long between emails in order to capture bounces that may occur when an address is no longer active. Depending on the ISP, after bouncing for some number of months, an inactive email address may be converted to a spam trap. At that point the address will no longer bounce. If you are sending very often to a segment of subscribers that are not opening your mail, consider decreasing the frequency and adopting the reengagement tactics described below.

Preference Centers

In today's world with the ever-increasing volume of digital communication, people look for ways to help them manage the content they receive and consume. Empowering subscribers to control what messages they wish to receive, and how often, improves deliverability, builds trust with your customer and helps lead to better outcomes. Provide a preference center for your subscribers and listen to what they have to say. It will allow you to tailor your program to their interests, reduce complaints and improve engagement.

8. Re-engagement

Don't ignore subscribers who have stopped engaging

When someone has not opened any of your messages in a while (the time period depends on the program), it's time to change the conversation. They are not responding to the current subject matter so change the Subject line and preheader to include a call to action. If they are not opening the mail, the subject line and preheader are your only line of communication until they do. Also, since they have not been opening, lower the frequency of sending.

Don't wait until a subscriber has not engaged for six months before changing your message. It is not uncommon for an audience to open and click less frequently with time. When you see this happening, consider offering an incentive or some new and special content to rekindle interest in the program. With an ever-increasing focus on engagement, sending to a list with a high percentage of inactive addresses has a negative impact on deliverability. Get your subscribers' attention before this happens.

Never Active

Some of your subscribers may have not opened an email from some time after having signed up. This could be due to a variety of reasons. Perhaps there was a misunderstanding, or they entered an incorrect address (accidentally or on purpose), or maybe they are just not interested, If the address was not confirmed with COI, then it is even more important to induce engagement sooner rather than later. Note that if you have an abundance of never active addresses it could impact your deliverability even for engaged subscribers.

Was Active

The rest of your sign ups have engaged at one time or another. You can group them into categories and define them according to the age of the activity. You should also factor in the

percentage of the overall list as large inactive segments will be tolerated for shorter periods of time.

Example Categories

An example categorization could be the following:

- **Never active** – has not opened or clicked within the first 120 days or the first 12 emails (the threshold could vary with the program). At this point, ask for permission once again and if not received, deactivate the address.
- **Less Active** – was active but not within the past 3 to 6 months. It's time to send these subscribers a different message lest they move to the next category.
- **Inactive** – was active but not within the past 6 to 12 months. This group now requires a concerted re engagement effort and should be placed in a segment outside of the primary mailing list. This can last for many weeks or months depending on when it was triggered. After a threshold (typically 12 months but once again could vary with your program) you should send a request to reconfirm their permission. If one or two of these are unsuccessful the address should be deactivated.

NOTE: As activity wanes, it helps to mail less frequently so as not to continually add inactive addresses to your campaigns. At the same time, it is important to send regularly, as some ISPs will bounce old addresses and then turn them into spam traps. If you don't mail frequently enough, you could miss the bounce period, during which they would be removed as inactive or unknown users. After this period (which varies with the ISP), if they have become traps, they will no longer bounce, and your reputation will be negatively impacted if you continue to mail to them.

9. List Management

Stop sending to subscribers who have not engaged with your messages for a long time

Manage your list daily and remove those who no longer want your mail. Also remove addresses that may no longer be valid or active.

Subscribers who have never opened an email during an initial period after sign-up present a risk to your database and reputation.   The risk is higher if the sign up was single opt-in. For COI, even though you have a confirmed address, the person may have changed their mind. Consider sending a note to confirm they still want your mail and then if they still do not engage, remove them from your list. The period is dependent on the email program, but this safety check should be built into your process.

Maintain your Reputation

A list with too many inactive addresses can damage your reputation and negatively impact deliverability. As the ISP focus on engagement has increased, they look at the percentage of the addresses that are engaged to help determine inbox placement. It is therefore important to incorporate an activity-based segmentation strategy into your program so that it is integrated rather than an occasional task.

Old, inactive addresses may be repurposed as spam traps. Sending to these traps can result in a blacklisting with your emails being blocked.

Addresses that have passed through the phases of decreasing activity, have been given a chance to re-confirm their permission and have failed to do so should be removed from your list.

10. Compliance

Follow local laws and regulations

While doing all of the things you can to optimize the deliverability of your email program, make sure to pay attention to local laws and regulations.

In the United States, the CAN-SPAM act is the ruling piece of legislation. The requirements are weak relative to international law, and with the current focus on data privacy, there is the possibility of stricter regulations in the future. If you are sending to Canadians, review the requirements for CASL. If you send to subscribers from the European Union, look at the requirements for GDPR. Familiarize yourself with the laws of the countries of your subscribers

Whether focused on international subscribers or not, your list may contain addresses of individuals in other countries. A general recommendation is to obtain explicit permission. In order to assist with targeting and also to maintain a record if needed for compliance reasons, requesting and recording the user's address, or at least their country, is recommended.

- Obtain explicit permission when mailing outside of the United States, if not already obtaining that for U.S. subscribers. Do not use pre-checked boxes.
- Maintain a record of the opt-in.
- Include a postal address in all emails and information on how to contact you.
- Maintain a working unsubscribe link. The process should be easy and the address should be unsubscribed quickly.
- The subject line should never be false or misleading and should accurately reflect the content of the message.
- The email should be easily identifiable with you as the sender.

11. Transactional Email

Transactional or relationship email helps the customer relationship by providing a trusted message stream related to a subscriber transaction.

Transactional mail is subject to different requirements in the United States, under CAN-SPAM, as well as some other countries. A transactional message may not contain false or misleading information but is otherwise exempt from most of the provisions of the CAN-SPAM act. Before ignoring those provisions, make sure your message stream meets the legal requirement for transactional mail.

The following is not legal advice. The source is the U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Please consult your company attorney for guidance.

- **Transactional or relationship content** – facilitates an already agreed-upon transaction or updates a customer about an ongoing transaction
- **Commercial content** – advertises or promotes a commercial product or service, including content on a website operated for a commercial purpose
- **Other content** – is neither commercial nor transactional or relationship

The message type is determined by the primary purpose of the email. The primary purpose is transactional or relationship if the message contains only content that:

- facilitates or confirms a commercial transaction that the recipient already has agreed to;
- gives warranty, recall, safety, or security information about a product or service;
- gives information about a change in terms or features or account balance information regarding a membership, subscription, account, loan or other ongoing commercial relationship; provides information about an employment relationship or employee benefits; or delivers goods or services as part of a transaction that the recipient already has agreed to.

If the message combines commercial and transactional or relationship content, then the primary purpose is determined by subject line and position of the transactional or relationship content. If the subject line would lead the recipient to think the message is commercial, then the primary purpose is commercial. If the bulk of the transactional or relationship content

does not appear at the beginning of the body of the message, then it is considered a commercial email.

Separate Message Streams

ISPs and other Receivers are concerned with providing good service to their customers and protecting them from spam. For example, if a legitimately transactional message stream has too many complaints, the receiver will place it in the bulk folder or block it. It is therefore important to maintain an excellent reputation on your transactional message emails. Best practice is to use separate IPs and separate domains for your transactional and commercial messages. As with any message stream, sending a volume of mail much large than normal in a short period of time will surprise the ISPs which may cause them to defer or even block your mail. Instead, spread campaigns with a larger than typical volume over a longer period of hours or even days as appropriate.

Set Proper Expectations

Describe the transactional messages the subscriber can expect to receive. Sometimes a sender will use text only email for transactional messages. In this case, if the branding is not prominent enough the recipient might not recognize the source and mark it as spam.

Use the pre-header as another place to provide the reason for the email.

12. In Conclusion

Maintaining good deliverability is an ongoing process that requires attention to the entire lifecycle of your subscribers. From acquisition to loyalty, ensuring that your emails will be delivered to the inbox means getting permission and ensuring good data quality, keeping your messages relevant, maintaining a good sending reputation and focusing on subscriber engagement. The best practices below will help guide you towards maintaining a successful email program.

Best Practices for Email Deliverability

Set proper expectations for what happens when someone signs up.

Send messages only to subscribers who have asked for them.

Send a message to welcome new subscribers as soon as possible.

Send content they have asked to receive.

Send from a place they expect with a subject that relates to their interest.

Send at a frequency that the subscriber expects and allow them to modify as desired.

Make it easy for the subscriber to unsubscribe from some or all of your messages.

Change your message for subscribers who are losing interest.

Follow local laws and regulations.

Stop sending to subscribers who have not engaged with your messages for a long time.

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