

Chief! Marketer Special Report

EMAIL CREATIVE

What you need to know to improve open and clickthrough rates in 2013

By Beth Negus Viveiros

Like all direct marketing creative, good email creative isn't just about being clever. To be successful, it must generate results. In this special report, we break down email bit by bit, from the subject line to copy to design, and learn from the experts what is working now.

SUBJECT LINES

What subject lines work best—long or short, humorous or straightforward—has long been a matter of debate for marketers. While one approach might work for your business, another marketer's mileage may vary. No matter what your vertical market, however, one trusty tenet still applies: Test.

"Build testing alternate subject lines into your process," says Elle Woulfe, director of marketing programs for Eloqua. "If they didn't bite on the first email, send them another—a different approach [on the same message] might work better for that prospect."

"It's important to collect and watch the data on who you're sending to and how they've responded to various subject lines in the past," agrees Sanjay Dholakia, CMO, Marketo.

FINDING THE RIGHT TONE

The subject line tone that will elicit the most positive response from your audience has everything to do with the expectations a consumer has about your brand, says Kara Trivunovic, vice president of marketing services, StrongMail. "If you're in financial services, people don't want cute or funny, because you're talking about their money. But if you're talking about travel, that's more appropriate, because you want it to be fun."

In healthcare marketing, for example, whether to be direct or clever in a subject line depends greatly on the category and demographic, says Daniella Koren, founder and president of healthcare relationship marketing firm DKI.

"You should be relevant to what the reader signed up for. And you



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—ELLE Woulfe, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING PROGRAMS, ELOQUA



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ALEX LUSTBERG, CMO, LYRIS

have to be tasteful and empathetic and supportive,” Koren says. “But marketers do need to have a personality and not just deliver clinical information. Of course, if we’re talking about acne to a young demographic, funny might work. But if we’re talking about lung cancer—not so much.”

The proof, of course, is in the numbers. Campaigns that marketers think are clever might not resonate with the audience. Trivunovic cites one re-engagement effort that gently poked the recipient with subject lines such as “We know you’re there,” and followed up with “Resistance is futile” when they didn’t respond to the initial message. “I loved it,” she says. “But when I talked with the marketer, I found out it didn’t work.”

For many marketers, a more straightforward, offer-oriented approach to subject lines is what works. However, a subject-line offer that seems good for the consumer may not necessarily have the best return for the sender. Return Path, for example, looked at the percentage-off offered in a subject line and found that, sometimes, less is better.

“We saw that the read rate for [subject lines promising] less than 25% off was good. But as the percentage-off increased, there was a decrease in read rate—offers of 25% or less got an average 25% read rate, but if it went up to 50%, the read rate was only 15%,” says Tom Sather, director of professional services, Return Path.

Why the falloff? “It’s hard to say, but spam filters have learned that as the discount gets higher, the possibility that [a message] could be spam goes up,” he says.

Using words like “Free” or putting exclamation points in a subject line doesn’t hurt deliverability as much as it used to, but it still isn’t best practice, says John Murphy, president, ReachMail. “If you’re not sure your subject line is appropriate, run it through your spamchecker tool.”

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

While subject-line lengths still run the gamut, brands that are focused on mobile are seeing that shorter is better, says Waccara Yeomans, director of creative services, Responsys.

Adds Sather, “Some email clients do cut subject lines off, so it’s always a good practice to front load with important information. Seventy-five characters is the point where most email clients cut off, so that might be the optimal length.”

As subject lines trend smaller, the importance of email preheaders gets bigger, notes Janine Popick, CEO, Vertical Response. Serving the same purpose as the Johnson Box in old-school direct mail, the preheader is the summary text that readers will see in many emails before they even open your message. Getting this right is essential to enticing customers and prospects to read your email. The length varies. Popick notes that she has hers set to five lines of text

on her iPhone, giving marketers valuable real estate to share their messages, offers and even alternate means of contact—like a phone number.

KEEP IT REAL

One subject line tactic that some marketers try is the fake “Oops!” which makes it look as if they’re atoning for some mysterious mistake. The consumer opens out of curiosity to discover the faux pas, and sees an offer. This is one trick that works, notes Sather: Read rates have jumped anywhere from 10% to 30% with the fake goofs.

Likewise, some marketers have put fake RE: or FW: starts to subject lines, he adds. This can make a message seem more personal, but could also alienate customers who don’t like to be misled.

A good rule of thumb is to generate authentic interest in what you’re doing, says Murphy. “You don’t want to trick people—you want the open to be related to what you promised in the subject line.”

Also, says Popick of Vertical Response, be careful not to overdo personalization. Don’t just do it repeatedly—be personal in a more informed way, based on behaviors such as a recent purchase or whitepaper download.

And if you do get personal, get it right. Getting it wrong is a definite turnoff. Trivunovic remembers one marketer sending her personalized birthday greetings in the wrong month, showing that they didn’t really know her at all.



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STATUS SYMBOLS

Yeomans says she’s seeing a ton of symbols popping up in subject lines, but adds that she hasn’t seen them making a huge difference in response rates. “If used once in a while, they could get attention—but you don’t want to risk inboxes looking like Craig’s List.”

StrongMail’s Trivunovic also says she isn’t seeing icons in subject lines having a big impact on open rates. “If there are icons that are true to a vertical and add something to the subject line, then we’re seeing a little bit of a lift, but there has to be something worthwhile [in the message] in the first place,” she says. “People like and remember them, but they don’t necessarily drive open rates.

Testing is essential to knowing whether this is right for your brand, notes Alex Lustberg, CMO of Lyris, who predicts symbol overload in three to six months. “Email is an art and a science, so test and learn how it impacts your results.”

“Symbols can be clever, but some email clients still don’t render an apostrophe correctly,” says Woulfe. “If you’re sending a relevant message, like a trigger based on an actual behavior, that will perform better than using a symbol just to get attention.”

Return Path’s Sather notes that many marketers started using symbols in the fourth quarter, often associated with the holidays. Read rates of messages did go up a bit, he says. “But of course

we’re seeing a lot of spammers starting to use them, which is a potential sign that they’ve ruined the party—but they haven’t been overused yet.”

EMAIL COPY

“Back to basics” is a good mantra for marketers when it comes to populating the body of their email messages. “We’re getting back to things that have always worked, with relevant, consistent calls to action,” says Woulfe.

GET TO THE POINT

Calls to action should be specific, says Koren. She’s a proponent of emails with short, to-the-point copy that drives the reader to a dedicated landing page for more information. “The problem in healthcare, though, is that there is a lot of required information that must be included,” she says. “This means that emails get very crowded with everything but the kitchen sink.”

People are “less and less interested in reading,” says Woulfe, which means videos and teasers that will get them to click through will work better than reams of copy. “Make it clear what the user experience will be if they click through,” she says.

“I’ve always likened email to driving by a billboard at 70 miles per hour. Brands continue to put lengthy copy in there and people don’t want to read it,” says Trivunovic.

The challenge is that many voices

within a brand often have things they want included in an email message, which dilutes the punch of the email’s main message, she adds. “Brands need to be more precise about what they include in an email—they need to consider what happens when the relevance [of messages] wanes.”

BE RELEVANT

The vague sign-up promise, “Give us your email and we’ll send you updates” is a pet peeve for Koren. “We’ve found that preference-based email content is successful,” she says. “Make sure that users can select the topic that they want to hear about next, and make it relevant.”

Marketers need to be specific and set expectations. “Tell them that if they provide their email address, they’ll get weekly emails with a certain type of content,” Koren says.

“Email as a silo that sits by itself is no longer something consumers want,” says Dholakia. “They want content to reflect behavior in other channels, like social or website visits—if I view a page on your site and then you send me an email with a subject line that reflects that, that’s relevant.”

MAKE SURE YOUR CREATIVE IS YOUR CREATIVE

Often, marketers send emails in conjunction with other marketing partners. And in doing this, it’s often common practice to share creative or



include images or copy from the partner or brand. That is a mistake. While it may save time and money in the short term, it could be harmful in the long run.

“Always use creative that is unique to your brand—don’t send another brand’s creative,” Murphy says. “If they’ve committed any sins in the email world, you get tagged as well [by ISPs].”

Always run your creative through a spamchecker tool (most ESPs have them), and see if there are any domains in your email’s links that are blacklisted. The same applies for any images that might have originated with a partner.

You can re-create messages from partners to look similar, but make it different, make it unique, so you get a fighting chance with your offer, Murphy says. He adds that putting images “found” online is also a no-no. “Sharing creative can lead to unintended results that can destroy your whole marketing effort.”

DESIGN

The crux of all good email design today is to make your messages readable on any device—mobile or desktop.

“Buttons and fonts must be bigger, and there should be less copy that people will strain their eyes over,” says Trivunovic. “Mobile is forcing brands to become more focused.”

“If you’re going to have buttons, keep them 40-pixels square so fingers can actually click on them,” says Popick. “And keep images small so they can actually

load.”

“Make it hard for users to accidentally click on the wrong thing,” says Sather, noting that marketers should make buttons big and avoid hyperlinks within paragraphs.

RESPONSIVE DESIGN

More and more marketers are creating messages that use a responsive design, coding them so that the message displays slightly differently depending on the device, notes Trivunovic.

For example, an email that uses responsive design might show those users who are reading the message on a desktop a detailed top or side navigation bar, but eliminate that element for users viewing on a smartphone. Likewise, mobile viewers might see larger, simplified headlines, or multiple columns consolidated into one longer column.

“Marketers need to embrace their mobile audiences and give them an experience that fulfills their expectations,” says Yeomans.

IMAGES AND TEXT

Given the increased focus on designing for mobile, should marketers drastically trim back their text in favor of more, larger images? It depends on what you have to show. Yeomans notes that she’s seeing many retailers test this technique, and it can work in some cases.

Lyriss’ Lustberg notes that Apple’s email template—strong images with little to no text—is an example. “Their design is sleek and they express that creatively,” he says. “You don’t want everyone to do that, but it’s expected for Apple.”

“You have to know our audience and deliver to them and stand out,” adds Dean Silvestri, art director, Lyriss.

Marketers are cutting down their email copy in general, says Lustberg, usually having no more than three lines of text in any given section.

WORST PRACTICES: So, what are the big email creative no-nos?

Not segmenting your email file:

“Everyone getting the same message at the same time will ensure that your campaign is the least relevant for the most people,” says Sanjay Dholakia of Marketo. Find out where your subscribers’ interests and preferences lie, and segment your list to deliver content relevant to their particular needs.

Not proofing your messages for deliverability:

“The prettiest art won’t be seen if it gets stuck in the spam filters,” adds Dholakia. “If you’re truly batch and blasting, that’s a way to remind ISPs that your stuff isn’t very [valuable] to folks.” And, notes ReachMail’s John Murphy, “If multiple people are working on creative, you could get sloppy code that would get you into trouble.” Make sure the HTML in your messages is well formed and clean—i.e., no missing end tags, no empty inline elements left in because you are recycling a previous message.

Not getting to the point. “I still see a lot of emails that are super long, and as a marketer, you need to learn to be succinct,” says Lyriss’ Alex Lustberg. “Sure, you want to be informational, but you need to create an integrated approach with your design and content. I scan a lot of emails, and there are very few that I actually do anything with.”

“Get the call to action at the top of the message and make it clear what you want to drive them to,” says Elle Woulfe of Eloqua.

Not going mobile all the way. Less than 20% of marketers are doing mobile optimization, which is bad enough. But many of those that are optimizing their messages for mobile devices are then directing users to a web page that isn’t optimized for mobile. “That’s not a true mobile experience,” says Lyriss’ Dean Silvestri.

