

Influence in the Inbox

The challenges & opportunities in B2B email marketing

A key nuance in B2B email is acknowledging that the person who chooses to buy a product and the user aren't necessarily the same. For B2B email marketers, this means added challenges when it comes to creating messaging that will get noticed.

"In B2C, purchases are more impulsive, because the buyer is the user," notes Suneet Bhatt, CMO, LiveIntent. "B2B conversations are more extended, and need to be more sharable and have more detail."

B2B engagement cycles are by nature longer, and require rich and thoughtful content to keep people interested. Recipients are particularly drawn to content that will help them feel (and sound) smarter in business conversations, Bhatt says.

Tools like LiveIntent can help email marketers and publishers target relevant advertising, images and content to the right audiences. While the use of social forums continues to rise, email's popularity hasn't waned, particularly in B2B. In many instances, B2B email subscriptions have gone on for a long time and audiences feel a loyalty to those publications, which come into their inbox at their request.

"Marketers need to own the audience and the conversation," says Bhatt, noting the names on your

email list are loyal to your brand. Your Facebook fans, on the other hand, may be more loyal to Facebook than you—and be easily distracted. "They might just pop off to read one piece of content on your site—and then go back to Facebook."

CONTENT THAT CONNECTS

Content coming into an email inbox can be viewed as more personal, because the reader actively opted-in to receive it. They also actively made the decision to open the email. "Fewer people might get to that stage, but those who do are incredibly engaged," he said. "This is your best audience."

James Arnold, vice president of sales and operations for Farm Journal Media's AgWeb.com, notes that his audience—farmers—are heavily

engaged in Facebook and Twitter, but email open rates haven't declined. "Granted, we're not sending to as many people as maybe we used to, but we're sending the right message with more engaging content."

Arnold keeps a keen eye on analytics, looking at what influences open rates on emails. Through research AgWeb has learned that straightforward "just the facts" subject lines resonate with their audience.

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WARNING! EMAIL OVERLOAD!

6 TIPS TO STANDOUT IN A CROWDED INBOX

It is estimated that people see 5,000 marketing messages per day, according to LookBookHQ and Beutler Ink. To say there is stiff competition for your target's attention is an understatement. There is good news for email marketers though—Salesforce Marketing Cloud reports 69.7% of U.S. Internet users say that email is still the preferred method for communicating with businesses.

Here's six ways you can get noticed.

1. Focus on subject lines: Subject line writing is a bit of an art, but doing it right doesn't have to be complicated. Think about what makes you open an email. In most cases, you think you are going to get information you need. If your subject line is too vague, it will miss the mark and go unnoticed. But, it can't be so specific that it's too long. The art lies in creating a short, clear subject that catches attention. At Toshiba, we have found that subject lines between 40 and 50 characters have the highest open rates. This length allows for creativity, as well as some specificity. Asking questions also engages the audience and shows you understand a concern or issue they are facing.

2. Become a trusted source for information: First, you need to identify who wants to hear from you. Targeted communications that give your prospects information they actually need will pay dividends when it comes to relationship building. It's increasingly easy to get cast off into spam folders, so starting with a solid list is your first hurdle to overcome. Start by segmenting contacts based on information from your sales team, website download and opt-in forms and other sources.

3. Deliver engaging content: In the B2B world, people want information that will help them and their business improve performance. Disguising purely promotional content, like brochures or flyers, as information that will give them an edge is a surefire way to have future emails ignored. At Toshiba, one of the first questions we ask is "what is the content this audience needs." If we have it, we proceed with the email. If we don't, we either create the content or consider another topic that will resonate and has associated content. For our campaigns, videos, white

papers and case studies have the highest clickthrough rates. Potential customers like to learn more about how your product is going to make a difference in their lives; what better way to demonstrate this than to have current customer advocates give their perspective.

4. Get to the point—fast: People don't read anymore. They skim. To have an impact, and drive clickthroughs to your content, you must focus on one idea – ideally a customer pain point that you are solving. Highlight the benefits – avoid talking about your product or service without linking to a clear customer benefit and do this all in as little copy as possible so that readers want to learn more by clicking. Finally, put your call-to-action at the top of your email, or at least "above the fold," and make sure the call clearly identifies what people will get when clicking.

5. Be visual: Once you have mastered increasing your open rates, keep your audience engaged and deliver on that subject line. Powerful visuals and headlines draw readers in and capture attention. When possible, and if budget permits, try to avoid stock photography. If you can design a visual that helps tell your story, it's more likely that the audience will be intrigued enough to commit to your email for the full story. Additionally, maximize your branding initiatives and invest in developing a consistent look for your email campaigns.

6. Optimize for mobile: With more people checking email on mobile devices, marketers have the opportunity to reach their audiences away from the desk. There is also greater risk in losing your audience if your email is not optimized for mobile. Consider an email that doesn't load properly or display well on an iPhone. Chances are your target will move on without a second thought. To avoid this, use a responsive design. If you decide not to use a responsive design, you can still create emails for optimal mobile viewing. Many of the principles still apply for mobile—use simple visuals that tell a story, keep the copy short and direct and make sure all of the important elements, like the call-to-action, at the top of the email so it's noticed without having to scroll.—Charlene DeBar, manager, corporate communications, Toshiba America Medical Systems Inc.

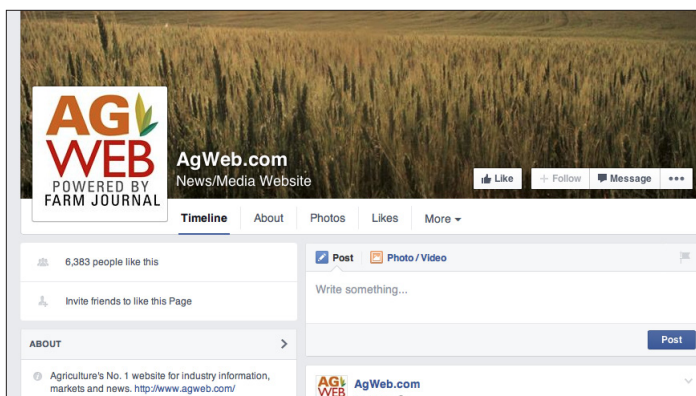


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"Everything we do is based on data and we're more and more micro targeting the type of audience we want to deliver, through both LiveIntent, delivering ads to all types of email browsers, and Marketo, to put the right content in front of the right people."

Many B2B marketers who perhaps previously didn't put a lot of thought into their email strategy are now looking at whether their website needs retooling, or whether they have the right email platform or CMS.

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AgWeb's audience of farmers are active on Facebook and Twitter.

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JUST DO IT

"For B2B marketers, this is not the time to try to keep everything held together with masking tape and Band Aids – time to pull the trigger and step up to newer solutions," says Karen Talavera, president of email consulting firm Synchronicity Marketing, who will lead a session on email trends at B2B LeadsCon. "There might be growing pains, but they need to get into the game."

The good news today is that various systems like ecommerce and CRM talk to each other a lot easier than they used to, she says. "The biggest challenge

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A NEW EMAIL (RE)MODEL FERGUSON'S MESSAGING REACHES PROFESSIONALS AND HOMEOWNERS

For HVAC, plumbing, lighting and waterworks wholesale distributor Ferguson, email is a key tool for keeping professionals and consumers engaged with the brand, even when they might not be in the market for a new fixture.

The company sells wholesale to plumbing and HVAC professionals, and also connects directly with consumers online and via showroom appointments. Three years ago, Ferguson didn't consider its email strategy evolved enough to make it a major communications channel.

"We've come a long way. Now, we're operating on more of an enterprise level with email for loyalty, transactions and reengagement," said Mary Abrahamson, email marketing specialist, Ferguson. "We're hitting at all angles—we're mostly B2B, but we talk to B2C [customers] to keep them engaged for the next sale, which might be five years down the road."

Ferguson's email marketing program acts as a support system to the 1400 locations across the U.S. Not all locations use the corporate-led email program regularly, but their customers do feel the benefits—if, for example, there is an HVAC training in Virginia Beach, all HVAC contractors within 20 miles of that location would get an email invitation.

The company's email strategy includes a mix of both locally and nationally targeted messages, as well as automated transactional and behavior related emails. There are about 14 different segments targeted, including HVAC, remodelers, homeowners and builders.

The approach taken to connect with different segments varies, notes Abrahamson. For example, an HVAC professional might look to Ferguson for business information and want updates in an easy to read, digestible format. Emails to them don't need to be extremely visual—they're amenable to a newsletter format and don't mind wordier messages.

Homeowners and designers, on the other hand, respond better to lifestyle imagery. They like more visual and product focused emails.

Email sign-ups come from a variety of sources, including the website, trade shows, and other in-person events. Local showrooms also manually upload names of prospects who signed up in-person.

Knowing the interest of individuals on the file is essential to target them properly. If names in the database are unknown or incomplete, continually running automated programs help direct them to the preference center to complete their profile.

Across the board, for the most part, Ferguson's customers like straightforward communications.

"Our customers don't related very well to tongue in cheek language, and for us as a brand, that's not our style," Abrahamson notes.

The company, which uses Silverpop as their ESP, has tested vendor based versus action language in subject lines. Trade professionals respond to brands they typically use, while consumers aren't often familiar with the brand names, so those don't necessarily move the needle.

Social is being integrated into Ferguson's emails. The brand, which sees the most social engagement via Twitter, is looking at experimenting with Facebook audiences, and has added a Pinterest button on email communications to cross-promote social campaigns like the "Mother of All Kitchens" Mother's Day board on Pinterest. —BNV



Ferguson uses social to promote campaigns like the Mother's Day "Mother of All Kitchens" effort.

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in B2B is understanding the sales funnel —the sales force needs to understand who the customers are, build relationships and create conversations.”

LEGO Education recently connected its marketing automation program with MicroSoft Dynamics CRM, to help deliver more personalized and customized email messaging to teachers, administrators and other education professionals.

“We are very diligent about segmenting our marketing lists to a finite level that allows us to deliver extremely relevant content,” notes Brandee Johnson, senior marketing manager, North America, for LEGO Education. “We have three primary segments that we target—preschool, elementary, and middle school educators. We segment those groups more than 100 ways to deliver content that is relevant to each person.”

Some of the criteria LEGO Education uses for segmentation includes grade level, geography, years in education, placement along the customer journey and previous products purchased and recent interaction with the company.

“We create three monthly emails for each of our core segments,” says Johnson, who will present with Talavera at B2B Leadscon. “We deliver a mix of content in the form of newsletters, promotional emails,



LEGO Education's email recipients respond well to video.

and product and segment level campaigns.”

The main goal of LEGO Education's email program is to meet the customer wherever they are at on their journey and deliver relevant content that addresses pain points, questions, and delivers information that is relevant to them. Metrics measured include open rates, click rates, time on site after clickthrough, number of pages visited, and conversion rates.

“The tools we use give us transparency to the customer's behavior long after they open the email, so we can attribute revenue to email campaigns for an extended period of time,” she says.

LEGO Education has tried multiple types of content and found some that work well and others that don't. “It often depends on where the customer is at in their journey,” Johnson says. “In general, videos work really well as well as previews to the software or curriculum. Testimonials from other teachers are also effective.” !



Beth Negus Viveiros
Managing Editor, Chief Marketer
bnegus@accessintel.com
@CMBethNegus

B2B EMAIL BY THE NUMBERS

Times: The most frequent time of day for opening B2B email newsletters during weekdays are 9 am, 10 am, 11 am, 3 pm and 4 pm.

Days: The most popular day for unique opens and impressions is Monday (9-11 am, to be specific). Weekends see a spike in B2B opens from 9-11 am as well, but not in the evening.

Device: PC is the most popular (50% of impressions and 44% of conversions), followed by phone at 20% of impressions and 12% of conversions.

Operating System: Windows is the most popular device for B2B users, with 42% of impressions and 40% of conversions. iOS (or iPhone) is a distant second with 22% of impressions and only 13% of conversions.—Source: LiveIntent

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