

It's marketing to you, but is it spam to your customers?



the more you use it, the smarter you get.

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The question all marketers should ask themselves before hitting the Send button.

E-marketers are spending a lot of time and research money trying to find out what makes, or breaks, a successful e-mail campaign. Perhaps they should spend more time understanding what makes a successful online customer.

It's the study of human behavior—specifically, how it changes when people sit down to open their inboxes—that holds clues to why some e-mail programs work and others don't. The most important observation is that customers see the Internet as an extension of themselves. Not as an extension of America, Inc. As a result, they're in a very different mindset in front of their computers than when they're watching television or reading the newspaper or even opening their snail mail. Online, people are typically on a mission, trying to get work done or answering correspondence. That doesn't mean they aren't willing to consider e-marketing, but the messaging has to adhere to some stiff criteria if it's going to overcome the customer's delete finger—which, by the way, is becoming increasingly itchy with all the inbox clutter.

Criteria #1: the customer needs to have heard of the company sending the e-mail to even consider opening it.

Criteria #2: the content of the e-mail needs to be relevant, expected and of value to the customer. Break both or either of these rules and the e-marketer has committed the sin of unintended spamming.

Unintended Spam: The Corporate Form of a Familiar Nuisance

Spamming? When most people hear the word "spam" they think of volumes of unsolicited e-mails offering Viagra, debt resolution and a chance to win \$\$\$\$\$\$ instantly! However, there is another form of spam and it's being sent by highly respected companies that, for the most part, believe they're practicing tried and true marketing techniques. But in the world of e-mail, these techniques can wreak havoc with existing customers and prospects alike. What they're really practicing is a form of marketing suicide.

Spam is typically defined, first and foremost, as unsolicited e-mail. It is also e-mail that does not deliver the content the recipient expects. "But wait," most marketers say. "People open their mailboxes every day and find mail from us they neither requested nor necessarily want." The difference in the online world is that the volume of spam is overwhelming. Moreover, the snail mail only arrives once a day. Online spam is a constant annoyance. Like telemarketers ringing every 5 minutes.

To make matters more complicated, what constitutes unsolicited and/or irrelevant e-mail can be very grey. For example, does "unsolicited" include e-mail sent to people who are automatically new customers of a company via an acquisition? And how do you tell if you're about to blast out an e-mail that is filled with valuable information in your eyes but that your customers or prospects will immediately dismiss? Everything depends on what the customer does, or does not, expect.

Astute e-marketers and the vendors who service them have come to realize that certain policies and practices that put the customer in the driver's seat provide the only way to avoid unintended spamming. Step one is to clearly spell out the company's baseline rules of the road for e-mail. Next, determine what is called "proof of relationship." This in turn will clarify any grey areas around what constitutes unsolicited e-mail. Equally important is creating guidelines around the type of content to be included in e-mails. Adhering to a few do's and don'ts can save companies from inadvertently betraying customer trust with the wrong kind of messaging. Finally, customers should always have the opportunity to opt-out of receiving a company's e-mails. This has become standard e-marketing protocol and is required for CAN-SPAM compliance.

Basic Rules of the Spam-free Road

Creating unintended spam is the direct result of ignoring some very basic tenets of good e-customer management. The first rule is to know where a recipient's information came from and how it was collected. Next, recipients need to know exactly what types of e-marketing they can expect in the inbox.

A third rule of the road is that e-marketers need to make sure the content of e-mails is consistent with the company's initial intentions and that it meets expectations.

Once these basic guidelines are adopted, there are very specific practices to follow regarding list management, content creation and e-functionality that can help any company implement repeatable spam-free e-marketing. Determining "proof of relationship" is the place to start.

Proof of Relationship

The idea behind “proof of relationship” is a simple one: If an e-mail recipient has never heard of a company, or had any interaction with a company at all, then the e-mail is irrefutably unsolicited and therefore spam. By determining “proof of relationship”, an e-marketer ensures that when that e-mail is sent, there will be some recognition of the sender. Ascertaining “proof of relationship” takes some due diligence but it is well worth the trouble. Not only does the e-marketer avoid sending e-mails to parties who won’t welcome them, it’s a good way of building a well-qualified list.

Here are some basic steps to take in order to determine “proof of relationship”:

For Existing Customers:

In the case of current customers, legitimate forms of “proof of relationship” are invoices and receipts as well as account information collected during purchase or a promotional effort, be it online or off. These are all evidence of a pre-existing relationship between customer and company.

For Prospects:

It may sound odd to try and determine “proof of relationship” for prospects but it can be done. One good source is online information requests. While obtaining prospect information should never be a requirement for obtaining information about a company, offering the opportunity for people to provide contact information is a good way for prospects to put themselves into your database. During this process, the prospect should be able to choose which types of communication

he or she wishes to receive. And, as always, there should be full disclosure of the company's privacy policy readily available.

There are also offline sources of prospect "proof of relationship." Every salesperson comes back from a trade show with a fist full of business cards. Obviously these can only be acquired if the salesperson has indeed had some interaction with the recipient. Therefore, they earn "proof of relationship" status. Written requests for e-mailed information are also legitimate forms of "proof of relationship" and should be channeled into the prospect database. In terms of online "proof of relationship" at the B2B level, individual, one-to-one e-mail correspondence also qualifies.

All examples of prospect "proof of relationship" share one critical criterion: There has been some contact with the company that was initiated, at least in part, by the prospect. Contacts initiated solely by the company don't count.

Which brings us to a difficult point of discussion. For years the offline direct marketing world has relied on third party lists in order to build customer databases. These lists are a big part of the unintended spam problem. There's no way to filter out those recipients who do not meet "proof of relationship" criteria. When they receive the e-mail, it is completely unsolicited. Chances are the recipients made the list in the first place because they purchased a certain kind of product and gave the company permission to contact them. But permission is not transferable from one marketer to the next.

For Members & Subscribers:

Membership and subscription lists are a good way to determine “proof of relationship” as long as the members and subscribers were aware they would be receiving e-mail when they signed on. It is important to update the list regularly—not only to remove names of those who have dropped out but also to add new recruits as quickly as possible.

For The Windfall Customer:

The last group of recipients in the “proof of relationship” discussion are those who suddenly find themselves windfall customers. Very often when two companies merge, or when one company buys out another, they merge their databases. People who are prospects or customers of one company the day before suddenly find themselves receiving e-mail from the other. Whether or not this is appropriate depends on the steps the companies took as the merger or acquisition took place. If e-mails were sent to customers informing them of the change in ownership and the customers were allowed to determine whether or not they wanted e-mails from the new company, then this constitutes confirmed “proof of relationship.” If that overture is not made, then any e-mails that don’t bear the name of the company with whom the customer had the original relationship constitute unintended spam.

Unintended Spam by Meaningless Content

There is also a form of unintended spam that is created by poorly created and/or targeted marketing content. Good examples are in-your-face promotions for products the customer has never purchased before. Naturally the marketing department assumes existing customers will be thrilled by a discount. But there are usually strings attached and it’s nothing more than a transparent effort to get the customer to buy more products or services. This is unintended spam.

Content that unexpectedly departs from the kind of information the customer has already been receiving from the company also qualifies as unintended spam. If a customer is used to receiving an e-newsletter filled with good information and perspectives, and then suddenly it turns into one long ad, they will view it as spam. Moreover, it's the worst kind of spam because it's betrayed a trust that will be hard for the company to win back.

To avoid unintended spam via bad content, companies need to continually revisit the customer's original expectations. If the marketing department is sending out blasts of e-mails that don't deliver the kind of information originally requested, then it should be changed. (Not the marketing department. The content.) Also, today's technology allows companies to track not only open rates and page views, but other important customer actions. For example, Informative Marketing™ serves valued content in response to reader behaviors and interests. It utilizes continuous loop feedback based on which content individual readers view first, where they "travel" on the printed page, where they spend the most time, even which articles they pass along to friends and co-workers. Using this type of self-informing system ensures that the information chosen for the next e-mail is guided by what the user found interesting in the last one. This keeps it from becoming unintended spam.

If an e-marketing effort goes out and no one clicks through to certain pages, or does but doesn't stay on them, the content is not meeting their expectations. Another good indication is the opt-out functionality that should be on every e-mail. If an e-newsletter goes out and all of a sudden a lot of requests to unsubscribe come back, there's a clue.

What about penalties?

E-marketers and the vendors who often provide development and distribution services should have some policy in place for dealing with companies that continually violate customers' trust by sending out spam, unintended or otherwise. Of course, the ability to reprimand requires that a formal document outlining a specific code of e-mail ethics be created and circulated among all parties. A typical table of contents for this document includes:

- Your company's own definition of spam
- Roles & Responsibilities — who is responsible for ensure non-spamming e-mail practices?
- Subscriber qualification — what are the "proof of relationship" criteria?
- Content protocols — guidelines ensuring content is useful and not just promotional
- Distribution policy — what is the process for determining subscriber receptivity to certain content, i.e. previous purchaser, referred by another subscriber
- Infractions — how will they be dealt with?

Some e-marketers and distributors establish a reprimand policy based on the number of complaints received from customers. Another good practice is to implement a spam complaint system that lets the company track negative feedback against certain initiatives. Learning by previous mistakes is often the most effective learning there is.

In conclusion, the good news about unintended spam is that it's the one kind of spam that is easily fixed. Companies can clean up their own e-misdeeds by assessing their current e-marketing, putting policies and practices into place, and then making sure they're honoring them.

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