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MarketingExperiments Journal

The Five Best Ways to Optimize Email Response: How to craft effective email messages that drive customers to action

Our research shows that even the most professionally designed email marketing suffers from conversion leaks by overlooking a few simple principles. In this issue of *MarketingExperiments Journal*, we'll take an in-depth look at how to apply these principles to help you craft effective email campaigns.

We'll explore the basic structure of your email and what each piece should convey to make it effective – from adjusting your subject line to tie into the sequence of thoughts of your audience to making sure that the overall message is in-sync with the way today's postmodern consumer operates.

“[W]hat is common sense isn't common practice.” – Stephen Covey

This issue of *MarketingExperiments Journal* builds on [previous research](#) we've published about email marketing. We found that even experienced marketing professionals sometimes overlook basic principles that can have a huge impact on conversion.

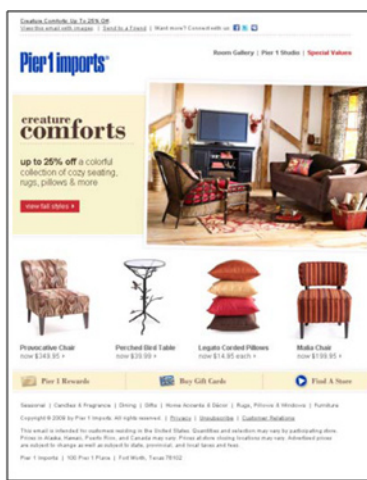
For example, the three email messages below were designed by professional agencies:



- 52%



- 19%



- 34%

Yet, as the numbers below each email indicate, they all generated lower click-through rates than the control email.

These results bring a slew of questions to mind. Where are you losing most of your money? Where is your greatest potential? Is it in a template design? Is it in your frequency? Is it in your subject lines?



If you are an agency hired to improve a client's email campaigns, how can you get more response from the same email list? More specifically, how can you drive real bottom-line results (not just create better-looking email templates?)

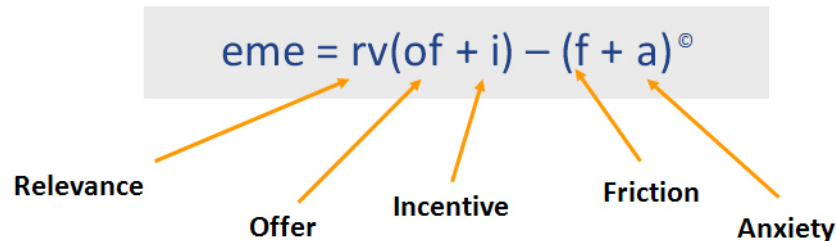
And, as a marketer, what principles should you keep in mind as you evaluate past, current, and proposed email campaigns?

Essentially – where is your greatest opportunity and how can you capitalize on it?

We will answer these questions with five principles that are distinct, yet build on each other to form a foundation for effective email marketing.

I. “BEST PRACTICES” ARE NOT ENOUGH – IT IS ESSENTIAL TO WORK WITHIN A RIGOROUS METHODOLOGY.


The Email Messaging Optimization Sequence is a heuristic used to evaluate the effectiveness of an email campaign and determine where the greatest optimization opportunity can be found.



A scientific approach to email marketing optimization is more than just an efficient way to tune what you are already doing, it helps you find the greatest (existing or entirely new) opportunity. It also gives you a clear view of current and potential areas to optimize and a consistent method for each approach you test. As Peter Drucker has said, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.”

II. CLEAR MESSAGES ARE MORE EFFECTIVE THAN PERSUASIVE TACTICS – CLARITY TRUMPS PERSUASION.

For the rest of today's issue, we'll focus on offer optimization. To learn more about the entire Email Messaging Optimization Sequence, feel free to explore the [Email Marketing training course](#).

$$\text{eme} = \text{rv}(\text{of} + \text{i}) - (\text{f} + \text{a})^{\circ}$$


Every email has an average of seven seconds to prove its worth and convey its offer – so get to the point. Your email must have a single aim in mind. Do not clutter your message with 16 different links. The more options a customer has, the more likely they'll get lost.

To reduce the options and give your email a clear purpose it may help to look at each of your email messages through the lenses of external and internal clarity:

External clarity:

First, put yourself in the shoes of your customer. What are you asking the recipient to do? And why should they do it?

Your prospective customers are not looking for a reason to read your email; they are looking for a reason to delete your email. That is why it is so important to take the time to make sure you are answering the two questions above. You likely eat, sleep, and breathe your product and know every detail inside and out. So an email may seem obvious to you. But, for someone breezing through an email inbox, is your message really crystal clear?

Internal clarity:

You also must be clear that your team or client has a full understanding of the desired result of every email send. What is your objective? What is the best way to achieve it? And what really is the offer? Is it to sell a product or to get a click?

The only thing you should try to sell in your email is a single, split second action – “click.” From there, your landing page can do the actual selling of your offer. While this simple thought sequence is often overlooked, it is key to engaging and then driving your customer to final conversion.

III. CLARITY IN AN EMAIL MESSAGE IS FOSTERED BY PROPER THOUGHT SEQUENCE.

When we strip away the bits and bytes involved in an email send, we soon discover that a successful marketing email is really just part of a conversation that connects a recipient's previous engagements to future ones.

Therefore, a well-crafted email requires a sequence of thought. Let's break down a few examples to see how you can play out that thought sequence in your email messages.

Not this

From: Sales
Sent: Tuesday, February 19, 2009 2:16 PM
To: bob@example.com
Subject: Save on Memory

But this

From: Brian Johnson – Technical Support Manager
Sent: Tuesday, February 19, 2009 2:16 PM
To: bob@example.com
Subject: Speed Up Your Dell Latitude D620 – Free Memory Tool

Every part of your email messages helps shape how your audience perceives this conversation. For example, one avenue of communication often overlooked is the “*From:*” field. Which email are you more likely to open? An email from Sales? Or an email from a Technical Support Manager who has sent you a personal message using his name?

In your entire life, you have likely never had a conversation with a Sales Department. A Sales Department did not come in on Monday morning and share the amazing hike he took with his son over the weekend. A Sales Department was not upset when his dog of 16 years died. And a Sales Department has never helped you make your computer run faster.

But Brian probably has. And when you talked to Brian about that computer or that hike, he likely didn't speak in vaguely generic terms (“*Walked on Trail,*” “*Save on Memory*”). He told you his story in a way that it related to you. (“*I know how you loved hiking on Big Talbot Island. Well, this weekend we went there and spotted a school of bottlenose dolphins just yards from the trail,*” “*You can speed up your Dell Latitude D620 with this free memory tool.*”)



Not this

Dear Customer:

Your computer may need new memory and XXXXXXXXXXXX.com has over 19,548 memory modules available at discount prices.

Take a look at our new memory deals.....

But this

Your computer: Dell Latitude D620

Your memory type: 512MB DDR2-533 (PC2-4200) SO-DIMM

Dear Bob:

You purchased 512MB of memory for your Dell Latitude D620. We appreciate your trust...

As we get into the body of this email, let's think more about our conversation with Brian. In this case, we'll make Brian the owner of a computer store at the corner of your street.

When you walk in the door of that store after having bought computer products from Brian in the past, will he greet you with a hearty "Hey customer. We have 19,548 memory modules in our store. Please buy one."? Or will he say "Hey Bob. Remember when you bought 512MB of memory for your Dell Latitude D620? Well, it's been a while, and your computer probably needs an upgrade. I've just received a fresh supply of the exact type of memory that your computer takes. It will really speed up your computer."

Now, of course, you likely do not run a local shop from a Norman Rockwell painting and are probably not on a personal, first-name basis with all of your customers. But that does not mean you should not try to approximate a real conversation. Technology may have changed the means by which we communicate, but it hasn't changed the way in which we process communication.

If you have invested in shiny Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools, your email messages are an excellent chance to put all that data to good use. And even if you haven't, there are many other ways to collect information and categorize customers to have a personalized, not aggregate, conversation with them. Don't just try to speak to your average customer. After all, who is average? Speak to your individual customer.

The second email gives a perfect example of just how to do this. The nested subject line replaces the headline that is usually above the body of a marketing e-mail. The nested subject line is intended to instantly instill recognition that we already have an established relationship – that this is not a “cold-call” SPAM message – which in turn holds their attention long enough to engage the prospect in an earnest evaluation of the message.

IV. PROPER THOUGHT SEQUENCES ARE SYNCHRONIZED TO THE DECISION PATTERNS OF THE RECIPIENT.

As with any conversation, that thought sequence does not happen in a vacuum. It is a two-way street. You must keep in mind the way potential customers interact with your communications and your product.

The proper sequence of an email:

CAPTURE

Subject line/headline
Salutation
Opening sentence



CONVINCE

First paragraph
Subsequent paragraphs



CLOSE

Call-to-action
Signature
Postscript



Re: The Research Results You Requested

Dear MarketingExperiments Subscriber,

As the President of MarketingExperiments, I felt it was important to personally inform you regarding one of the most significant breakthroughs in the history of our paid search experimentation.

In this study, we were able to reduce cost by 35% and yet increase conversion by 300%. You can find out more by [clicking here](#).

Perhaps this breakthrough will help you improve your paid search ROI.

Greg Burningham
President
MarketingExperiments

P.S. [This link](#) will only be active for 24 hours; we are trying to get this information to our subscribers before it reaches the media.



“The Truth must dazzle gradually” – Emily Dickinson

So much for the canoe!

Taken alone, that line is meaningless. At the end of a properly told joke, with steady pacing and solid setup, that line is hilarious.

Your email message works in much the same way. While your ultimate goal is a click, you must first tell your customers why they should trust you and click on your link which takes them away from their email to your site. To do that, you must keep in mind every element that is at your disposal.

The subject line gets the open. Then the headline must get me to read down to the subhead. The subhead into the first paragraph. The first paragraph to the second paragraph. Keep going. Keep the pace up. Let's keep talking. Finally, bring me down into the close. Tell me what you want to do. And reinforce why I should do it.

Each email will have its own unique combination of these elements. As our above example shows, not every element is necessary. But the fundamental principle you must keep in mind is that these elements work in conjunction to create a linear conversation that drives your prospect to the desired action.

Just how fundamental is this principle? You can see this same pattern stretch back throughout the history of communication. For example, the basic three-act dramatic structure of films and plays dates back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the earliest-surviving work of dramatic theory.

V. SYNCHRONIZATION TO DECISIONS PATTERNS OF THE RECIPIENT REQUIRES COMMONALITY OF LANGUAGE.

Once you align the structure of your email messages with how your audience communicates, the actual execution of the email involves writing in a language that matches the way in which your audience actually talks.

Building Rapport

You will often see a good example of this desire to match language with audience in a typical political campaign. One day, the candidate may be meeting with an association of investment bankers, wearing the finest bespoke suit, and speaking in an eloquent, sedate manner about the affects of taxation on the carry trade.

Yet the very next day, this same candidate is an every(wo)man downing a brew at the local pub in a flannel shirt and speaking rather loudly in the regional twang about a recent game where the local team “just got robbed” by the referees.

Notice, even the way in which we describe these two situations is different. The words we choose. The tone we approach the matter with. Your challenge is to speak to your audience the way they desire to be spoken to without drawing attention to the fact that you are doing it. Unlike the politician referenced above, you must not appear to be an outsider currying favor, but rather the genuine article.

This can be a huge challenge. A strange thing happens when we take off our “person” hat and put on our “marketing” hat. Even marketers who live and breathe the lifestyle they are trying to sell often come off as inauthentic.

Remember, you should just communicate naturally as a person, not as a corporation that is marketing a product. You don’t have to change your natural way of communicating if you yourself are a member of the audience you are trying to reach. This authenticity is vitally important with this channel, since most people simply do not trust email marketing.

Why do we not trust email?

The very nature of email is our first challenge to building trust. Unlike a landing page that a prospective customer has actively sought out (from organic search, PPC, a newspaper ad, etc), email is outbound (“push”) marketing. This intrusiveness creates a natural response of skepticism and distrust similar to that of a telemarketing call.

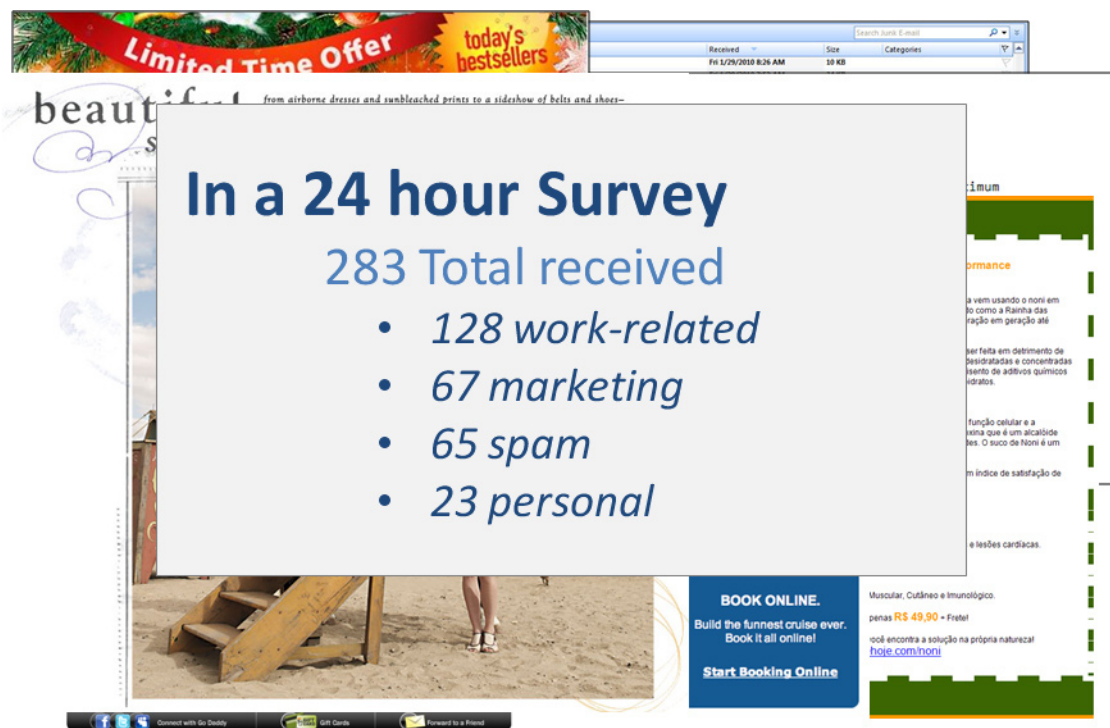
And, of course, beyond that intrinsic nature, email is heavily used by legitimate marketers and often abused by unscrupulous marketers. Most people are inundated with marketing messages all day long. Therefore, the average consumer reads email with a disposition to delete.

In fact, in the few moments it took to write the above sentences, one member of our writing team received an email offering “Viagra for a 75% cheaper price.” Because of messages like this, we’re all used to being rather click happy with the “delete” and “mark as SPAM” buttons.

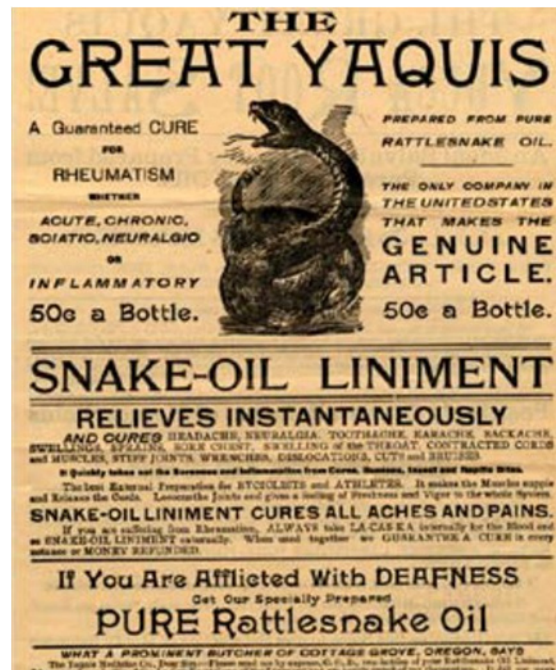


The Five Best Ways to Optimize Email Response

Of course, that email entered our inbox in just a few moments. We wondered how much total email we actually receive in a given day. So we tasked one member of the MarketingExperiments team with actually keeping track of each and every email she received over a 24-hour period. Even she was surprised at the final numbers:



There's not much you can do about the first two reasons most customers do not trust email. So you must put all of your energy in rectifying reason number three – email messages are full of so much marketing hype and qualitative bragging that no one believes us anymore. Essentially, many email messages are modern-day descendants of this classic:



Crafting conducive language:

You might laugh off the above ad as simply a swipe at spammers. Yet, while most professional marketers aren't as obvious as spammers, they can be oblivious to the faults in their own messages. It's all too easy to be one person at work (a marketer) and an entirely different person once we get home (someone who finds marketing laughably bad).

To help you take an introspective, honest look at your own efforts, we've crafted a series of statements that your customers might be thinking and the way you can respond:

The Prospect's Protest (A Problem)

1. I am not a target; I am a person: Don't market to me, communicate with me.
2. Don't wear out my name, and don't call me "friend" until we know each other.
3. When you say "sell," I hear "hype." Clarity trumps persuasion. Don't sell; say.
4. I don't buy from companies; I buy from people. And here's a clue:
5. I dislike companies for the same reason I dislike people.
6. Stop bragging. It's disgusting.
7. And why is your marketing "voice" different from your real "voice"? The people I trust don't patronize me.
8. In all cases, where the quality of the information is debatable, I will always resort to the quality of the source. My trust is not for sale. You need to earn it.
9. Dazzle me gradually: Tell me what you can't do, and I might believe you when you tell me what you can do.
10. In case you still don't "get it," I don't trust you. Your copy is arrogant, your motives seem selfish, and your claims sound inflated. If you want to change how I buy, first change how you market.

The MarketingExperiments Creed (A Response)

ARTICLE ONE: We believe that people buy from people, that people don't buy from companies, from stores, or from websites; people buy from people. Marketing is not about programs; it is about relationships.

ARTICLE TWO: We believe that brand is just reputation; marketing is just conversation, and buying is an act of trust. Trust is earned with two elements: 1) integrity and 2) effectiveness. Both demand that you put the interest of the customer first.

ARTICLE THREE: We believe that testing trumps speculation and that clarity trumps persuasion. Marketers need to base their decisions on honest data, and customers need to base their decisions on honest claims.

(Editor's note: MarketingExperiments has published an article called "[Transparent Marketing: How to earn the trust of a skeptical consumer](#)" that specifically deals with the commonality of language.)

BOTTOM LINE

Email marketing is really just a conversation. And like any good conversation, a few elements are key – clarity, proper timing, a common language, and a focus on how the person you're talking to hears what you're saying. Combine these elements with a methodology that allows you to optimize each part in a real-world, feedback-intensive setting, and you've mastered the basics of email marketing.

As you communicate with your customers, don't talk to them like a typical salesperson. Don't put on your marketing hat and sell with every word. Just be you. A true conversation happens when two (or more) people have an authentic dialogue. You encourage communication with potential customers, as with anyone else in life, when you use thoughtful yet simple (and appropriate) language. You don't need a marketing voice, you need a genuine voice.

Beyond understanding your customers' motivations, understand your own. What are you really trying to do with each email send? Don't expect your email to do all the heavy lifting and get a sale. That would be like casting a fishing pole in the water hoping to pull out a three-course meal of stuffed salmon. All you need is a little nibble, a click. And a good landing page can do the rest.

If you want help driving email ROI for your company, you can order your custom Email Response Optimization Package at MarketingExperiments.com/email.

About MarketingExperiments

MarketingExperiments is a research laboratory dedicated to discovering “what really works” in marketing. The MarketingExperiments Lab tests every conceivable methodology to determine which online strategies and tactics are the most successful at improving conversion, driving traffic, and selling product. The laboratory also conducts real-time marketing experiments with research partners such as Royal Bank of Canada, Johnson & Johnson, 1-800-Flowers, The New York Times, and Reuters Group. Scientists at MarketingExperiments have developed patent-pending methodologies which allow its partners to achieve significant conversion gains in their marketing efforts. The findings from these experiments are regularly published in the MarketingExperiments Journal and broadcast via online briefings. MarketingExperiments, along with MarketingSherpa and InTouch, is part of the MECLABS Group.

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