

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR

EMAIL MARKETING?

With threats from inbox overload, spam and image blocking, how must email evolve to retain its place as the key B2B marketing medium? And how should it be used to maximise its effectiveness? **Lucy Fisher** reports

Email remains an alluring prospect for marketers, for reasons such as cost and speed. Yet rapidly filling inboxes mean that badly targeted communications can be an annoyance for recipients. Email may be cheap and relatively easy to track, but skimping on the investment of time and planning makes it more likely your campaign will end up rejected by spam filters or ignored.

Fortunately, the discipline is maturing. Marketers have learned a number of lessons when it comes to the success of email campaigns, not least the fact that the days of 'batch and blast' are over.

"Leave mass mailing behind or you'll turn people off," says Andrew Stout, managing director at digital agency Dolphin. "You now get more junk-style information in your inbox than through your letterbox – because it's more cost-effective than mail."

Here are five ways that marketers can safeguard the future of their email activity.

1. Opt-in is the best option

Experts agree that it's wise to bear in mind the fact that current UK legislation, which allows B2B email marketing to be carried out on an opt-out basis, could change. Best

practice is to ensure opt-in, whilst opinion is divided as to if and when the law will follow suit.

The Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, has said he has no plans to change the current regime, despite pressure from Europe. However, the appointment of a new Information Commissioner, the ASA's director-general, Christopher Graham, could signal a new regulatory approach, when Thomas retires later this year.



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The consumer data blunders of recent months have also served as a trigger for many to go beyond the letter of the law in order to differentiate themselves from the competition.

Email marketing specialist Pure, for example, has decided to position itself as a best practice provider. "We recently changed our policy," explains managing director Marc Munier. "Although there's no legal requirement for B2B opt-in, people don't tolerate it when it's not, and you may get detected as a spammer. It's not about viewing email as a cheap channel, as a form of direct mail with free stamps."

2. Content is king

If marketers choose to develop a fully opt-in database, the creation of valuable content is a good place to start. This is something that all B2B marketers should be good at – after all, it takes a lot of information to sell a multi-million pound server system.

Edward Weatherall, managing director of agency Concep, says that property firm Cushman & Wakefield is an example of a



Image blocking: rules to remember

While images remain blocked, your ability to track is seriously compromised. Here are some simple tips to bear in mind:

- Use compelling subject lines: headlines drive people to action
- Only use pictures as an enhancement: Don't put key content in images and don't put images at the top of a message, or the recipient may see a large blank.
- Strike a good balance between copy and images.
- Place the key message in text at the top of an email.
- Use effective descriptors, fully describing what an image represents.
- Remember that if the content is valuable, people are more likely to interact with it.
- People know how to download images, but include a link above the email, directing recipients online if the images are not displaying correctly.
- Test different creatives.
- Some may prefer plain text emails anyway. These are cheaper, and can look more personal. "HTML emails are like a red flag, alerting recipients to the fact that they're being sold to," warns Michelle Crouch, marketing director at Blue Sheep.
- Ultimately response lies in your relationship with the recipient: nurture this, and the rest will follow.

brand that has taken a thought-leadership approach. Recipients are invited to sign up for information bulletins and RSS feeds and a variety of easily disseminated content is promoted via email. "The big thing is the

perceived value of content. We all have our Blackberries. Content is key; the time you send isn't so important," he explains.

Outlook can now receive RSS feeds, and many experts agree that these can be an

effective complement to email. Eloqua's director of client services, Stuart Wheldon, comments: "A feed from, say, an industry magazine, can be embedded into an email about your products and position you as a thought leader. Producing a webinar on a certain topic can also result in good leads."

Thanks to technological advances, there are now more options for displaying content in emails. Weatherall says that iTunes has a huge B2B catalogue – but few companies are using video and podcasts: "You don't necessarily have to read information. In an email, you can direct people to where they can view a video. It's about asking 'What's the best way for them to get this information?'"

In this way, email can become more of a 'pull' than a 'push' trigger. Richard Lee, managing director of Blue Sheep, is an advocate of this trend to use email in order to boost what he terms 'brand stickiness'. "Until now, email has been a cheap and overused acquisition tool," he says. "It can be used to drive real-time updates in opt-in, with choice and preference being driven by the customer. This will mean the recipient



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takes an interest and agrees to be communicated with, thereby building 'stickiness' with brands they want to be involved with."

3. Automation for lead generation

Lead generation programmes have also evolved in the past year. Eloqua and Silverpop, for example, offer software and systems that allow clients to gauge the interest of a prospect or customer, and automate communications according to where they are in the customer journey.

Eloqua describes the process as a form of 'digital body language' whilst Silverpop prefers the term 'engagement marketing'. These systems are suited to high-level consideration items that will involve a number of interactions before a deal closes. "Look past opens, bounces, and clicks, and consider which metrics can be turned into actions," says Wheldon.

The purveyors of these systems also claim that, by freeing marketers from manually conducting such processes, efforts can be focused on planning and creative.

They say this is helpful at a time when marketers are increasingly stretched.

And by passing better quality leads on to sales, efficiency increases. "The sales

processes in B2B are much longer than B2C – and they usually involve various stakeholders. You have to understand when somebody is ready to buy," explains Will Schnabel, Silverpop's vice president and general manager.

Having moved to the UK from the States, he's seen a dramatic shift in terms of uptake of these systems, which he believes is set to continue.

"With mid-market companies, as opposed to larger companies, lead management is still fairly new and they've been struggling even with the basics. It has changed a lot in the last six months and I think it will become de facto. It's an enhancement of email marketing."

4. Multichannel works best

Such lead nurture and generation campaigns aren't all focused on email.

"The first step in the funnel may be getting someone to sign up for an email newsletter, but it's about tailoring your message and channel according to where they are in the mix," says Skip Fidura, digital director of dotAgency and vice chair of the DMA's email marketing council.

Channel integration is easier with a single customer view – which has long been the holy grail for marketers. Since November, InfoUK has had a centralised CRM system, so anyone who buys or responds, whether via email, or any other channel, is automatically logged in the system.

"For all companies, responses should be automatically linked to CRM. The link between sales and marketing needs to be clear, to improve efficiency and relevance," says InfoUK's head of marketing and product development, Andy Taylor.

Effective data systems, and marketing that respects the audience's preferred channel, will no longer be a nice-to-have. According to Dolphin's Stout: "The majority prefer email but only when they've opted in. You need a centrally-held data system and information about channel preferences. Look at models like Amazon, that's a similar concept, and that's where the future of email is going."

Why link emails to a microsite?

The use of email to drive traffic to a company website is nothing new. But many brands are going one step further, by harnessing the benefits of highly relevant microsites, where users can download tailored information or offers, and be tracked more easily.

Getting a change done to a corporate website may be tricky, but a dedicated microsite – similar in look and feel to the trigger email – can be tailored to the needs

of a particular campaign.

"Microsites hold a huge amount of power. You only need one page of a newsletter in the inbox, for example, and the end user can access the rest, with full functionality, and displayed images on the web by clicking through from the email. Microsites can attract visitors through keywords too," says Newsweaver's newsletter specialist Denise Cox. "They will grow in importance."

B2B email marketing: Ten trends

1. A move away from list rental to grow-your-own databases, with a focus on opted-in data
2. The use of 'pull' tactics, using content of genuine value and integrating social networking
3. Increased use of multimedia within emails, such as video and podcasts
4. Personalised direct mail featuring URLs, followed by an email communication to boost response
5. RSS feeds used as a complement to emails, and the use of microsites and embedded web links
6. Growth of automated lead management platforms
7. The breakdown of traditional silos and a focus on centrally-held databases
8. Simplified reporting structures to allow marketers to increase efficiency
9. Companies choosing to operate on a fully-opt in basis to differentiate themselves from the competition
10. Analytics: Beyond open and click-through rates, and informed action as opposed to information for the sake of analysis; an increased focus on email as a retention – as well as acquisition – tool.

The future of email marketing may finally see a more sophisticated integration of the channel with the rest of the marketing mix. "I think, in the B2B space, email will grow in conjunction with SEO, PPC and social media," adds Taylor.

5. Hand-in-hand with social media

But the question marketers are still grappling with is how social networking tactics can be integrated within email marketing. In the B2B space in particular, marketers are still experimenting – and in many cases lagging behind their B2C counterparts.

Discussion groups about products or services are an obvious starting point. "I think B2B will start allowing 'share to social' type activities, say if you have read a relevant article, and you share it on LinkedIn," says Schnabel.

Proprietary networks are also being created. According to Taylor, "With social media, the end goal does not have to be direct sales. By asking people to share their views and experiences, sales can emerge as a result of that."

Again, innovation is being seen in the email channel. "I think the opportunity is to leverage user-generated content in email marketing – say, to have a blog and to encourage people to comment on your website," adds Fidura.