The complete guide to B2B email marketing

Introduction

It's no secret that email, done well, is an unbeatable online marketing tool. With a Return On Investment (ROI) of $44 for every $1 spent[1], it gives you around 3x the return that social media marketing does.

Of course, the key words in that statement were 'done well'. Successful Business-to-Business (B2B) email marketing campaigns aren't achieved by chance. It takes an understanding of the elements needed for a campaign to achieve maximum impact. This comes down to more than just writing a catchy subject line (although this is definitely important!). You need to know your audience, understand and make best use of your data, create an engaging and persuasive email – and ensure that it reaches the right inboxes. You also need to understand what success looks like and how to measure it.

If that sounds intimidating, it needn't. In this guide, we'll cover all of the steps you need to know, to start implementing powerful B2B email marketing campaigns of your own.

How to create the perfect email campaign

1. Be relevant

Personalisation is one of the most powerful elements of a great email campaign. Businesses have never had access to so much data and consumers expect them to use it. Your customers want you to treat them as individuals. They expect you to know their preferences and communicate with them accordingly.

Businesses who can use their data to create more targeted and specific campaigns which are based on their customers' behaviour, demographics and preferences, will be light years ahead of those who still use the 'one size fits all' approach.

According to research by Mailchimp, segmented campaigns performed significantly better than their non-segmented counterparts. Open rates were 14.31 percent higher, unsubscribes were 9.37 percent lower and clicks were an impressive 100.95 percent higher![2]

2. Be creative

Once you have targeted the people who you know are going to be interested in what you have to say, you need to keep them interested! Make sure your content strategy is creative and that as much effort is put into what goes IN to your emails as to who you send them to. Consider how you can keep people engaged with use of stories and interesting or innovative design.

Show attention to detail when it comes to your personalisation. Make sure your data is up to date – especially when you are targeting the C-suite in large corporations such as the CEO, CFO or CMO. Nothing can be less engaging than personalisation gone wrong…

Stay up to date with email trends – for example, in 2017, it's expected that we'll start to see automated emails triggered by web chat sessions. Depending on your target audience, you can expect anywhere between 15-70 percent of your emails to be opened by mobile phone which means that email length is expected to reduce. Video continues to explode across all marketing channels and email is no exception, with HTML5 Video expected to take off this year.[3]

3. High quality data

As you can see, quite a bit of thought and effort should go into creating your email campaign. The next stage is to make sure that you reach as many of your target audience as possible with it! The quality of your data really can be the difference between the success or failure of your emails. For maximum impact, your emails must first of all be sent to people who will be interested in your subject matter. Secondly, those emails must actually reach their inboxes so that they can see and open them.

The fundamental risk of poor quality data is that your email won't reach your desired customer – either due to an incorrect or out of date email address. This can lead to high bounce rates and damage to your email reputation score. This in turn means fewer people see your emails and you make fewer sales. At its worst, poor data can lead to breaches of the Data Protection Act and consequently, fines and reputational damage for your business as a whole.

So how can you ensure that the data you capture is as high quality as possible?

Email data constructed using a ping process to gather data from an IP address by establishing the domain names and topology typically demonstrates very low bounce-back rates. Data captured via telephone can also be extremely accurate but to get this information, skilled operatives are needed. Online activity is a frequently used capture device, but you can only be 100 percent sure of those addresses you've captured yourself, in terms of both quality and opt in.

Should you decide to purchase your data, then make sure you do your due diligence beforehand to ensure that you're getting high quality data that will enhance, rather than damage your campaign results.
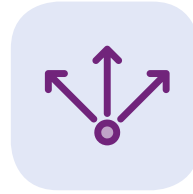
4. Multi-channel

In order to further boost the impact of your email marketing, consider integrating it into a multi-channel campaign. By using a number of different channels to communicate with your customers, you can emphasise your message and increase your audience.

For a successful multi-channel campaign, set clear goals and create a detailed content plan for each channel ahead of time. Ensure that you monitor results closely throughout the campaign so that you can tweak and optimise as you go.

Aligning your message across all channels in this way is powerful – and it's also a huge opportunity to get ahead of the competition. According to CMO by Adobe, only 14 percent of organisations are currently running marketing campaigns across all channels![4]

5. Direct sales

Direct selling via email is pretty common practice in the Business-to-Consumer (B2C) world, but still fairly rare in B2B. This is probably because the B2B purchasing process can be lengthier and more complex than a simple 'buy now' button in an email will allow for. However, when you consider that 66 percent of consumers have made a purchase as a result of an email they've received[5], this could be an opportunity that B2B marketers should be investigating.

If you can deliver relevant, creative emails to the right audience, then asking them for the sale should be the logical next step.

Buying email data

We've established that high quality data plays a vital role in any successful email marketing campaign. As a small business, you may not always have an email list that reaches the size of audience you'd like, but with email marketing giving an ROI of $44 for every $1 spent[1], purchasing email data seems like a pretty sound investment. It increases your reach, enhances your targeting and ultimately boosts the results of your email campaigns.

Looking online, you may see a lot of advice against buying data and this is down to one big mistake that a lot of marketers and business owners make. They focus on quantity over quality.

'The more people I email; the more sales I'll make...'

This statement is only true if the people you're emailing are interested in what you're selling – and if they receive your email in the first place! It doesn't matter how big your email list is – if the data is poor, then your results will be too.

So how do you make sure that your email data is high quality? In a nutshell, you need to ask potential providers the right questions before you make a commitment to buy.

1. Where does the email data come from?

Find out if the data that you're buying has been sourced compliantly and check that it has been fully verified. If the data is out of date or incorrect, then it has little to no value and it will weaken the impact of your campaign. Non-compliant data may well lead to fines and will almost certainly lead to reputational damage to your business. You should ideally see at least one reputable source to ensure optimum coverage.

2. How and when was the data verified?

Out of date data can have a number of nasty side effects. At a basic level, if data is out of date it may not be correct any longer. Email addresses change, people move jobs and the details that may have once been valuable are now pretty useless. The last thing you want is to waste valuable budget marketing to businesses that no longer exist!

The problems don't stop there. If you're using data that hasn't been verified recently (or at all) then your bounce rates will increase and so will the number of emails landing in peoples' spam folders.

To reach as many of your target audience as possible, only purchase data that you know has been recently verified.

3. Is the data compliant?

In order to simplify your own compliance requirements, it makes sense to ensure up front that the data you are purchasing is fully compliant for the purposes of your email campaign. This means that you only have to include opt-out subscription clauses in your communications, without worrying about the legal status of your business leads.

4. What segmentation is possible?

To maximise the results of your email campaigns, it's important to target your ideal clients. That is, those who you know will be most likely to buy from you due to their interests, demographics and previous buying behaviour.

When you select a data provider, it's important that their database is flexible enough for you to refine the data for your own needs and to fit your own target market.

Applying these filters gives your campaigns more depth and precision and your email marketing, a better ROI.

5. Does the data include any high risk businesses?

Just as it's wise to do your due diligence when choosing who to buy data from, it's just as important when you're choosing new clients and customers. A good data provider will not only give you the functionality to target your specific market, but to filter out those contacts who may expose your business to risk of bad debts.

By removing businesses that are at high risk of failure in the next twelve months, you can feel more confident about your data and its value. After all, spending your marketing budget on businesses that won't exist next year is as fruitless as spending it on those that don't exist today.

Where possible, ask if factors such as payment performance trends can also be factored in, allowing you to identify how quickly a business settles its invoices or the number of County Court Judgments (CCJs) that have been registered against them over the last year.

6.How often is the data cleansed?

In B2B markets, sectors with high job turnover can see contact data decay rates as high as 70 percent per year[6]. With data going out of date this fast, it's vital that your data supplier is checking and cleansing their data regularly. Recent research by Royal Mail shows that businesses are losing around 6 percent of their revenue due to poor data,[7] so data cleansing is definitely worth the investment.

7. Can you cleanse and append my current email data?

A 'single customer view' is the dream for any business when it comes to managing their data. If your data supplier can cleanse your current data AND provide up to date email addresses, then this will help you to deliver the best results for your next integrated campaign. It's also worth considering what other useful data can be added to your existing records. Perhaps named contact details, market intelligence information such as financial data or employee numbers or other data that can help you to segment and target your audience more effectively.

8. Can you provide 'lookalike' email contacts?

If you can identify trends and common characteristics in the customers who perform well for you then by finding more of the same, you can maximise the results of your email campaign. Ask your data provider to model these characteristics and provide you with new prospects who match.

9. How securely will be my data be transferred?

Personal data must always be kept and transferred securely. Your data supplier will usually transfer your data to you by encrypted File Transfer to ensure that the details can only be accessed with secure login and password details.

If you are not satisfied that sufficient precautions have been put in place, then be very wary of using that particular supplier. Unsecure data transfer brings risks of data breach, which in turn can be costly – both to your bank balance and to your reputation.

10. How is the data priced?

As with any investment, you should understand the costs and terms up front so that you're not caught out later down the line. Make sure that you're clear on all the following points before you sign on the dotted line:

• How many times you may use the emails
• Exactly what information you get for the cost
• Whether the customers can be followed up with by telephone or direct mail – and how much that additional data would cost
• Whether there are any restrictions which may increase the cost
• Whether there is any refund for bounce backs

Building great emails

How many marketers does it take to create a great email campaign...?

No, that's not the start to a joke... you see, a successful campaign relies on a lot more than just great content and high quality data (although, they are definitely key ingredients!).

Your campaign also relies on getting the build of your email right and there are a number of factors here which will significantly impact your results. These guidelines will help you to navigate them more easily:

Technical

- The email creative should be no wider than 700 pixels

- Inline stylesheets can be used to format text, but it's recommended to use regular HTML font formatting for guaranteed universal acceptance

- Avoid using JavaScript since most email clients will not accept it

- Forms are not recommended, but can be used if the mailing doesn't include Hotmail users. Even then, the form should be very basic and not employ JavaScript

- Creative can be coded using colspans, but it's recommended to use a stacked table structure since it is more stable across all email clients

- Flash should not be used within an email template. If Flash is required for the campaign, consider directing the user to a hosted landing page to view the Flash content

Creative

Preview pane

Any high priority creative, navigation or content should appear in MS Outlook's preview pane area. Other than your subject line, this is one of the best ways to encourage users to open their email. The average measurement for this is 300-500 pixels in height and 600 pixels in width.

Above the fold

This is the area that appears above the browsers bottom window bar and that can be viewed before scrolling. As with the preview pane, your featured content such as your key message and call to action (CTA) should appear 'above the fold' when using a web-based email client like Gmail and Yahoo! This area also averages 300-500 pixels in height.

There is also an argument that people are now used to scrolling and that rather than putting your key content above the fold, it should be 'teased' here and users should actually be encouraged to scroll to see more.

Generally, the purpose of your email will help you decide how to use your above the fold area. For example, if your goal is to increase awareness, then you want your reader to keep scrolling. If however, your aim is to convert, then keeping it short and to the point, and your CTA above the fold, is often the best tactic.

Test what works for you and whichever way you go, give it thought and make sure your content fits accordingly.

Stylesheets and style

Email development involves a combination of HTML and Cascading Stylesheets (CSS). While HTML structures the content, CSS is used to determine its style and format, such as colours and fonts. We recommend using inline styles, which are applied directly to HTML elements and are most likely to render properly across a variety of email clients.

Your entire template should have a 1-pixel border to give the design a more unified feel for the user.

Consider adding more organic shapes into your template design. Email creative is displayed through applications which have very rigid, box-like layouts. Adding images with people, or designing with curves will make your template work harder visually to attract the users interest.

Make sure that the featured content in your email exists in HTML text, not only images. With Gmail and other email clients that don't display images by default, the user won't be able to initially see any content that's in an image unless they opt to turn the images on.

Navigation

When designing your navigation, always keep in mind your goal. What action do you want your customers to take and how can you make that as easy as possible through your navigation? You should also consider the user experience and how you can improve this through your design.

If your email contains a lot of content then you may decide to use 'same page' navigation, allowing readers to jump to the sections they're interested in. Alternatively, you could just include snippets in the main body of your email and then link through to a website or presentation for those who want more information.

Your CTA will act as a key navigational tool and can be used to lead people through your email and encourage them to take your desired action.

Call to action

CTAs should be used carefully. Too many, and your users will be confused by all the different choices. In fact, faced with too many decisions, the natural reaction is often to make no choice at all and just ignore the CTAs all together.

By setting one clear direction for users, your CTA will perform better.

When it comes to making your CTA **stand out,** consider using a contrasting colour and creating a button rather than using clickable text. Just this simple tweak can increase click rates by as much as 28 percent![8]

Click here

Building great emails - continued

Images

Images play an important role in email marketing, but should be used strategically. They are a great way to break up content and keep your readers' attention, but they should never be used to communicate important information. Why? Because recent research shows that around 40 percent of your recipients probably won't see them.[9]

There are a number of email clients, such as Gmail who won't display images unless the recipient takes action to do so.

Email client	Images blocked by default	Renders ALT text	Renders styled ALT text
AOL Mail (Chrome)	✓	✓	✓
AOL Mail (Firefox)	✓	✓	✓
AOL Mail (IE)	✓	✓	✗
Gmail (Chrome)	✗	✓	✓
Gmail (Firefox)	✗	✓	✓
Gmail (IE)	✗	✓	✗
Outlook.com (Chrome)	Sometimes	✓	✓
Outlook.com (Firefox)	Sometimes	✓	✓
Outlook.com (IE)	Sometimes	✓	✗
Yahoo! Mail (Chrome)	✓	✓	✓
Yahoo! Mail (Firefox)	✓	✓	✓
Yahoo! Mail (IE)	✓	✓	✗

Lastly, on a stylistic note, avoid spaces in your HTML code between an <img> tag and </td> tag. Some browsers will read this space as an actual space in the overall layout which can lead to cracked graphics.

Text emails

In some cases, there may be no need for images, or you may not have the functionality to include them. It's therefore important to find other ways to emphasise your message and keep the attention of your reader.

There are certain limitations with email which don't exist with web content. Often, even basic elements of style such as font, bolding and italics aren't customisable so you must find other, more subtle ways to grab your recipient's attention. Consider your use of:

- Spaces

- Lines

- Special characters

- Capital letters

Dimensions of text emails

The width of a text email shouldn't exceed 70 characters. There are no such restrictions on the length. However, it's worth considering that the longer a text email is, the less likely it is that your reader will reach the end, without the help of images to break up your content!

URLs

Try to keep the length of any URLs as short as possible. Longer URL's are more likely to break or not work.

Importing text content from MS Word

If you are importing text, then it is best to avoid MS Word because Microsoft generally use non-ASCII characters and so letters may appear differently from the way they should.

Instead, we would recommend using a text editor like notepad or wordpad when creating text for email.

Getting email reporting right

One of the reasons that email marketing is such a powerful tool for small businesses, is the speed at which you can reach your audience with your message. While direct mail can take 4-6 weeks before results can be seen, with an email campaign, it's possible to see leads coming through almost immediately. Even better, once you can see results, you can start to analyse them and in turn, make changes to your campaigns to improve them.

By knowing what to measure – and how, you can maximise the performance of your campaigns and ensure that your results continue to grow and improve.

Email marketing metrics

Let's start by looking at the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that you should review and monitor as part of any B2B email marketing campaign:

External KPIs

These metrics focus on the email itself and will help you to spot trends and identify issues such as low engagement and poor deliverability, allowing you to make tweaks and improve performance in future campaigns.

Below is a breakdown of the external KPIs and how they should be used:

KPI	Calculation	Used to measure	Evaluation
Delivery rate	% of total emails sent – those which were undeliverable	Deliverability and list hygiene	List quality and deliverability
Open rate	Opened email messages as a % of delivered emails	Interest or engagement. Customers opening your email more than once	Could indicate interest in your offer
Unique open rate	Number of delivered emails opened as a % of delivered emails (repeat opens by same recipient not counted)	Interest or engagement	A more accurate reflection of email reach than standard open rate
Bounce rate	Undeliverable emails as a % of emails sent	Deliverability and list hygiene	Highlights issues with list quality and deliverability - even by different target audiences
Unsubscribe	% of email contacts that ask to be removed from your list	Customer engagement and message relevance	Strength of campaign message and brand
Click-through rate	% of clicks on one or more links in the email	Customer engagement and message relevance	Highlights good prospects and those who are just casual browsers
Unique click-through rate	Number of unique recipients who click on one or more links in the email	Customer engagement and message relevance	Highlights good prospects and those who are just casual browsers
Spam complaints	Total number of complaints that the message is spam	Sent automatically by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) or manually by recipients	Strength of campaign message and brand
Referrals/forwarded messages	Number of times your email is forwarded to a new contact	Customer interest and message relevance	Strength of campaign message and brand

Internal KPIs

These focus on the overall impact of your email campaign on your business and allow you to track important factors such as ROI and revenue:

KPI	Calculation	Used to measure
Revenue	Revenue generated during the campaign	Campaign revenue and Return on Investment (ROI)
Average revenue/email delivered	Revenue divided by number of emails delivered	Comparison with previous campaigns and against objectives
ROI	Revenue generated per £ spent on campaign	Effectiveness of marketing investment
ROI per email	ROI per email delivered	Comparison with previous campaigns and against objectives
Leads	Number of recipients registering interest in offer	Message relevance and engagement
Conversions	Number of leads converted to sales as a result of the campaign	Relevance of message Effectiveness of campaign
Customer actions	Number of recipients who follow the call to action in the email – eg. Download a document, register for a prize draw, complete a survey.	Message relevance and engagement

Getting email reporting right - continued

Deciding what to measure

Of course, not all of the KPIs that we've mentioned may be necessary or appropriate for each campaign you run. The last thing you want is to waste precious time measuring things which aren't going to add value, so we've put together the following nine steps. Following these will help you to decide what you need to measure for your own campaigns and your own business. You'll be able to use this template for all your future campaigns!

1. **Set clear campaign goals** which directly support your business objectives

2. **Choose external and internal KPIs that will help you** to demonstrate the value of your marketing investment

3. **Make sure you or your email delivery service** has the software that will allow you to measure the KPIs you've chosen

4. **Set up in advance the reports** you'll need to complete and track

5. **Review and analyse all the information you've collated** so that you can spot any issues and trends and take appropriate action

6. **Run tests and compare the results** so that you can tweak and enhance your campaign as you go (not to mention future campaigns!)

7. **Track results over time,** monitoring key highs, lows, averages and means that can be used to model and forecast your future campaigns

8. **Review your results against your objectives,** noting which you have met and which you consistently fail to meet. This will help you to identify current processes which may need to change

9. **Review your learnings** and use them to keep making improvements to your email campaigns

How to measure your email campaign results

Once you know *what* you need to measure, it's important to know how to go about it. Here are a few ways that you can gather results.

A/B testing

By testing different versions of your copy or design, you can optimise your emails for maximum impact. Here are a few examples of ways that you can use testing in your own campaigns;

- Try different subject lines to see which has the best open rates

- Use segmented target groups to test different offers

- Test different images, copy and formats (HTML or plain text) to see which get more engagement

- Send your emails at different times and days to see which works best for your audience

Only change one aspect of each email at a time so that you can pin-point exactly what has triggered any variations in results.

Developing an email campaign model

As you collect more and more information on all your email campaigns, you can start to create a model which will allow you to forecast the results and performance of future campaigns. You can plan campaigns efficiently by basing your decisions on previous results and evidence of what works and what doesn't. Here are a few of the factors to consider when developing your model:

- What guidelines can you use to influence future KPIs?

- Do personalised subject lines work better?

- Which days and times generate the best opens, clicks and leads?

- How long does it normally take for customers to take action once the campaign is delivered?

- Are responses improved with personalised content?
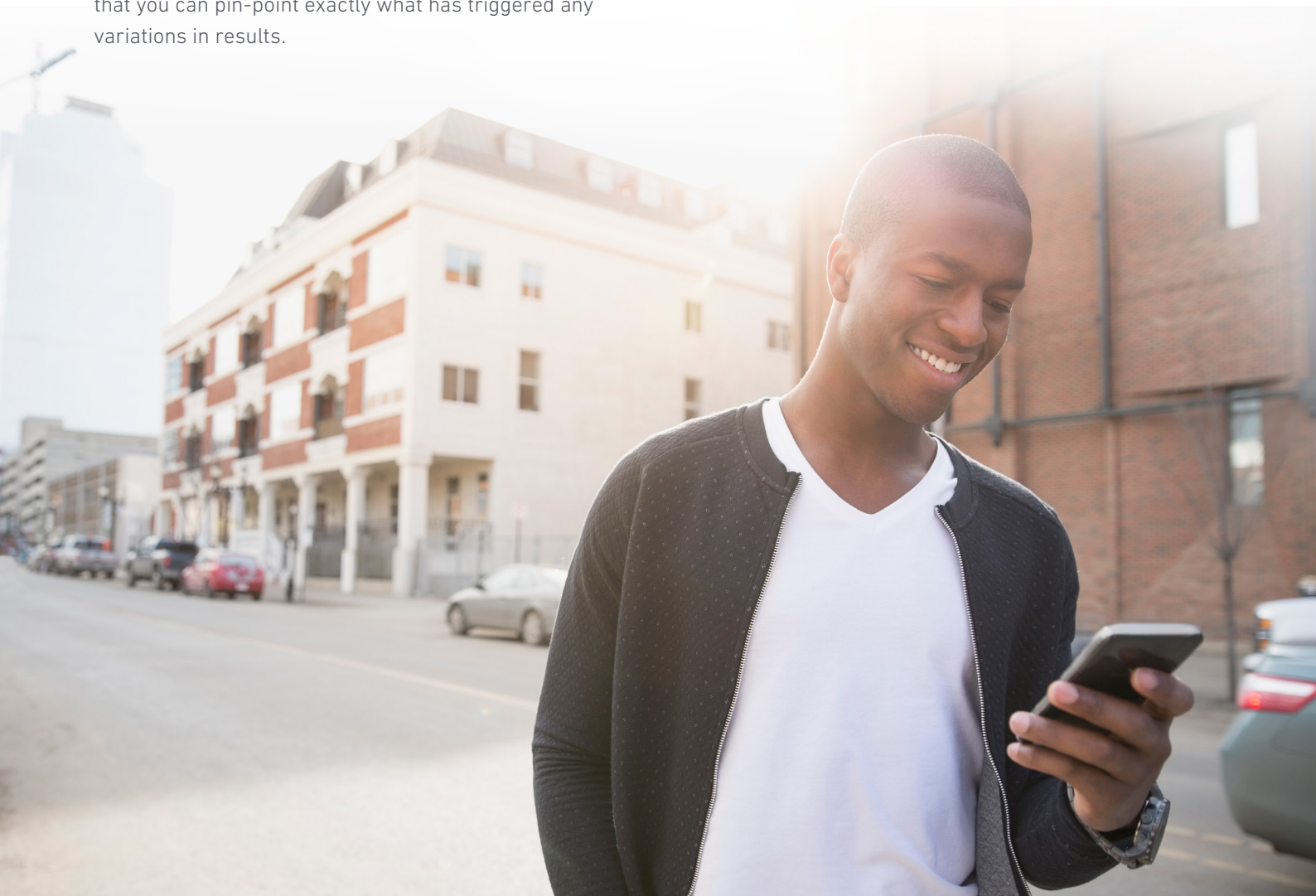
Getting email reporting right - continued

When you're not getting the results you want

There are a number of factors which may be having a negative impact on your campaign. By identifying these risks, you can put processes in place to reduce them – or avoid them completely.

Reason	Description
Poor permission practices	This can be a key reason for poor results. If you've bought contacts and haven't done your due-diligence, then you may be emailing people without permission.
Incentivised subscribers	If you have incentivised people to sign up to your list with offers, prize draws or free trials, they may not be genuinely interested in your campaign.
False expectations	Don't promise more than you can deliver when you're trying to get people to opt in!
Poor content	If your copy, your images or your format are bad then this will impact your campaign performance.
Irrelevant content	If people have been on your list for a long time, their interests may have changed. Allow them to update their preferences or unsubscribe easily if they are no longer engaged or interested.
Low deliverability	If your emails aren't even reaching your recipients' inboxes, then your campaign will suffer. Monitor deliverability rates and if there are issues, identify which ISPs may be blocking your emails or which addresses are failing. Your email marketing software should be able to remove bounced addresses.
Wrong frequency	Too many or too few emails to your subscribers can cause them to get annoyed or to completely lose interest. Ask your subscribers how often they want to hear from you!
Old list	Your contacts start to 'decay' after 3-6 months and this leads to lower open rates, clicks and conversions. Contact your unengaged subscribers to re-engage them or nudge them to the unsubscribe button.

Of course, your campaign relies on more than just delivering high quality emails. You need to ensure that your audience quality and size is optimised for maximum conversions. Here are a few factors that may impact your list:

List churn

This is the rate at which people unsubscribe from your list. For example, if you have 20,000 addresses on your list, and 6,000 drop out in a year (500 a month), then your annual churn rate is 30 percent and monthly is 2.5 percent.

You can reduce your churn rate by providing subscribers with segmented content that specifically matches their interests and customer behaviour.

The frequency of your emails can also impact churn. Find out how often your customers want to hear from you through a combination of testing and customer feedback.

List fatigue

When people on your email list have become inactive because they are no longer interested or engaged with your content, they are unlikely to open your emails and so to convert. Be conscious that your churn rate doesn't give you the full picture on what your audience feels about your email campaign. Many people will feel unengaged but won't unsubscribe due to apathy or complete lack of awareness of your emails.

Here are the three main contributors to list fatigue:

• Incorrect email frequency. As above, make sure that you have tested and sought feedback on how often your audience want to hear from you

• Irrelevant content and offers

• Content that provides no value, but just goes straight for the sale. Don't forget, your customers want to be wooed!

List hurdle rate

As list fatigue and churn deteriorates the size and quality of your list, you will need to calculate your 'email list hurdle rate'. This will give you the number of subscribers/ new records you need to acquire to re-build your email data list and replace the ones you lose through inactive and unsubscribed customers.

Calculation: Total of hard bounces, unsubscribes and spam complaints divided by your current list size.

For example: You may lose 40 subscribers in month one for a monthly hurdle rate of 0.80 percent (480 over a year). Therefore, if you have a list of 5,000 that you want to grow to 7,000 in a year, you would need to add 2,480 new subscribers over the 12 months, 480 more than the 2,000 needed if no subscribers were lost. This calculation is very helpful when it comes to your annual marketing planning and to forecasting subscribers and revenue.

Conclusion

We have illustrated that there are many factors to consider when planning and creating a successful B2B email campaign. Here are our key takeaways for you to put into action in your own email marketing strategy:

• Get the right balance between quantity and quality when you're building your email list. The larger your list, the more sales you'll make – as long as you have cultivated a list of engaged customers who fit your target audience

• Purchasing email data can be a great way to boost your results, but make sure you do your due diligence before you buy

• Segment your list so that you can deliver personalised content to your audience. This will reduce your list churn and increase your sales

• Be aware of the technical best practices when you are building your campaign so that you can ensure maximum visibility and deliverability

• Your job isn't finished when you hit 'send' - identify your key KPIs and monitor these so that you can make appropriate changes to improve your existing and future campaigns

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