

Double-Edged Sword

Paula O'Connell

TECHNOLOGY

Double-Edged Sword?

Email provides an immediate, direct and cost-effective means to reach customers. However, it is vulnerable to misuse, open to poor targeting, often ignored and deleted or lost in the influx of messages in any one person's inbox. Paula O'Connell reports...

Powerful as an email can be, it can clearly be a double-edged sword. If used well, it has a proven ability to build store traffic, loyalty, repeat business and can even encourage greater customer spending. If misused, however, an email campaign can be disastrous for the sensitive customer relationship and have a negative impact on community attitudes to email marketing in general.

One of the most common pitfalls, particular for those new to email marketing, is the temptation to say too much within one message. Short and sweet is most favoured in other formats, but in the email environment, the need for clear and concise communication is more critical than ever. If a newsletter or special offer does not make its point immediately, recipients are likely to hit the delete button. Worst-case scenario – legitimate customer messages are so badly represented by their subject lines, that they are simply mistaken for spam.

One of the biggest challenges in this form of communication is to stand out from trivia and nonsense. With only a 'from' address and a subject line to get your readers attention, you must pay caution to the words used. Messages with titles such as "Chance to WIN \$500!" are more likely to get deleted, and rightly so! It is more preferable to use amiable language such as 'Special offer from company x' or 'your gift from x company'. Many emails arrive in the average inbox these days, all jostling for the recipient's attention. Companies are compelled to find clever ways to get their messages noticed, but very few are drawing on the most powerful resource and the one that sets them apart from competitors – their own existing customer database.

The idea behind the buzzword "personalisation" is about using the customer information to tailor messages and therefore make it more meaningful to the individual. The great tragedy is that, so far, many email campaigns do little more than insert the recipient's name and incorporate a standard message that may have very little relevance to an individual customer. These messages fail to demonstrate any consideration for the individual's preferences or requirements. Any benefits can be completely undone with bad data washing if the email uses an incorrect name, improper case on the name, includes the customer's full name in a casual communication, or vice-versa.

It's important to listen to customer feedback. Some may be passive, derived from click-through analytics, and open behaviours. Others may provide active feedback such as preference in the way information is given through member management pages, registration pages and customer surveys. These are a key opportunity to show respect for the customer's email-based relationship and develop strong, loyal associations. In a recent UK survey, customers described spam as any email "that arrives too often", even from a company they do business with. It is vital to show respect for the customer relationship by communicating to them when appropriate and relevant.

There are also risks in the choice in email formatting and construction. Colour and graphics, along with animation, are useful tools to highlight the message, communicate company brands, and call to action within the body content. However, some go overboard with graphics, make the email too image heavy, which then takes a long time to download or slows down their own server. Ask the recipients what format they prefer to receive their emails. Let them tell you if they prefer text or html and most importantly, follow through with these requests so that trusted relationships are built. A poorly constructed email campaign has the same risks posed by too-frequent, un-tailored and



For an email marketing campaign to work, they need to be smarter about the content they use. Retailers, in particular, stand to benefit greatly in light of the intense competition to maintain customer loyalty. They need to start using more datapoints and harness what they know about customers in order to remain competitive. Email is both cost efficient and direct, so customising messages to suit individuals is imperative if you are intent on the campaign being a success.

Of course, having a robust database from the beginning is the easiest way to tailor emails, but companies can also ask for the information needed down the line if they don't already have it, by way of member management pages and surveys.

misdirected messages. These pitfalls can actually harm a company's ability to communicate with the customer in future. If a customer unsubscribes, it can be difficult to reach them again without follow up with telesales or via post. Remember, email offers one-to-one, customised communication that's highly traceable and has instant, measurable results. Before clicking 'send' on the next campaign consider – are you using your message as a powerful tool, or taking a haphazard swipe with a double-edged sword?

Paula O'Connell is the Managing Director of returnity, an Australian email-marketing specialist.

