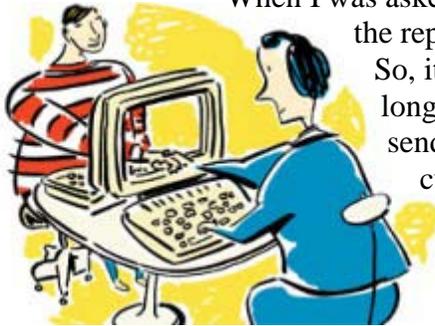


8 Lessons Learned from My First Million Emails



When I was asked to contribute to an [online article for BusinessWeek](#) on email the reporter used bits and pieces of an intense 30-minute interview. So, it got me thinking: I haven't written about email marketing for a long time. I manage a handful of email campaigns for clients, sending roughly 75,000 emails per month to prospects and customers. So, here goes.

Always be building your list.

Don't bother trying to buy an email list like you buy a list for direct mail. While a few good ones exist, the chances of you buying a bogus list far, far outweigh the chances of you finding a good one.

Good email lists are built, literally, one address, or a handful of addresses, at a time. Start with your customers. Use an Excel spreadsheet with just a handful of columns: first name; last name; email address; company name; type of product bought. The reason: you'll want to personalize your messages, or perhaps send only to those people who bought a specific product.

Start another list for prospects from the free downloads on your site, blog commenters, inquiries, trade show passers-by, vendors.

Collect email addresses as you would dollar bills on the ground: every time you stumble upon one, regardless of where or when, pick it up. Sitting down to add addresses once a week or month assures you'll miss at least 20% of them. And by the way, do you know what a good email address costs to buy (if you can find the good ones)? About a buck.

Use a service to send, manage and report.

Google "email marketing" and you'll find a million to choose from. An email service sends the email for you, manages lists you upload, provides design templates for your emails, handles opt outs and bounces and, most importantly, gives you reports on response. Most start at around \$15-20 per month, which allows you to send to a few thousand people. The cost goes up as the number of people you send to increases. We use and recommend myemma.com. Using a service simply makes it easier on you. Also, as you build your list into the thousands, some email providers may label you as a spammer. Email services are known to the spam police.

Write the Subject Line last, and give it its due.

Don't assume that because they are your customers people will automatically read what you send. You have to earn their attention, and the subject line is where you do that. Think newspaper article headline: punchy, but descriptive. It's fine to be excited about things, but leave

the "Our Biggest Sale Ever" to the spammers. Don't exaggerate or over-promise. You're an adult. Your customers are adults. Act accordingly.

Send as often as you can create something you'd appreciate receiving yourself.



I get asked a lot how often can you send email without wearing out your welcome. The headline to this section is really the best answer. It's about quality. When you have something important or interesting to say, say it. I try to avoid Mondays and Fridays for obvious reasons. I receive emails from Seth Godin every day. They're terrific. I receive emails from copyblogger.com maybe once a week. They're terrific. As long as you worry more about keeping them terrific, how often you send will take care of itself.

Build value in your emails, don't sell. . .or, more to the point, sell by building value.

The more value you deliver, the stronger the selling results. I tell people to imagine being a paid coach of the people receiving your emails. How can you best educate this group in bite-size pieces? That's your email campaign. What questions are you getting from your customers lately? Answer those. What's going on in their world you can help them understand, give advice around or link to an article about? If you still aren't sure about content, subscribe to some email updates by competitors and from companies you admire, regardless of industry. It would be a great use of time to spend a month receiving emails before you start yours.

If you are having a sale, promote it. If you've lowered a price, announce it. If you have a new product, let people know. But keep those types of emails to about 20-30% of the total.

Present the entire story in the email.

I get asked this a lot too: How long should my email be? My answer: it should have a beginning, middle and end. Most people think shorter is better. Short is good, but not necessarily better than long. On a good day, 12% of the people who you send to will click through to your website. On a great day you might double that. If you want more than 20% of your recipients (at best!) to get the whole story, and you do, don't make them click to get it.

Include images.



Pictures help you tell your story. Very simply, more people will read your email with pictures than without. The one I use at the beginning of this piece is by Ward Schumaker. I also use istock.com, a great site that sells low-cost stock photos and illustrations.

Personalize your emails.

Dear Hamilton is better than Dear Friend. All the email services allow you to do this, so do it. With one client we also mention the customer's salesperson in their emails, which doubled their click-through rate.

That's it. Until I get to #9, 8 will have to do. All of these lessons may not relate to every email you send, but you'll send better, more interesting and impactful emails if you at least consider each before you hit "Send."



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