

THE TRUTH
ABOUT

EMAIL MARKETING

“Email Marketing is
extremely cost
efficient, targeted,
and measurable...”

Simms Jenkins

Nationally known email marketing expert and CEO of BrightWave Marketing

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Publishing as FT Press
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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Portions of this book first appeared as columns written by Simms Jenkins on iMedia Connection (www.imediaconnection.com) and are used here with permission.

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing August 2008

ISBN-10: 0-7897-3794-9
ISBN-13: 978-0-7897-3794-6

Pearson Education LTD.
Pearson Education Australia PTY, Limited.
Pearson Education Singapore, Pte. Ltd.
Pearson Education North Asia, Ltd.
Pearson Education Canada, Ltd.
Pearson Educación de Mexico, S.A. de C.V.
Pearson Education—Japan
Pearson Education Malaysia, Pte. Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Jenkins, Simms.

The truth about email marketing / Simms Jenkins.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-7897-3794-6
1. Internet marketing. 2. Electronic mail systems. I. Title.
HF5415.1265.J46 2008
658.8'72--dc22

Publisher
Paul Boger
Associate Publisher
Greg Wiegand
Acquisitions Editor
Rick Kughen
Development Editor
Rick Kughen
Technical Editor
Mark Brownlow
Marketing Coordinator
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Foreword

Ask online marketers to rank tactics by ROI, efficiency, or just about any other success measure, and email marketing normally battles paid search for top place. Surveys show the returns easily outpace those from any other form of direct marketing.¹

Email drives online and offline sales for retailers and delivers leads for B2B marketers. It strengthens customer relationships, creates loyalty, and builds trust and awareness. And it does all this cost-effectively using data-driven technology that lets you customize your messages down to an individual recipient basis.

Email marketing is a proven success.

Despite this, email has never received a commensurate level of respect or attention from the marketing media or from those who hold the marketing purse strings.

Although email marketing budgets are predicted to nearly double over the next few years² to over US\$2 billion in the United States, the numbers pale in comparison to the resources handed out to other tactics with a poorer track record.

Email marketing is an unloved stepchild.

But why?

To some extent, email is a victim of its own success. There is no denying that email can be a very low-cost way of doing marketing. This has led to a culture of underinvestment: “Email is ‘free’; email doesn’t need resources to work.”

In addition, email marketing has brought success without too much effort. It has been the packhorse of the online marketing world, quietly getting on with the job without requiring too much sophistication or care. Successful, but not very sexy.

As a busy and resource-pressed marketer, you might then ask why you’d bother looking closer at email when it’s already doing an adequate (and cheap) job?

Why indeed?

Email marketing has survived happily in its relatively unsophisticated state partly because until recently, we've lacked the tools, expertise, and insight to do anything different.

Today, even value-priced email marketing services and software offer everyone access to the kind of clever tools and features that let us refine and customize our messages to make them more relevant to the recipient. The result is more responses: sales, downloads, registrations, whatever.

We also have a far better understanding of such issues as email design, email copywriting, targeting, and other critical elements in the email marketing toolbox.

Together, these new insights and technologies give us the opportunity to get even more out of email marketing. Surveys and numerous case studies show the clear ROI benefits of investment in more sophisticated and innovative email techniques.

So there is a clear upside to investing time, energy, and cash in best practices and advanced email approaches.

Equally, there is a clear downside to continuing with the old practices.

Email users are growing increasingly selective and short on patience when choosing which emails to read. The quality bar is rising. While the rewards for those who best meet user needs are huge, those who continue with old-style email marketing are likely to see their returns fall steadily.

The same users who reward good email marketing with attention and action can also “punish” mediocre email marketing. They do this not just by ignoring the messages, but also by reporting emails as spam simply because they don’t want them anymore.

If enough do so, you can find yourself blocked from access to millions of email inboxes.

Those who guard these inboxes—the Webmail services, Internet service providers (ISPs), and IT departments—are also increasingly picky about which emails they let through to their customers and users.

In the arms race against spam, legitimate marketing emails that don't follow best practices can end up as collateral damage—blocked by the same antispam technologies designed to catch the less salubrious unsolicited email.

Changing email habits add their own complications. Consider the growth of mobile email, for example. How do you build emails that look good on small screens and catch the attention of busy executives and consumers away from the office or PC?

Then we have new online developments: Web 2.0, social networks, instant messaging, blogs, feeds, wikis, and so on. None will replace email, but all potentially compete with email. Or complement email. Or provide opportunities to make better use of email. (Or all three.)

The modern email marketer is charged with making sense of all this. The aim is to reap the many benefits that email marketing offers by building strategies and employing tactics that exploit the medium's potential while meeting the challenges previously outlined.

If that sounds like a daunting task, you're in the right place.

With *The Truth About Email Marketing*, Simms Jenkins has written a book that supports exactly this aim. In it you'll find the background information and insight you need to review your existing email marketing efforts and make them better.

Much of the literature on email marketing deals with practical minutiae. Though Simms also covers some of that, this book focuses on two elements of email marketing rarely covered elsewhere.

The first element is the strategic and organizational background. This begins with an understanding of the benefits that email marketing can bring your organization and how you can build the right framework for developing your program.

The second element is an explanation of the concepts behind winning email marketing systems. In a dynamic online world, there is only temporary value in giving specific instructions on the whats, wheres, and whens of an email.

Simms "teaches you to fish" by arming you with the knowledge necessary to continually assess and refine your strategy, tactics, and emails in the light of both long-standing principles of best practice and the challenge of an ever-changing email and online environment.

Your organization can gain so much from new and proven approaches to email marketing. After reading this book, I'm sure you'll be nearer to achieving those gains.

Mark Brownlow, Ph.D.

Email Marketing Reports

www.email-marketing-reports.com

April 2008

Introduction

“What helps people, helps business.” —Leo Burnett, advertising legend

“Trying to assess the true importance and function of the Net now is like asking the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk if they were aware of the potential of American Airlines Advantage miles.” —Bran Ferren, Chief Imagineer, Walt Disney Company

Email marketing is one of the most incredibly powerful yet misunderstood mediums of the marketing world. Nearly all businesses and consumers utilize it, whether it is to send or receive content and offers.

Email marketing is a unique communication platform that blends both art and science while delivering value to the subscriber’s inbox. While many companies practice it, few get email marketing right. It is part of our business landscape that requires constant grooming. Change is the only constant.

I’ve been working in the interactive space for over ten years. During this time, I’ve seen a great deal of money thrown into questionable business models and unproven companies and executives. I’ve also seen a lot of really bright people take chances in their careers and launch game-changing companies.

Email emerged as the “killer app” of the Internet age. While there is certainly more competition for buzz and mindshare today, email still is the bread and butter of any online user experience. In telling *The Truth About Email Marketing*, I had to make a lot of hard decisions about what to include and what not to include. I hope this book provides a range of key email marketing elements that will appeal to and educate a wide audience.

This book should be the kind that sits on your desk and is referenced, earmarked, and highlighted rather than passively read. My aim was for this to be a guide in your email marketing adventure. Whether you are a seasoned professional email marketer or are brand new to the topic, this book is for you.

Now back to the two quotes at the top of this section. They both speak to me in different ways. How they speak to email marketing is revealing as well.

My biggest complaint about email marketers (and often marketing in general) is a fundamental one. Entire strategy and email campaigns are often driven by achieving internal marketing goals, rather than bringing compelling and helpful information to their subscribers who gave them one of the most important things one can provide in an online world: permission. If we remember to focus on the subscribers first, the business goals will follow.

Email marketing has changed, as the Internet has, in a dramatic fashion. And I'm just talking about in the past six months. It's quite challenging to wrap our heads around the impact of email marketing in its short history. There are many levels to how email marketing has changed businesses and consumer habits. Nevertheless, we can clearly demonstrate email's ongoing effectiveness and develop and follow a set of core best practices that will ensure that effectiveness continues into the future. Hopefully, this book can help you along the way in this endeavor.

Just as the Wright brothers had no idea how their invention would impact the future aviation industry, many of you marketing professionals are shaping Internet history.

PART V: THE TRUTH ABOUT
CREATING AND GROWING A LIST

TRUTH

14

It is not easier to ask for
forgiveness



You know how it goes. You settle into a nice dinner with your family or have just tuned in to the season finale of your favorite TV show when the phone rings. It's a sales call. You didn't ask for it, and it certainly isn't happening at an opportune time. Even if the salesperson is offering something you might be interested in, you likely feel interrupted and frustrated since you didn't give out your phone number in the first place. Email marketing is no different in this regard, and sending unsolicited emails to people who don't want to receive them might get you a random conversion here and there, but it will land you in hot water with the Internet service providers (ISP)s, ruin long-term brand-loyal relationships, and damage your reputation.

Permission email marketing occurs when recipients have taken action to explicitly request you add them to your email address list. For example, your favorite restaurant is sending you permission email marketing messages after you give them your email address. In this case, the emails may contain menu items, specials, or unique offers.

Permission is the key to any good email program. Like I've said a thousand times, email is about building a relationship that will ultimately drive brand value and increase revenue. Sending unsolicited emails to a prospect's or customer's already clogged inbox will not get you very far. If you think that getting permission to send email to someone is optional, think again.

Checks and boxes

True opt-in means your subscribers are opting in by choice and checking a box on their own good will. Someone on your list who simply has not opted out should not be considered an opt-in. Or put another way, not unsubscribing or not checking the Do Not Send box is not the same level of permission as someone who willingly checks the Subscribe or Send Me Email options.

The first recommendation I have when it comes to gaining permission to email a prospect or customer is to never precheck a box for them. Say you visit a website for a company that sells widgets. You want someone to call you about the company's different products, so you complete the contact form on the company website. As you are about to click Submit, you notice a box at the very bottom

that has a check in it indicating that you would like to subscribe to the company's email program for special offers and promotions.

Often times, website visitors don't notice this box is checked and are tricked into subscribing. This is not the way to run a responsible email program. You need to put the potential subscribers in the driver's seat when it comes to email. Assuming they want email communications from you and creating the extra step of unchecking a box or, even worse, unsubscribing, won't work in your favor or theirs. You might get a bigger list but not a better list. If you are still focused on list growth by any means, you can skip ahead to Truth 17, and read what CBS SportsLine did in terms of making sure it had a list full of active subscribers.

Single opt-in

When it comes to getting permission from your subscribers, there are many ways and places it can happen. The most important thing to remember is that all subscribers on your list must take some type of action to indicate they would like to receive email communications from your company. As long as your sign-up is clearly defined and subscribers can easily understand what they will receive and when, a single opt-in will do the job. A single opt-in occurs when users provide their email address and are then automatically entered as new subscribers. No verification or second step is required of the subscribers during a single opt-in process. The best way to follow up with this type of opt-in is to send an immediate welcome message. (See Truth 43 for more on welcome messages.) This alerts you to bad addresses and gives the recipients a chance to see your email program in action while they still have your company on their mind.

Double opt-in

You may be wondering about double opt-in. This type of opt-in entails a person subscribing and then being sent an email asking them to confirm the desire to subscribe, usually by clicking on a confirmation link in the email. Although double opt-in gained momentum years ago, deliverability and usability issues with getting that confirmation email to the inbox and clicked have caused many to move away from it. In fact, only 3 percent of major online retailers use a double opt-in subscription process.¹

Many clients using a double opt-in process have a black hole of data for those who are not completing the second stage of the double opt-in process. This means often there are many would-be email subscribers who fail to complete the second step for one of many reasons and, therefore, are not in the database but may not know that. Ensure that you can identify where the “forgotten email subscribers” data resides and make sure the second step email goes out without a hitch.

Existing relationship with no opt-in

If you have a recent existing relationship with customers or prospects, it is okay to send them a one-time message offering an opportunity to join your email list. After permission is granted, you’ll be able to email them again, but remember that an offline relationship does not give you the right to email them. So get their permission before adding your offline customers into your email database.

An old list

If you have a list that has collected some dust and you’ve finally decided to rev up the old email program, ask subscribers to reconfirm or opt out. It is up to you to engage them again, but being honest and upfront about your intentions is a good first step. It can often lead to getting an updated user database as well. Here’s some language to get you going: “We know you haven’t heard from us in a while, but we are excited to say that we’ve made some improvements to our email newsletter and want to begin sharing them with you. You are subscribed already, but since you haven’t heard from us in a while, we want to ask our valued customers and subscribers for continued permission to email them about our great offers and news. If you would like to continue to receive these email notices, please click here to update your profile.”

Remind them

In addition to always including an easy way (in each message) for recipients to opt out from your email program, include reminder language in your header or footer such as, “You signed up for this newsletter on our website or in our stores. If you would like to opt out of future newsletters, click here.”