

## 5 Rules for an Effective Direct Email Marketing Campaign



By Eric Rudolf

Since the middle of 2001, I estimate I have booked, written, sent, and evaluated over \$8 million in B2B and B2C direct email campaigns—promoting everything from enterprise software to educational services to retail products. Over this eight-year period many things within the direct email landscape have changed, thanks in part to laws like The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 (which laid out enforceable rules for content, unsubscribing from email, and sending email) and the increased availability of opt-in lists that anyone with a credit card can get their hands on.

While other Internet-based marketing methods such as blogging, social networking, and mobile device integration are rapidly advancing in sophistication and quality, I continue to see companies both small and large make the same direct email mistakes they were making almost a decade ago.

With the above in mind, here are five new rules for direct email marketing.

### Rule #1: Don't Cram the Entire Message into the Subject Line

Typing a short story into the subject line of an email is something even my technology-inhibited grandparents are savvy enough to not do, but for some reason most companies still can't help themselves. Case in point: earlier this morning I received the latest edition of the Weekly Marketing Bulletin via email, and the subject line was this:

Includes: The Top 10 Reasons Your Email Isn't Being Delivered & How to Fix it

For those of you who aren't willing to do it, I counted . . . there are almost 80 characters here. **If your company doesn't already have guidelines for the number of characters in a subject line, a good rule of thumb is 35 to 45 characters maximum.** And as a sanity check, always send the email to yourself first so you can see what it looks like in your Inbox. This particular email showed up in my inbox pane as "Includes: The Top 10 Reasons Your In..." Hardly compelling.

### Rule #2: Put the Important Information in Places People Will Read It

Anyone who has taken a marketing communications workshop in the past five years understands **there is a pattern to how people read email. As I recall, the order of information from top to bottom typically goes: 1) subject line, 2) email header and sub header, 3) linked text, 4) bold text, 5) anything in a bulleted list, and 6) P.S. line,** if one exists. If the information you want to communicate isn't in one or more of those places, chances are no one will see it.

### Rule #3: Take Advantage of the From Line

To this day, I can't figure out why so many companies refuse to use a "from" line that makes sense. Looking through my Deleted Items as I write this post, I see dozens of non-descript "from" lines such as "M L," "Info," "EXED," and "hub1"—abbreviations that are completely meaningless to me. At a minimum, using something like your company name in the "from" line will spare you from having to use it in the subject line, saving dozens of characters that can be allocated to an actual marketing message.

### Rule #4: Scale Back Your Message Frequency

The act of someone joining your marketing list does NOT give you permission to pound their email boxes into submission. With direct email there is a "noise threshold" you MUST obey to prevent opt-outs—**one email per three**

#### Email Tips

[Does Email Cold Calling Work?](#)

[How to Write an Effective Email Newsletter](#)

[Case Study: How to Create and Execute an Email Campaign that Generates High Prospect Interest](#)

weeks for B2B, and one email per week for B2C. When it comes to message frequency, less is definitely more.

Unfortunately, many people I follow on Twitter have a difficult time grasping this concept as well. In the past week I have stopped following over 30 companies because they believe posting four tweets at a time—at a rate of six times per day—is an intelligent way to drive traffic to their websites. Here's a tip: if you send me 24 messages per day, I won't read any of them. Then I'll block you.

#### **Rule #5: Segment Your List**

If all goes well, soon you will be in possession of a 20,000-piece, opt-in email list of people who actually *want* to hear from your company on a regular basis. When you have that list, the next challenge—demographic segmentation—is even more difficult than building the list. In a perfect world, every person on your list will have the same needs and interests. But most of us aren't this lucky. When your list becomes larger, start the segmentation process by sending subscribers a quick survey about the types of information they are interested in, giving them a small list of options to choose from. When it is time to get even more sophisticated, dig deeper into your followers' backgrounds. The key to good demographics is to customize them based on your business model and what you are trying to accomplish—not to use the same job function, title, age, and gender classifications every other company in the world uses.

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#### **Reader Feedback**

Excellent and pithy article that all marketers should read once in a while for a "common sense check" on what they are up to with their email campaigns!

—*Tim Haveron Jones*  
*Practice Director, BMR Advisors*

Rule 1 is quite often forgotten. If prospects can't read your brilliant subject line because it isn't there, what good is? Though too long to make his point, Rudolf's example subject line is an interest catcher. Potential readers have to want to open our emails, so the subject line has to be about them succeeding. It's the hardest thing when creating direct emails to remember to write the whole thing about the recipient benefitting. Yes, I put ONLY benefitting here—like Rudolf's example. We can too easily write about our features they'll benefit from and go light on stating the benefits, assuming they see themselves succeeding just because we do. I wrote a good bit more on getting people to open and read our emails in my latest post, [The 1st 7 Seconds Rule for Emails](#).

—*Ted Vinzani*  
*Owner, RelevanceSells.com*

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