Improving Email Open Rates – My Favorite Tips

By: Chris Bachman | July 10, 2014

1. 60 Characters Subject Lines

Keep it short and to the point. How does it read? Does it make you want to read more? Does it come off spammy? Treat it like you would a Title tag on a website page. Better yet, look at your email each day and make note of the subject lines which catch your attention. What works? What doesn't?

2. Deliver what you promise

Don't be vague or promise something just to get them to open the email. Do that and your numbers will plummet as your opt-outs soar. Always lead with your strongest point and reiterate it in the opening copy. You have about 15-20 seconds before they move on to the next email.

3. Frequency

It is different for everyone and it can change over time. One client I have been producing a newsletter for over the years had me creating one every week. About two years ago I noticed the opt-out rate starting to climb. I had a hunch and convinced them to let me drop it back to every other week. The opt-out dropped back. I dropped it to once a month and the-opt out vanished and the open rate increased by 8%. They are saving money and getting a better response just by exercising some restraint.

Experiment with frequency. I am sure we all have emails which come so often that we simply delete them now without reading them. And we have ones that are so infrequent we can't remember why we are receiving it. Find a happy mid ground. And watch your analytics. You do have analytics installed, don't you?

4. Use their name

If you have room in the subject line, use it there. Otherwise, try to begin the email with a Dear John Doe ….the first line or so of an email is often visible in the preview pane.

Tip: First name increases open rate. Last name increases it more. Using both names increases it the most. This varies a bit by industry but is a general rule of thumb. Naturally, if you have a relationship and want to be more casual then using their first name is preferable to using first and last. Just saying…there is a difference and it isn't always what you might think.

5. Separate email addresses for different mailings

Try using a specific email address to send newsletters from versus sales pieces versus announcements etc. It should reflect the department or purpose of the email. This also helps cut down on lost contacts when someone clicks Unsubscribe or "Junk". Instead of losing them entirely you will only lose them from that list (Varies by email service).

6. Imply Urgency or Time Sensitivity

The words that have the most impact are (from least to best):

Alert / Important / Breaking / Urgent

Avoid mentioning specific dates though as that can reduce your open rate with delayed reads.

7. "From" should always mention your company or organization

Time and again I receive emails from companies where the sender neglects to mention their company in the "from" line. Since all I see is a name I am not familiar with, which instantly makes it look like so much junk mail I receive, the odds are it gets marked as junk mail and blacklisted. Don't let that happen to yours. Always make it "Your name / Your Company".

8. Test your Send times

Each audience has a somewhat different profile as to when they are most likely to open emails. Some open more on weekends rather than weekdays, others need it mid week. Some are best sent during lunch hour, some at 3PM. Test a variety of times over a period of 6-8 sends and compare the results. You might be surprised, I sure was.

9. Watch your words

Words like "Free" and "Act Now" can trigger spam filters. Words like "Reminder" and "Cancelled" can reduce open rates. On the other hand, word like "Announce" and "Invitation", in all their iterations, have a tendency to increase your open rates. Do some research on this or ask your email service provider for a list. Trust me, they have one.

10. Run Tests

Use tags to separate your lists into various sub-lists and then experiment. Run A/B tests against the ideas presented here and see what works. Doing this with our clients we routinely see up to 50% + improvement in open rates. You can too.

Chris Bachman is a business consultant and Project Director at ProClassWebDesign.com as well as a self confessed serial entrepreneur. He is a regular writer on topics pertaining to marketing, SEO, and business websites as well as an instructor and independent consultant. Learn more about Chris Bachman on Google+ or LinkedIn. Contact him at Chris@ProClassWebDesign.com.