

white paper

messagemedia

Effective Long-term Strategies for Building Your E-mail Lists




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There are many reasons why e-mail marketing to an in-house opt-in list is one of the most effective strategies for building customer loyalty, reinforcing brand and increasing revenues. Not the least of these is how cost effective such programs are. According to a recent report by Forrester Research, e-mail marketing to an in-house opt-in list has the lowest average cost per sale (\$2) when compared to any other marketing means. For instance, e-mail to rented lists costs \$286 per sale. Direct mail to an in-house list costs \$18 per sale.

According to Forrester's "The E-mail Marketing Dialogue," marketers report high conversion rates for retention e-mail sent to a company's in-house list of customers and prospects. On average, marketers get click-through rates of 10% on in-house lists; of those who click-through, 2.5% make a purchase.

But how do you create and then steadily build an in-house list? In fact, there are numerous options available that can be used individually or in combination to create a permission-based e-mail list of interested prospects. However, they don't all fit every business model. You will need to pick and choose among these strategies and then carefully craft a list development plan that fits your company's particular online marketing objectives and business model. If you're using an e-mail outsourcer, your account team should help you develop your strategy and then provide periodic reviews to ensure you're implementing an effective list-building plan.

Permission and Value Reign Supreme

As you will see in this white paper, there are two overarching themes involved in each and every list-building option: permission and value. This is because the rules of the game are different in e-mail than they are in any other marketing medium, and permission and value reign supreme.

There are numerous reasons why consumers dislike unsolicited commercial e-mail (known as spam), including the fact that it takes up valuable bandwidth and disk space. In fact, there are many organizations now calling for legislative action to eliminate spam and it is already illegal in some states. MessageMedia both follows and strongly advocates using only strict, permission-based standards when sending any commercial e-mail. For more information about creating a spam-free e-mail program, see MessageMedia's white paper on the subject, *Sometimes the Messenger Should be Shot: Build a Spam-Free Marketing Program*.

The number one requirement in e-mail marketing is simple: you must get a person's explicit permission before you can begin sending them e-mail. Doing this may prevent you from alienating many prospective customers who, if you had simply sought their permission beforehand, may have been highly receptive to your marketing efforts. Plus, it allows you to concentrate your resources on your most qualified leads – those who have expressed an interest in hearing from you. A competent e-mail solution provider should be able to consult with you on the best opt-in techniques and help you avoid trouble spots.

The second maxim in e-mail marketing is that you've got to offer something of value both to gather e-mail addresses and to keep the attention of your customers once you've made it to their inbox. In the new online business paradigm, your competition is just a few clicks away, so you must offer consumers something of value to get their attention and continue delivering it to keep them tuned in. There are many ways of creating value for your customers. In online retailing, that something of value could be e-mail only discounts, coupons, gift certificates or free shipping – even personalized and customized information. For example, one online cosmetics retailer provided fashion and beauty tips via a monthly e-mail. In online publishing, it could be unique, valuable or conveniently delivered information. As you develop your e-mail marketing strategy, take some time to think about ways of delivering value with each and every communication.

Planning for a Long-term Relationship

The unique features of e-mail marketing create special opportunities for establishing a dialogue with your customers. You can get nearly instant feedback to measure the success of different programs. You can reinforce your brand with a consistent look and feel. You can develop customer loyalty through personalization and customization. And, you can target your communications to selected demographics or to specific interests.

But to do all that, you must carefully craft your list development strategy. You'll need to consider how much information to gather initially and then explore whether to collect further data over time. Initially, perhaps you may just collect an e-mail address and a customer's permission to start receiving e-mails from you. You may want to ask subscribers how often they would like to hear from you, too. Over time, however, you may want to gather information on their interests or demographic profiles. In order to do this, you will need to develop a one-to-one relationship with subscribers that engenders a sense of trust. Consumers will give you more information if they trust that you will use it wisely by maintaining their privacy, that you have a useful purpose for it, and that there is some benefit for them. Again, you must offer subscribers something of value and make the case that the information will enable you to better serve them by allowing you to tailor your communications to their specific interests and needs. Then, follow through on your promises and the likely result is that you will achieve the ultimate in e-messaging success – maximizing the value of each customer by communicating the right information to the right person at the right time.

Converting an Existing In-house List to an Opt-in List

If you already have a list of names that you have gathered over time, but you don't know whether they are officially opted in – or if you know that they aren't – then now is the time to convert it to a fully permission-based list.

Let's clarify what we mean by "opt-in" and "permission-based" e-mail. We mean that an individual not only gave you his or her e-mail addresses, but also gave you explicit permission to make contact via e-mail.

So, you may be wondering, if someone gave you an e-mail address, why can't you start firing off marketing messages to that address? As we mentioned earlier, the rules are a little different in the online world. Unlike direct marketing via "snail mail," permission e-mail requires that you get a person's active permission to send to them – meaning they checked a box or filled in a form that clearly stated the e-mail address would be used.

If you didn't expressly state that you would be sending e-mail when you gathered your e-mail addresses – or if you're not sure whether you did – then you cannot assume the people on your list implicitly agreed to receive e-mail from you. Without that permission, you are likely to alienate or anger some of your target audience.

Fortunately, turning your existing list into an opt-in list is a fairly simple operation. You ask. Just send one e-mail (and only one) to your list members asking if they would like to receive e-mail from your company. Plainly state that if they do not reply, they will not be added to the list and may therefore lose out on future offers from you. Now is the time to pull out the heavy artillery of special incentives because you want to get as many people to sign up for your list as possible. To join, they must reply to your message.

Accept no reply as a "no thank you" and remove those names from the list. Don't send a followup message to those who declined to respond. To do so could expose you to accusations of spamming. Yes, after this process your list will likely be significantly smaller. But the quality of your list will be significantly higher because you have now established that these are people who want to hear from you.

Using Your Web Site to Gather New Names

By far the most popular way to gather new names for your e-mail marketing list is on your Web site. There are two keys to success. The first is that you must make it easy. The second is that you must offer something of value in return.

To make it easy, place the invitation to join your list on your main home page and sprinkle it throughout your site in other appropriate places. Depending on the complexity of your e-mail marketing initiatives, you may want to collect only the e-mail address or you may have a need to collect more detailed subscriber preferences. If you're gathering only the address, then you'll want to place a very simple e-mail address entry box on your home page with a submit button. Be sure you tell them what they're subscribing to, such as a daily news flash, a monthly newsletter or an occasional sales notice.

If you have a complex e-mail marketing program and are communicating different kinds of information to different groups of customers, then you may want to create a subscriber preference page and place the link to it on your home page. A subscriber preference page allows people to choose what kinds of information they want to receive from you, how often they want it and, ideally, what display format they prefer (text or graphically rich HTML).

Sometimes less is more. For instance, giving customers the opportunity to hear from you once a month instead of once a week can yield increased response rates. A good e-mail solution provider should be able to help design and then host a subscriber preference page to capture appropriate data.

You may also want to collect demographic data such as gender, age, income, etc., although we recommend that you make providing that information optional because it may discourage some people from signing up.

Two examples of the different approaches to gathering information are The Web's Entertainment Center (<http://www.twec.com>) and Mail.com (<http://www.mail.com>). TWEC.com has a simple e-mail address entry box to subscribe to its weekly newsletter right on the home page. Mail.com e-mail account holders are asked for demographic information (optional, of course) and can choose to receive information about products and services via e-mail in a variety of categories from autos to travel through its *Special Delivery* opt-in e-mail service.

You can't forget to offer people something of value for giving out their e-mail addresses. Of course, in the online world, where information is valuable currency, it doesn't have to be something of monetary value. For example, MessageMedia offers subscribers a series of e-mail marketing lessons, Smart Marketer, exclusively via e-mail. Another example is Amazon.com's offer to send customers an e-mail notice when new releases by a favorite author or on a particular subject are available.

Drive customers to your Web site in all the usual ways such as banner ads, print ads, or anything else that makes your Web presence known. If you use banner ads, consider building in a simple e-mail

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Two different sign up strategies: Mail.com collects user preferences while TWEC.com gathers only an e-mail address.

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The Information We Collect
You browse the Countrywide Home Loans web site anonymously. There are two ways that we gather information about you. First, we do track which pages of our site you visit and note your IP address (as all web sites do automatically), but do not gather any information about you as an individual. The general information we gather enables us to serve you better by continually improving our site based on current use patterns. Second, we also gather specific information from you when you're interested in our products and services.

Countrywide Home Loans Web site features an easy-to-understand privacy policy.

address entry box that will add new people to your list in one simple step. Don't forget to include copy that indicates that by submitting the address they agree to hear more from you via e-mail.

When you collect names at your Web site, subscribers may want to know what your privacy policy is. A privacy policy explains how you use information collected on your Web site and is vital to any online enterprise. If you don't have a privacy policy, it's important to carefully craft one. Once you have one, make it easy for site visitors to find it.

If you foresee any opportunities for partnership co-marketing to your list from third parties, then you need to gather explicit permission for that purpose. In general, consumers say that just because they agreed to hear from you, it does not mean they agreed to hear from someone else through you. To get permission, simply provide a separate checkbox at signup, with a caption such as: "While we never share your personal information with anyone else, we do occasionally receive valuable offers from selected companies

that we like to pass on to our valued customers. Please check this box if you would like to hear about these."

Ethically Using Partnerships and Third-Party Opt-in Lists

Partnership co-marketing and third-party opt-in lists are two other ways to get your message out to new names. The advantage of these types of programs is that you can carefully pick your target audience. Opt-in list companies have extensive demographic and "interest profile" information on their subscribers. Or, through partnership co-marketing, you can join forces with a company that has a list of people whose interests are related to your purpose. For instance, an online publication looking for new subscribers could send a message to another online publication's subscribers, or an adventure travel agency could send to an adventure outfitter's list.

These are the only two circumstances under which you should ever use someone else's list, and there are several things you'll need to keep in mind as you plan such a program. First and foremost, you must make sure that the list you are sending to is a genuine opt-in list that adheres to the highest standards of permission-based e-messaging. You should investigate the opt-in practices of anyone whose list you plan to send a message to. Do they include a checkbox or otherwise indicate to the subscriber that they will be receiving e-mail? Do they explicitly state that they may include third party offers? Ideally, they will also use confirmed opt in. The message here is that you don't want to associate your company's good name with a bad list.

There are numerous opt-in e-mail list companies today and the number keeps growing. Identifying the right lists to target is a growing challenge for marketers, so it may make sense to use a list broker to maximize the value of mailing to these lists.

Spreading the Word (Cautiously) with "Viral Marketing"

Another popular way of gathering e-mail addresses is through advocacy marketing, which is often referred to as "viral marketing." Simply put, you leverage your existing subscribers to gather new ones by asking them to

“tell a friend.” This method has become somewhat controversial due to some marketers’ poor implementation of such programs.

One online bookseller runs a viral campaign the right way. Once a customer makes a purchase at the Web site, they receive an e-mail with a promotion code which they can forward on to a friend. If the friend makes a purchase, then he or she gets free shipping on the purchase while the original customer receives a coupon book with \$500 worth of airline discounts.

Contrast the bookseller’s program with that of a major online retailer that recently came under fire for its viral marketing program. The online retailer invited its list members to provide the e-mail addresses of 25 friends in order to receive a special offer. The retailer then sent those new names an e-mail with a coupon for a modest discount off a purchase. What’s wrong with that picture?

For one thing, it violates one of the primary tenets of permission-based marketing: permission is non-transferable. Note that the bookseller does not allow people to “add a friend” to the list by giving someone else’s e-mail address. The forwarded offer comes from the original customer – not the company – so the friend receives no e-mail from the bookseller until he or she personally subscribes to the list.

For another thing, 25 is generally perceived as too many “friends” to be asking for. In order to prevent its current list members from becoming spammers themselves, the bookseller limited its offer to one coupon book per customer.

There are a few things you can do to run a successful viral marketing program without generating consumer backlash:

- Don’t let your customers sign others up for your list. My friend cannot give you my permission to e-mail me. Only I can give my permission.
- Structure the program so that the customer – not your company – sends the offer to the friend.
- Don’t encourage your customers to send the offer to any more than 10 friends. Five might even be better. Beyond that, they’re probably targeting acquaintances who may already be weary of being on such a zealous e-mailer’s joke list anyway.
- Limit the number of incentives your current customer can receive, perhaps even to just one.

Other advocacy marketing methods include placing “send a copy” buttons on original content you have on your site to allow your loyal audience to share something of interest with a friend or colleague, which brings new people “into orbit” around your site.

Sponsor a List or Newsletter

One of the key advantages to viral marketing, partnership co-marketing and sending to external opt-in lists is that you are sending e-mail to people who are already used to the medium. In a way, they are “qualified leads” because they are online, read e-mail and are accustomed to receiving information this way. Another way of targeting these qualified leads is by advertising in or sponsoring another e-mail list – particularly a newsletter or discussion list. These can be among the most cost-effective ways of reaching more people, and due to the highly specialized nature of some of these lists, you can often target very specific demographics. For example, you can sponsor a discussion list or newsletter for pharmacists, or one for tea drinkers or one for people who office out of their homes. Due to the opt-in nature of discussion lists, there are no spam issues involved, either. According to Jay Schwedelson, Corporate Vice President of Worldata, Inc., there are between 10,000 and 15,000 e-mail newsletters available, and many times that number of discussion groups. If you’re outsourcing your e-mail program – or are considering doing so – your account manager should be able to provide you with industry-specific recommendations. If not, you can

use an agency or ad network such as Worldata (<http://www.worldata.com>) or List-Universe.com (<http://list-universe.com/ad-network>), to explore pricing and options, or you can go directly to one of the many list networks such as eGroups (<http://www.egroups.com>), Topica (<http://www.topica.com>), or Cool List (<http://www.coollist.com>).

Maximize Your Marketing Efforts

While it's important to think of ways to reach out to a broader audience, don't forget to use all of your internal marketing resources to build your list as well. People should hear about your list from you, too. Put information about your e-mail lists in your brochures, on business cards, on sales letterhead and in press releases. A simple statement like "Subscribe to our monthly e-mail newsletter at abccorp.com" will do. Most companies that have an online presence now put a Web address in all these materials. By mentioning your e-mail subscription list in particular, you are making a specific call to action and are implying that you want to engage in ongoing communication. At your Web site, use all the best practices you should already have in place to make them true opt-in subscribers.

Customer Contacts Create Opportunities

Printed marketing materials are just the tip of the customer contact iceberg. Think of all the myriad ways you come into contact with your customers and prospects every day and then consider how you can make every customer contact point a sign-up opportunity.

- For bricks and mortar holdings, consider using in-store postcards to gather addresses. Remember, as always, that you must explicitly state that they are subscribing to a list. Just placing an e-mail address entry box is not enough. As on your Web site, you should add a checkbox that indicates they are agreeing to receive e-mail from you.
- Include a similar postcard in billing statements and add the same invitation to any applications you have such as club memberships or credit applications.
- You can also use customer service call centers to gather e-mail addresses.

One caveat to these methods is that the more hands touch the data, the more room there is for error. One catalog company found that its customer service phone representatives were typing out the words "at" and "dot" when customers gave them their addresses, so be sure that you properly train whoever will be entering the data on how to type e-mail addresses.

Some E-Mail Marketing "Do's"

We haven't covered everything just yet. There are several other things to consider when developing an e-mail communications program.

- Not everyone who has e-mail has web access, so it's wise to set up an e-mail autoresponder, so that if someone only has e-mail, they can still subscribe or unsubscribe to your list by sending an e-mail.
- One good way to retain names on your list is to offer a vacation service. Allow subscribers to specify a "turnoff" period so their mailbox won't be overloaded when they get back from a vacation.
- Develop standard text to go at the bottom of every e-mail you send that invites customers to join your list. This way, a customer will receive an invitation to join with every confirmation notice or other customer service notice you send via e-mail. Also, as people forward your newsletter or other messages to friends,

subscription instructions will always be handy. If you maintain multiple mailing lists for different products or services, use some kind of descriptive text to upsell and cross-sell your different lists to current subscribers.

- Personalize and customize as much as you can. Personalized greetings and customized information are vital to developing a one-to-one relationship with your customers. According to a study of 50 e-commerce sites by localization company Rubric, nearly 90 percent of offer e-mails were not targeted to the individual's needs or buying habits and only 16 percent were personalized. This is a great opportunity for your company to distinguish itself.
- With all your communications, try to create a sense of value through e-mail by making offers online that customers can't receive anywhere else – whether it's information or coupons. For example, Mirage Resorts sold 3,000 room nights by sending its opt-in e-mail list a notice about special deals that were available exclusively online.
- As soon as someone subscribes to your newsletter, send a copy of the most recent issue. They'll know your company is a responsive organization and they won't have to wait a month or more to start receiving the information they're interested in. And be sure to post notices about your newsletter in e-mail publication directories such as Liszt (<http://www.liszt.com>) and New List (<http://www.new-list.com>).
- Don't underestimate the value of quick confirmation messages. Online consumers have come to expect timely confirmations of purchases, subscribes, unsubscribes, changes in personal data, service requests, and so on. Confirmations demonstrate your company's responsiveness and also give you cross-selling and upselling opportunities – even if it's a confirmation of an unsubscribe.
- Give recipients an opportunity to unsubscribe with every e-mail, and make it easy. We know, some might prefer to make subscribers work at least a little to unsubscribe, but it's not a best practice and it can definitely alienate subscribers who may be very vocal with friends and others about their experience. It's to your advantage to get uninterested subscribers off your list quickly. One of the hallmarks of spam is that you can't unsubscribe from it because it has a bogus “unsubscribe” address or there simply isn't one. Don't ever let your company's name fall into this category. Remembering that there are some subscribers who don't have Web access, be sure to allow them to unsubscribe via e-mail and not just the Web.

While you must respond immediately to “unsubscribe” requests, you can find ways to communicate that you will miss their business. For instance, one online news source uses humor in the reply message. The message indicates that the subscriber will be immediately removed from the list, but that the editor is in tears and the staff is at a standstill, mourning the loss of a valued subscriber. This may cause the subscriber to reconsider the unsubscribe decision. Another useful technique which can be integrated into the unsubscribe reply is an invitation and a clickable link to a brief, Web-based survey to find out why they discontinued service so that you can improve it in the future. This demonstrates that you're interested in customer dialogue. You might also want to tout your vacation service, if you offer one.

Some E-mail Marketing “Don'ts”

Don't expect overnight success. When every marketing magazine has yet another article touting the 20% or higher response rates and impressive ROI that some e-mail marketers are getting, it's easy to underestimate the complexity of designing and implementing such a program. In fact, it's better to think of successful e-mail marketing as a

process rather than a goal. Each step you take builds upon the last step. Test everything you can, evaluate the results, learn from your successes – and your failures – and make continuous improvements to your e-mail efforts.

Don't sacrifice long-term profitability for short-term gains. There are more aggressive (and usually unethical) ways of building your list quickly, but while they may appear to provide fast results, in the end they usually prove to be about as successful as the get-rich-quick schemes offered by spammers. Focus on ethical, long-term strategies for

“Marketers that outsource the delivery and list management of their e-mail have higher conversion rates than those that keep e-mail operations in-house. Outsourcers increase response rates by creating detailed, sales-oriented reporting systems that allow marketers to create more valuable segmentation strategies.”

***— The Email Marketing Dialogue,
January 2000, Forrester Research***

developing a high-quality list and you are likely to reap long-term rewards.

Lastly, don't shortchange your e-mail marketing efforts. Depending on your budget, we recommend that you devote a minimum of one staff person your e-mail programs. To develop and deliver a quality e-mail marketing program that grows your list, fits with your brand strategy, capitalizes on the latest technology, and engenders customer trust and loyalty requires at least one dedicated resource.

Preparing to Implement

After you've planned your in-house opt-in e-mail list development program, it's time to implement. According to a Forrester Research report, by 2004, marketers will send more than 200 billion e-mails annually in the U.S. As the volume of e-mail grows, capabilities such as personalization, customization, data mining, tracking and reporting will grow in importance. These features typically require the more specialized skills that e-mail outsourced solutions can deliver. In fact, companies that outsourced their e-mail marketing had purchase rates more than four times higher than that of companies that kept those services in-house.

An Invitation

With a comprehensive suite of e-messaging solutions, MessageMedia invites you to contact us:

Web: <http://www.messagemedia.com>

Phone: 800-565-0198

Fax: 303-440-0303

6060 Spine Road

Boulder, CO 80301

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(See? We follow our own good advice.)

About MessageMedia

MessageMedia (Nasdaq: MESSG) delivers e-mail marketing, online customer intelligence and online customer care services as well as a full line of hosted and enterprise software applications designed to advance a complete online dialogue between organizations and their customers. The company's renowned client services team – with more than 125 marketing professionals – provides quantitative analysis of campaign and customer data, opt-in program design and custom implementation for every customer based on current needs and future business strategies.

MessageMedia offers specialized industry solutions for the publishing, financial services, travel and entertainment, ISP/portal, e-tail and high-tech arenas. Clients include Cisco Systems, Dell Computer, E*TRADE, AOL, Mail.com, Trans World Entertainment, Countrywide Home Loans, Varsity Books, Yahoo!, Microsoft, GeoCities, CMP Media, Barclays Bank, EDS, Universal Studios, and Bertelsmann.