Content and Search Marketing

Step-By-Step Guide to Email Campaigns

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So you are about to launch your latest and greatest new product (or service).

The product design work has been completed, manufacturing is poised, pricing is set and your sales team is prepped. All you need to do now is tell someone about it.

This is where your marketing and communications professionals leap into action. Based on the product the brochures are crafted and the website is updated - in other words all the necessary assets are polished. As part of the overall strategy it is decided to launch an email campaign. Easy, right? Well actually, yes. Anyone can design an email and fire it out to a list. However if you want killer ROI for your campaign it's worth making sure you load the right ammunition into the gun before you fire!

The aim of this guide is to give you some pointers on what you can do to try and ensure campaign effectiveness. So let's look at nine key steps to email campaign success.

Step One:
Think about your target audience

This is the foundational step for your email marketing campaigns. Here you need to precisely think about to whom you are going to send your emails, as the message needs to be 100% relevant to the recipients.

This means asking questions such as:

- Can you segment your existing email lists by focus sectors, target companies and contacts? (This will allow you to aim before you fire and not to use a scattergun approach to your entire customer database). Do you really want to send to your entire database and risk alienating the customers who will never have an interest?
- Will your data warehouse enable you to slice and dice information. For example, are there any lapsed customers in your target markets (people who once bought but haven't purchased recently or customers that used to purchase similar products from you but have gone away)?
- Who are the key companies within the target sector you want to do business with?
- Within those companies do you have the key contacts; are they the decision makers, the people who will be interested in your offering? If not can you find the names from somewhere?

Tip: It may seem alien but speak to your sales team; they will or should know target customers and in most cases an implied opt-in can be used to add them to the list!!

Step Two:
Focus on the key messages

Benefits not features.

It's great to have the latest and greatest product that does this and does that. Specification points and performance indicators are important but it is important to think about why customers need it. This is an ideal opportunity for you to get creative with your content. Think about what drives the customer in terms of purchasing these products. Get emotive with your messages and focus on producing content that speaks directly to the important business issues that will get your customer standing up and taking notice.

Statements like "reduce your inventory costs", "proven to improve machine reliability by x%" and "reduce time to market" are all emotive and work a lot better than purely feature-based messages.

If you're struggling with this step, why not download our six-step guide to developing positioning statements.

Tip: Talk to your customers. By spending time talking to them you can gauge what is important to their business and what drives them when it comes to making purchasing decisions. Use the discussion to shape your emotive customer-focused key messages.

Step Three:
Polish your email addresses

Are the email addresses up to date?

Admit it, are you 100% confident that your email lists are accurate? Well, in reality you can never be 100% confident but they need to be close. What's the point of designing and crafting a beautiful email only to send it to 'dirty' email addresses. Put some real effort into maintaining this valuable database, after all it's the lifeblood of your email efforts. If you haven't used the list in a while don't be afraid to ask people to re-verify their information. At the same time you can ask them for additional information. Also if you haven't segmented your list before, now is the time. Don't be afraid that the size of your list will collapse, better to be sending to 100 people that want to hear from you than upset a 1000 that don't.

Tip: Go beyond the generic email address at a target company. For example, you may want to use LinkedIn to reverse engineer an email address or consider enlisting the help of a telemarketing company to find the exact names of relevant contacts. Better still; engage a telemarketing company to 'clean' the addresses.

Step Four:
Adopt best practice email design

Just think about the effort you used to put in to designing printed leaflets, brochures and the like. Well it's equally important that you put effort into the design of the email.

Here's a short list of some things to focus on:

- No wider than 600px: many people don't actually open their email. Design them so they can be viewed in the preview panel.
- Always include an unsubscribe link: it's the law!
- Use consistent branding for recognition.
- Put the offer, call to action, or key message at the top of your email.
- Don't overuse pictures and make sure the email still works if the person has image downloads turned off.
- Don't overuse text. Keep it to the point - do not expect viewers to read lengthy text. Perhaps consider using hard-hitting bullet points.
- Encourage sharing.
- Keep your eyes on the left hand side: Data from eye tracking marketers have shown that the left side of the screen is the main focus of email readers.
- Think about personalising emails to recipients; response rates prove that this can be very effective.

Step Five:
Focus on subject lines

Think about your email subject lines to avoid the SPAM trap.

The subject line should be engaging, benefit-oriented and talk about the content of the email. The key message in the subject line should be first; subject lines are often truncated.

When writing subject lines be sure they don't sound "spammy" by avoiding over-the-top claims and language favoured by less reputable emailers.

Whilst you're at it:

Optimise your "from line" - The from line of an email newsletter should clearly identify the sender and be quickly recognizable to the recipient. Studies have shown that when viewing their inbox, readers start by looking at the from line; engaging readers here has been shown to increase open rates.

Tip: Don't use words in the subject line like free, offer etc. Also try to avoid capital letters.

Step Six:
Think about the customer journey

This is important as ultimately the end destination will determine what action the receiver takes to your email. From our point of view we have had the greatest success with campaigns that drive the customer to a relevant landing page. We see many emails that jump you to the homepage of the company's site. The problem with this is that many marketers forget to optimise the home page for every campaign. What you ultimately get is customers landing there and jumping off quickly as the page is not relevant or they are unsure of what to do next.

If you really want to take them to your company's websites make sure you take them to a landing page that is relevant to the campaign. So for example, if it's for maintenance products for the rail industry take them to the page on your site that is bang on relevant!

However you may want to think about stand-alone campaign landing pages that are content-optimised for maximum effectiveness. You can quickly and easily construct pages that are designed to sell off-the-page. Here you can emphasise your key messages and give some further information, then combine it with very strong on-page calls to action.

Always include a form to capture viewers' details and a prominent phone number that potential customers can use for instant action. Try to avoid links to other sites on your landing pages. This will jump customers to a place where you don't want them to be and you stand a chance of losing them.

Tip: You may want to give something away to inspire action from the email recipient. Think about what the target audience would want to get (high perceived value) and would call or fill a form in for. Make this offer big and bold on your landing pages to encourage the form fill. Once filled this is a lead. Always include a "forward to a colleague" link as this is a great way to find hidden contacts.

Step Seven:
Think about when to send

To first make sure you're getting the best delivery rate, ask readers to "white list" you by adding your emails'

"from address" to their address book.

Then conduct tests by scheduling your emails on different days and times to discover which delivery time works best. The timing of your delivery can also make or break your ability to reach readers. The email should be sent at regular intervals and delivered at an appropriate day/time.

Step Eight:
Use a great email delivery system

There are numerous email marketing delivery systems out there but which one is the best for your business? It's true there are many free-to-use systems that will give you basic sending functionality, but for detailed metrics it is worth checking out some of the paid options. Ultimately you will need to provide a solid set of metrics around return on investment. Whilst sales are the ultimate measure, the dashboards within the more featured systems will help you to build your case.

As a checklist look for systems that feature:

- Easy template editors
- Email client testing
- Spam analysis
- Metrics around open rates
- Reports on delivery success and failures
- Email link hotspots: this will allow you to position your important links accurately
- Automatic unsubscribes handling
- Personalisation functionality
- Test features

The above are just a snapshot of some of the features that email-marketing delivery systems have. A good starting point is to look at systems like Dotmailer or Exact Target.

Tip: Always consider making the investment into a paid for system. Over and above the software functionality you will get 24/7 customer support and account management. This can prove to be invaluable when you have an urgent mail to send and you run into a problem.

Step Nine:
Follow up all leads

The most important step

The follow up (or lack of it) can make or break the success of your campaign. Ultimately the campaign should be measured against what it returned to the business in terms of sales. It is imperative therefore that your sales teams understand the importance of the leads that come from these campaigns.

Whether your internal team qualifies them first and then passes to your field sales team is irrelevant. What is relevant is that they get acted upon. If you are generating form fills, taking emails or calls from this campaign then it's important that you drive the value out of these opportunities. We have found the best success comes from agreeing a set of follow up metrics with the sales team. It's important to engage them early on and get their buy-in for the follow up. If they see that the campaign is well thought out and relevant to their target markets they are more likely to buy into the accountability aspect.

Tip: Why not use a specifically assigned telephone number for each of your campaigns. This will allow you to track leads for each individual campaign. What's more when a form is filled on your landing page try following it up straight away to acknowledge not only the fact you have received a customer request but also to see if there is any business you can drive instantly.

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