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The Ten Rules for Successful Permission-based E-mail Marketing

Marketers everywhere are embracing opt-in e-mail marketing. Though similar in many ways to traditional direct marketing, opt-in e-mail operates under very different rules. Those who violate the rules are often deluged with complaints and find that response rates suffer. These guidelines will help you avoid the problems and focus on success.

1 SEND E-MAIL ONLY TO THOSE WHO HAVE **"OPTED-IN"** TO RECEIVE IT

Ideally you should use *"confirmed"* opt-in, in which a confirmation message must be sent to the recipient, who in turn must reply to the message for the opt-in to take effect. Avoid "opt-out," which forces the recipient to receive messages until he says no. This widespread practice of opt-out appears to actually discourage e-commerce. A recent survey by Intelliquest found that 63% of Web users agreed with the statement, *"If I buy online, I'll end up getting junk e-mail."* And the trend is up - Intelliquest found only 58% agreed with that statement in 1998. Perhaps this is why many people use fake e-mail addresses when buying online; Shop.org found in a 1998 survey that 60% of surfers have given false information when filling out online forms. Bottom line: Consumer trust is something you have to earn. One of the best ways is to respect their wishes when it comes to e-mail.

2 ALWAYS HONOUR USER REQUESTS TO OPT-OUT

Make it a simple process and include a Web site URL in every message that allows the user to opt-out. (A simple *"reply to unsubscribe"* does not always work if the user has multiple e-mail accounts, which can be extremely frustrating for the end user.) For some companies, it might make sense to *"downsell"* the end user. For example, a news site that provides daily deliveries may have success in offering the user an opportunity to *"downgrade"* to weekly digests. After all, many opt-outs are simply a natural reaction to too much e-mail in general; a reduced burden is often welcome.

3 CONFIRM EVERYTHING BY E-MAIL: THE INITIAL OPT-IN, ORDERS, SHIPPING NOTIFICATION AND CHANGES IN THE CUSTOMER PROFILE

This blunts the problem of false information. If a fake e-mail address has been entered, the confirmation will either bounce or be delivered to someone who possibly has never heard of you, in which case he will contact you and let you know your database needs to be updated. Always include an opt-out mechanism in these messages. As an added bonus, use these messages as an upsell opportunity. For example, an airline could offer the user a reduced rate for renting a car from a particular sponsoring vendor.



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4 ALLOW USERS TO SPECIFY THEIR PREFERENCES

What kind of information do they want to receive? How often? Encourage users to give you as much information as necessary to allow you to effectively target them in your e-mail promotions and other e-commerce activities. But avoid asking for her life story. Instead, structure your program so that you gain more information over time -- with her permission, of course!

5 GIVE AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

Customers don't give you their e-mail address and other personal information out of altruism. They do it in exchange for something of value. It could be information (on your Web site, via e-mail or through some other media), a free gift, a coupon or a chance to win a sweepstakes. Be creative, but also follow through by delivering real value to the recipient with every message.

6 YOUR LIST IS AN ASSET THAT ONLY YOU CAN USE; DO NOT SELL OR RENT IT

If you want to realize incremental revenue beyond your own offerings, allow the users to opt-in to receive offers from your partners. If you do this, make sure you control the mailings, and that your brand *"introduces"* other brands. Example: *"Because you opted to receive promotional offers of our valued partners, we at ABC Corp are please to give you a special offer from XYZ Corp."* Ask the company doing the promotion to give you an exclusive on the offer for a limited time; limiting the offer to only your customers increases the value of opting in.

7 DEVELOP AND POST A PRIVACY POLICY FOR YOUR WEB SITE

Do NOT violate it!

8 RESPOND TO CUSTOMER E-MAIL INQUIRIES PROMPTLY

It reinforces how valuable they are to you and reminds them that there are real, live people "behind the scenes" of your web site.

9 DO NOT USE RENTED LISTS

The only exception is vendors who use the method described in number 6.

10 ALWAYS REMEMBER THE NETWORK EFFECT

Bad news travels much faster than good on the Internet.

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