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The new laws of emarketing

by Debra Blundell.

The smorgasbord of communication that is email marketing has undergone a Gordon Ramsay-style makeover of late. And, unlike the café of Monty Python fame, spam is now definitely off the menu. Second generation e-marketers have realised that bombarding contacts with persistent, often irrelevant and certainly unsolicited promotions and offers just isn't going to cut the mustard any more.

Not only has a wave of UK and EC legislation made us all think twice about the way we communicate with our potential customers over email, but the recipients themselves are making more demands of those who communicate with them. The companies that get the best results from e-marketing campaigns today – and there are some great results to be had – are those that have changed their tactics from simply blasting out thousands of emails and hoping something sticks, to building relevant and sustained communication with a willing audience. The key word here is relevant: you have to constantly revise and refine the relevancy of your communications as you get to know your audience better to make sure you keep your place in the inbox.

If you are one of the many companies that has only used email marketing sporadically up to now, the new maturity of e-marketing means there's never been a better time to make it a permanent feature of your marketing activity. Whether your chosen vehicle is a newsletter (like this one from indigo, the creative communications agency), targeted and relevant offers, practical information, fun and games or a mixture of these, it's worth giving some serious consideration. And, if you are already a regular e-marketer, take stock and ask yourself honestly whether your activity meets the demands of today's more discerning customer. If it doesn't, you're wasting time and money. If you want to keep ahead of the game, you have to play by the new rules, which are:

Create anticipation

Marketing by email used to be about interrupting people on your mailing list until you got a response. Don't. It's annoying and it doesn't work. The new way is to build relationships by providing content that people want, need and choose to receive. Instead of interrupting them, they will start to anticipate, value and enjoy communication from you. But beautiful relationships aren't built overnight. It takes time, so be patient.

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Concentrate on the quality, not the quantity, of your list

Forget the scattergun approach. It doesn't work and can actually make your lists smaller: the more unwanted emails you send, the more customers opt-out or just stop reading them altogether. So forget about list size and focus on relevancy and building relationships with people who care.

Use recognition to build trust

We used to put all our effort into writing a catchy subject line that would reel people in. Sadly, the catchiest lines often came from the spammers and recipients grew cynical of wild promises and golden opportunities. The subject line will always be important, but now it needs to be backed up by a credible name in the 'from' field. People scan the 'from' field before anything else. If they don't recognise the sender, they probably won't trust the email or open it. The 'from' field is your brand – work on building this and protecting it across all your marketing platforms and you can gain their interest, not just for this campaign, but for the lifetime of your relationship.

Put the control in the customers' hands

Don't assume that your customer wants to listen to something just because you want to say it! New generation e-marketers understand that every contact has a limited amount of receptivity to your communications and each has different interests and motivations. Only they can know what those are, so it make sense to put control in their hands. Break your communications down into channels or categories – for instance, special offers, tips and tutorials and news – and then let them chose which is most relevant to them, which they want to receive and how often.

Use email for long-term brand building

To make email marketing work, you need to be in it for the long haul. It's tempting to stick with the old way of viewing each campaign as an island and judging its success or failure on the response (whether click-throughs or responses) it generated. But by marketing a single campaign too aggressively in order to get those results, you can lose sight of relevance and risk turning off a certain number of customers. View each campaign as a single component in an on-going brand-building campaign and keep sharply focused on relevance. That way you will lay the foundations for long-term relationships that will ultimately net better rewards.

A lot of the old attitudes evolved when email was in its infancy and have persisted far too long. Often managed in-house and using uncleaned, unapproved lists, email was seen as being virtually free, so there was a carefree, experimental "we might as well see if it works" attitude to its use. If you haven't already, you need to realise now that it was far from free: using email unwisely damages your brand and costs you valuable customer relationships. Approaching e-marketing the right way does, inevitably, incur costs (employing the skills of a specialist agency like indigo, for example), but bear in mind that these are still considerably lower than for many more traditional forms of marketing. And the potential returns are great. Email marketing is all grown up now. It's time that we, as marketers, make sure that we approach it with the maturity it deserves.

If you would like to discuss your emarketing in greater detail, contact Gary Clark at gc@indigocreative.co.uk