

Open Sesame – making email magic

If only getting returns from an email marketing campaign was as easy as uttering a few magic words. With a quick abracadabra, your customers' eyes would be opened to the potential of your brand and the treasures locked in their hearts, minds and purses would be yours.

In reality, effective email marketing campaigns have nothing to do with magic but a lot to do with experience and the common sense to take lessons learned from other fields of customer communications and apply them to email. What this approach has revealed is that email is not all that different to direct mail. In both cases, there are two keys to success – getting people to open mail instead of consigning it straight to the bin and getting people to respond to it. There's no magic formula – every campaign, customer and company is different. But there are a few tricks that will stand you in good stead:

Getting your mail opened

The subject line is the first thing anyone you email will see. It needs to stand out to get their attention, raise their interest and spur them into action. You've no graphics here so words will have to do all the work. Beware of using words like 'free' or 'special offer' as you may be wrongly identified as spam and filtered out. Instead, make the subject line catchy, compelling and punchy (no more than 70 characters). Think of it as a newspaper headline.

Make sure the sender field and the subject line work together. Don't repeat your company name or topic in both. For existing contacts, the sender field is most important, as it instantly establishes trust and reassurance. If you're sending to a list, the subject field takes precedence.

Keep it above the fold. The top 50mm of your email is the most important. Many people read their emails in preview mode and will only open them to reveal the full content if they're sufficiently interested - so get your key proposition up top.

Make it small and fast. If you send a big file that takes too long to open, people will ignore it. Avoid flash – stick to HTML. Keep files under 60kb for dial-up connections and certainly no more than 100kb. And don't embed images – serve them from an image server.

Don't confuse relevant and personal. Personalise emails in the sense that content that is relevant to your personal interests always holds more appeal. But remember that unsolicited emails that address you by your first name are at best irritating and at worst intrusive.

Getting a response to your mail

Again relevance is key. Collect information, track response and hone the content of your communications over time.

Integrate with other marketing activity. If it's relevant, have your emails link to websites with more information – detailed specifications or prices that back up the more emotional offer in your emails work well. Linking to transactional sites that make it easy and instant to buy increases success. Co-ordinate your email campaigns with advertising (print, TV and radio), direct mail, seasonal campaigns or other marketing activity. Make sure all customer activity automatically triggers an email response; if they order something on your website, for instance, send them an email informing them of complementary products or services.

Email marketing is getting harder, not easier. Customers are more cynical. Mail boxes are fuller. Campaigns are more expensive. But people still love the convenience and immediacy of having relevant offers delivered online. Responses can still be high and represent an excellent return on your investment, not just in immediate returns, but in longterm brand building. So get out there and work some magic!