

A New Farming Method

Email Marketing Strategies Every Online Retailer Should Adopt



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Introduction

As an online retailer, you are well aware of the tried and true methods that you and your competitors or fellow retailers use. Among them are SEO, social media, PPC ads and direct marketing through emails, as well as many other approaches. How are they working out? Do you feel that you should be doing something more? Less? Different?

The ways in which you use these strategies have changed over time, and yet email marketing is one method you can use much more effectively than most realize. Consider that there are more than four billion email accounts at work at any given time around the globe. Around 1/4 of them are work or business accounts, meaning that each person has around three email accounts.

Emails, however, can now be heavily managed, filtered and received without ever being seen, opened or used. The average email account holder gets around 500 marketing messages each month, and opens less than 25% of them!

So, why use them? They still give you the most effective means of communicating, AND the best ROI (return on investment) if used wisely. As one blogger said about emails, they are the best "way to communicate with an audience — of ANY size — and email is the foundation of all other channels." (Su, 2015)

Think about it...if you are building a social media campaign, using SEO methods to attract an audience, considering a PPC campaign...emails are the essential component. To join social media, shop online, and register any sort of account you must have email, and so email always translates to "reach". Every single consumer and businessperson has an email address that they use and access daily!

This is why email marketing is such a huge area, yet it is the most "mature" channel because it has been around for so long.

Old and New Work Best

In their popular book entitled "Successful E-Mail Marketing Strategies," authors Arthur Middleton Hughes and Arthur Sweetser described email marketing as a "serious marketing discipline" that has been transformed into something much less effective over the decades.

Explaining that standard "batch and blast" methods have caused major problems, the authors go on to indicate that "60% of subscribers simply ignore the emails" due to flaws in the methods at work.

What are the flaws? Sending too many emails, flooding subscriber inboxes with irrelevant or poorly tested information, not combining online history with offline behaviors, and failing to build loyalty are some of the biggest problems with the outdated methods.

Describing the common strategies as "annoying" the authors indicated that traditional "fishing", even when outcomes are assessed and certain tactics developed from the data, is an approach doomed to failure.

Instead, they suggest that email marketing is best when done via "farming". This method emphasizes personalized, relevant messages to subscribers. The approach also relies on an array of data that includes behavioral as well as demographic details, BUT allows you to create individualized and promotional messages tailored to the customer's or potential client's needs, behaviors, preferences, and lifestyle.

Clearly, there are some challenges involved. For example, if you are drafting segmented marketing messages each day or week, you need excellent copywriters, you need the data on the market segments, and you need to understand the best times to communicate. The good news is that we are going to address such issues in these pages!

Why Describe it as Farming?

We also use the term farming because it is a great visual when thinking about the ideal methods for email marketing success.

For example, the best farming methods create roots, nurture and sustain growth, require patience and persistence, eliminate "weeds" that can weaken growth, and understand that the fruits of labor come only from ongoing work.

Just consider how effective a farmer might be if they used the exact same soil, fertilizer and methods for growing lettuce as they did oranges. One or both crops would fail! This is why modern marketing should reflect a farming ideology - it should look at the individual and address their specific needs.

Clearly, we have a lot of ground to cover, and these are email marketing strategies that every online retailer must understand. So, let's jump right in!

Section One

The Data

There are several very commonly used terms whenever email marketing methods are discussed. They include:

- ❖ Data
- ❖ Segmentation
- ❖ Relevance
- ❖ Testing
- ❖ Assessment

Clearly, we could just look at these issues and consider how to apply them to the flawed framework that is commonly described as "fishing". As you might guess, this would be of no value to your marketing efforts. It would show you precisely how everyone else is doing it - whether it is all that effective or not. After all, you can buy your data, choose one or two very broad segments, attempt to develop a generically relevant message, test a few variations of subject line or banner, and then build a campaign from there.

Go to your inbox...you'll find many messages based on just that approach. This is what is most commonly at work today, and a method you will find in many modern organizations. However, if we take the old framework and familiar tactics we can then discover how best to apply new, farming-like methods as:

- ❖ Triggered and Relevant Messages
- ❖ Mobile Optimization
- ❖ Multi-Channel Messages
- ❖ Pre-Targeting and Re-Targeting
- ❖ Knowing When to Use a CTA, Soft Sell or No Sell at All

❖ When to Send Email Messages

In doing so, the new method of email marketing is going to retain clients, build loyalty, keep you well stocked with leads, and assure success. If you take the time to learn and study your clients, discover their needs, and then supply them with the solutions, you will reach your marketing goals.

A Few Words on Segmenting

Let's first look at segmenting. It is exactly as it sounds and divides your subscribers - whether you have 20 or 20k into clearly defined groups or segments. Naturally, it all begins with the data. We are going to assume that you already have a basic or even well-defined mailing list or database of subscribers/clients/leads. How are you segmenting them? How do you communicate with them?

If your email marketing uses a single, relatively generic campaign message that is lightly tweaked for the recipient (i.e. a few word changes for leads versus clients), you are not segmenting effectively or using email to gain marketing ground.

Consider that studies prove that "segmentation improves open and clickthrough rates. The *Marketing Sherpa E-mail Marketing Benchmark Guide 2008* reported that open rates for segmented campaigns versus nonsegmented campaigns are as much as 20 percent higher..." (Hughes, 2011)

The Challenge of Segmenting

Yet, even in this current era few marketers use segmentation in their programs. The reasons are simple - resources. To use segmentation means developing specific messages for the various segments. At the average two emails each week sent out by most marketers, that could mean a large number of messages.

Consider the simplest example: You send out two messages per week. You have created five segments in your database of subscribers. You will then need to create ten different emails each week. It takes a good copywriter and marketer a day to create one solid and effective email. That means you would need TEN days in a week to draft those relevant and targeted messages!

Does it mean you can't use this tactic? No, not at all. What it does mean is that you have to be aggressive in your database building if you want truly dynamic segmenting.

A Good Illustration of Segmenting How-To

If you are looking for a good role model where segmenting is concerned, the King Arthur Flour Co. is one to study. They have a clickthrough rate of at least 50% and use segmentation and relevance as their guideposts.

They segmented very slowly to avoid unsubscribes and lost leads. Doing this let them test their segmentation, adjust and enhance the strategy, and discover the possible outcomes. In other words, they accepted it would take time, testing, assessment and adjustments to make it work.

Doing it this way helped them very clearly define the other segments in the larger audience. They used everything from purchase histories and locations to shipping data. They also used a preference center that allowed email recipients and website visitors to select their preferred messages. They integrated this with the signup page, and offered incentives for keeping such preferences up to date, i.e. coupons.

Instead of looking at their data as "people who bake" and who "need different flours", they eventually created segments for gluten free bakers, wholesale buyers,

Canadian buyers, buyers interested in retail store locations, Baking Education Center subscribers and those who want only the newsletter.

Content for Segments is Not Rocket Science

One of the greatest things that comes from the King Arthur Flour strategy, though, is that they leverage their internal resources to create effective content.

As one article on their success indicated, "Developing and formatting content is the most time-consuming part of King Arthur Flour's email program... Every email the brand sends includes a recipe that is related to the audience's interests. For example, gluten-free subscribers will receive gluten-free recipes...[they] repurpose content from throughout the company to use in the email program...the company's staff are often willing to write blog posts, provide recipes, or help in other ways." (Sutton, 2011)

Indicating that each email segment is a stakeholder in all other areas within the firm, the different groups share and support content creation in order to build lists and create more dynamic communications. They also frequently repurpose content from other marketing areas, adapting it for email, web or even publishing campaigns.

Using the old-fashioned blasts to the entire list along with targeted messages to the segments has proven successful for the firm. Staff draft blogs for other segments outside of their own, provide recipes, tweak and restructure content, and so on.

This is the sort of model to follow, using a careful schedule of messages that are relevant, targeted, timely, and optimized for the recipient. Allowing subscribers to select their segments is another easier way to begin segmenting in general.

It sounds easy, and in some ways it can be, but you want to constantly keep the most important factors in mind. We'll look at them individually in the next section (below).

For now, stop considering data as a mailing list and start to look at it as a database in need of segmentation. Start to identify the different needs of your "crops" (recall that we used the carrots versus apples analogy, and keep that in mind). Plot out this process carefully - don't divide up the groups using guesswork. Instead, look for the most obvious segments (i.e. the gluten free group such as King Arthur Flour did) and start very slowly.

Section Two

The New Techniques

Once you have your data organized, and you are ready to segment it, you can begin to draft much more effective marketing messages. Even if you use the most basic segmenting factors (such as purchases or web activity) or you get extremely detailed using lifetime value or behavioral indicators, your segments are only valuable when you use farming-based email marketing.

The following concepts will really empower your efforts and are methods that any online retailer must integrate into their strategy for optimal outcomes:

Triggered and Relevant Messages

This represents two different areas. First, triggered messages are not a one size fits all issue for all marketing. Some firms collect data such as the birthdates of subscribers, and this "triggers" some sort of email or special offer. As one report

notes: "Triggered e-mails are opened and read at about double the rate of regular promotional e-mails." (Hughes, 2009)

Take time to identify the ways that your segments will respond to triggered messages. What sort of events can you associate with triggered messages? Whatever it might be, be certain that it incorporates a promotional offer or material.

A variation of triggered messages is the transactional email. For example, "Your order has just shipped!" is a common form of transactional email). Don't just use this as a courtesy but as a time to build relationships with clients. They have a 90% open rate, are usually read in full, and can incorporate links to informational blogs or web content in addition to light promotional materials, such as "other customers who purchased this item were interested in..."

Are these relevant? Yes and no. They contain data your clients need, but they are clearly NOT marketing. When you are using campaigns and marketing, then your messages have to be relevant.

Relevance is a general word because it can vary from person to person. It is up to you to decide how to use titles and layout. For example, how are you "personalizing" your messages? How are you using subject lines to ensure recipients open the email? How dynamic is the content?

And a word of warning is very necessary here: Even if you are getting high open rates, it is still not a proven indicator that there is interest in the campaign materials. Many argue that it is the secondary clicks and the rate that recipients read but do NOT unsubscribe that is an illustration of content relevance.

This is the reason that testing, assessment, and adjustments are so important.

As one blogger says: "if you want to learn how well your emails are received, measure secondary clicks. Messages that get clicked twice or more are of interest to your subscribers, and should produce meaningful sales."

Mobile Optimization

In line with this last point, though, is the issue of "high opens but low clicks". This is a sign that you have poor content OR that your content is good but that you don't have a mobile optimized campaign. While you can always mobile optimize your messages, remember that some users don't want to click out of the app they are using.

Around 65% of most emails are now being opened via a mobile device. This is a key reason that you have to optimize for mobile. Doing this is simple - you keep the messages clean and simple, going light on images. You ensure that your emails are "responsive" or able to adapt to the screens on which they are viewed. Give a lot of time and thought to your "from" and "subject" areas because phones may display limited numbers of text. Don't pack the email with text or information, including limiting links, and use buttons rather than links as people prefer to tap a button on a screen. Also, be sure that all links take viewers to mobile-friendly pages on the site!

You can also overcome the absence of a promotions inbox in most mobile mail apps by harvesting phone numbers and using SMS to confirm or welcome those who have used an email received on the device.

Multi-Channel Messages

In line with the last point, you can use multi-channel messages as part of your marketing. It is easily done if you consider emails as "part one" of the message. As an example, you can deliver a call to action after a customer takes a preliminary step (that could be registering for an account but not verifying it, downloading your app but not activating it, and so on). That CTA could come as an email, but you can also follow up with an SMS that remarkets using an identical message.

As one marketing expert emphasized: "Creating campaigns that work means creating messaging that floats across multiple channels and touches your audience in a meaningful and consistent way across more than one access point.

The key ... is consistency:

- ❖ same offer
- ❖ same headline
- ❖ same language
- ❖ same CTA
- ❖ one core message that is supported by a chorus in the form of multi-channel follow-ups

Don't send a bunch of random messages on a bunch of channels with all different asks or CTAs. Instead, keep things focused and tight, and reiterate simple CTAs with the same language."

Is it really okay to do that? Actually, it is a very effective method of using all of your hard work in segmenting and creating relevant content, and is also part of effective pre and re-targeting.

Pre-Targeting and Re-Targeting

Let's say that you are a savvy marketer who is about to launch a paid advertising campaign on a channel such as FB or Twitter. You have a list that can be used for pre and re-targeting too!

You can use emails in advance of the conversion campaign to "warm up" your audience and bolster brand awareness. You will never use a hard sell in the ads or the messages and will apply all appropriate segmenting. You send the emails, and then go ahead and launch the paid ads.

You can then re-target based on the outcomes. You might send a second email to those who opened the initial email but did not follow any CTAs or perform secondary clicks. You could send a message to those who failed to open the initial emails. You could use the re-targeting for those who opened, followed your CTA but did not end up becoming customers or conversions.

Knowing When to Use a CTA, Soft Sell or No Sell at All

And what if you have no direct CTA? Is that even a viable approach? Actually, there are times when you may just use an "FYI" instead of a sell. This is a delicate balancing act, and knowing when to use a CTA, a soft or hard sell, or no sell at all requires excellent planning.

As an example, you can avoid hard sells by just asking your recipients to finish reading the content by clicking through to the web-based article. You might push it a bit more by requesting they subscribe or even commit to an annual account where money changes hands. You can, also just build their interest by sending a "coming soon" or "save the date" sort of message. This has to be planned as a two

part email message, but is great for new product lines, seminars, registration-based events, and more.

This could be a way of pre-targeting, sending out that email and using a channel like Facebook as the actual follow up, or it could be a two-part email series. Either way, it is great for developing a taste and then enjoying the outcomes.

When to Send Email Messages

Most marketers understand that the issue of when to send varies widely based on your campaigns. Most, however, agree that your segments are some of the best guides for such issues. Typically, this will allow you to select a 24-hour period of time that will generate the best all around results. Regardless of geographical data, that 24 hours is a reasonable period in which the data can be sent to all corners of the globe or country and generate a realistic response in that time frame.

As an example, your demographical segment may be non-responsive during a weekend, and more prone to a mid-week window. Do keep in mind, though that many marketing experts still say there are off-peak and peak times.

Weekdays, mornings, and even certain periods early in a typical work week are gauged as peak message times. As a prime example, just consider what days or hours are peak times for those in your industry? When would you receive your competitors messages? Whatever time that might be, you may want to book around it to a quieter period, even if it initially seems less aggressive.

In Conclusion

As a modern, online retailer you already understand most of the basics. You know you need to use that standard combination of website, SEO, social media, and paid advertising. You know that a strong email list is a key to success, and you also know you need a constant stream of traffic that you can convert.

However, the email marketing methods we considered here are part of the newest and most effective strategies. Be sure you segment, assess your data, test your messages, and adjust, but also use relevant content, triggered messages, mobile optimization on all campaigns, market across channels, consider pre and re-targeting options, determine if it is time for a CTA and hard sell or just an FYI "teaser", and consider those times when there is less "noise" and your messages can get through the most effectively.

When you use these techniques, you will cultivate and farm the very best campaigns and audiences possible, growing and sustaining your firm! Good luck!

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