

Value-added Marketing

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Building Your Business with an E-mail Marketing Program

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E-mail marketing campaigns can provide a good return on investment, having a potentially greater impact than search engines, displays, print, television, and nontraditional methods such as text messaging on mobile phones. With the elimination of postage, printing, copying, and labor needed to address and stuff envelopes, costs for developing and administering an e-mail promotion can be significantly lower than sending promotional items through the mail.

Deciding on the E-mail's Primary Purpose

Crafting an effective e-mail message will take some trial and error. Ask recipients to comment on the message

and make suggestions for future e-mails so that you can fine-tune messages. Remember, it is poor practice to send an e-mail just for the sake of sending one – be sure to define the purpose of the e-mail and present information that supports this message. Recipients who open and read e-mails are making a choice between this activity and others. Consider the consequences of sending a message that is poorly crafted with no real purpose; the result might be an increase in the number of recipients asking to be removed from the e-mail list.

One purpose for sending an e-mail is to encourage a “call to action” which encourages the reader to “click through” the e-mail and make a purchase online or visit the retail outlet for a sales event or other promotion. Additionally, an e-mail message can be used as a “relationship builder” and include content that provides consumers with timely information or solutions to their problems. Examples range from landscape contracting firms with a “to do” list for preparing garden beds for the upcoming fall season to a specialty food store providing readers with holiday entertaining tips. The focus of the e-mail is to help readers achieve a desired outcome, not to promote products and services.

Developing an Appealing E-mail Template

Since an e-mail recipient doesn't physically handle e-mail messages, they can be relatively easy to discard or delete. Certain elements can encourage a reader to open and read the e-mail:

- Identifying the purpose of the e-mail in the subject line, e.g. “Sale ending soon!”
- Personalizing the message by including the recipient's name in the greeting
- Inserting a link to a Web page with a discount code
- Developing subheadings that clearly describe the purpose of the content that follows
- Providing content brief enough to pique readers' interest and direct them to the Web site where they can read the remainder of the article
- Using images that correspond to e-mail content
- Placing a portion of a compelling story below the “fold line”— the portion of the e-mail message that is not visible on the screen unless the viewer scrolls down the page to reveal it — to encourage readers to continue down the page.

Each of these components has a certain level of effectiveness and influence on “open rates,” the percentage of e-mail recipients who open or view the message.

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Software is available for purchase which can help you monitor and measure open rate.

Constant Contact, Vertical Response, and iContact are three such software options. If open rates are low, consider asking customers to provide feedback to better assess how the e-mail is being received and if there are other design elements or content that they would suggest adding.

Choosing When and How Often to Send the E-mail

Deciding when to send the e-mail is just as important as choosing what information to include. According to one research report, the two best days to send e-mails are Sunday followed

by Friday (Loechner, 2005). Compared to other days in the week, not only is readership higher on Sunday, but the click-through rate to the Web site is also greater. Sending the e-mails in the middle of the week tended to result in a lower percentage of readership and click-through rates. A good monitoring program can help with deciding the best days of the week to send e-mails as well as altering the schedule during nonpeak times or when products are in high demand.

Another common question is: “How often should e-mails be sent?” There is no correct answer to this question. Rather, consider the seasonality of your business and the months the business operates. How many and what holidays, occasions, or events correspond to your goods and services offered? What is your customers’ desired frequency for receiving e-mail messages? For example, begin by sending e-mails on a monthly or biweekly schedule. Develop a survey and send it to recipients about the frequency with which they receive the e-mails, particularly if a mass number of subscribers asked to be removed from the list. Don’t forget to ask if there are topics they would like to see included in the e-mails.

For a seasonal agribusiness, it may not be necessary to send e-mails during months when the business is not operating. Rather, focus on sending e-mails when the business is operating and during the month prior to the grand re-opening. This e-mail should remind customers about products offered, introduce customers to new goods and services, provide hours of operation, serve as an invitation to the grand opening, and so forth. Seasonal agribusiness owners concerned about losing contact with customers during non-operating months can send a “thank you for your business” e-mail shortly after the end of the season. Include other information in this e-mail such as the date of grand re-opening and anticipated new goods and services that will be offered. Additionally, e-mails can be sent during holiday times to wish the recipients well.

Measuring E-mail Campaign Effectiveness

Just like any other marketing strategy, it is essential to determine if the time and money spent on crafting and sending an e-mail to your list “paid off.” Since you probably assess the effectiveness of in-store promotions such as coupons sent in the mail to your loyal customers, you should do the same to evaluate the effectiveness of your e-mail campaign. Questions you should consider include how many recipients read the e-mail, who were they, how did they learn that your e-mail newsletter exists, and, if applicable, how many went to your Web site after reading the e-mail?

Click-through rate is the percent of e-mail recipients who click on a link in a message and are then taken to your Web site. Not everyone who clicks on a link intends to make a purchase. Software can also be purchased to record what generated the visit (e-mail, search engine, or otherwise), provide accurate counts of how many consumers click on the link in the e-mail, and track

Percent of email recipients who read emails and click through to a website		
	Percent who read e-mail	Percent who clicked through to website
Sunday	30.8	7.2
Friday	27	5.3
Monday	25.6	3.9
Tuesday	23.9	3.9
Saturday	23.7	3.9
Thursday	23.1	3.7
Wednesday	22.8	3.5
Source: Loechner, 2005.		

visitors' movements through the site.

Monitoring the number of new e-mail subscribers and asking how they first learned about the e-mail list is a way to determine if content is being shared with others. Approximately half (53 percent) of consumers learn about Web sites they visit from family and friends (www.eMarketer.com). Another study indicates that consumers who use the Internet are very likely to share e-mail content with family and friends (89 percent), with 75 percent of these consumers stating that they send the e-mail to up to six other people (ShapePartners 2006). If the list of e-mail recipients is not growing at the desired rate, consider providing an incentive (e.g. discount or free shipping) to current recipients who send messages to others in an attempt to build your list. You may also want to read our article "Developing e-mail Lists" for further information.

When List Members Are Unresponsive to E-mails

You should expect that a certain number of e-mails will not be delivered to the intended recipient or will simply not be opened due to unresponsiveness, incorrect e-mail addresses, or spam filters. Rather, consider the seasonality of the business and decide during what months to expect high click-through rates or increased traffic to your retail outlet. Open rates and responsiveness may decrease during slower sales periods or the off season. Additionally, recipients' interests in the products promoted in e-mails may have changed and may feel it is easier to delete them than to opt out.

- Nonresponsive e-mails can easily be deleted from the list; however, before you do, consider sending e-mails to nonresponsive list members and:
 1. Ask them to update their profile

or confirm their interest in receiving messages

2. Ask them to fill out a survey as to why they have not opened or responded to e-mails
 3. Provide them with an incentive to open e-mails and "click through" to the Web site or, if you don't have a website, to visit your retail outlet or place an order over the telephone
 4. Change the e-mail's subject line and resend it without changing the content.
- If these recipients still do not open the e-mail, it may be practical to remove their e-mail addresses from the list.

Customization: Features That Personalize an E-mail

Many agribusinesses sell a variety of products, with different categories and brands appealing to different customers. Certain retailers will receive new products seasonally, some of which may be collectors' items or difficult to obtain during other times in the year. What better way to ensure e-mail recipients open, read, and click on links in the e-mail than to ask them their preferences when they opt in? For example, consumers who drink wine may have strong preferences and only consume white or red, dry or off dry, or prefer a particular varietal. Developing a subscription form with choices about the type of content they would prefer to receive may entice more consumers to opt in. A subscription form for a winery with a tasting room may include questions such as:

- Would you like to receive announcements of upcoming events held at the winery?
- Would you be interested in joining our "tasting club" loyalty program and receiving e-mails informing you about this program?
- Which of the following varietals

most interest you and would you like to receive e-mails about new releases (check all that apply)?

Similarly, an on-farm market can help consumers customize the e-mails they receive by also asking their preferences for products sold and interest in learning about on-farm events or other events in which you will be conducting.

Conclusion

Properly planning how you will build your e-mail list and deciding what components you will incorporate into your e-mail template are crucial and need to be completed well before the first e-mail is sent. It is possible that you will only get one chance to attract the recipients. Even when you have a satisfactory response rate it is still necessary to re-evaluate your campaign, send messages with content that will appeal to recipients, and assess their reaction. The time and energy invested in a successful e-mail campaign will certainly be worth it.

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