

Best Practices in Email Marketing

# 22 Quick Tips for Better Email Marketing

PUBLISHED BY

StrongMail Systems, Inc.  
1300 Island Drive, Suite 200  
Redwood City, CA 94065  
P 650-421-4200  
F 650-421-4201

StrongMail Systems UK, Ltd  
Prospect House, Crendon Street  
High Wycombe, Bucks  
HP13 6LA  
Telephone: +44 (0) 1494 435 120

Copyright © 2010 StrongMail Systems, Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of the contents of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of StrongMail Systems, Inc.

STRONGMAIL and the STRONGMAIL logo are registered trademarks in the United States, other countries or both. All Rights Reserved.

StrongMail Systems UK, Ltd is a company registered in England and Wales at 5 New Street Square, London EC4A 3TW. Reg. No. 6398867. VAT # GB 925 07 6228. Trading Address: Prospect House, Crendon Street, High Wycombe, Bucks HP13 6LA.

[www.strongmail.com](http://www.strongmail.com)

## Table of Contents

TIP 1	KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN.....	1
TIP 2	DEFINE YOUR OWN BENCHMARKS.....	1
TIP 3	TEST SUBJECT LINES – IN REAL TIME .....	2
TIP 4	SOCIALIZE YOUR EMAIL.....	2
TIP 5	DON'T SAY SO MUCH .....	3
TIP 6	BEING RELEVANT IS STILL RELEVANT .....	3
TIP 7	PAY ATTENTION TO SUBSCRIBER ENGAGEMENT .....	3
TIP 8	DO SOME LEVEL OF LIFECYCLE MESSAGING.....	4
TIP 9	BE GRACIOUS, SAY WELCOME .....	4
TIP 10	REMIND SUBSCRIBERS OF YOUR VALUE .....	4
TIP 11	DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE .....	5
TIP 12	IF YOU COLLECT IT, USE IT.....	5
TIP 13	DON'T BE CREEPY WITH BEHAVIORAL TARGETING .....	5
TIP 14	INCLUDE EMAIL SAMPLES AT REGISTRATION .....	6
TIP 15	ALLOW RECIPIENTS TO DICTATE FREQUENCY .....	6
TIP 16	USE AN EMAIL MINI-SERIES .....	6
TIP 17	DON'T SAY BLAST – PLEASE, WE IMPLORE YOU .....	7
TIP 18	GET PERMISSION!.....	7
TIP 19	DON'T SEND EMAIL FROM PEOPLE AT YOUR COMPANY .....	8
TIP 20	HOLD A CONTROL GROUP .....	8
TIP 21	ALLOW FOR SUBSCRIPTION MANAGEMENT .....	8
TIP 22	DON'T JUST REDESIGN – OPTIMIZE CREATIVE .....	8
	CONCLUSION .....	9
	ABOUT STRONGMAIL SYSTEMS .....	9

Whether you're new to email marketing or have years of experience under your belt, keeping up with the latest best practices and integrating them into your email marketing programs can have a profound effect on their ultimate success.

The truth is that changing technologies, regulations and consumer behavior make it imperative that you constantly review your email programs and optimize them with the latest strategies.

In the spirit of that advice, we are introducing 22 new "Quick Tips" that serve as a complete update and follow-on to our previous and extremely popular quick tips white paper. Boosting performance of your existing email programs while improving customer satisfaction is as easy as reviewing the practical tips outlined below and incorporating them into your email strategy.

*Make sure your reply-to address is monitored by real people who are empowered to respond to comments directly – not by an auto-responder.*

#### **TIP 1 KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN**

The power of email lies in its inherent effectiveness as a relationship channel. Consequently, email is one of the best ways to encourage and grow solid relationships with your subscriber base. Because relationships are built on two-way communication, setting your email reply-to address as *donotreply@company.com* or including copy that asks your customers not to respond is extremely counter-productive. Such behavior indicates that you want to be able to talk with them, but you do not want to hear what they have to say in return – and that's never a good way to start a relationship.

Instead, you should make sure your reply-to address is monitored by real people who are empowered to respond to comments directly – not by an auto-responder. You may find that some of the most honest, relevant and interesting feedback you get will come directly to that reply-to address. Facilitate it; don't dissuade it.

#### **TIP 2 DEFINE YOUR OWN BENCHMARKS**

Leveraging industry benchmarks for email program performance is pretty commonplace for marketers today – but doing it can often be a great disservice to you and your program. What does it really mean that the average open rate is 30 percent? How engaged are those audiences? How long have they been subscribers? Is the content being sent relevant? How much content do the marketers send? There are too many unknown variables for benchmarks to be an effective means of evaluating program performance.

Rather than rely on industry benchmarks, consider defining your own based on your audience profile, email sending behaviors and past and present program performance. By doing this, you gain a relevant measure of how your strategies and tactics are moving the performance needle – your performance needle!

### **TIP 3 TEST SUBJECT LINES – IN REAL TIME**

Subject line testing is one of those things that we all talk about and many of us do – but the method behind the madness is often ineffective. There are a number of things that affect the performance of a subject line and many of those outside contributors have more to do with things completely out of our control than anything else. This is why you should test your subject line for every email you send. Rather than take your learnings and automatically apply them to all of your email subject lines – leverage testing in real time to determine what the right subject line is for one specific message at a given moment in time.

Deriving long-term methodologies out of a single subject line test is a dangerous course of action. Are you forever going to include your company name at the front of your subject lines? It may work for the time being, but it will likely age quickly and the effectiveness will diminish. Test in real time – it's the way to go.

*Leveraging social media in your email campaigns can be very successful if you include content that is compelling and viral in nature.*

### **TIP 4 SOCIALIZE YOUR EMAIL**

Incorporating social components into your email communications provides a mechanism for easily and effectively expanding the reach of your email program beyond your email subscribers. But in order to achieve that incremental reach, it is necessary to have a plan – a real strategy.

Some marketers choose to include SWYN (share with your network) links in their emails – almost as a glorified forward-to-a-friend. While some have seen minimal success with this approach, especially at the on-set when it was pretty new, others are finding that performance has started to normalize and isn't as impactful as it once was. But all is not lost. Leveraging social media in your email campaigns can be very successful if you include content that is compelling and viral in nature. In brief, making content shareable is not enough – you need to make it share-worthy. And that will take some testing on your part to determine the right approach, content and/or offer for you audience.

## **TIP 5 DON'T SAY SO MUCH**

The amount of time one of your recipients spends viewing your email is nearly as minimal as blowing past a billboard on the express way. You have approximately seven seconds to convey your message to a recipient, at which point they either decide to conclude the engagement or read on. Messages that are very copy heavy can be daunting – especially if your content is being rendered on a hand-held device.

For promotional email messages, be sure your headlines are obvious and succinct, and limit your body copy to no more than four or five lines. Sometimes less really is more. For newsletters, the rules of thumb are a little less clear – but testing the presentation of content and how much is included in the newsletter will go a long way in getting the type of engagement with your messages that you seek.

*You have approximately seven seconds to convey your message to a recipient, at which point they either decide to conclude the engagement or read on.*

## **TIP 6 BEING RELEVANT IS STILL RELEVANT**

Social media may have emerged as the new hot topic, sending marketers clamoring to figure out the best application for their business, but that doesn't mean you get a free pass on the basics of email marketing. Getting the right message to the right person at the right time should always be the end goal.

Create relevant experiences for your subscribers with your email program by leveraging all the tools at your disposal: data, imagery, content, call-to-action and timing. Holistically looking at how you can achieve relevance with the information readily available is the best and only way to go. Relevance does take some work, but the effort will pay for itself many times over in terms of improved response rates and customer satisfaction. Failure to send content that addresses the needs, desires and expectations of your subscribers will not only reduce response rates, it can lead to higher complaint rates and unsubscribes.

## **TIP 7 PAY ATTENTION TO SUBSCRIBER ENGAGEMENT**

Recipients all engage with email differently. There are some who open most of your email and click through pretty consistently, while others may save your email and only open it to identify offers or programs that are relevant as they look to do business with you. Regardless of what that behavior is, you need to know it. Having a clear picture of how your recipients use and interact with your email is a great indicator for programmatic planning, messaging cadence, content direction and planning.

It also lets you understand just how much of your audience is not engaged with your program at all. Having this information helps to determine what your contact strategy is for that audience, how long you want to continue targeting that audience and what your plan for reengaging them is. If you don't know, you can't plan.

## TIP 8 DO SOME LEVEL OF LIFECYCLE MESSAGING

When experts start talking about lifecycle messaging, many immediately begin to think of the data implications of running a full-blown lifecycle program. But no one said you had to jump right in the deep end. There are plenty of data points available to drive a basic lifecycle program. The most frequently used milestones often include new customer on-boarding, birthday/anniversary messaging and reengagement programs.

If you want to get a little more involved with it, consider looking at what your customer lifecycle really is with your product or service. Product/service renewals, as well as the months leading up to them, are a great opportunity to plug back in with the recipient to remind them why they are doing business with you in the first place – customer referral programs and product review programs are other strong components to leverage in building out your lifecycle messaging.

## TIP 9 BE GRACIOUS, SAY WELCOME

Email subscribers are valuable. These are individuals who have willingly provided their email address and given you permission to mail to them (we hope). But what are you doing upon receipt of that information? If you are not yet, you need to be sending a welcome message.

A welcome message is the perfect way to say thank you to the new subscriber for trusting you with a prized possession – their email address. The welcome message is also an ideal time to set expectations for the recipient, including:

- When they can expect their first communication
- How often the messages will arrive
- What the message is going to look like
- Add-to-address-book details

Setting expectations appropriately – and then delivering on those promises – is imperative to providing a relevant experience for the recipient and to realizing a successful email program for you.

## TIP 10 REMIND SUBSCRIBERS OF YOUR VALUE

Don't assume that just because your subscribers provided permission 18 months ago means that they remember why they decided to join your program in the first place. You need to make your unique value proposition apparent, always. This doesn't mean that you blatantly tell them why or when they started engaging with you, but you should not lose sight of the importance of making it clear. Your subscribers have real lives outside of their inbox and are often too busy to remember what it was that drew them to you in the first place. Don't be too proud to remind them why they love you – every once in a while.

*A welcome message is the perfect way to say thank you to the new subscriber for trusting you with a prized possession – their email address.*

### **TIP 11 DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE**

Sometimes email marketers get a little bit of tunnel vision when it comes to the customer experience. Often times, we focus on what our goals and objectives are and how our performance is being measured – and the customer experience becomes less than ideal. Make note, we are talking about a customer experience, not just a subscriber experience.

Consumers do not discern between the experience they have with your email versus your front line staff versus your call center team. All of those interactions are a reflection of your brand and impact their impression of you. Taking a step back and looking at how email fits in to that overall experience is paramount to long-term program success and customer satisfaction.

*If you are going to collect information at the point of subscription, be prepared to use it as an apparent piece of information in your email campaigns.*

### **TIP 12 IF YOU COLLECT IT, USE IT**

Data is the key to creating a relevant experience for your subscribers. Most marketers are data-dorks by nature – you thrive on what you can discern from the information and then find a way to creatively market against those data points. You may not want to admit it, but it's true.

In the quest to get your hands on as much data as possible, sometimes information goes by the way-side and the recipient can become frustrated. If you are going to collect information at the point of subscription, be prepared to use it as an apparent piece of information in your email campaigns. If you ask about preferences, messaging frequency, language preference, etc. – be sure to use it within your email campaigns. Asking subscribers what they want and then not honoring it will damage the trust you've built.

### **TIP 13 DON'T BE CREEPY WITH BEHAVIORAL TARGETING**

Leveraging site-side behavior can provide you with very powerful insights into how your customers or prospects interact with your brand, what information they are interested in and at what point they bounced from your site. But you need to be mindful about how you leverage that information within your email program. For example, abandon cart messaging can often appear as if you are chasing someone down to buy your product. Instead of using language that says, "you forgot this," it might be more effective to send a promotional-type message that features a discount, sale or offer for the very product they were just looking at yesterday. Your message will more likely be seen as relevant instead of pushy or desperate.

#### **TIP 14 INCLUDE EMAIL SAMPLES AT REGISTRATION**

Giving your potential subscribers a glimpse of what they can expect before they subscribe is still important – and not many marketers do it. Think about all the free-trials and money-back guarantees out there, all geared towards providing the best experience for customers who want to do business with you. Your email programs should be no different. You want subscribers that “want” your email – and what better way to ensure that than to give them a little taste of what they can expect.

Not only does providing a sample help to increase the engagement level of your subscribers, it can also help to minimize unsubscribes and complaints – all of which have a positive impact on your email sending reputation. Not too shabby!

#### **TIP 15 ALLOW RECIPIENTS TO DICTATE FREQUENCY**

Frequency is one of those situations where you really do need to be prepared to deliver – but more and more marketers are finding success in allowing the recipient to tell you how often they want to receive your email. There are two common ways to approach this – the first is to collect this preference point at the time of subscription.

The challenge here is that the recipient hasn't yet had an opportunity to really engage with your program, so they can't definitively tell you that “weekly” is going to be the right frequency. The second way is typically offered at the point of unsubscribe. As part of the unsubscribe process, the recipient is given the opportunity to reduce messaging frequency instead of abandoning the program all together – but at that point it may be too late.

Consider, instead, reaching out to your new subscribers as part of your welcome or onboarding process weeks into the relationship to quickly survey their satisfaction with the program, including specific language around the desire to change communication frequency. You will find that this can go a long way to deepen the relationship you have with your subscribers.

#### **TIP 16 USE AN EMAIL MINI-SERIES**

You should try your hardest to make all of your content relevant to every recipient for every mailing – but let's face it, that's just not always realistic. People's interests vary from one person to the next, one day to the next. But you can isolate and address a very specific topic for a short period of time.

Enter the “email mini-series.” All of your email marketing programs don't have to continue indefinitely. Try launching a mini program that's main goal is to address a topic specific to a moment in time, and structure the subscription to coincide with that defined moment. Some marketers have introduced the “email mini-series” during the holidays: 12 days of Christmas, Shopping Tips Countdown or even the 12 days of Holiday Baking Tips.

*Providing a sample email message prior to registration can help to increase the engagement level of your subscribers and minimize unsubscribes and complaints.*

Ultimately, the email mini-series offers the following benefits:

- Enables a limited subscription on a concentrated topic
- Simply conveys the content relevance
- Sets expectations on frequency of the messaging
- Establishes an end in sight for the subscription option
- Leverages top-of-mind customer interaction with less potential for attrition

There is no end to the “email mini-series” possibilities – just your imagination (and maybe your bandwidth).

*Playing the pre-existing business relationship card is a dangerous move that will lower your response rates while sending your complaint rates soaring.*

#### **TIP 17 DON'T SAY BLAST – PLEASE, WE IMPLORE YOU**

Let's keep “blast” in the past and move into a new, more intelligent era of email communication where we refer to our email communications as “launches,” “distributions,” or “deployments.” As professional email marketers, we are mindful about message content that contains email problematic phrases like “free” or “limited time offer.” The same consideration needs to be given to how we as marketers refer to what we do on a daily basis. We need to “walk the walk” by removing the word “blast” from our daily vernacular. This will also help educate those internal customers that have a stake in your email marketing.

#### **TIP 18 GET PERMISSION!**

You don't have to talk to very many email marketers about permission practices before you come across one that defines permission as anyone who has done business with them in the past. When pressed for an explanation, they will often times cite the CAN-SPAM requirement of a pre-existing business relationship – the easy way out. But put yourself in the shoes of the consumer. Just because you've done business with a particular company once or thirty times doesn't necessarily mean that you want to hear from them all the time. While you want to believe that your product or service is different, it may not be different enough.

When subscribing recipients to your email communications, you should always seek clear and obvious permission. Playing the pre-existing business relationship card is a dangerous move that will lower your response rates while sending your complaint rates soaring.

### **TIP 19 DON'T SEND EMAIL FROM PEOPLE AT YOUR COMPANY**

Your email subscribers are expecting to receive email from your company – not necessarily from an individual at your company. While you may feel that this approach personalizes your message, it will always get lost in the “sort by sender” world some of us live in to deal with overburdened inboxes – and if the “From” name is not a household name, it may get overlooked entirely. Plus, what happens should that person leave your company? Using a company name ensures that you maintain a consistent communication with your subscribers.

So unless you are a B2B marketer that sends email from your sales team (and that sales team has relationships with your customers or prospects) or you are Oprah or Martha Stewart, you should make sure you're sending email from your company.

*If you send more than one communication type, be sure to offer subscribers the opportunity to opt out of specific topics.*

### **TIP 20 HOLD A CONTROL GROUP**

Email marketers seem to be the most reluctant to hold control groups when testing, and it isn't clear why. Ultimately, we are trying to determine if the variate or variates we are testing are driving some sort of incremental lift over what the recipient previously received. There really isn't much more explanation necessary. Hold control groups when testing anything.

### **TIP 21 ALLOW FOR SUBSCRIPTION MANAGEMENT**

If you send more than one communication type, be sure to offer subscribers the opportunity to opt out of specific topics. For example, if you send partner messages, you may want to manage this as a separate topic for subscription to protect your core database from attrition due to lack of interest in specific partner messaging. Your recipient controls the relationship with you as a brand and should be given the flexibility to decide what email programs they would like to receive.

### **TIP 22 DON'T JUST REDESIGN – OPTIMIZE CREATIVE**

Too many marketers redesign their templates and put them immediately into practice. Beauty is still in the eye of the beholder, but functionality is completely up to the numbers. You may prefer one color combination or another for your call-to-action button, but what your recipients actually click on is another story entirely. Be sure to test each creative component for optimal interaction with your subscribers – but don't forget to hold a control (see Tip 20), you may find that even though you are bored with your creative – your recipients actually prefer it.

## CONCLUSION

Investing time and attention in best practices can dramatically improve your email programs; however, keep in mind that email best practices are constantly evolving along with email marketing itself. As such, it's extremely important to make the effort to stay current with this dynamic channel. For more information about email best practices or how technology can enable you to follow them, we encourage you to visit StrongMail's website ([www.strongmail.com](http://www.strongmail.com)), or give us a call at 800-971-0380.

## ABOUT STRONGMAIL

StrongMail's online marketing solutions for email and social media enable businesses to reach, engage and influence their target audience using two of the most powerful channels available to marketers today. StrongMail gives email marketers the control and support they need to improve campaign performance, boost deliverability and lower costs, while leveraging the power of social media to extend the reach of their campaigns to new audiences.

Combining an easy-to-use email marketing application, high-performance delivery system, viral-marketing tool, social media integration, and a wide range of deliverability, strategic and supporting services, StrongMail makes it possible for companies with all levels of resources and expertise to take advantage of its proven solutions.

Headquartered in Redwood City, CA, StrongMail's clients include global leaders across virtually every industry. To learn more about StrongMail, please visit [www.strongmail.com](http://www.strongmail.com) or follow us online at [www.twitter.com/StrongMail](http://www.twitter.com/StrongMail) or [www.facebook.com/StrongMail](http://www.facebook.com/StrongMail).

StrongMail Systems, Inc.  
1300 Island Drive, Suite 200  
Redwood City, CA 94065  
P 650-421-4200  
F 650-421-4201

[www.strongmail.com](http://www.strongmail.com)