



# Think About Your Rep

Optimizing deliverability in the 2010s

**A**s dutiful marketers, we pay close attention to our delivery results and identify e-mail marketing campaigns with lower than expected opens and clicks as harbingers of potential delivery issues. But as ISPs tweak their spam filtering techniques, marketers must consider user engagement in addition to the basic precepts of deliverability best practices if they intend on making it to the inbox.

When e-mail started taking off with consumers in the early '90s, ISPs put up few to zero obstacles to senders en route to the inbox. Small advances in spam filtering took place every few years, helping keep volumes manageable. When spam volume began to explode in the 2000s, ISPs honed their technologies and processes to reduce mailbox clutter, most often by looking at basic triggers such as whether the sender generated too many user spam complaints or mailed to too many invalid addresses and spam traps.

In today's "Web 3.0" era of e-mail deliverability, individual customer preferences prevail in the eyes of the top ISPs. Major providers such as AOL and Yahoo now look for signs of positive user engagement when processing incoming e-mail, such as opens and clicks, and

how many users are clicking "this is not spam" when messages are erroneously filtered into the spam folder.

## Deliverability Paradigm Shift

When, in the summer of 2009, Yahoo began including opens and clicks in its reputation equation, acquisition mailers felt the pain immediately. Yahoo caught on to their gaming of the system by mailing to large numbers of inactive users in order to artificially deflate overall spam complaint rates. By adding engagement metrics into the mix, many of these same acquisition mailers who were previously whitelisted and received preferential inbox treatment suddenly faced blocking and spam folder placement.

These changes represent a paradigm shift for e-mail marketing: ISPs are off-loading some of the responsibility of identifying legitimate mail directly to their users, who are being given the opportunity to evaluate and determine which senders' e-mails they're most interested in reading. As members anonymously vote on their favorite senders and brands, ISPs gather millions of data points with which to filter incoming mail. Voilà—a smarter inbox!

Another important new feature that has been introduced into the landscape is the subtle shift from IP- to domain-based reputation systems. Although IP-based assessments of reputation are still the most common, several major ISPs have begun to collect data on domains and are tying the constituent parts of a mailer's reputation to its domain. Aiding this movement has been large growth in sender adoption of cryptographic e-mail authentication solutions such as Domain Keys Identified Mail, which facilitates accurate domain-level reputation monitoring.

## It's a Team Effort

It's become clear that the days of setting up whitelist and feedback loops and then walking away thinking your job is complete are long gone. The old standbys of deliverability—reverse DNS, monitoring hard bounces and blacklistings—no longer are enough, and deliverability specialists no longer can operate in isolation from their marketing teams and strategies. The application of engagement metrics to inbox disposition and greater accountability through domain reputation mean deliverability and marketing teams must

*(continued on page 26)*

## E-MAIL

(continued from page 25)

work more collaboratively than ever. Most of all, senders need to deploy smart campaigns that inspire users to click on messages to grow and optimize their reputations. Here are recommendations for hitting this target:

- **Evaluate your mailing practices, and establish targeting strategies that focus on delivering unique content to engaged customers.** Basic selects of e-mail names by product brands, publication titles, geography and demographic data segments require overlays of recency and activity variables to achieve higher response rates and more deliverable campaigns.

- **Think about creative and innovative ways to generate clickthroughs.** Companies that shun deep discounts, loss leaders or an extra month off of a subscription fee as promotional tactics may consider these approaches acceptable, if only to drive further signs of positive recipient engagement and increased delivery.

- **Monitor deliverability like a hawk.** As deliverability specialists closely track how many customers are opening e-mails in the spam folder through new technologies such as MailboxIQ, they can flag their marketing colleagues in real time as these

levels increase. Sophisticated marketers will take immediate action based on this knowledge, devising new ways to drive activity with the hopes of altering the placement of future e-mails to the inbox. They can identify "hyperengaged" individuals who actively mark their e-mails as "not spam" and deliver customized content to grow the dialogue.

- **Although there are marked advantages to domain reputation, some companies may prefer to keep the connection between their mailstreams separate.** Different IPs were sufficient for separating mailstreams in the past—however, today mailers may consider setting up completely separate domains for such efforts as list rental, e-mail sponsorships, affiliate programs, e-mail change-of-address and appends programs. Each of these practices is considered risky and may have a negative impact on your overall reputation, subsequently polluting your most valuable campaigns and lists if you use the same IP or domain to deliver these campaigns.

### Deliverability 3.0

In 2010 and beyond, smart marketers will adapt to the changes and discover that evolutions in spam filtering technologies are just narrowing the conversation

between them and their customers. The Wild West of the late '90s and early '00s was punctuated by a one-to-many style of e-mail marketing. Today, customers demand greater personalization in their marketing communications.

The more personalized you can get, the more in-tune with your customers you ultimately will become, and improvements to your overall deliverability will manifest as greater engagement metrics grow your overall reputation. In the world of Deliverability 3.0, marketers should think less is more, make it personal, and keep the dialogue with customers a fluid and personal conversation.

It's refreshing that users have been empowered—whether they know it or not—with greater levels of control to dictate what should or should not be delivered to their inboxes. However, marketers are now challenged to better segment their lists and engender more user engagement not just to increase response rates, but also to ensure the delivery of their messages to the inbox in the first place. ■

Michelle Eichner is COO and VP of client development at Pivotal Veracity, an e-mail delivery auditing and optimization firm. She can be reached at [meichner@pivotalveracity.com](mailto:meichner@pivotalveracity.com).

## BRAND MATTERS

(continued from page 17)

take a lot of time. She encourages us to fit in one artist date a week.

I share this idea with my clients, and we take the time right then and there to make these lists. I check in with them at a later date and encourage them to share their stories about these mini-adventures. No one has ever told me he or she regretted an artist date.

### Boost Brand Creativity

Moodling can happen within your traditional business venues. I remember colleague Joan Litle telling me years ago that she learned from Williams-Sonoma founder Chuck Williams to take in trade shows in reverse. To yes, walk around it one way but then do it all over in the opposite direction.

"You'd be amazed what you see the second time that you missed the first!" she advised. I know this to be true.

Moodling may be considered inefficient from a time-motion perspective, but from a creativity-enhancing perspective, it's one of the best things you can do. I wonder what else we would learn about our brands if we "toured" them in reverse!

And yes, you can muddle without even leaving your home or office. One of my favorite things to do is to buy five to seven magazines from fields that I normally do not read or study and just page through them. I often do this at airports when I am tired. Sometimes all I do is look at the photos, headlines, designs, typefaces and, especially, the ads. I always learn about something

I've never been exposed to before and appreciate these new perspectives.

Plato once said, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." Think about that idea in relation to your company ... imagine what you might learn if you and your team took time to "play in the brand." It's time to take playing and moodling seriously. ■

Andrea Syverson is president of IER Partners, a strategic consulting company specializing in innovative brand and merchandising directions. Look for her new book, "BRANDABOUT: A Seriously Playful Playbook for Passionate Brand-Builders and Merchants," this spring. She may be reached at [asyverson@ierpartners.com](mailto:asyverson@ierpartners.com).