The Technical Elements of Email Marketing

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Introduction to the Technical Side of e-marketing

Email marketing is one of the highest 'return on investment' advertising solutions of today. With numerous sources claiming an average of £20 for every £1 spent it's no wonder so many of us are trying to utilise the benefits of email marketing.

However, it's not all that simple, as many technical aspects need to be considered before throwing out your next email campaign.

Things to consider

- **Email service providers**
  These are email marketing providers who offer online services for processing your email campaigns, they are alternatives to using desktop programs such as outlook.

- **Useful Tools**
  Useful tools to help you create the best e-marketing campaigns.

- **Tracking data**
  The data tracked by online email service providers to help you understand your e-marketing campaigns and improve their performance.

- **Subject Line**
  A catchy subject line is essential. Which of these would you open;
  ¬   Amazing Sale Now On! Save up to 50%
  ¬   How to Save 20% on your Energy Bills
  The second subject line is the better option, it's specific in what it's about and is telling us it's going to instruct us how to do something we're interested in (Save money). Have a read of Juliet Fay's "How boring subject lines in emails kill open rates" http://www.onlinesalesmessages.com/boring-subject-lines-emails-kill-opening-rates/ for more tips on writing successful subject lines.

- **Avoiding the spam box**
  This is the last place you want your email message to end up, avoiding it is critical. We'll look at good practices to apply later.

- **Spam words**
  Spam words are words that spam filters recognise as being strongly spam mail related and therefore are given a spam score, all to which contributes to the effectiveness of your email message and whether or not it ends up in the spam folder.

- **Data protection and UK SPAM laws**
  A brief introduction to email marketers obligations and compliances with UK laws.

- **Using double opt in processes**
  The process used to subscribe users by where they opt-in to your mailing list and confirm in a confirmation email.

- **Design of email campaigns**
  The design of your email campaign is important and needs to be balanced, too much of something can make it uninteresting.

- **HTML & plain text email versions**
  Not all users will view your email message in HTML, so it's important to send a plain text version that equally reads well without the fancy colours and images.

- **Reading panes**
  Reading panes are potentially the first insight subscribers have to your campaign, so catch their attention in this quick glance.

- **Cross email client display**
  Ensuring your email message display correctly in a wide range of email clients can be difficult without comprehensive testing.

- **Optimised landing pages**
  Don't just send users to your home page and make them search for your special

offers, send them directly to where they need to be to make a purchase/enquiry/booking.

- **Increasing subscribers**
  Offer something free, an incentive for users to subscribe. Creative thought and ideas can work wonders here.

- **Maintaining subscribers lists**
  Optimising your subscribers list is important, they easily go out of date and can become stale if not looked after. Remove bounced addresses and always look to subscribe new members.

- **Sending limits**
  Send limits are enforced by internet service providers or email service providers such as Google mail, yahoo mail, hotmail etc. They vary from one to the other so it's a good idea to find out what limits they impose. Google mail for example allows up to 500 email addresses though if a high number bounce your account may be suspended. Further more connecting to Google mail through Outlook or Apple Mail may reduce your limit to 100 addresses. This is why it may be a better option to use a dedicated email service provider.

- **Sending times and frequency**
  There's a certain mystery about the best time to send email campaigns, it's said mid week and during the day is best. Mornings we're usually bombarded with emails and our delete tolerance is very low. Friday's we're planning the weekend and Mondays we're not awake, so it's said. Experimentation is the best practice here.
  Send frequency depends on your business but a structured campaign will work best, try to send the time day and same time every time, subscribers will come to expect your newsletter over time.

- **Website integration**
  Many email service providers feature automatic form builders that create the registration forms required for your website. They are best suited to your home page, if not all pages and request the minimal amount of personal information. Don't get too personal.

Email Service Providers / Delivery Programs

There are many email services providers out there as well as the traditional Microsoft Outlook, Live Mail and other online based web mail suppliers.

Mail Chimp - www.mailchimp.com
Free accounts available with a 2000 member limit and 12,000 per month email send limit. Various other paid accounts exist starting from £6 ($10) per month or pay as you go options based around email credits (which are effectively emails sent, 1 credit per email sent.).
Free accounts lack a few features compared to paid accounts and the Mail Chimp logo will appear on the footer of email campaigns sent.

Sign Up To - www.signup-onlinemarketing.co.uk
Accounts start from £40 per month and range up to £200 per month. Packed with features like detailed reporting, web versions of email campaigns; twitter sharing, campaign scheduler for pre-planned campaigns and even SMS messaging services. UK Based.

Constant Contact - www.constantcontact.com

Accounts from £9 ($15) per month for a 0 to 500 email address campaign, right up to £92 ($150) per month for a 25,000 limit. The Canadian based company offer other services such as event marketing, online surveys and social media. Anti-spam checker, facebook and twitter links made easy, over 400 templates as well as detailed reporting.

Campaigner - www.campaigner.com
Packages from £6 ($10) per month for 1000 email addresses with unlimited sending power. Increasing account costs per number of email addresses used up to £33 ($55) per month.
Interesting personalisation features, easy email builder and detailed reporting.

Others include: Dotmailer, Market Mailer, Send Blaster, Infusionsoft

Tools
There are a variety of tools online that can help you with your email marketing campaigns. Some free, some almost free they can help you get the most out of your campaigns.

Google URL Builder
Used in conjunction with Google Analytics the link builder helps you create the web links you need to track conversions through Analytics.
If I wanted to link from my newsletter to a page on my website about 'website design' I'd create the following link tags for the purpose:

http://ww.jamieking.co.uk/webdesign.htm?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=text_link&utm_campaign=july_newsletter
Google's tags marked in blue | My values for each tag in green.

Step 1: Enter the URL of your website.

Website URL: *
(e.g. http://www.urchin.com/download.html)

Step 2: Fill in the fields below. **Campaign Source**, **Campaign Medium** and **Campaign Name** should always be used.

Campaign Source: *   (referrer: google, citysearch, newsletter4)
Campaign Medium: *   (marketing medium: cpc, banner, email)
Campaign Term: (identify the paid keywords)
Campaign Content: (use to differentiate ads)
Campaign Name*:   (product, promo code, or slogan)

Step 3
Generate URL   Clear

Google URL builder available at:
http://www.google.com/support/analytics/bin/answer.py?answer=55578
Or visit www.google.co.uk and search for "Google URL builder".

Return on investment calculator for email marketing
Calculate the ROI of your email marketing campaigns by completing the details requested on the web page.
http://www.emailtools.co.uk/tools/roicalc.htm

Spam Checker
Check your email campaigns spam score and get feedback on improvements you could make to avoid the spam box before you send.
http://spamcheck.sitesell.com

Spam Checker at Litmus.com - $49 to $299 per month

Check your email campaigns through the litmus spam filter checker as well as check cross email client displays and find out how your message display in a range of other email service providers.
www.litmus.com

Others include: www.previewmyemail.com – Paid accounts.

Tracking

Many of the ESP (Email service providers) feature in-depth reporting and analytics of your email campaigns. Logging data such as how many subscribers opened, deleted or forwarded your emails. Right down to who clicked on what link, what email addresses bounced, how many users unsubscribed or reported a spam complaint.

Knowing what to do with this data sometimes can be a daunting task, so what do they all mean?

Opens: Number of emails opened.
Unopened: Number of emails not opened.
Clicks: Number of user clicks within your email message.
Unsubscribe: Number of users who clicked and processed the unsubscribe
                        link in the footer.
Complaints: Number of users who reported your message as spam, reported
                        through their email client provider.
Bounced: Number of messages sent to an email address that did not exist
                        or could not be found.
Forwarded: Number of times your message was forwarded.

Total Recipients	48	Recipients Who Clicked	(8.3%) 4
Successful Deliveries	48	Clicks / Unique Open	11.4%
Times Forwarded	0	Total Clicks	4
Forwarded Opens	0	Last Click Date	3/10/11 12:46PM
Recipients Who Opened	(72.9%) 35	Complaints	0
Total Times Opened	42	Total Unsubs	0
Last Open Date	3/11/11 5:44AM	Recipients Who Liked on Facebook	0

What about Google Analytics?

As long as your ESP provides Google Analytics integration or you've added the required URL tags using Google's URL Builder you'll see data recorded respectively.
For example any traffic generated from your email campaign will show as 'Source= email'. Campaign data will also be stored in the title you named your newsletter, allowing you to see performance of each campaign you send.

If you're ESP doesn't have tracking data or perhaps your using outlook for your email campaigns you can use the Google URL builder to help integrate some tracking data into your Google Analytics account. (If you don't have an Analytics account it's worth getting one, it's free and tracks your website usage as well.)

Make Informed Decisions

Make informed decisions by using this data to enhance the performance of your email marketing campaigns. Use your bounce rates to filter out expired email addresses and maintain a high quality subscriber list.
Use open and click rates to measure the effectiveness of your email and make changes where required.

A/B Split Testing

Some ESP provide A/B split testing, this is where you send out 2 different email campaigns equally to your subscriber list and can see which version of your campaign received the best response. A good example of A/B split testing would be to try 2 different subject lines, or 2 HTML layouts.
Use A/B split testing where you can, especially in early stages to find the best format for future campaigns.

Using Segments or Filtered Subscriber List's

Taking Mail Chimp as an example, you can segment subscribers based on various criteria. Perhaps you want to create a subscriber list based on the subscribers who 'opened' your last email campaign. Or perhaps who did not click a link in your message. You can even give members ratings and compile special list's for your most loyal subscribers.

Avoiding the Spam Box

The spam box is an e-marketers number one enemy. The last thing you want after all the hard work of compiling your email campaign is for it to end up in the spam box.
Spam mail evolves rapidly and with it so do the spam filters. A constant review of your messages will help you stay at the leading edge of this evolution and help keep your campaigns in the inbox.

How Spam Filers Work

Email providers have spam filtering technologies installed on their servers. A widely used version of this is Spam Assassin which intelligently scores email messages for their spam content and filters accordingly.
Here's an example of Spam Assassin's scoring:

- Talks about lots of money (.193 points)
- Describes some sort of breakthrough (.232 points)
- Looks like mortgage pitch (.297 points)
- Contains urgent matter (.288 points)
- Money back guarantee (2.051 points)

So your email campaigns are filters and scored in the same way, the higher score you receive the more likely your message is marked as spam and eventually sent to the spam box.
Many of the ESP listed have spam checkers available though not all. You can use a spam checker as listed in the Tools section previously to get an idea of your spam score. The lower the better, but here are some tips for keeping your spam score low.

Keeping a Low Spam Score

- Don't use spam words within your email message, these include words like; Free, Cash bonus, click here!!, download now, winner, No risk, Low risk, Order now, No obligation etc.
  You can find many examples of spam word lists online through normal search.
- If you do use a spam-like word, don't repeat it over and over throughout.
- Keep your HTML code clean and avoid spam scores for bad coding.
- Spell everything correctly.
- Use a mixture of text, images and media content, not solely images.
- NEVER USE CAPITALS when you don't have to.
- Don't use multiple explanation marks or £ pound signs.
- Don't colour fonts bright red or green.
- Designing a HTML email in MS word and exporting the code to HTML (The coding is bad and spam filters hate it.)

The fight against Spam

Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003 & Data Protection Act 1998

The UK government addressed spam mail as well as other electronic marketing messages in the 2003 Regulations.
Though criticised for not being as harsh as those in the US (CanSPAN 2003) or in Italy it covers some basic points.

- You obligated to include a valid address for un-subscription and clear web links to the opt-out process.
- Faking sender information is an offence.
- You must have users consent to store and hold their personal details including email address and all in accordance to the data protection act.
- Businesses can email potential customers once in respect of starting communication and awareness of their business but cannot continue to email the consumer with marketing, publicity or sales information without first getting the consumers content to receive such like material.

Individual's rights in relation to UK Spam Laws

1. Not to have their personal email address processed or stored without consent.
2. Not to receive marketing email without explicit consent unless it is related to an existing relationship with the company and you have not withdrawn consent.

What if I buy a list of email addresses?

If you have purchased a list of email addresses then you may want to know the following.

- It is legal to send messages to businesses on an opt-out basis only. Meaning as long as you give them the opportunity to unsubscribe you are complying with regulations.
- Consumers must have given consent to receive unsolicited mail from third parties that are offering similar products/services/information to which they consented to receive.

Check with the company selling email list's before purchasing.

It is recommended that you read over the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003 & Data Protection Act 1998 when you have the opportunity.

Other tips on avoiding the spam box
- Sign up for a few free email accounts like yahoo mail, Google mail, hotmail etc and send test email campaigns to them to see where they end up. You can even change your spam filtering settings for each account and see how high you can push them before your message is spam boxed.

The Double Opt-in Process
It is advised where possible to use a double opt-in process for your subscribers. This is a process that follows a process like this;
1. User enters email address to subscribe to mailing list.
2. User receives a confirmation request for their subscription to the email address they supplied previously.
3. User clicks confirmation link, confirming that they opt-in to receiving email marketing messages.

Most ESP's use double opt-in processing though it is worth asking before signing up to any packages.

Email Campaign Design
Designing your email campaign used to be a tricky business if you didn't know HTML coding. These days with all the email services providers offering a variety of free templates to chop and change it's become so much easier. There are however a few points to think about before creating your next masterpiece.
- If using HTML, keep your code clean, most ESP will do this automatically but if building the HTML yourself keep it clean and remove non required coding.
- Try and avoid using MS Word and exporting the code, spam filters dislike this.
- Think about the use of reading panes in email clients; make sure the top quarter of your email message has something to capture their attention rather than a large heading image that may be blocked anyway.

- Use a good mix of text, images and media. Don't use solely images as spam filters think your trying to trick them and will spam your messages almost certainly.
- Don't forget to include the required information in the footer such as unsubscribe links as mentioned previously.
- Test your email campaign over several email clients such as outlook, hotmail, yahoo mail, Google mail as well as portable devices and mobile phones to ensure they display correctly. Some ESP's offer this service as part of their packages, though some do not.
- Some ESP's will offer a web version of your email campaign; this is good if the user's mail client doesn't display the email correctly. Choose an ESP who offers this feature.
- Keep it simple; busy, congested emails can put people off. If it's not easy to read it probably won't be read.
- Try A/B testing where you send out two different designs between your subscribers and monitor the response for each.
- Remember to send a plain text version of your email campaign and ensure you optimise the plain text email before sending.

Landing Page – From Email to Website

Should you strike gold and get subscribers to open and click on links to your website from your e-newsletter you'll want to make sure your website corresponds. There's no point asking the user to visit your website to take your 'fantastic offer' for them to end up on your home page searching around for where to go next!

This is simple landing page optimisation, ensuring that what's on your website corresponds to what's in your e-newsletter. Your landing page is the page the user goes to when they click a link in your e-newsletter.

For example: If I want a user to read more about website design, I'll ensure they are linked directly to http://www.jamieking.co.uk/web_design.htm rather than my home page.

Closing Tip

Build a relationship with your subscribers and build their confidence in your company.