Blackbaud Communication Services Best Practices for Email

Organize and Create Email Content for Successful Delivery

Blackbaud Communication Services provides an industry-leading delivery system that monitors and manages industry best practices so you can focus on your mission and content strategies. To ensure the successful delivery of email across multiple email clients and help improve your reputation with recipients and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) alike, we recommend you follow these best practices.

Communication Plans

Before you begin to compose your email, have a solid communication plan in place to ensure your messages are effective and well-received.

Templates. Plan your templates so messages are consistent with your organization's brand for external communications, including your website, but are distinct across different email campaigns. For example, use a consistent font within all email for a particular campaign to create a common identity across its messages. Keep the banner image short so links and content that drive recipients' participation occupy the majority of the preview pane of their email clients.

> As many recipients will view your email through a mobile device, keep responsive design in mind as you develop email templates. With a responsive email template, your messages render appropriately across multiple devices and email applications. For examples, see ZURB's *Responsive Email Templates* and Email on Acid's *Free Responsive Email Template*.

Schedule. Over-communication can be as bad as non-communication. Plan your eNewsletter and email campaigns to ensure timely delivery of relevant information and an opportunity for interaction. To avoid delivery during business hours, do not send email messages between 8:00AM to 8:00PM. The best days to delivery email are during the middle of the week. Try regularly scheduled communications such as eNewsletters on different days until you determine which day is most effective.

Recipient lists. To enable visitors to easily subscribe to eNewsletters and email blasts, include a simple and efficient subscription form on your website. To ensure your communications are exactly as intended, test email messages with a list of internal recipients and seeds. To filter responses to a central monitored location, use a generic email address such as info@***.org as the 'Reply-to' address of your email messages. To determine the effectiveness of your recipient lists, check the delivery rate. If less than 80% of recipients receive your email, clean the list.

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To help build your sender reputation, use a consistent 'Reply-to' address with all your messages.

Email Content

As you compose the content of your message, follow these best practices to create subject lines and body copy that engage recipients and ensure successful delivery and a positive sender reputation.

Subject line. You have at most 10 seconds to capture your recipients' attention in the inbox, so keep the subject line descriptive and inviting, as well as concise and relevant, but **not** promotional. To help increase the likelihood that the recipient will open your message, follow these best practices:

- To ensure the recipient recognizes the sender, clearly identify your organization or known staff in the "From" line and address.
- Use no more than 25 characters so the entire subject line appears in the recipient's inbox, including on mobile devices.
- To avoid being mistaken for a duplicate message, update the subject line for each mailing, especially different mailings on the same topic.
- To avoid issues with content filters like *SpamAssassin*, don't use numbers or special characters, and avoid exaggerations such as ALL CAPS, overused exclamation points, and stars or dotted lines. Also, avoid terms such as "Free", "Apply now", "Extra cash", "Home-based", "Opportunity", "Limited time", "Money", and any words that may be considered pornographic.

> For an exhaustive list of words to avoid, see HubSpot's The Ultimate List of Email SPAM Trigger Words.

 To analyze the effectiveness of your subject lines, check the open rate. If less than 25% of messages are opened, rework your subject lines.

Calls to action. Your message should include at least one call to action — such as to donate, register, join, volunteer, or visit your website — that gives the recipient a compelling reason to act now. To increase the odds that the recipient responds in kind, follow these best practices:

- The call to action should be the focus of your email message. Start the message with a compelling
 call to action that is short enough to appear within the preview pane of the recipient's email client or
 mobile device.
- To ensure recipients see your call to action, style buttons as text and CSS so they appear regardless of whether the email client downloads your images.
- · Use verbs and active voice with specific action-oriented language.
- As 70% of recipients click the first link, make that the most important call to action of your message.
- · To analyze the effectiveness of your call to action, track the clickthrough rate of its link.

To help build your sender reputation, use a consistent 'From' address with all your messages.

Most ISPs use a service like *SpamAssassin* to analyze messages for suspicious content.

As a non-profit, your identity may be more important than making a sale, so keep the call to action soft. Some email may be informational and may not need to push the call to action.

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Body copy. To retain your recipients' attention once they open the message, keep your content clear and concise, with no more than 250 words for total body copy. To make the most of those 250 words, follow these best practices as you compose your copy:

- Use email messages to introduce main content or functionality on your website. Rather than pack
 the message with lengthy copy full of details, include only the basics and point the audience to
 pages on your website.
 - For a monthly eNewsletter, point to a page with more information about each article and a donation page.
 - For an event announcement, point to a page with more information about the event and a registration page.
 - For a fundraising appeal, point to a donation page.
 - For a progress report on a mission, point to a slideshow of activities, a page with a summary of media mentions, a "tell-a-friend" page, and a donation page.
- Identify your organization by its specific name and location. In accordance with the United States'
 Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing (CAN-SPAM) Act, include a link to your website and a contact phone number and email address.
- · Avoid large graphics or pictures. Keep graphics minimal and sized to take up minimal space.
- Use headlines and bulleted lists to emphasize important points and allow recipients to quickly scan the content.
- To engage the recipient, use stories to share experiences and then use statistics, testimonials, case studies, and expert opinions to support the point.
- To grow relationships and response rates with recipients, use merge fields like <First name> to
 personalize the content.
- To avoid issues with content filters like *SpamAssassin*, avoid terms like "As seen on TV", "Call toll-free", "No obligation", "Limited time offer", "This is not spam", and "Earn extra".
- · To communicate how you value recipients, invite them to update their profiles on your website.
- Keep your audience in mind. Provide content that is appropriate for the level of engagement and interest. To target different audience segments within the same communication, use dynamic content and segmentation.
- To analyze the effectiveness of the design of your copy, check the clickthrough rates to gauge engagement. Test with different colors and graphics until you see clickthrough rates improve.
- To analyze the length of your copy, check your unsubscribe requests. If you have a high rate
 of recipients who request to unsubscribe, you may be losing your audience with the amount of
 content.

To avoid issues with content filters, preface links to your website with 'Follow this link' rather than 'Click here'.

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Email Design

When you design a Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) email, remember that email clients have developed slower than web browsers. Keep your design simple and rely on older HTML standards.

> Some applications — like Blackbaud *Online Express* — automatically ensure that the HTML and CSS used for email result in messages that render correctly across email clients and on mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets.

> To preview how your design renders across email clients, use a testing service like Email on Acid.

CSS. As some email clients remove the CSS from <head> and <body> tags, use inline CSS. Email clients may reject CSS shorthand, so declare each attribute of your elements separately.

> For an exhaustive look at which CSS style elements popular email clients support, see Campaign Monitor's CSS Support. To quickly move existing CSS inline, use a conversion service such as Premailer.

Tables. Email clients have poor support for <float>, <margin>, and <padding>, so use tables for layout. As you design your tables, follow these best practices:

- To set the width of a table, set the width of each of its cells rather than of the table itself. As email clients have poor support for percentage-based widths, use pixels instead.
- To add padding to a cell, use either the <cellpadding> attribute of the table or a CSS padding for each cell, but not both. Or, nest tables rather than set margins or padding for table cells.
- Avoid whitespace between the tags of your table, as email clients may add padding above or below the cell contents.

Color. The use of color can help engage your audience and promote your organization's branding across email. As you design color in your HTML email, follow these best practices:

- Email clients may ignore the <background-color> specified in your CSS or <body> tag, so use a
 container table for background colors. For example, nest your email content within a 100%-width
 table with a background color.
- · Use longhand hexadecimal color values, as some email clients may reject shorthand values.
- To prevent email clients from overwriting your hyperlink colors with their default colors, set a default color inline for each link and then use a redundant span inside the <a> tag. For example:

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<a href="https://blackbaud.com/" style="color:#8cbe4f"><span
style="color:#8cbe4f">This is a hyperlink.</span></a>
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Images. As most email clients block images by default, provide <alt> text for images so the recipient's first impression of your email isn't an empty placeholder or stripped image. The use of appropriate <alt> tags can increase recipients' trust in your message and the likelihood that they allow an email client to download your images. As you include images in your email, follow these best practices:

Provide a background color to use with email clients that don't support background images.
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Review the text versions of your HTML email to ensure the communication is equally effective.

In text versions, include the full URLs next to links, as some text email messages do not automatically include links.

- Set the dimensions of your images so email clients don't impose their own sizes for blocked images. Size images correctly before you add them to your content, as some email clients rely on the true dimensions of the image instead of the dimensions specified in the CSS.
- To position images, use the <align> attribute rather than <float>.

As some email clients may not support PNG images, use GIF or JPG formats instead.

Sender Reputation

Your sender reputation determines whether your messages arrive in an inbox or a Junk folder. Low-reputation senders are more likely to land in a Junk folder or be denied altogether. Large quantities of email sent to invalid addresses can lower your reputation and affect the deliverability of email sent to your valid supporters. ISPs may block images or disable links in email from non-trusted senders.

The most important thing you can do to protect your reputation is to prevent complaints. Send email to only those recipients who request it, such as through a subscription form on your website. Keep your email relevant. Set expectations as to the type and frequency of email recipients will receive and then send content that meets those expectations, per the established schedule. To help improve your sender reputation, you can also ask subscribers to add your "From" address to their contact lists so ISPs know your recipients expect your email.

As you design and compose your email, develop content and subject lines in accordance with the CAN-SPAM Act and Canada's Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA).

- Use accurate header information such as "From" and "Reply to" addresses and routing information that clearly identify your organization.
- · Avoid deceptive subject lines. Keep the subject line descriptive and inviting, but clear in it intent.
- Provide recipients a way to opt out of future email at no cost, and honor any opt-out requests within ten (10) days. Do not sell or transfer the email addresses of recipients who opt out of your email.
- · Clearly identify "commercial" email as an advertisement.
- · Include your organization's physical postal address in email messages.
- > To quickly test the quality and deliverability of your email to avoid content filters, use Contactology's Email Spam Checker.

For email sent through your Blackbaud program, *Blackbaud Communication Services* automatically includes safeguards to help protect your sender reputation.

- · Throttles large mailings to reduce the number of messages delivered at one time
- Blocks email sent to addresses in your recipient list that are recognized as invalid or that have reported your previous mailings as spam
- · Monitors the reputation of all senders to detect and correct problems before they cause issues
- > For detailed information about how Blackbaud delivers email through its products, see *An Overview of Blackbaud Email Services*.

Unsolicited email often results in 'Report as spam' warnings.