

The Email Opportunity

By Bernadette Johnson • December 1, 2004

Once called the "killer application", email promised to automate a plethora of business processes—all but eliminating the need for phones and snail mail. And though the hype has died down to a respectable level today, email has continued to make great strides: its speed is still unmatched; it continues to be cheaper than almost every other marketing/communications vehicle; and increasingly, it is facilitating powerful and instantaneous tracking, monitoring and profiling capabilities.

And it's about time sales organizations got on board, say pundits. The potential is great: applications span from using it as a tool to communicate and build relationships directly with customers and partners via email newsletters, tips, alerts, reminders and contests; to leveraging it internally as a sales incentive tool to motivate and reward your team.

Many organizations haven't yet begun to harness the strength of email, says Geoff Linton, co-founder of Guelph-based Inbox Marketer, not least of which is its power to provide traceable and immediate results. "They need to look at how some businesses are using it in their sales processes to ultimately lead to transactions—whether its sales, lead generation, contact/territory management. It's becoming a required competency even for small businesses."

For Toronto-based N5R.com, the focus is on helping sales team connect with people. "Nine out of every 10 sales calls go to voice email," says president Roman Bodnarchuk. "The biggest challenge is not so much the selling as it is actually getting in touch with someone."

Email newsletters, for example, provide that bridge, he says—and while Outlook and other e-mail platforms are great for sending one-off emails, an investment in an email-publishing tool or

system is often required to really leverage the creative, branding, targeting and tracking possibilities.

"Not only can an email newsletter look good, you can also measure who opened the email, who forwarded it to a colleague, who went back to the Web site. We can report that to the sales reps so they know which clients are really interested—so they know who to invest their time with."

Newsletters allow companies to be in consistent contact with customer and to be seen as providing value, says Shelley Paolini, director, email marketing, at Toronto-based Ariad Communications. That value comes in the form of newsletter content: company and/or marketing announcements, editorial content around marketplace trends/developments, tips, case studies, white papers, contest alerts, business incentives.

"Email is such that if you're not delivering valuable information in an ongoing and permission-based way, people aren't interested," she says.

Beware, adds Linton, of creating brochure emails and Web sites—ones filled only with promotional content. Leaders in this area, rather, have populated their communications with value-add info in order to help the customer in their day-to-day and remain top-of-mind, he says.

Newsletters, Linton says, become a lead qualification tool: sales reps can see who looked at the message, who opened it and what content they clicked on, and then customize and adapt their sales discussions and phone calls to the content those people are interested in—within privacy sensitivities, of course. Currently Inbox can send a newsletter to any size audience that is made to look like it is coming directly from the appropriate sales rep. The subsequent metrics (recipient actions) are then broken down by rep.

"If a rep has a couple hundred contacts, physically he does not have the time to

contact everyone by phone—and you can dynamically personalize it," he says.

Paolini adds: "Companies need to look at using email to generate leads and build value within the customer relationship and give frontline sales the opportunity to do what they do best."

For his part, Linton has also worked with clients to develop email applications like trade show alerts that allow sales reps to pre-promote an event, pre-engage the customer and encourage them to sign up instantly via email/Web, or at least indicate whether or not they will be attending. Among other things, such an initiative allows salespeople to pre-qualify and be better prepared at a show since they know in advance who will be popping by.

Inbox Marketer has also used email to compile surveys and profile information, enabling organizations to continually populate the customer profile with in-depth preferences, opinions, etc. Subsequent emails can then be triggered and customized dynamically using the database fields to match content with customer preferences.

Hilton Canada and N5R.com recently encouraged meeting and conference planners to sign up to revive Hilton emails using a personalized postcard that drove recipients to a unique URL. As soon as recipients responded by clicking through to the Web site and/or inputting their information, the Hilton sales rep were alerted, and within seconds had a profile in hand.

"Reps could follow-up immediately—they knew it was a good time, because the person was at their desk signing up for email. And now they were talking to people who were actually interested and they could provide relevant information. It helped them close the sales cycle," says Bodnarchuk.

N5R.com also learned that people leave patterns: people tend to check their

email at least three times a day, and they tend to check it at the same three times each day, he says, adding that once the pattern is evident, sales reps know exactly when they are most likely to reach a customer on the phone.

The most important part of the whole equation—once companies have figured out how to gather content and deploy a newsletter—says Bodnarchuck, it is tracking and measuring those emails and feeding the data back to the appropriate sales reps. In fact, he adds, that is one of the overall holdups: Everyone thinks it's a great idea, but they got lost in the technical side of things.

Adds Linton: "Doing email deployments on its own, is much less meaningful that if your harness the power and link it up to a simple database. If you do it without metrics, it's lost learning—so it is a necessary investment for any size company. And there is no reason it can't be done for a small fee per year."

Inbox's ten tips for successful email marketing messages:

1. Have a clear objective and stick to it. Internet users will not wade through your email to find out why you are writing. Get to the point or risk being deleted.

2. Personalize your emails as much as possible, especially the TO and FROM fields. Never have an email address as your FROM field, these emails will almost always be deleted. If possible use a name and recognizable

brand or company. Recipients are more likely to read an email that looks friendly and from a trustworthy source. Also, a personalized TO field that includes the recipients first and last name are more likely to get opened and read.

3. The SUBJECT line is extremely important. If your subject line does not catch the reader's attention or looks like spam, your email will not get opened. Your subject should be no more than seven words and should be honest and straightforward. Ask a question or state a benefit, but don't make empty promises.

4. Make your email reader friendly. Make sure you format your email in such a way that anyone who quickly scans it understands your message. Use bolding, underlining and colour to highlight important points, headings or links. Ensure the most important information is at the top of the message (above the preview pane cut-off).

5. Use a conversational tone. Get to the point and avoid the use of buzzwords and acronyms. Understand your target audience and write in a tone and style that is appropriate.

6. Test your message and your links. There is nothing worse than convincing a prospect to click on a link and then it doesn't work. This makes your email look unprofessional and will

deter the recipient from reading further emails.

7. Never use a file attachment. With the increasing threat of viruses, email users almost never open an email with a file attachment unless it is from a trusted source such as a colleague. Instead send an HTML or plain text message with hyperlinks.

8. Comply with the CAN-SPAM act. Only send emails to those who subscribe and be sure to include an opt-out (unsubscribe) link and a link to your privacy policy. You may also want to include a forward to a friend link, but these recipients cannot be added to your subscriber list unless they subscribe.

9. Add a personal salutation (e.g. Dear Paul) and include your signature in email alerts.

10. Always measure. Most email marketing systems provide real-time tracking of open rates and click through rates. Track your trends by customer type and message type.



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