The Ultimate

Email Marketing Best Practices Guide

A practical guide to email marketing for business and nonprofit

Haines & Company, Inc.

Introduction

Effective email marketing is more complicated than uploading a list of contacts and pressing “send.” Doing so puts you at risk in a host of ways. Abiding by email marketing industry guidelines will:

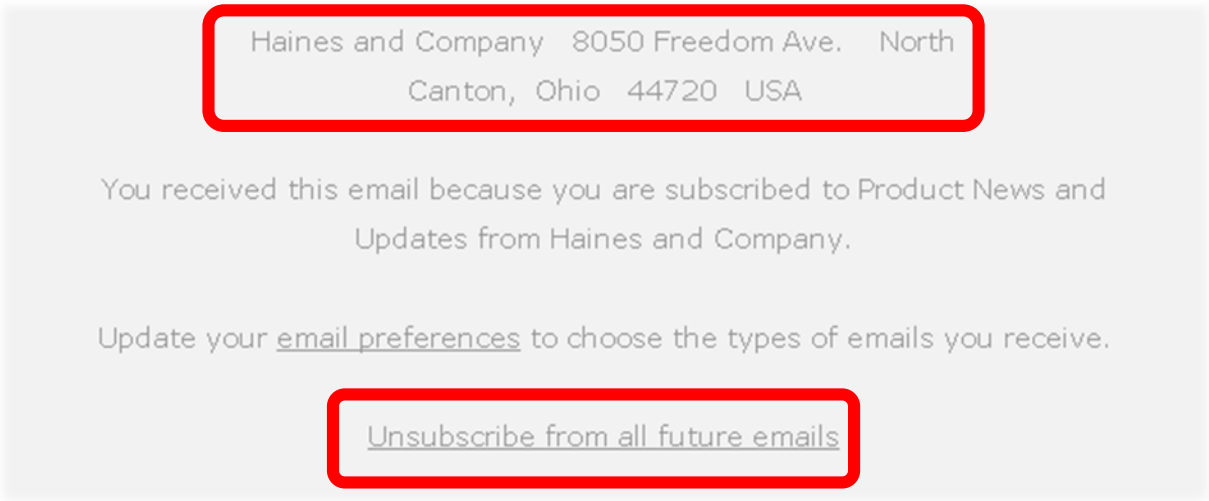
1. Increase the likelihood that emails are delivered to the recipient’s inbox and not filtered to a spam or junk folder
2. Minimize the number of recipients who opt out or mark the message as spam
3. Protect sender reputations and avoid blacklisting

Comply with the CAN-SPAM Act

Most email marketing platforms are designed to comply with the CAN-SPAM Act. However, complying with CAN-SPAM only meets the bare minimum legal requirements. It does not prevent you from being blacklisted or protect your sender reputation in any way.

The most often overlooked requirements are:

- Tell recipients where you're located
- Tell recipients how to opt out

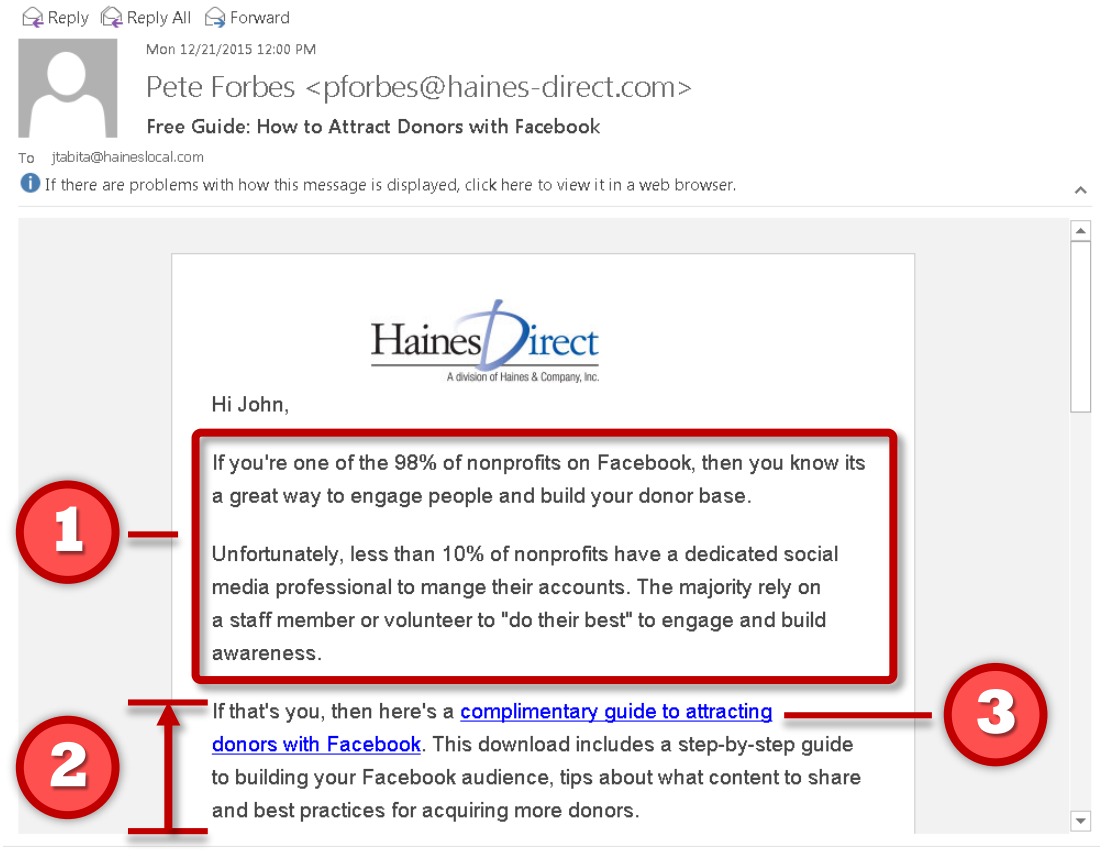


CAN-SPAM Act: A Compliance Guide for Business
https://www.ftc.gov/tips-advice/business-center/guidance/can-spam-act-compliance-guide-business

Optimize for Scanability

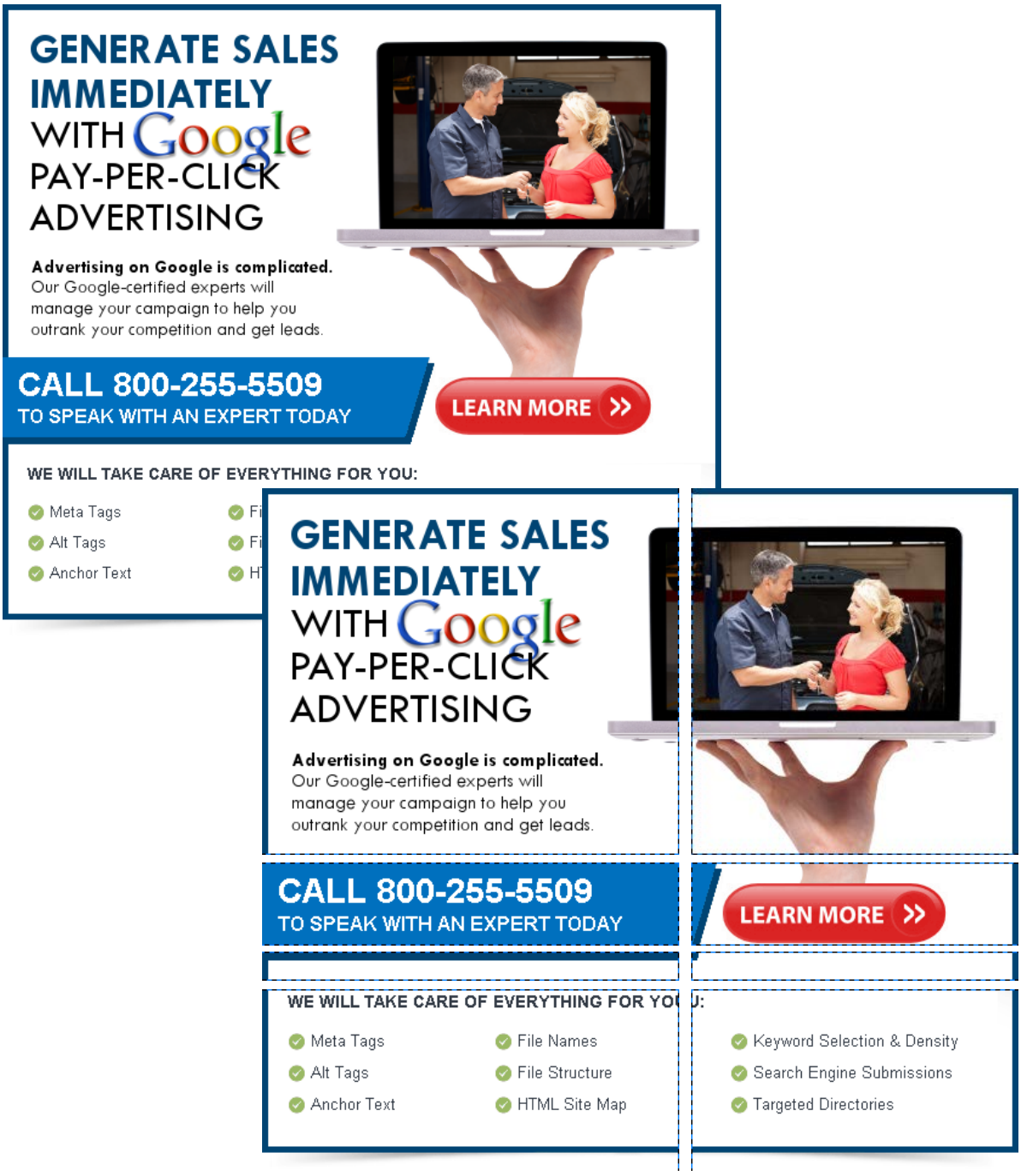
Most readers won't read the entire message but will scan it. For best results:

1. Use short blocks of text and bullet points
2. Call-to-action (CTA) should be above the fold
3. Links should be clearly formatted as clickable links



Use the Proper Image-to-Text Ratio

Don’t design an email using one large, sliced-up image. While it may look pretty, these kinds of emails perform poorly and are likely to trigger a spam filter.



Never Use Images for Important Content

Assume images will be initially blocked by email clients. Headlines, links or calls-to-action should be text, not an image.

The exception is when using a call-to-action button:

Learn More

Just be sure to also include a text link in the body of the message, such as:

> To learn more, please visit our website.

Use the Proper Fonts

Email clients like Outlook can only display fonts that are installed on your computers. But just because you have them won't mean everyone else does.

What's more, Apple and Windows computers have completely different fonts installed by default.

Follow these guidelines for maximum font compatibility:

- Use only cross-platform fonts
- Sans-serif fonts such as Arial, Calibri or Verdana are best for readability
- Other cross-platform sans-serif fonts are: Arial Black, Tahoma, and Trebuchet MS
- Avoid Times New Roman, as it tends to look dated
- If a serif font is needed, use Georgia

Optimize for Mobile

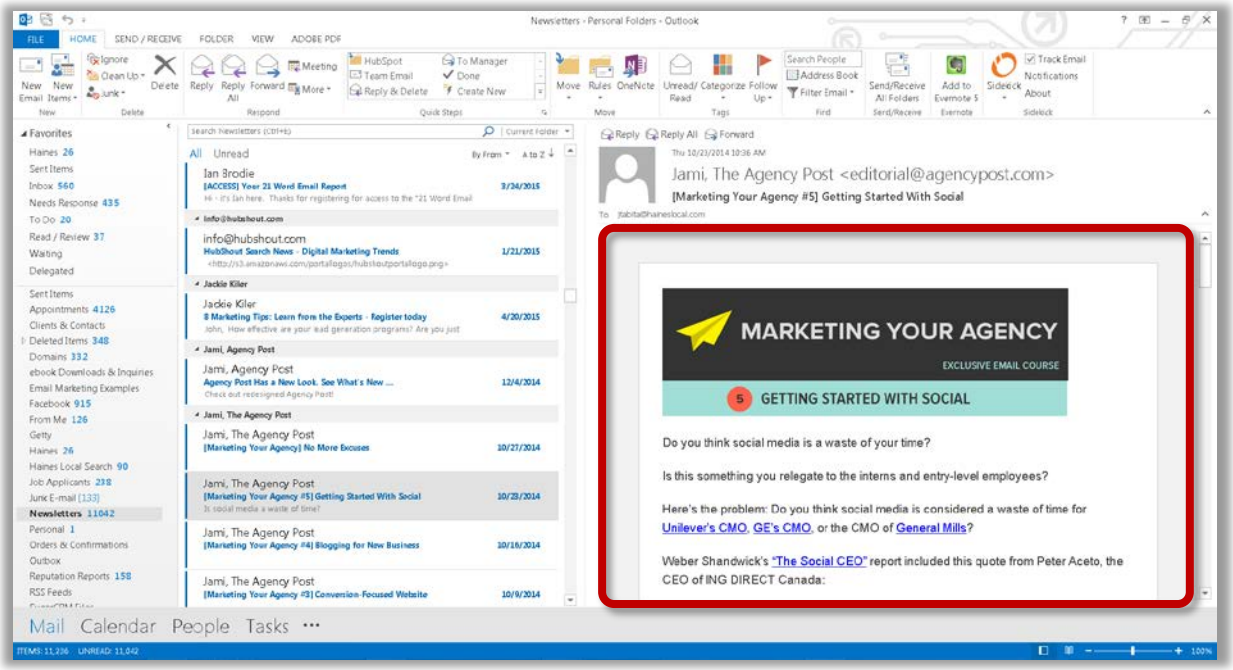
A large percentage of your recipients will be viewing your message on a mobile device:

- There are more mobile-only adult Internet users than desktop-only Internet users.
- More than 75% of adults Internet users access digital content on both desktop and mobile devices (a 68% increase from the year before)
- 42% of adults 55 and up own a smartphone

You'll most likely use a pre-made template within the email software platform that's already optimized for mobile (i.e., "responsive"). So don't try to make your email look like a static printed letter, as elements will be repositioned when viewed on a mobile device.

Optimize for the Preview Pane

Most desktop recipients will be viewing your email from within a preview pane:



Emails should be 600 pixels maximum width. This will make them display better within the preview pane size provided by many email clients.

Write Great Subject Lines

Keep it Short and Sweet

Your subject line should be a maximum of 50 characters. It may prove difficult to get your point across in so few words, but it's effective.

Get Personal

Use personalization tokens to add a feeling of rapport. For example: "Hi John, here are some email marketing tips we wanted to share with you…"

If you can't (or don't want to) use personalization tokens, use "you" or "your," so it still sounds like you're addressing them directly.

Don't Make False Promises

Trying to get your email opened through false pretenses will irk your audience and increase opt-outs.

Use FoMO (Fear of Missing Out)

Deadlines like "today only" or "24 hour giveaway" create urgency and encourage readers to act now, rather than putting it off until later.

Emphasize Benefits

"Increase your open rates by 50% today" is more appealing than "How to increase open rates."

Make it a List

People love numbered lists and human curiosity always spikes when numerals are involved. For example, these tips are from the article, 19 Quick Tips to Improve Your Email Marketing Subject Lines.

Write Great Subject Lines (cont.)

Ask a Question
Question like “Are you making these email marketing mistakes?” or “Do you know how to write effective email subject lines?” draw readers in with

Tailor Subject Lines to Recipient’s Location
Location-specific offers or news can increase open rates.

Make Recipients Feel Special
Subject lines like “For our beloved donors only…” can be magical.

Do Not Use Uppercase
“OPEN NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE TRIAL” isn’t going to get your email opened. (It’ll actually do the opposite.)

Always Be Testing
A/B testing is a great idea. You should use this on most of your content, and your email subject is no different.

19 Quick Tips to Improve Your Email Marketing Subject Lines
http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/improve-your-email-subject-line

Avoid Spam Trigger Content

Content in the subject or body that could trigger a spam filter are:

- Words like “free,” “guarantee,” and “no obligation”
- **Red fonts** or script fonts
- ALL CAPS
- Exclamation marks!!!!!
- Misspellings
- Too much copy, or copy stuffed with keywords
- Low text-to-image ratio (e.g., too many images or very large images)

The Ultimate List of Email SPAM Trigger Words
http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/30684/The-Ultimate-List-of-Email-SPAM-Trigger-Words.aspx

Email Spam Test

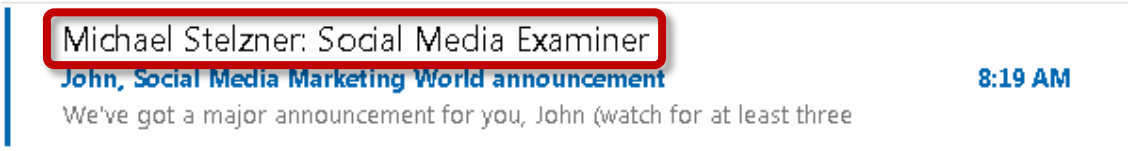
www.emailspamtest.com

This is a free online tool that helps determine if your email may be flagged as spam or filtered away by spam filters. It’s rules are based on SpamAssassin, the leading spam filter used by millions of email servers .

Results are based on email subject line, text content, links analysis, etc.

Use a Proper "From" Line

The From line is vital to the success of a campaign. Most people will not open an email unless they recognize the From line.



- Use an email address based on your domain
- Never use *noreply@company.com* – it's less personable and less likely to get opened
- Use no more than 25 characters, including spaces
- Use a consistent from line in case recipients have white listed you

Do not use just an email address as your From line. Some options are:

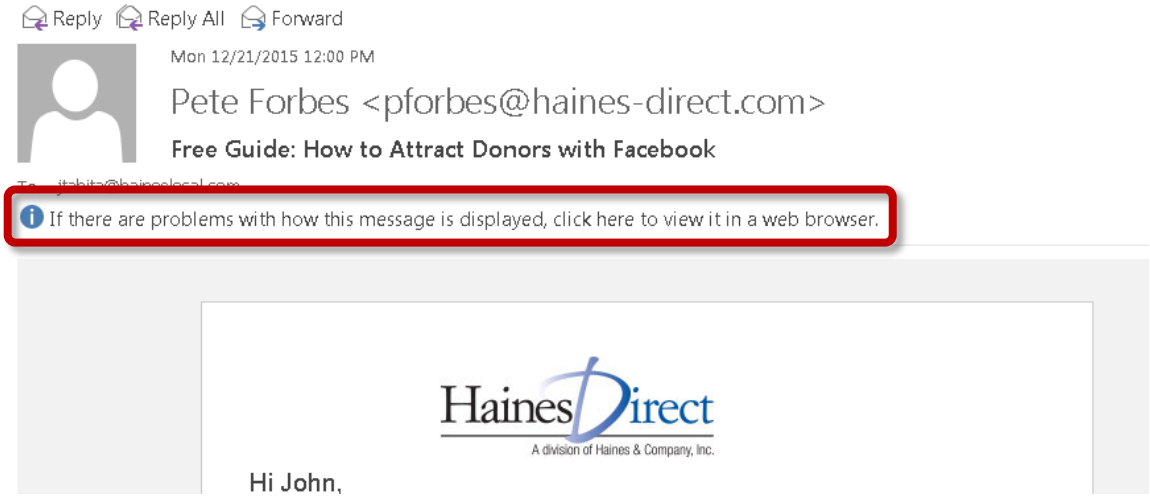
- Company/organization name
- Brand name
- Product or service name
- Publication name
- A person's name
- A campaign name, for example "YMCA Strong Kids"
- A combination of the above

Use Preview Text

Preview text displays in the preview pane of some email software, so make it interesting. (Well written preview text can increase open rates substantially.)

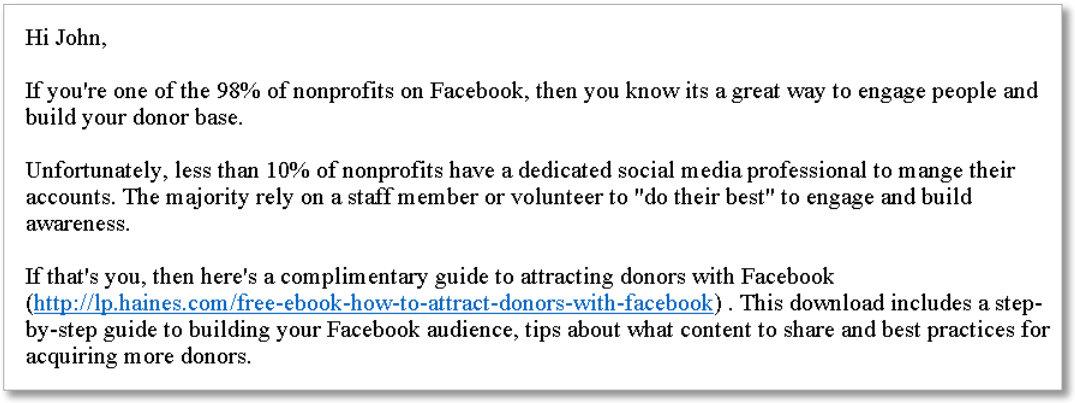
Enable a Browser Version

Most email marketing software platforms have a feature that allows you to enable a browser version of the email. This gives the recipient the option of viewing the email in a web browser:



Enable a Plain Text Version

Plain text emails are void of any images or formatting, such as bolded, italicized, different font styles/sizes; colors, etc. Enabling a plain text version allows your message to render properly in email clients that don't support HTML emails.



Hi John,

If you're one of the 98% of nonprofits on Facebook, then you know its a great way to engage people and build your donor base.

Unfortunately, less than 10% of nonprofits have a dedicated social media professional to mange their accounts. The majority rely on a staff member or volunteer to "do their best" to engage and build awareness.

If that's you, then here's a complimentary guide to attracting donors with Facebook (http://lp.haines.com/free-ebook-how-to-attract-donors-with-facebook) . This download includes a step-by-step guide to building your Facebook audience, tips about what content to share and best practices for acquiring more donors.

PLAIN TEXT

HainesDirect
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HTML

Optimize Your Images

Always Optimize the Image File Size

Most stock photos are more than 3000 pixel wide. Do not place an image larger than 600 or so pixels wide into an email and then reduce it down to size in the email editor.

Nor should you place an image that's *too small* and make it larger. Instead, images should first be resized to the exact size needed using image editing software like Photoshop, and then uploaded to the email platform and placed in the message.

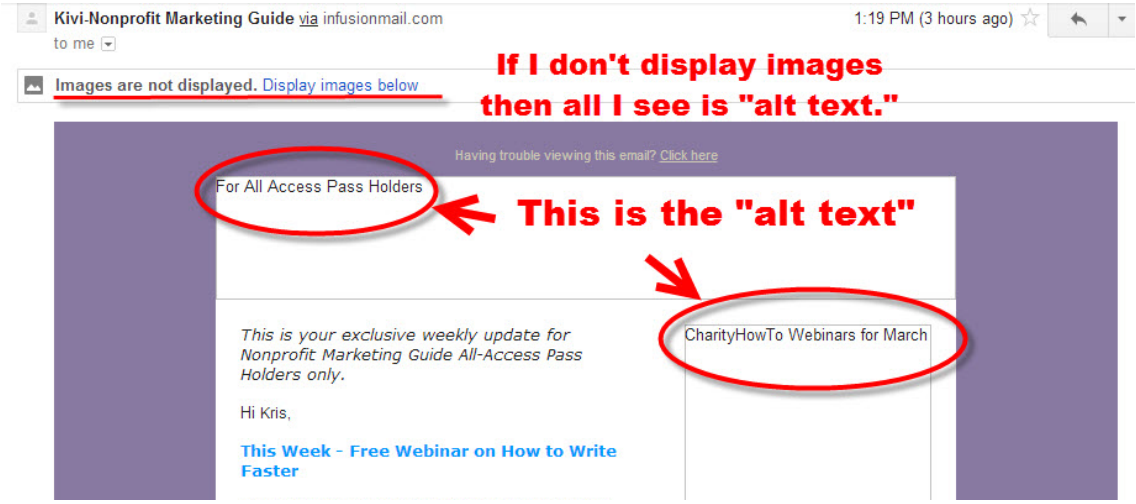
Use the Correct Image File Format

The wrong file format size can drastically increase the kilobyte size of your email.

- Use JPG for photos and images containing gradient colors
- Use GIF for plain, sharp graphics like logos
- Avoid PNG, as it tends to create larger file sizes

Use the Image ALT Tag Attribute

Be sure to add ALT tag text that describes the image. This help readers who have images turned off by default.



Determine Optimal Send Times

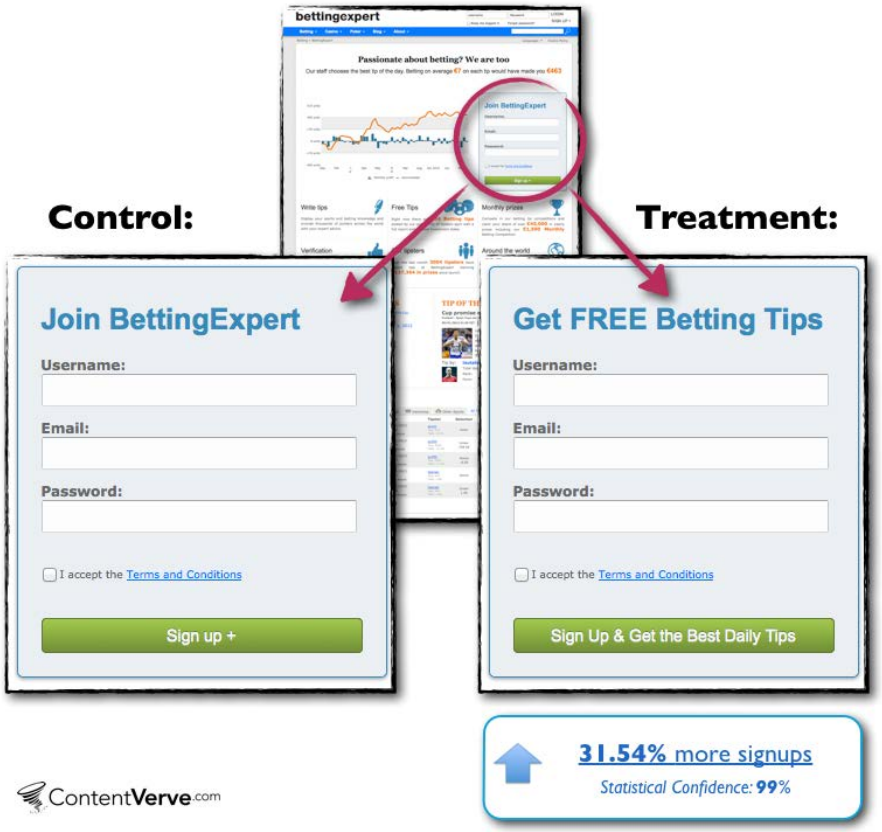
On average, open and click rates are highest in the early morning hours. But is early morning the best time to send emails? As a general rule, yes—but some kinds of promotions are better sent at certain times of the day more than others.

The timing is relative to the time zone you're targeting. When targeting multiple time zones, it may be best to segment your list by time zone.

The Science of Social Timing Part 2: Timing & Email Marketing
https://blog.kissmetrics.com/science-of-social-timing-2/

Always be Testing

A/B testing (sometimes called split testing) is showing two versions of an email or landing page to a similar audience to see which one performs better.



How to Boost Email Conversion Rates With A/B Testing [Video]
http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-to-a-b-test-emails-video

Monitor Key Metrics

Closely monitor deliverability, opt outs, complaints, bounce rates and other key metrics.

The Essential Email Marketing Metrics You Should Be Tracking
https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/metrics-email-marketers-should-be-tracking

Google Postmaster Tools

https://support.google.com/mail/answer/6227174

If you send emails to Gmail users, you can use **Google Postmaster Tools** to see:

- If users are marking your emails as spam
- Whether you're following Gmail's best practices
- Why your emails might not be delivered
- If your emails are being sent securely

Create Monitoring Accounts

Add a "seeded" list of email addresses using ISPs that your customers use most often, such as Gmail, Yahoo Mail, AOL, and Hotmail.

1. Set up approximately five mailboxes at each provider
2. Include the seed email addresses in each mailing list
3. Log in to each account and verify whether the email was delivered, blocked or sent to spam/junk folder

Practice Good List Hygiene

Online reputation depends on maintaining a clean, healthy email list. You should plan to purge or re-engage address displaying no activity for 12 months.

1. Purging

Too often companies don't think about purging data until significant email delivery problems have surfaced. If you wait until your email is blacklisted or delivered to the junk folder, you risk having to make much more aggressive purging decisions than marketers who proactively manage their data.

2. Re-engagement

Sending a re-engagement message offers a chance to win back the recipient. A re-engagement message usually alerts a recipient that their subscription is expiring due to lack of activity, and entices the user to opt in again to continue receiving the email.

Re-engagement messages provide the benefit of shedding abandoned accounts or spam traps from your list. Your list will lose some numbers, but usually the people lost were unengaged, poor prospects anyway.

For very valuable lists, marketers may use a series of emails enticing the recipient to come back. This can have a better response rate than a single email. If a subscriber doesn't interact with the re-engagement email, then it's time to remove their address from future sends.

How to Use Email to Re-Engage Sleepy Subscribers
http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/32123/How-to-Use-Email-to-Re-Engage-Sleepy-Subscribers.aspx

Monitor Your Sender Reputation

Sender Score

Sender Score is a number ranging from 0 to 100 that Mail Service Providers and ISPs use as an email filtering criteria.

The lower your Sender Score, the more likely ISPs will apply filtering criteria to your entire IP address as well as each email campaign. Senders with scores below 70 will experience aggressive email filtering applied to every email coming from their IP address.

Sender Score of a domain or IP can be checked at https://senderscore.org.

Other sites to monitor sender reputation:

- Senderbase.org
- ReputationAuthority.org
- BarracudaCentral.org
- TrustedSource.org

Monitor Blacklists

Blacklist providers are organizations that publish databases of domains and IP addresses considered to be spammers. If you get on a blacklist, you'll have trouble getting emails delivered.

The following sites will tell you if your domain or IP address is blacklisted:

- http://whatismyipaddress.com/blacklist-check
- http://mxtoolbox.com/blacklists.aspx
- http://blacklistalert.org/

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