

View From the Back of the Bus

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Effective Email Marketing to Design Professionals

In my view from the back of the bus, I have noted that product manufacturers and product representatives are not very effective in their use email as a direct and powerful marketing tool. Through research, experience, and stealing great information from experts, I have identified a number of issues that should be considered and understood to effectively deploy email marketing.

Jackie Gallogly and Lynne Rolls of Inbox Interactive Inc. extol the virtues of email in a recent web article "The Virtues of Email, the Killer App"¹. In the article, they list a number of items that they consider to be virtues of email. Several of them are directly applicable to the marketing of expertise and products and worthy of consideration.

Relationship

Email has the inherent benefit of quick, direct two-way communication. It also has the potential to harass people and invade their privacy. Communication is a key aspect of relationship and email is an effective way of staying in touch with key contacts and clients. Like anything else, too much of a good thing will limit effectiveness and certainly compromise hard won relationships. Whenever you send an email, think relationship first and product second.

Customer Dialogue - Issue Testing

Another excellent use of email is establishing dialogue with design professionals, asking questions, soliciting opinions, or testing ideas through surveys or questionnaires. I strongly discourage using email as a vehicle for blatant product promotion or pseudo-subtle image pieces in the guise of dialogue or testing. Dialogue is about industry issues, trends, and demonstrating leadership. Attempting to showcase products by disguising it as discussion of industry issues is not appreciated, wastes the recipient's time, and will trash your credibility.

Lead Generation

Email is an excellent tool for generating leads and identifying key players and decision makers. It is critical that lead generation type email strictly adhere to industry privacy policies, opt-in procedures, and the like. I suggest following the referenced link (endnote 2) for more information on privacy policies and permission marketing.² Consider the following from Gallogly and Rolls about soliciting lead information, "*The longer the form, the more intimidating and time-consuming it is. If you want to acquire names or customers, or even data from existing customers, think carefully about what information you need. Eliminate questions whenever possible. If you're talking to new customers...., try to limit the information to email address, first and last name, and one or two other items.*"³

Building Brand

In my mind the most important aspect of email is building your brand. Obviously, focusing on what it is you do and why you do well is important. However, clearly demonstrating that you are about solutions and expertise, not products, is probably the most important key to building a successful brand. To paraphrase Tom Peters in his key note address to the 2002 AIA Convention recently, "Experience = Brand". Consider that we directly experience solutions and expertise. We rarely consider products in terms of experience. In my estimation, email can, by following some simple rules, be a highly effective method to build brand awareness.

Rule 1: First Impressions are Critical

Even before you write the message, there are two critical things that must be handled correctly or many recipients will just delete the email without ever opening it. Statistically, only 3-8 percent of emails are opened so getting these right are critical. The most important part of any email is the subject line. The information contained in the subject line will make the difference between being read or being deleted. The second is the sender identification. If I can't positively identify the sender, I delete the message without opening it. Interestingly enough, web addresses (URLs) and email addresses are very effective branding devices. When I get a message from xyz@woopie.com, I delete it immediately. I have discovered through sad experience that I generally don't want to know who "xyz" is. I recommend that you review your URL and email addresses to ensure it is a positive part of your brand experience.

Rule 2: It's the message not the media

In a great on-line article entitled "*12 Common Mistakes of Email Marketing*"⁴, an unnamed author makes the following observation, "*Slick, clever, funny, creative and different are very poor substitutes for informative, believable, memorable and persuasive.*" *The name of the ebusiness game is persuasion; getting people to take the action you want them to take. Don't even dream of neglecting those magical words that are going to help you craft your brilliant, perfect message.*" In my experience, you have between 200 and 300 words to effectively get your message across before most specifiers stop reading or hit delete. Email communication is most effective when it is brief, informative, and to-the-point. An email message must fit on the viewing portion of the screen. Requiring the reader to scroll or otherwise click to read more most often results in closing or deleting the message.

Consider the following items when writing a marketing email (paraphrased from *Make Your Sales Letters Sizzle* by Orvel Ray Wilson, CSP):

- Readers are lazy, keep sentences short and easy to read. Use clear, simple vocabulary.
- Keep paragraphs short as well, three or four sentences. Cut out everything extra. Make every word count. Keep the entire message on the screen.
- For emphasis, use bold or italics or underline, but never combine them.
- Concentrate on expertise and solutions, not features and benefits. Don't try to tell the whole story. Just generate a response.
- Close by asking for some direct action; hot linking to website is highest priority.
- Even though the P.S. is at the bottom, it's the FIRST thing people read.

When developing content for email, Gallogly and Rolls offer the following advice, "*A basic rule, but one many forget. Often, the rationale is as long as we're sending an email, let's showcase other services or products. Think about basic direct response principles. Options suppress response. Email promotions need to follow this rule even more diligently. The Web enables attention deficit disorder, and there's too much to distract your customer. Reduce those distractions!*"⁵

Most important of all, take the specifier to the product, service, or issue highlighted in the email. The most useful aspect of email is to get design professionals to visit the website. Whether it is your local website or a manufacturer's corporate website, specifiers need to be able to get to the information in one click. Do not make them go to the home page and then have to navigate to the key information. As mentioned in previous articles, most people will not click more than once or twice trying to find something.

Does this sound too simple? You would be amazed how many manufacturers and marketers ignore these simple rules. I receive over 30 email newsletters and dozens of email solicitations daily. Most of them are not user friendly and I have to really work to find the highlighted info. Even if the site has a product listings page that takes specifiers to detailed product information, take them to the product information first! Site navigation will provide options if they want to surf around once they get there.

Rule 4: Timing is everything

It should come as no surprise that you've got to think about timing your message. Who is your audience and when are they most likely to read your email? Rebecca Leib presents some very useful information on timing in her article *"Does Anybody Know What Time It Is? Does Anybody Care?"*

"Your goal is to give your customers the right message and send it when they are apt to take the time to read it. This isn't the same as suggesting you should time your message to exactly when you think your customer is going to act on it. Seasonal situations aside, an important tenet of advertising is this: "Tell the customer WHY and wait for WHEN. Quit trying to predict the moment of need."

I believe this is an important issue for marketing to design professionals. I am always in the market for industry knowledge, product information and design applications. However, being hounded to act immediately is not helpful. Provide information and the ability to follow-up and I can handle the rest.

Results, Response, and Privacy

It is important not to confuse "response" with "results" when using email as a marketing strategy. The author at GrokDotCom makes an insightful comment in his discussion of email marketing mistakes, *"Slick, clever, funny, creative and different ads are most likely to generate comment, or response." Buzz doesn't feed the bulldog and excitement alone won't bring in the cash.*⁶ It is very important to be able to differentiate between a strong response due to fluff and eyewash as opposed to actual results (i.e., actions taken).

Privacy continues to be a growing concern in the web and email space. To stay on the safe side, it is incumbent on marketers to always respect recipient rights, state your company privacy policy clearly and post it properly on the web site and do not forget to adhere to it. Otherwise you may find yourself in danger of a privacy lawsuit or worse design professionals deleting your email.

As a wise person once said, "Intelligent folks learn from their own mistakes; wise folks learn from the mistakes of others."

Reference Notes:

1. www.clickz.com/em_mkt/em_mkt/article.php/1000331
2. http://www.clickz.com/em_mkt/em_mkt/article.php/1034991
3. www.clickz.com/em_mkt/em_mkt/article.php/1000331
4. www.grokdotcom.com/12commonmistakesofemailmarketing.htm
5. www.clickz.com/em_mkt/em_mkt/article.php/1016591
6. www.grokdotcom.com/12commonmistakesofemailmarketing.htm

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