MDR's **Email Marketing Best Practices** for Education Marketers

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OVERVIEW

Education marketers have been dramatically shifting more and more of their marketing budgets into email marketing and for good reason. It has emerged as a highly effective way to reach teachers and is a cost-effective way to prospect.

Leading education marketers expand their prospecting reach, deepen their customer relationships, drive revenue and sales growth as well as conduct market research and brand exposure using email marketing to teachers at their institutions.

In order to bring your email marketing program into the category of optimized high achievers, here are some best practices to boost your results.

DELIVERABILITY

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE DELIVERED

It all starts with getting your message in front of your audience. There is always a chance your email message can be diverted from the inbox into the junk folder, so follow these basic steps to help ensure it ends up in front of your customer.

Build Strong In-House Programs: When you are capturing emails on your site, you should clearly describe for your customers what they are signing up for, what value you are going to deliver to them, and how often you intend to do it. Then you should do what you say. Give your customers as many options as possible. Frequency of communication, HTML vs. text, and a range of topics are some standard user choices that work well. Keep your in-house customer email file happy by not over emailing them and always deliver them valuable information along with your marketing offers.

Add to Address Book: This is one of the easiest things to implement, yet still not a universal feature on most marketers' sites/communications. Add to address book is a simple set of instructions for your customers that guide them on how to make sure they add your domain/address to their safe senders list so that your email doesn't get routed to the junk mail folder. Once you have these instructions created, don't be afraid to utilize them whenever you are acquiring a new email subscriber or you are communicating with a current email subscriber. It just might rescue you from the spam folder.

Click here for an example of add to address book.

Images vs. HTML: If you are still sending your email messages as a single image (or multiple images) without any HTML text, you need to rethink your creative strategy. Because of a rise in spammers utilizing all images to get past spam filters, there has been a responding increase in the percentage of spam filters blocking emails for improper image-to-HTML ratios. While there is no set in stone percentage that is guaranteed to get you delivered, best practices dictate a balanced mix of HTML text to images not only to alleviate the spam filter concern but to address the image rendering issue, which we will discuss later in the Creating High-Value, Effective Email Creative section.

Spam Filter Testing: Overall, email marketers are going to see a shift away from content analyzing-based filtering to more reputation-based filtering or a healthy mix of the two. So it will be important to ensure your content is compliant with most spam filtering applications as well as the reputation of your sending domain being clean. However, due to the protracted adoption rate of software solutions in the education space in general combined with the lower cost of some of the open source content filtering solutions, it is likely that schools will be relying heavier on content-based filters, such as Spam Assassin, for longer than most. Education email marketers should consider incorporating spam filter scoring of their messages as part of the message creation process.
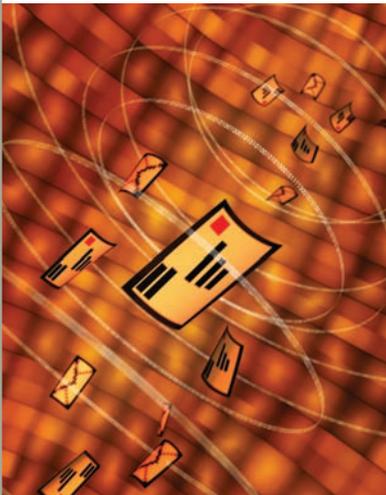
Feedback Loop: Now more than ever, it is important to utilize all the feedback from your email campaigns. This means looking at the return codes from the deployment (if you have access to this information) and to system-generated or user-initiated reply emails. Analyzing the emails you receive in your reply-to email box will provide you with insight about your deliverability. You will find opportunity to improve your messaging and deliverability by what you find in the reply-to box. Additionally, you will identify some schools that utilize "Challenge/Response" systems or other applications that might make you want to segment them to the side to treat differently. The more you learn and adapt to your campaigns, the stronger your deliverability will be.

CREATING HIGH-VALUE, EFFECTIVE EMAIL CREATIVE
GETTING YOUR MESSAGE OPENED AND READ

Designing From the Ground Up: From image rendering issues to readers' scanning practices to preview panes, it is no longer acceptable to simply repurpose your direct mail creative for email; you need to design your email creative from the ground up. There is a preponderance of evidence to support the additional resources that are needed to make this happen, and those that do add these resources and optimize their creative for email will see better results and increased ROI. Designing from the ground up means:

1. Taking into account the potential issues that your email creative might face and designing to mitigate them

2. Designing with a mix of images and text, with a strong and clear value proposition prominent and forefront in the message

3. Including clear calls to action right up front in the message (above the fold), not at the bottom of the printed page

4. Getting right to your message, as the practice of scanning and preview panes give you little room for long-winded warm-ups

Make the commitment to invest in your creative rather than taking a hand-me-down from another channel, and it will repay you with huge dividends.

Image Rendering: Image rendering will continue to be a problem for education marketers due to the fact that image blocking has been widely implemented by most schools and educational institutions. The good news is that many smart education marketers have successfully adapted to this phenomenon and are showing no signs of it having a negative impact on the success of their campaigns. A majority of email recipients will choose to download the images (anywhere from 54%-79%, depending if you have a relationship with them or not[1]), if they have some reason driving them to download the images. Utilize a mix of images and HTML text to get your value proposition across loud and clear, with or without images. Take the time to ensure that your email looks good when images are turned off in Outlook 2003. Utilize hosted Web pages of your email message and give readers a compelling reason to view the hosted Web page in your description of the link, rather than the canned "Click here to view this email as a Web page." And, lastly, account for the fact that the open rate metric from your campaign results is going to be reduced by those messages that had images turned off. The email recipient still opened, read, and may have clicked through and purchased, but the open is not captured in your metrics because the call for the image is turned off.

Get Right to It – Creating Strong Value Proposition: We have already mentioned the benefits of getting to your value proposition as quickly as you can in your message. It is important to keep your focus on doing this as it has a cascading effect. The number two reason why educators open and read emails is relevance (behind having a relationship with the sender). So if you don't quickly (from the subject line on down) show relevance, educators, like anyone, are going to abandon your message. Once you get their attention with your value proposition, move to action. You can utilize and lead with your brand if it is emblematic of your value proposition to set the table for you. Or lead with tailored and personalized value propositions and let the brand follow. Test both and see which pulls better.

Subject Line Testing: As was just mentioned, your subject line can be used for several purposes. The number one reason that teachers reported their likelihood to open an email was knowing who the sender is.[2] Test subject lines that focus on identity and brand. The number two reason stated was that the message was relevant to them. Test subject lines that focus on a solution to a problem or need that you know your reader has or relevant content that will help or interest them. Mixing in your value proposition is possible. Utilize the "display from" field to reinforce these as well. Instead of sending an email with a display from of "ABC Textbook," you can add relevance to your audience with a display from of "Reading Solutions from ABC Textbook." Now you have begun your value proposition and relevance messaging and still have your subject line to refine it further.

CONVERSION
GETTING YOUR READER TO TAKE ACTION

Segmenting and Customizing Your Message: By segmenting your prospecting email campaigns into smaller groups with specific needs, you can custom tailor your relevance and value messaging. As we just illustrated, if a company has many solutions to a diverse group, segmenting down to a single-like group allows you to only talk about the products and services that specifically address this group. This dramatically increases the relevance to this audience, making them much more receptive to your message.

Strong Call to Action: Don't try to have the email close the sale (that's what your Web site or sales force is for), rather move them to the next step. Give them enough information and keep it focused. Present a strong call to action and move them along. Think of email as an inbound customer call and the click as routing the call to the sales specialist for that product. Attention span is short. In general, the first paragraph or few sentences will be read the most, so don't waste time with long lead-ins; get right to the point. Don't offer too many unnecessary choices in the email and offer no choices on the landing page. It should be 100% focused on driving the action.

Landing Pages: The importance of landing pages has received a lot of attention lately and that is a good thing. Taking the time to design and deploy specific landing pages for your email campaigns can give you one of the highest ROI lifts in your email marketing efforts. All email campaigns have to overcome three obstacles on the way to the sale. First, you have to gain your readers trust and peak their interest enough to open the email. Second, you need to quickly illustrate your value proposition and relevance so that they read through and want to learn more (clicking through). Third, you need to convert them. Too many people focus so much on the first two events that they neglect the third, which of course is the most critical. Here are some best practices for creating highly effective landing pages:

1. Integrate and dovetail the marketing message to what they just read in the email, create a smooth transition, and don't start over or leap forward.

2. Create single-focused pages and remove all navigation and links from the page, except for a path back, should the reader decide not to respond.

3. Always keep the call to action prominent and in view.

4. Utilize a two-column (or more) design and test swapping left and right panes—keep the page length as short as possible.

5. Make strategic use of graphical elements—use trust builders whenever applicable (for example, TRUSTe or other privacy marks, Trade Association logos, etc.).

6. Test it, measure it, and tweak it until you arrive at a control. Then periodically test new designs against your control. Never settle for good enough, as small gains in conversion at this stage of the process can yield strong revenue gains.

Capturing and Following Up on Leads: While this topic is worthy of its own best practices white paper, it is important to bring up in the context of email campaign best practices. To maximize your email campaign, it is key to plan for what you are going to do with all responses to the deployment. This means the traffic to your site, the hits to your landing pages, the open and click data, the responses to the reply-to box, and of course those that take action. Plan to follow up with responders (opens and clicks) that don't convert through. A sales phone call quickly after the action has shown very strong results.

Further capture leads on your site when a reader clicks through but doesn't convert; offer them something of value for their contact information. Again, plan to follow up on this lead in a timely fashion.

CONCLUSION
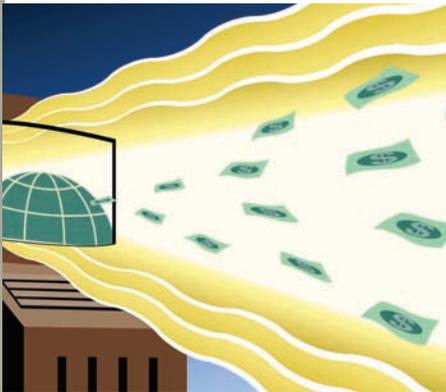
Education marketers, like all email marketers, should be looking to maximize the ROI in their email marketing efforts as educators' email boxes become more crowded in the years to come. By adopting these best practices in your emarketing programs now, you will see an immediate boost in your email marketing efforts. You also will develop a foundation to build upon—to turn pure prospecting into relationships and increase overall sales and customer loyalty.

[1]Epsilon, *Default Image Suppressions Effect on Consumers and Marketers,* September 2006.

[2]Source: MDR's report, *E-Mail Trends in the Education Market*.

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