

Beat the Spam Trap:

Understanding Email Deliverability

Introduction

Today's marketers can access a myriad of technologies to connect with their audiences, but even with all of the new options available, including everything from social media to virtual reality, email marketing still reigns supreme. Why? Email marketing is one of the most cost-effective marketing channels, allowing marketers to send targeted messages directly to huge audiences with minimal manual effort. But, as with any technology, there are a number of behind-the-scenes requirements with which marketers must comply, and for email marketing, deliverability is one of them.

The idea of "deliverability" has been around since the dawn of email, but its meaning and impact on marketers and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) has changed significantly over time. Originally, deliverability was mainly concerned with ensuring that the email arrived in the intended recipient's inbox, and involved addressing technical issues with ISPs. As email is low cost with high reach, it became an easy way for unsolicited mail (spam) to be sent with little regard for whether people actually wanted it, and in response ISPs started evolving deliverability measures to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate mail to combat this practice. Today, deliverability transcends technical requirements, and encompasses more of a consultative and educational role, helping marketers understand how to create transparent, repeatable email campaigns.

So how exactly does deliverability work? Unfortunately, every ISP (Google, Yahoo, etc.) has its own rules and safeguards related to identifying and filtering spam email. These rules often focus on content-level indicators related to image or hyperlink use in an email, as this is how spammers often try to bypass word filters. Unfortunately, images and hyperlinks are also among the most valuable aspects for marketers trying to provide engaging customer experiences. Getting the content wrong can sometimes cause false positives, meaning a perfectly legitimate email can get tagged as spam.

In addition, data protection and privacy are major concerns for today's consumers, who are becoming increasingly protective of their inboxes. This may seem like an impasse for marketers, but when handled correctly, deliverability can actually help marketers reach their audiences more effectively. The key is creating engaging, targeted, and personal emails that build a two-way relationship, while avoiding being falsely flagged as spam.

*DELIVERABILITY
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The History of Deliverability

Before diving into modern deliverability technologies, it's important to look back and explore how email arrived at this point. In the early days of email, there were no laws or regulations governing marketing emails or spam. With the explosive growth in unsolicited mail, and nascent mail-server technologies struggling to cope with the huge demand, it quickly became apparent that this 'Wild West' mentality of email was unsustainable. So, ISPs began searching for ways to address the problem of spam, without impacting legitimate mail.

The first effort, responding to user complaints, was to use filters and policies to try and counteract spam, but each mechanism introduced resulted in more ingenious ways for spammers to bypass them. Blacklists based on keywords saw spammers use images with embedded texts as a workaround, resulting in the rise of additional methods that analyze heuristic patterns, attachments, and other content criteria. While these regulations were certainly an improvement, plenty of loopholes remained, and false positives ran rampant where legitimate emails were often flagged as spam because they simply looked too similar. To combat false positives, ISPs started to open communication with Email Service Providers (ESPs) and create 'Postmaster' lists, which granted reputable senders exemption if their content looked too much like spam. The problem with this tactic was an incredible lack of data on the ISP side, and the formidable amount of manual labor required to maintain these postmaster lists.

From the mid to late 2000s, email use grew at an exceptional rate, and ISPs relied more heavily on automated technologies to sift through the rapidly increasing amounts of traffic. This period also saw a shift in the responsibility for deliverability from the ISPs to the shoulders of senders. Because of this shift, a number of authentication scores and filters emerged, and different ISPs use different combinations. For instance, if an organization meets only one requirement, their marketing emails may be fine with Gmail, but not with Apple Mail or Yahoo, and vice-versa. These technologies evolved mostly in parallel, and many do the same thing, but in slightly different ways.

Examples include:

Sender Scores

Sender Score technologies provide easy-to-understand numbers between 1 and 100 that tell marketers how deliverable their emails are. ISPs often check Sender Scores before deciding whether or not to flag an email as spam.

Sender Domain

This is a unique identifier that helps determine if an email is safe, and prevents phishing and spamming attacks caused by cyber criminals. Two methods of Sender Domain authentication are:

DMARC

This stands for Domain-Based Message Authentication, Reporting, and Conformance, and looks for proof that emails are being sent by the domain from which they claim to originate.

DKIM

This stands for DomainKeys Identified Mail, and is a method for matching a domain name to an email message. This 'digital signature' in the message is compared with the domain, and ensures that email really is from the known sender and hasn't been tampered with before delivery.

*THE RESPONSIBILITY
FOR DELIVERABILITY
AND COMPLIANCE
IS NOW ON THE
SHOULDERS OF
SENDERS, NOT ISPS.*

It became the senders' responsibility to comply with all these mechanisms to ensure their emails were clean before they could be delivered to the inbox. The rise of these deliverability technologies happened to coincide with another technological growth of the 2010s: **Big Data**.

Today, ISPs use the power of Big Data to extend their deliverability checks by recording and analyzing inbox metrics and activity among contacts. Using 'engagement metrics' to see what happens with the content after it has been delivered is a powerful indicator of how much the recipient actually wants the content. Some of the core key engagement metrics include:

- How many of a sender's emails get moved to spam or trash.
- How much the recipient interacts with the email, e.g. clicks, replies, forwards.
- Whether the sender has been added to the address book, thus endorsing both the sender and future email content.

*THE RISE OF BIG
DATA AND MACHINE
LEARNING IS
REVOLUTIONIZING
DELIVERABILITY,
AND NOT ALWAYS
IN THE MARKETER'S
FAVOR.*





ONE IN FIVE MESSAGES FAILED TO REACH AN INBOX IN 2016.

RETURN PATH

The Importance of Sender Reputations

According to the Return Path 2016 Deliverability Benchmark Report, one in five messages failed to reach an inbox in 2016. It goes to show that even with modern technologies in place to differentiate legitimate email from spam, deliverability is still a challenge for senders. In addition to the technical and content-level mechanisms ISPs use, the latest key factor in differentiating between spam and legitimate email is sender reputation. Sender reputation is how your brand is viewed by ISPs, and is the result of how well you adhere to rules and requirements. Sender reputation includes, but is not limited to:

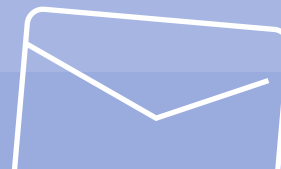
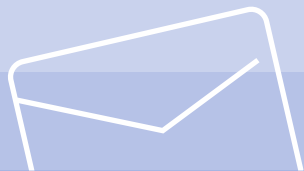
- Meeting technical requirements, e.g. DKIM, etc.
- Ensuring content-level compliance, e.g. balancing image and HTML use.
- Achieving good engagement rates, e.g. sending to people who want the content.
- Complying with complaint and unsubscribe handling requirements, i.e. quickly and effectively.

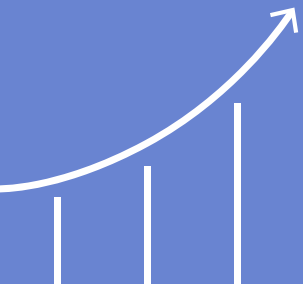
With ISPs adopting a more holistic approach to deliverability, one of the more critical aspects of the sender reputation happens away from the email campaigns themselves. An ISP can see all the emails a sender tries

to deliver to their domain, including those which never make it. If an email fails delivery, it is classified as a bounce, which can be due to a variety of reasons such as the inbox being full ("soft bounce"), or the address being malformed ("hard bounce"). With information on how many emails bounced and what the reason was, senders are able to make sure that they take care of these problem addresses so that they don't keep hammering the ISPs with requests that will not go anywhere. This is known as database hygiene, and is one of the less visible, but equally vital, aspects of the sender reputation.

Marketers can monitor their own sender reputations by keeping an eye on campaign engagement rates. **Such metrics include response rates, bounces, complaints, immediate deletes, and spam flags.** This engagement data is critical to the sender reputation, because it indicates whether recipients actually want the emails, and that the sender is paying attention and sending to those who want the content, which is what the ISPs want to know. Marketers who work to improve these metrics will be rewarded with better reputations and improved inbox placement rates. Return Path states that marketers who frequently generate high levels of positive engagement from their subscribers are more likely to see emails reach their destination. Similarly, according to Hubspot, 83% of instances where emails fail to reach inboxes are direct consequence of poor sender reputation.

For e-commerce marketers, reputation is an extremely important element of overall marketing strategy. If a brand alienates itself by getting blacklisted as a spammer, overcoming the resulting communication roadblocks becomes nightmarish, and repairing the damage done to the brand itself becomes very expensive.





*MAXIMIZING DELIVERABILITY BEGINS AT
THE BACKEND OF AN EMAIL, WITH CLEAN,
PROFESSIONAL CODE.*

Proactive Ways to Avoid the Spam Filter

While all these technologies and requirements may seem daunting, understanding the impact of deliverability gives marketers the opportunity to be proactive and build deliverability into their strategies to ensure messages are seen by their recipients. Deliverability is a multi-step process, involving one-off configurations, content-level considerations, and ongoing database maintenance. The following is the foundation for how you can keep your content out of the dreaded spam folder.

The Initial Setup

The foundations for maximizing deliverability begin deep in the backend of the email marketing infrastructure, and include online presences as well as implementing regular processes to maintain data.

Get your Sending Infrastructure Right

Marketers should always implement all the various authentication mechanisms to ensure their content does not trigger any spam flags.

Deliverability-Proof your Templates

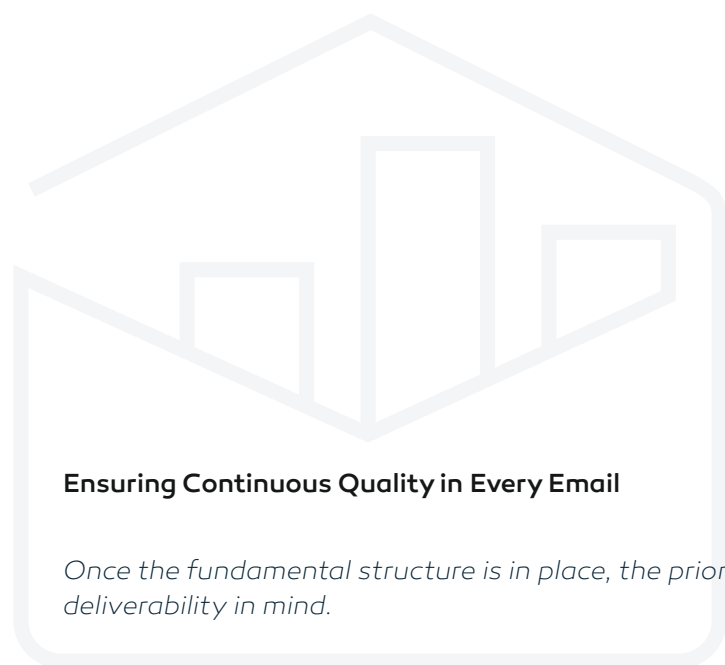
It is imperative to include a footer with relevant privacy information, opt-out support, and an “Add to Address Book” link.

Deliverability-Proof your Web Resources

Deliverability includes a number of additional resources, such as transparent data-handling information, easy one-click unsubscribe functionality, company information, etc. Even the signup forms need to be compliant in case of complaints.

Setup your Database Maintenance Schedule

Problems arising from old or poorly maintained email lists, full of incorrect or inactive addresses that cause bounces or low engagement rates, can easily be avoided. Deliverability and engagement metrics give marketers a clear overview of which addresses reject mail and need removing. Removing all bounce addresses protects from ISPs and anti-spam organizations that use repurposed email addresses as spam traps to spot bad marketing practices.



Ensuring Continuous Quality in Every Email

Once the fundamental structure is in place, the priority shifts to crafting quality emails with deliverability in mind.

Always Use Relevant Subject Lines

A compelling subject line is key to ensuring the recipient actually opens the email in the first place, but it has to relate to the content! There are plenty of resources available that outline evolving subject line best practices, such as Writing a Good Subject Line.

Don't Go Overboard with Formatting and Design

As exciting as **bold**, underline, or ALL CAPS may seem, it's best to use these styles sparingly because spammers have ruined it for everybody.

Never Include Attachments in Marketing Emails

Attachments can contain viruses, and are therefore instant red flags to ISPs. Including attachments in marketing emails is a sure-fire way to immediately be flagged as spam and never reach a target inbox.

Use a Content Checker

Tools that quickly scan email content and code before it is sent are a must. Being able to identify if there is anything suspicious or at-risk in the email, that could see it flagged as spam, helps prevent deliverability issues before the campaign is launched, rather than dealing with the fallout.



Futureproofed Market Entry

Email marketing and e-commerce are two of the easiest, fastest, and most cost-effective ways to break down market barriers and increase market share. For companies looking to grow, email marketing makes it easy to reach large audiences with tailored messages, regardless of location. The rise of marketing automation technologies, Big Data, and machine learning, means that these messages can be more personalized than ever before, by location, demographic data, buying history, and more.

Many countries have their own deliverability regulations and laws in addition to ISP level requirements, which means additional compliance requirements. As marketers grow their email marketing strategies, platforms with global deliverability compliance compatibility will become imperative, as they automatically operate within regional laws as they enter a new market. These platforms ensure that brands can venture into new market segments and regions without having to worry about being slapped with fines resulting from unique deliverability requirements or regulations of which the marketer was unaware.

It is becoming increasingly common for countries to develop individual anti-spam regulations to comply with their own data protection and privacy laws. Canada's CASL is an example, being one of the strictest anti-spam laws in the world. Using a proof of opt-in model, CASL only allows marketers to send to clearly opted-in email addresses, and has the power to impose significant fines regardless of the sender's country of origin.

Such wide-reaching legislative powers are problematic to senders who might not realize just how global their audience is until it's too late and they fall foul of one such law.

In addition to the monetary fines, there are additional spam-related repercussions for marketers. According to The American Economics Association, spam costs American firms a total of almost \$20 billion in annual fines. Quantifying the cost of bad deliverability and looking at it in context of overall revenue can reveal huge, avoidable expenses to the organization's bottom line.

In today's global market economy, it is especially important for brands to implement and maintain robust deliverability policies. Today's marketers must be able to communicate with prospects and customers all around the world, without worrying about content being trapped in limbo.

*SPAM COSTS
AMERICAN FIRMS
AND CONSUMERS
ALMOST **\$20 BILLION**
ANNUALLY.*

THE AMERICAN ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION

Is This The End?

Deliverability is an important component of marketing strategy, one that should be proactively and continuously addressed. Failure to comply with deliverability requirements has been proven to have severe consequences, including damage to brand reputation, inhibited growth in new markets, and even a direct impact on revenue.

Resources are available to help marketers improve deliverability, including everything from content checkers, to tools that help maximize conversions among recipients.

Improved deliverability means more emails in recipient inboxes, who want to interact with the sender. This leads to improved effectiveness of email campaigns, greater results for marketing initiatives, and

ultimately more revenue.

With the progressively more complex trickery of spammers, deliverability is likely to continue evolving to stay ahead. But that won't be a problem for marketers who understand and comply with the requirements, and commit to producing high quality, valuable email content.



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About Emarsys

Emarsys is revolutionizing the marketer's role, by delivering innovative and intuitive technology that empowers brands around the world to deliver truly personal interactions with their customers. Each month, the Emarsys B2C Marketing Cloud delivers over 10 billion omnichannel messages across email, social, web, mobile, and ads, as well as 1.5 billion personalized product recommendations.

Progressive marketers in e-commerce, retail, hospitality, travel, and many other B2C industries continue to partner with Emarsys to leverage their most valuable asset – data. Through the application of innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, Emarsys powers personalized marketing across all digital channels to drive more revenue.

Globally, Emarsys serves more than 1,500 clients in 140 countries through its B2C Marketing Cloud, including eBay, Toys'R'Us, Nike, Canon, American Express, and L'Oréal. Based in 17 global office locations, Emarsys employs over 700 people, 23% of whom focus on R&D to continuously advance and improve our technology.

Resources

<https://returnpath.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2016-Deliverability-Benchmark.pdf>

<https://returnpath.com/downloads/metrics-benchmark/?sfidc=701000000006djT>

<https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/31446/Everything-Email-Marketers-Need-to-Know-About-Sender-Score.aspx#sm.000004b64a8f75eampflrmpbobwus>

<http://documentation.emarsys.com/resource/b2c-cloud/email/best-practices/writing-a-good-subject-line/>

<http://www.verticalresponse.com/blog/email-anti-spam-laws-around-the-world-infographic/>



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