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Contact Management

A WORD TO THE WISE WHITE PAPER | BY LAURA ATKINS, CO-FOUNDER

Introduction

No email marketing program can be successful unless mail actually reaches the inbox. It's important to understand that many factors can influence the success of your email marketing efforts. One of the most important issues for both your overall success in the email channel and inbox delivery is understanding how engaged users are with your email.

Maintaining high recipient engagement requires active contact management. Users do not always unsubscribe from emails that they don't want to receive. Some just filter them into a folder, while others just delete mail without opening it. As a list ages, more and more disengaged users accumulate on the list. Failure to purge these disengaged recipients from a list leads to poor delivery.

A good contact management strategy will remove addresses that are disengaged before too many accumulate on your list. Creating this effective business process requires an understanding of your email list and recipient demographics. For instance, lists marketing products with long life cycles, like cars or appliances, may have different management processes than lists marketing products with short life cycles, like clothing or pet food.

Senders that understand the principles of contact management can make better decisions about managing their data. We'll explain why senders should manage this important data and share best practices on how to manage that data.

Why Purge?

In an effort to stay ahead of spammers, spamfilters have started measuring how recipients interact with mail. They use a number of metrics to measure how engaged users are with email and then use those metrics to determine if a mail should be blocked, delivered to the inbox, or delivered to the bulk folder.

Filters measure how many recipients open, read, and click on mail. More users interacting with mail tells the filter that mail is wanted and should be delivered to the inbox. Mail that users want and are engaged with gets delivered to the inbox. Mail that users are ambivalent about receiving is delivered to the bulk folder or not at all.

In an ideal world, senders would send mail that a recipient always wanted. If a recipient stopped wanting mail, that recipient would unsubscribe and stop receiving the mail. Recipients would never change email addresses, or if they did, they would notify all their correspondents of their new email addresses.

Alas, we don't live in an ideal world. Recipients don't always remember to move subscriptions to new addresses. Users lose their passwords and get locked out of their email accounts.

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Recipients ignore mail they don't want instead of unsubscribing. Employees leave jobs and sometimes don't have sufficient notice to change subscriptions before losing access to their email account.

Engagement at ISPs

ISPs use engagement as a way to measure how wanted an email is. Of all the different metrics ISPs use, engagement is one that is difficult for spammers to manipulate. Engagement is a measure of user interaction with email. This includes knowing how many users interacted with a particular message and knowing how those users interacted with the mail.

In addition to measuring engagement, some ISPs also take abandoned email addresses and turn them into spamtraps. Typically the ISP will bounce mail to those addresses for some period of time before turning them into a spamtrap. However, some companies have discovered that if they are not mailing segments of their list regularly, old addresses can become spamtraps.

Contact management for consumers at major ISPs is predicated on keeping abandoned addresses off a list. Too many abandoned addresses and spamtraps will cause delivery to suffer.

Engagement at businesses

In contrast to ISPs, businesses don't measure engagement as much as they measure employee distraction. Many businesses allow employees to receive commercial email at their work address. However, if email becomes too distracting or interferes with an employee's work, the business may block the mail.

Businesses often block senders that continue to mail an employee that's been gone for months or years simply because the mail is bothering her replacement employee.

Contact management at businesses requires removing addresses belonging to employees who have moved to other companies. Continuing to mail employees that have left may damage delivery.

What to purge

Contact management is a vital part of an email program that values inbox delivery. But making the decision to decision to purge inactive subscribers is only the first step. How a company goes about cleaning and maintaining lists is vital to the success of the program.

The overall goal of purging emails is to remove those email addresses that no longer deliver to potential customers. Sometimes that means removing addresses abandoned by their users; other times that means removing addresses belonging to users who are not longer interested in your products or services.

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Ideally, companies would have enough information to remove addresses based on knowing that those messages are no longer read. But that level of information is not available to most senders. Instead, senders need to use available metrics to identify abandoned or unengaged accounts.. These include email activity data such as opens and clicks. Retailers and senders who support logins at a website can use website activity data as an activity data point.

Many delivery experts advise purging any address without activity for a set period, typically 12 months. In some cases, though, this strategy risks losing viable prospects and sales. Many marketing campaigns have a cycle. Subscribers join, engage for a certain period of time, and then lose interest. Sometimes this time period is short, weeks or months. Other times the engagement period is years. It's that typical engagement period that dictates the right time to implement a purge campaign.

The key factors in implementing an effective contact management strategy:

- Know the engagement cycles of your specific email list.
- Identify the appropriate point in time where recipient engagement drops
- Establish business process to re-engage or terminate the subscriptions of users showing no activity after that point in time

How to purge

How a sender implements purging from their email list is just as important as deciding what to purge. Senders have a number of options for purging:

1. Send an email asking users to opt-out from future mailings.
2. Remove any addresses that meet purging criteria from all future mailings.
3. Send a re-engagement email asking users to take an action to stay on the list.

The first option is not particularly viable. Sending an email asking users to opt out from future emails requires a number of assumptions to be true. The sender assumes the recipient regularly checks the email account. The sender assumes the mail is delivered to the inbox, or if the mail is delivered to the bulk folder that the recipient goes into the bulk folder to find it. The sender assumes there are no spamtraps on the list. The sender assumes that anyone who receives the mail by mistake or who does not want the mail will click on a link to opt out. If these assumptions were true, then there would be no need for data management.

The second option, removing addresses that meet purging criteria from all future mailings, works for some senders. These senders typically have low ROI from each individual address and spending the money and time to send a re-engagement campaign is not cost effective. This will work, but may decimate the number of recipients on a list.

![WttW logo]

The middle path between purging non-responsive email addresses and continuing to mail them is to send a re-engagement message. This alerts a recipient that their subscription is expiring due to lack of activity. More importantly, this is a chance to win back the subscriber. Effective re-engagement campaigns entice the user to opt in to continue receiving the mail. Re-engagement messages have the benefit of not maintaining abandoned accounts or spamtraps on a list. While a list may lose some numbers, most of the people lost were unengaged with that mail anyway.

For very valuable lists, use a series of 3 to 5 emails enticing the recipient to come back. This approach can yield a better response rate than a single email. With business lists, sales reps can call recipients. This call has the advantage of being able to get direct feedback from the recipient about their current business needs. Maybe they've moved jobs internally and there is a better person to send the mail to.

If a subscriber does not interact with the re-engagement email or series of emails, then it is time to remove their address from future sends. However, this does not mean that the subscriber is lost to you completely. For instance, companies with websites can send a purged user an alert when they next login to the website. This alert can tell the user they're missing out on great emails and entice them to sign up again.

When to purge

Usually companies don't think about purging data until there are significant delivery problems with their mail. Companies that wait until their mail is blacklisted or delivered consistently to the bulk folder risk having to make much more aggressive purging decisions than companies who proactively manage their data. Third party filters often have very stringent rules for data purging, including only allowing a single email to be sent to re-engage users.

Lists that have addresses older than 3 or 4 years are prime candidates for purging. Standard industry metrics indicate that 30% of addresses on a mailing list turn over in a year. Most of these addresses are not unsubscribed and never bounce.

The first indications that it may be time to implement a data purging system are unexpected and difficult to trace delivery problems. Some mail may be randomly delivered to the bulk folder, with no clear indication as to why. Some mail may start being delayed or rejected. These minor delivery problems signal it's time to consider implementing a data hygiene process.

Maintaining list cleanliness

Purging is not a one-time event. In order to maintain list hygiene, senders should have an ongoing process of data maintenance. Reactivation campaigns should occur monthly. The first purge may be large, particularly for lists that have a lot of very old email addresses on them.

Subsequent purges, however, should be limited to a fraction of the subscribers acquired in a single month.

Passive list maintenance, through bounce handling, FBL handling, and un-subscription handling will also help keep a list clean.

Summary

- Poor delivery can be the result of poor list hygiene and maintenance
- Implementing a contact management process will reduce the number of delivery problems.
- Contact management processes must remove inactive addresses but not active addresses.
- Remove addresses with no activity before a certain date.
- Use an opt-in email, not an opt-out email to confirm activity.
- Use alternate contact methods like websites, direct mail, and phone calls to reconnect with purged recipients.
- Some blacklists and filtering companies require contact management before delisting. Implementing contact management processes before delisting happens lets you more fully control the process.

Need more guidance on list and contact management strategies?

Word to the Wise helps companies with best practices for email program management, deliverability, and managing abuse. **Get in touch today.**