



Email 101: Key Practices for Small  
and Medium Sized Businesses



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## Introduction: What Is Email, Anyway?

Emails are more than messages that are composed and sent electronically. Understanding what they are and how they play an important role in marketing campaigns for small and medium sized businesses is crucial to achieving maximum effectiveness in the Web 2.0 era. Emails not only have the capability of replacing or supplementing traditional marketing mailing programs, but also have the potential to accomplish something virtually no other medium in our time is able to do: reach almost every single internet user and continue to reach a growing audience that is irrespective of current and future technological mediums. Simply put, emails are more than just electronic letters. They're powerful agents of change and action.

Consider the key components to an email. There's the information contained in an email, usually in text form (what the email is about), and somewhere within that information is an opportunity for email readers to respond. Information that is sent via email almost always elicits a response, whether it's a casual message like an invite to a party, or a marketing email promoting a product or service. Even if there is no "Buy now with a money-back guarantee" slogan written at the end of every message, emails are asking readers to do something – whether they are aware of it or not.

The ability of emails to stir responses in readers is a powerful business tool. To be able to elicit a response, invoke a strong interest or desire, or to connect a person to an idea, product or service emotionally is something that happens on a number of levels. That's why it matters deeply for small and medium sized businesses to understand what those levels are, and how to craft emails that are effective in eliciting the desired responses from email readers.

## The 5 Key Rules to Sending Effective Emails

Emails are effective when they follow five key rules that appeal to reader sensibilities and needs/desires.

Emails are effective when they:

- Offer helpful, meaningful and value-driven content,
- are personally directed toward an individual rather than large groups,
- are easily and strategically integrated to other internet applications,
- are open to communication between sender and receiver,
- and are safe and private modes of interacting with others, including businesses, online.

A good way to understand the difference between effective emails and ineffective emails is to look at the archetypes of extremes. On one hand, the best email ever crafted for a small or medium sized business will have certain characteristics, and on the other hand, the worst email ever crafted will have distinctly opposite characteristics. The worst emails ever created already have a name associated with them and often bring



about feelings of negative emotions. The worst emails are known as spam and are allocated to a special place in most inboxes: the Junk folder. The best emails, however, are the ones that users flag for later, that are saved under specific folders, and that have value even after the email has been read and archived. Those emails often come from personal acquaintances and friends, but can also come from small and medium sized businesses. It's possible for businesses to craft emails that fall into the best category and avoid crafting emails that unknowingly or unwittingly fall under the category of Junk.

## The First Key: Effective Emails Are Helpful

Emails that provide information worth revisiting offer more to email readers than emails that provide little to no helpful information. Helpful content often has the following characteristics:

- Offers insight not found elsewhere,
- Presents information that is difficult to obtain elsewhere, or save readers time in gathering information into one location,
- Is succinct and direct,
- Is organized and easy to read and identify pertinent information quickly,
- Educates, empowers and informs,
- Appeals to a knowledge gap that exists for the customer.

In contrast, junk mail has the following characteristics:

- Recycles information already found elsewhere,
- Offers no real insight into a topic,
- Is wordy, lengthy and poorly written,
- Is disorganized and difficult to read,
- Is not interested in empowering, educating or informing readers,
- Aims to trick email users into a response,
- Appeals to unrealistic and ungrounded expectations a customer might have.

Crafting effective emails begins with the content of the email itself. The better and more valuable the content, the more resonant and dynamic the email will be despite any fancy HTML coding to enhance the “look and feel” of the email. If the message is junk, a fancy template won't stop it from going to the Junk or Trash folder.

Effective email is distinctly different than spam. It respects customers and values their ability to weigh decisions and make thoughtful choices that are beneficial to their lifestyles and interests, whereas spam does not. For example, an effective email from a company that sells blenders may have content on how to create healthy smoothies from organic fruit. Even though the company is not selling smoothies or fruit, it is educating customers on an aspect of the benefits of blenders. That benefit is useful whether or not the



customer will buy a blender from the company. It may also be beneficial to the customer because it focuses on a recipe or tip that the customer was not aware of. Emails like this promote the product and support the benefits of the product wrapped in an educational and empowering piece of information.

Helpful emails also do not try to hype up a product or service, promise unrealistic expectations or promise to “work wonders.” Helpful emails take on a more discriminatory tone, one that balances overt optimism with cautiousness. Helpful emails also take on a more educational and neutral role, leaving customers to make decisions for themselves. This is an effective strategy for small and medium sized businesses who are looking to form long lasting relationships with customers. As a customer’s knowledge grows, businesses can offer more benefits that meet a customer’s growing needs with new products or simply to point out benefits that have never been addressed or marketed before.

## The Second Key: Effective Emails Are Personal

Personal emails are affirming and inviting while impersonal emails make email readers feel like a number and that a business doesn’t care or isn’t interested in them. Personal emails are inviting because they give the impression that an email is targeted for a specific person, instead of a group. Knowing what a customer wants and is interested in is part of providing helpful content, and it often begins with tracking and analyzing customer responses.

The difference between personal emails and non-personal emails is a matter of degrees. Businesses write emails in segments and often use templates to be sent out to their subscription base. But within each segment, there are nuances that differentiate one cluster of customers from another. For example, one group of customers welcomes and takes advantage of 10% off coupons and promotions, while another group prefers free shipping promotions over percentage-based discounts. Addressing this difference is a way to make an email more personal. Personal emails do not have to be written differently for every customer, but they do need to be specific enough for customers to know that the email is for them. By simply addressing one aspect of a customer’s preference, small and medium sized businesses can tailor and personalize emails to customers.

Personal emails also appeal to a multi-sensory experience from the design of the email, the tone of the content, and in using detailed touches like including the customer’s name or specific products and services that are relevant to the customer. A common obstacle that many businesses deal with when it comes to personalizing emails is the balance between generating emails in segments and taking the time to customize and personalize emails for different customers. A solution that has emerged that allows businesses to strike this balance is the autoresponder.



Businesses can take advantage of a powerful tool called autoresponders that complement the concept of personal emails. It may seem like a contradiction to use autoresponders that schedule a series of messages to customers, but in actuality, autoresponders enable businesses to take advantage of the concept of personal emails by ensuring that clients receive emails crafted specifically for them.

A business can create multiple autoresponders for certain segments of their customers so that emails with different content reach the right audience. This ensures that customers do not receive emails that contain irrelevant content. Since autoresponders schedule and send emails automatically, it's a convenient way for small and medium sized businesses to reach their customers by crafting effective content and then automating it.

## The Third Key: Effective Emails Are Integrated

It is important to think of email as part of a bigger picture of tools and applications on the internet. Programs and applications are commonly being integrated and are communicating with each other more than ever before. While email is still the most widely used tool online, other applications are quickly catching up. For small and medium sized businesses, this means that emails are an important part of this emerging trend in integrated applications. Effective emails take advantage of this newly integrated reality and leverage it to add value to messages.

Integration means that businesses recognize the need to reference, include or link emails to some of the programs and applications online that their customers are already using. Effective emails may take advantage of popular websites and applications online such as Kaboodle, Facebook, Digg, and Twitter. Embedding content into emails also allows email readers to share content and distribute it to a potentially wider and unexposed audience. And since customers are connected to people who are connected to other people online, the power of integration is exponential.

Integration not only means connecting other applications and websites to emails, but also refers to the integration of emails to current and emerging computing platforms. Emails are not only being read on computers anymore. They're being read on cell phones, smaller netbooks, pads and tablets, book readers such as Amazon's Kindle, gaming devices such as Sony's PSP, and even in standalone email reading devices. Leveraging the power and reach of integration is an effective way to ensure that no matter what platform a consumer utilizes, emails can reach customers.

A good way to enable integration with multiple platforms for small and medium sized businesses, without expanding IT or investing in back end technology, is to ensure that the five keys to effective emails are being practiced. Succinct, direct emails that offer value, are easily organized, and are personal are the best way to ensure that emails can be read regardless of screen size and resolution.

Email integration does not have to be a costly expenditure for small and medium sized businesses on a tight budget. All it takes is simply understanding the need to engage customers in more than one way within an email. Whether it's including a link to a company's Facebook or Twitter page, or allowing customers to re-post an article or email content to a user-driven news aggregation site, it's relatively easy for businesses to optimize their emails with Web 2.0 integration.

## The Fourth Key: Effective Emails Promote Open Communication

Gone are the days of one way communication from business to customer. Customers now expect and want greater communication with businesses. They want to be able to give feedback and see recommendations reflected in their relationship with businesses. The good news for businesses is that emails provide an effective way to open communication between business and customer; and they do it in a way that is easy for businesses to collect, track and analyze that information.

Web analytics is a set of tools that does just that. By integrating surveys, opinion pools and other forms of feedback in emails, small and medium sized businesses allow customers another avenue to act on the information contained within an email. That activity generated by the customer can be important knowledge for businesses by understanding which links customers click within emails, which email campaigns elicit the most response, and which products featured in emails have the highest conversion rates.

Open communication not only empowers customers, but it also transforms the relationship between business and customer from a more static, irreversible one to a more dynamic and personal partnership. Establishing a relationship is something that small and medium sized businesses can aim to achieve as it can expose long term benefits. Some major benefits include: gaining more repeat customers, customers that refer and promote the business on their own, and the establishment of a strong reputation of a business that values its customers.

Larger companies can afford to hire marketing professionals to conduct surveys for them and to gather information on a consistent basis throughout the year. However, small and medium sized businesses often do not have that luxury. Instead, a more cost-effective solution to enhance open communication within emails is to include web analytics to track email effectiveness and to gather important information on customer behavior and online activity.

## The Fifth Key: Effective Emails Are Safe and Private

The fifth key, email safety and privacy, is also strongly related to the fourth key: open communication. Just as open communication can enhance a business' reputation, the fifth key, if not properly done, can jeopardize a business' reputation. But, when a business takes email safety and privacy seriously, it can reinforce the positive image customers have of a business.

Safety and privacy are important business concerns as well. Users that get spyware or malware by clicking on links embedded in emails sent by businesses not only will be irked by the lack of safety, but may also contribute to lower sales. And because emails contain important information about user email addresses, preferences and sometimes other pieces of data like account numbers or membership numbers, safeguarding that information is an important step to ensuring that emails are as effective as they can be.

According to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, which studies internet and email usage in America, "55% of email users say they have lost trust in email because of spam."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the volume of spam has increased, which has also led to the loss of trust and the increase in malicious emails that are gateways to malware and spyware programs that can affect user machines. A small or medium sized business cannot afford to lose customers' trust due to lack of safety and privacy in their email marketing programs.

Users also expect that their email addresses will be safe when signing up for email subscriptions. They don't want to get other junk emails from companies they don't know or haven't heard of without giving their permission. That's why permission-based email subscriptions are effective in gaining consumer trust and safeguarding customers against junk mail.

Permission-based emails also ensure that customers are getting exactly what they want. They are open to receiving communication and are a good source of reliable and useful feedback that businesses can collect to analyze and fine tune their email marketing campaigns. When users opt-in to emails, they are effectively opening a door for further communication that they think will be beneficial to them. Small and medium sized businesses have an excellent opportunity to reach customers who are interested in receiving emails and have greater likelihood to convert opt-in emails to sales.

<sup>1</sup> Pew Center Research: <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Spam-2007.aspx?r=1>



## The Bigger Picture for Crafting Effective Emails

Emails do not operate in a vacuum. Instead, they're integrated into a business' website, marketing program, technological capabilities on the back end, check out and payment processing center, customer service, invoicing, and branding components to a business. The bigger picture of effective emails is how established a small to medium sized business' core competencies are.

Emails can be useful in drawing customers to websites and gaining interest in products and services to close a sale, but if the rest of the checkout experience for a consumer is lacking, a customer may not complete the sale no matter how polished or professional an email is. As part of the bigger picture, small and medium sized businesses need to see emails as an extension of their existing business processes.

That means that emails do not receive any less attention than ensuring payment processing and checkout processes, and it means that emails need to be in alignment with the company's marketing and branding focus. Since emails can often be the first piece of marketing or branding that a customer sees, consistency and professionalism are key components to ensuring that emails are effective and contribute to rather than hinder a business' normal operating procedures.

Small and medium sized business' may not have large marketing departments or creative teams, but that may work in their favor. By understanding what emails do and how they are effective, small and medium sized businesses can leverage the fact that they are smaller in size to simplify and streamline the email marketing process.

After all, effective emails communicate a message. That message, no matter how simple or straightforward, is the crux of a business' marketing plan. Emails are a strong way to convey that message to customers, and tools like autoresponders are invaluable in automating the dissemination of that message in creative ways and at consistent intervals.

The 5 keys to effective emails can help small and medium sized businesses craft better emails that address consumer needs and convert email marketing campaigns into bigger sales. It can be said that a company's email practices also reflect a company's core values. Emails reflect a company's commitment to communication and how they perceive their customers. If they value them and want to establish a relationship with their customers, businesses will ensure that their first-line of presentation to a customer is not only professional and appealing, but that it's also beneficial to the customer.

Ultimately, customers may also judge a business based on its emails. The more beneficial and helpful the email is, the more likely the customer is to perceive the business as being interested in their well-being and



in acting as a resource to them, rather than simply trying to promote a product or service. The 5 keys to effective emails take this into consideration and offer practical guidelines on how to take advantage of the internet's most powerful and widely used tool.

## About iContact

iContact is a permission-based email marketing system that allows customers to easily create, send, and track email newsletters, autoresponders, and surveys, which allow them to engage, educate, and retain customers. As a Software as a Service (SaaS) company, iContact's products are completely web based. iContact boasts 99% reliability with proven methods of optimizing email campaigns at every level.<sup>2</sup>

iContact is the Email Marketing Expert with the most cost-effective solutions for small and medium businesses with prices as low as \$9.00 per month. Value-driven solutions, which include autoresponders, surveys, RSS feeds, reporting, RSVP management and more, are always included in the quote.

Additional resources from iContact, as well as information about iContact's SaaS products and solutions are available at [www.iContact.com](http://www.iContact.com), [www.iContactPlus.com](http://www.iContactPlus.com), and [fuel.iContact.com](http://fuel.iContact.com).

<sup>2</sup> Pivotal Veracity, an independent email delivery audit firm, scores iContact's email deliverability rates at 99%.

