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The Email Edge

By Anthony P. Mikes

It seems that many more of you need to embrace the newest, most powerful marketing tool out there today: **Rich Email**.

Rich Email enters into a market dominated by TV and other mass media. It brings a breath of fresh air onto the scene because of its direct nature of one-to-one selling and persuasion. Following are some points you should consider.

Why You Should Use It

- 1. Immediacy* -- The message doesn't land on the target audience's doorsteps, but right in their laps. There is no production time lag or waiting for a mail drop. Email is the ultimate way to spread news fast, and beat the competition to the punch -- at least until they hot-wire our brains.
- 2. Intimacy* -- One-to-one contact is email's most unique facet. Correctly prepared and merged with a targeted list, the message can be customized to fit each sector of the audience -- and, if the list is brief, to fit each individual reader. The more focused the message, the greater the impact on the reader.
- 3. Accuracy* -- Email allows you to target your most desirable customers and primary prospects, without the waste of a mass mailing, or the hit-or-miss results of mass media.
- 4. Low Cost* -- Compared to more traditional promotional efforts, email is relatively inexpensive. Building/buying the list may be the greatest expense. We already have print, audio, video and direct mail. Email is simply another media outlet. You might consider "cross-purposing" your plan and design to include email as part of every ad program. Remember to factor in the cost of software and training, especially if you contemplate using **Rich Email**.
- 5. Audience Focus* -- Your target audience is extremely focused on your message when it reaches them (unlike television, radio or even print, where outside distractions lessen the impact of a marketing message). Email is a rare opportunity to catch readers when they are giving the message their full, undivided attention.

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Permission Granted

It is very important that your email list contains only names of customers and prospects who have requested or agreed to receive your e-messages. Prospects can be added gradually, but an opt-out opportunity should always be provided with the first message, and a contact link with follow-up messages, so addressees can drop off the list at any time.

Be prompt about removing addresses when requested. e-marketing is supposed to be about customer relationship building, not bothering. Neglecting "remove" requests won't make you any friends. Current customers are less likely to object to receipt of ongoing sales efforts, but offer them an opt-out anyway and try not to send so many messages that they become annoying.

Spam Will Get You Canned.

There is no such thing as "tasteful spam." With apologies to Gertrude Stein, spam is spam is spam ... and you don't want to acquire that label. Some savvy email users have begun forwarding annoying spam directly to the FTC (uce@ftc.gov), where the source may be added to their list of firms under investigation.

Readers may also email complaints to your ISP, which could result in you being dropped or blocked -- permanently. Use e-marketing judiciously and reinforce it with other forms of marketing. Don't kill the e-goose that lays the golden eggs.

List Buying

If a marketing effort requires buying a list of new addresses, ask the same kinds of questions you would ask in purchasing a direct mail list, plus a few new ones.

1. How often is the list updated?
2. When was the most recent update?
3. Is the use of the list one-time or may the list be used as much as necessary over a defined period?
4. What does the list cost? Keep in mind that price and accuracy are often linked; a more expensive list may be cleaner with fewer bounces.
5. Is the list truly accurate? Many email addresses block receipt of unwanted mail based on subject, sender and whether there is an attachment, so a certain percentage of addresses will "bounce," or be rejected.
6. Does the list of addresses come with a complete database of additional contact information (business and contact names, street address, zip, titles, etc.)? Look for lists that provide full details of the prospects.
7. Does the list truly consist of customers who have granted permission for receipt of marketing messages? And is the list accurately targeted for the client's message?
8. How will the message be broadcast to the list? Email broadcast software is becoming more sophisticated. You need the ability to merge email messages with the database list, and to update them regularly. You also want to be able to segment the list into smaller groups to offer specifically targeted messages based on geography or customer history. A manual process is much more prone to keyboard errors and therefore to bouncing.

Watch Your Timing

Time email messages so the recipient can provide prompt responses. A "thank you" acknowledging receipt of the message should be sent almost immediately, certainly within 24 hours; there are programs allowing such a return message as an auto-response. Even more important, fulfill any request promptly. Failure to do so will lose customers and their goodwill. Avoid emailing on a Monday or Friday.

Write It Right

While your current contacts will recognize the email address or familiar project names or titles, recipients should be invited to read the message with a carefully constructed subject line.

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This is the "hook." Many phrases like "unique opportunity," and "free offer" are being blocked by screening software as "spam."

Don't try to "code" the subject line, be direct. Stimulate them to read the details. Subject lines should be brief (35-40 characters).

The target audience determines the body of the message. Will the audience go for interactive email and HTML, or rich-media? Will you direct them to your website with built-in links? (If you do, make sure the website will hold them—clean navigation, ease of use, and strong content will reinforce the email's success.) Avoid unwieldy images that slow the download or, even worse, freeze the systems of recipients whose computers are a little less than state-of-the-art.

Pitch a benefit, not a resume. Why should they contact you? Ask for a response -- provide a bounce-back email link, a phone number, and your URL. BE BRIEF. The most important part of the message should be in the first few sentences. Make it relevant to the recipient. Try to limit line-length to between 60 and 80 characters. Spell-check and proofread.

Make it "Rich."

Ben Isaacson, executive director of AIM (Association for Interactive Media), recently defined rich email as "anything that is dynamic and has the active delivery of content within the message -- without going onto the Web." Typically, rich media is streaming audio and/or video, but may also involve java applets, DHTML, animation, etc. Its use in email has been somewhat limited by bandwidth constraints and production costs, as well as the learning curve for novice rich email creators. But there is plenty of help available online. Start at *Clickz.com/B2B Email Marketing* where you'll find lots of info and links to other rich media sites.

Make the Most of the Contact

Consider asking for referrals. Be sure the first contact to a referral mentions the name of the referrer.

Check up on bounced addresses to confirm whether the address is simply bad, or if the message is being blocked. Update the list accordingly.

Use the BCC: address line rather than the to: in a group mailing. This abbreviates the message by not exposing the entire list to all receivers. And combine e-marketing with traditional marketing efforts. Send an e-message, then a follow-up direct mail piece, and finally call them on the phone.

Persistence is still the best technique for making a sale. E-marketing is so immediate and direct that it can truly be like meeting someone in person. The impression conveyed is a sort of digital equivalent to a firm handshake. Make the message strong, but not crushing, warm, but not sweaty.

Like any marketing technique, it is worth little all by itself. When combined with other techniques as part of a cohesive program, e-marketing becomes a superior generator of new customers and long-term client relationships. Get your feet wet.

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