Email Deliverability Is on a Lot of Email Marketers’ Minds During the Holidays Because of Increased Volume from Almost All Senders

Although delivery is important for seasonal email campaigns, delivering smarter is vital all year round. It’s more important than ever to make sure your messages not only get delivered, but also make it into the inbox where they can be seen and acted upon.

Within this guide, we go over how engagement is the key to the inbox and share tips and best practices for optimizing your inbox placement all year long.

We’ll cover ideas such as:

• How personalization and targeting improve delivery rates
• The effect of user engagement on your deliverability
• When it’s time to say goodbye

By understanding the way ISPs look at emails and following evolving deliverability best practices, you’ll consistently increase the chances that your messages make it to your subscribers’ inboxes.
Deliverability Terms to Know

**Black-List** noun /blak-list/
A list of IP addresses identified by an ISP as spam senders or unacceptable. Placement on some blacklists will cause much of your outbound email to be outright blocked.

**Click-Through Rate (CTR)** noun /kli̇k-thru̇-ō rāt/
The measure of subscribers opening your email messages and clicking inside them.

**Complaint** noun /kum-plānt/
When a subscriber clicks a “junk” or “spam” button while reading your email instead of choosing to opt-out. High complaint rates negatively impact deliverability.

**Hard Bounce** adjective, verb /härd baūn(t)s/
When an ISP’s mail server explicitly rejects a message due to any number of reasons, such as an invalid email address, your email being blocked, etc.

**Deliverability** noun /dih-liv-er-uh-bil-i-tee/
The ability to deliver email messages in recipients’ inboxes for email marketing campaigns and to avoid messages being lost, blocked, or driven to the spam folder.

**Internet Service Provider (ISP)** noun /in-tur-net sur-vis pro-vi-dur/
An email provider such as Gmail or Yahoo.

**Open Rate** noun /ō-pen rāt/
The measure of subscribers opening (or viewing) email messages.

**Soft Bounce** adjective, verb /söft baūn(t)s/
When an ISP’s mail server temporarily withholds delivery of a message in order to try again some time later. This is often due to mailboxes being full, for example.

**Spam** noun /spam/
Unsolicited bulk email messages.

**Spam Trap (Pristine)** noun /spam trap (pris-tēn)/
An email address that has been fabricated by either an ISP or blacklist solely to collect unsolicited email.

**Spam Trap (Recycled)** noun /spam trap (rē-sī-kuld) /
An inactive or abandoned email address taken over by an ISP to be used to identify spammers.

**Whitelist** noun /hwīt-list/
A list of email addresses or domains that a user grants explicit permission for sending email, usually to prevent the spam-filtering of desired email.
The Key to the Inbox: Engagement

In the past, deliverability was, in part, based upon certain words or phrases in a message. Sending to specific types of users also affected inboxing, which still matters, but not as much. Now nearly all major ISPs have increased their focus on user engagement as the primary factor in email delivery.

**ISPs Determine Positive Engagement Levels Through Certain Metrics:**

- Open rates
- Email forwards
- Subscribers placing messages in folders within their inbox
- Clicking the “not spam” button for received email

**There Are Also Metrics Contributing to Negative Engagement:**

- Spam complaints
- Messages not opened
- No action taken in message

**To Keep Up, Marketers Must Adapt Their Practices to Target Engaged Users and Foster Engagement in Others:**

- Send relevant content to targeted users
- Set clear expectations for new subscribers
- Provide a prominent unsubscribe link
- Clean lists regularly. Cut them loose if they’re not engaged
Smart Delivery = Relevance + Targeting

**Key Takeaway:** Provide subscribers with content they want to read, not the content you want to send them.

Just because you have three specific items on sale doesn’t mean that your subscribers want to buy one or any of them. The content you send should be relevant and valuable to your customer and subscriber base.

For example, create segments of subscribers and tailor messages to them based upon their demographic data, like zip code or state, to make the content feel more personalized. Take it a step further and segment by psychographic data: target back-to-school messages at college students, teenagers, or parents.

Give subscribers a reason to keep opening your emails instead of deleting them. The more times someone engages with your emails, the more times they’re going to convert on your email and the better placement your future emails will have in the inbox overall.

Use open, click, and purchase data to target your most active and loyal subscribers. Send these subscribers an extra email each month with never-before-seen content or special offers. Doing this not only drives engagement metrics, it also boosts revenue since repeat buyers produce the most return-on-investment.

**Set Clear Expectations**

When new subscribers sign up for your emails, they should know exactly what to expect in their mailboxes.

Unclear expectations at the time of signup are often the drivers of spam complaints, so it’s essential for you to include information about each of your emails on your Preference Site. At a minimum, you should address these topics:

**WHO IS SENDING**
Identify from which email address the email will be coming. This address should be clearly identifiable with your company.

**TYPE OF EMAIL**
Create a short blurb about the content in the email. It doesn’t have to be long; just a sentence or two indicating whether the email is a newsletter, event invitation, a promotion, or educational content.

**HOW OFTEN**
This is important. Tell people how often, on what day, and at what time they’ll be receiving your email: daily, weekly or monthly. If you don’t say you’ll be sending a daily email, people who sign up for it expecting a less frequent email will burn out quickly. Be honest and upfront about your send frequency.

**TOPICS OF INTEREST**
Preference Sites provide customization options for pinpointing specific topics in which subscribers are interested: deals and specials, hot products, newsletters. This helps target people by what information they want to receive.
Last Shot: Re-Engagement Campaign

You've figured out the love is gone between you and your inactive subscribers. Is it time to throw them to the curb? Try a re-engagement campaign first.

Re-engagement campaigns are one way to recapture some of your unengaged subscribers. Best practices recommend sending a series of two or three emails based on subscribers' behaviors. For example, the first email would go to subscribers who've been inactive subscribers for over six months. The second email would send to those who received the first email, but didn't open it after two weeks.

QUICK TIPS FOR CREATING RE-ENGAGEMENT CONTENT:

• Remind subscribers this is their last chance to stay on your list. Create strong calls-to-action for the subject line and preheader.
• Promote a coupon or special offer in the content of the email.
• Grab their attention with a catchy subject line: “We're saying goodbye.” “Are we breaking up?” “Don’t go!”

Most importantly, let go. After sending these emails, and not receiving any responses, it’s time to remove these non-responsive contacts. Your deliverability will be better off!

So Long, Farewell

Who knows why subscribers stop reading your emails. Whatever the reason, it’s time to say farewell to these engaged subscribers.

For every email marketer—no matter who you are or what you’re sending—there comes a time when you must say goodbye to nonengaged users on your lists. No matter how enticing your subject lines, no matter how delicious your deals, these people aren’t reacting. There’s no clicking, no opening, no action whatsoever on your email. All they’re doing by sitting motionless is damaging your deliverability—doing nothing is (almost) as bad as clicking the spam button.

How Do You Know When to Officially Bid Farewell to Subscribers?

Generally, a good rule of thumb is to say bye-bye when users don't open your last 50 emails or six months of inaction. This is based on a sending frequency of a couple of times a week, so if you only send an email once a month, this time period will be longer. Overall, subscriber inactivity behavior should be based on your company's particular target market and send frequency.

Promote the Unsubscribe Link

It goes against your instincts to promote the unsubscribe link: you don't want people to unsubscribe from your email list. You think smaller lists are bad. You think losing subscribers means losing ROI. The truth is, you will value unsubscribes.

No, it’s not crazy to think this way. Consider the alternative to unsubscribing: inactive, unengaged subscribers will most likely mark your emails as spam or delete them. This could lead to bigger deliverability issues overall and a definite loss of ROI. Think about a person who unsubscribes as one less individual who could hurt your engagement metrics.

Promoting the unsubscribe link in your emails will help your delivery rates. Hidden or hard-to-find unsubscribe links will generate spam complaints from unhappy users who aren’t interested in the content of your emails anymore. Where should the unsubscribe link appear in your email? Placing the link in the preheader has been shown to reduce spam complaints in many cases.
Do ISPs factor engagement into overall reputation or at the individual junk inboxing level?

Both: User-level engagement drives individual placement and aggregate data drives overall placement. No doubt, engagement is getting more critical.

Any idea how much the individual webmail providers are currently using it?

All of the big four (Gmail, Yahoo, Outlook and AOL) are using engagement, with Gmail probably using it most heavily. Smaller ISPs and third-party filters are also becoming more reliant on engagement by the day.

Related to engagement, how essential would you say responsive email layouts are?

Responsive email layouts are usually only seen once a reader is engaged. But these templates can foster future opens. For example, if I know Company A sends mobile-friendly emails, I’ll be more likely to open its emails going forward. An email marketer’s primary focus should be developing a relationship with subscribers and fostering long-term engagement. A move to a responsive email template is a big one, but worthwhile, as mobile email opens are overtaking desktop email opens.

Is image-to-text ratio still a concern?

Image-to-text ratio still matters, but not as much as it used to. Most filtering has moved from content to engagement. It’s still important to include text-only versions. Omitting them can cause delivery issues.

What’s the biggest difference between B2B and B2C delivery?

B2C inboxes mostly use similar filters, especially the big four (Gmail, Yahoo, Outlook and AOL). B2B inboxes have a much wider range of filter methods. Overall, complaints/spam trap hits are still the #1 driver for delivery.
Is there a benefit to serving images in email over https instead of http?

There can be security and user experience advantages, but there’s not necessarily any provider using that to determine inbox vs. spam folder placement.

How can i determine a good open and click-through rate?

This question is probably better suited for our Strategy Team, but I can say what is considered “good” for open and click rate varies widely by industry and market. The “average” open rate across all sectors is typically in the 10-20 percent range.

Many companies are using emojis in subject lines. Does that affect deliverability?

All of the testing we’ve done, along with data from others in the industry, indicates most symbols in the subject line do not affect delivery rates – yet. In fact, many tests indicate they increase open rates considerably. However, there’s always the possibility spam senders may start using these characters frequently, which could lead to a delivery impact down the road.

When we launch a campaign that includes thousands of emails to Google, Yahoo, Outlook/Hotmail, and certain other services/ ISPs, mail servers begin to throttle the receipt of email and start bouncing mail once we reach a certain limit/hour. Is this common, and is there a way to overcome this problem?

ISPs and mail providers rarely block mail based solely on volume. Any blocks are usually based on reputation or engagement. While most ISPs do have a connection limit or limit on number of messages sent per connection, OSG’s mail software is already set up not to exceed those thresholds. So any blocks you’re seeing would likely not be based on the volume of mail sent, but on other factors.

If you could give one tip to everyone doing email marketing, what would it be?

GET PERMISSION! Send timely, relevant email to engaged users who have explicitly requested it (maybe I cheated – that’s really about four tips rolled into one!)

One Last Thought

These notes on deliverability best practices will help you send smarter, more personalized messages that get into your subscribers’ inboxes, but we wanted to leave you with one last idea. Always remember, every company is different—each has unique goals, target markets, and email marketing programs.

While industry standards are a great way to see if your metrics are significantly off, they’re a guide post, and not the holy grail. Continued testing of your email marketing and comparing results to your past metrics is the best way to