



Email Deliverability Guide:

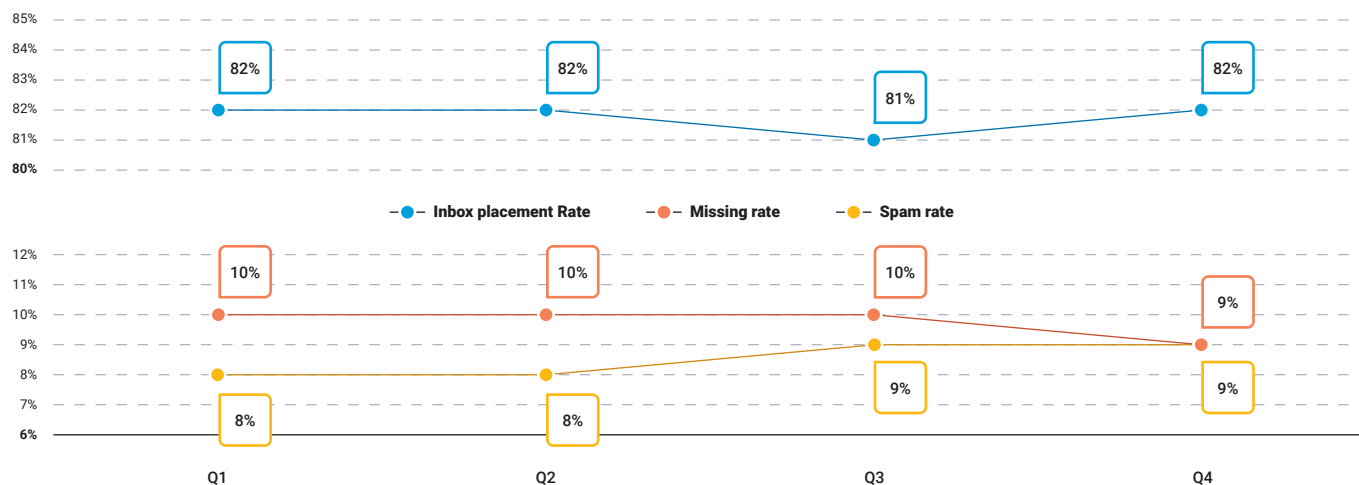
11 strategies for reaching the modern inbox

Executive Summary

Though it has been around for quite some time, email continues to be a tried-and-true marketing channel for companies, small and large, across industries. According to a recent DMA survey, email ROI increased by more than 30% year-over-year.¹ Recent data and technology improvements have made email even more convenient (and more essential) for communication at home and work. For example, new applications of artificial intelligence (AI) now allow marketers to eliminate guesswork when optimizing sending times. AI also helps users quickly write emails with predictive text and reminds them to read emails before an offer from a brand expires.

Yet, as much as email has become smarter, **deliverability challenges** still plague senders and prevent emails from reaching subscribers' inboxes. In fact, a 2020 email deliverability report² demonstrated that nearly 1 in 5 emails from U.S. senders failed to reach the inbox.

U.S. senders' email deliverability rates



Published on MarketingCharts.com

While email deliverability is a complex topic, there are ways to effectively and reliably avoid barriers. [Data Axle's Inboxable](#) team has drawn from their decades of expertise working with enterprise-level marketers and internet service providers (ISPs) to create this deliverability guide with effective strategies to reach the inbox.



Part #1

The basics of deliverability

The first step to improving deliverability is understanding what impacts your ability to reach your subscribers' inboxes. The glossary below defines some of the key deliverability terms that marketers need to know to get started.

Spam

An email sent to someone who has not given permission to be contacted (i.e., hasn't opted into your subscriber list) is spam. As a form of "checks and balances" and to ensure that users do not receive unauthorized emails, ISPs have set up spam traps as a way to identify senders who email without permission. There are three types of [spam traps](#) used to identify spammers:

- **Inactive recipients** - Email addresses that have not been active in the last 12 months or more.
- **Honey pots** - Email addresses that have never been released to the world nor subscribed to any mailing program.
- **Typo traps** - Email addresses with a purposely misspelled domain name that help ISPs identify senders who do not have a confirmed opt-in process.

When marketers send emails to spam traps, their campaigns are flagged and potentially blocked.

Bulking

The process of an email message being trapped by spam filters and sent to the junk folder.

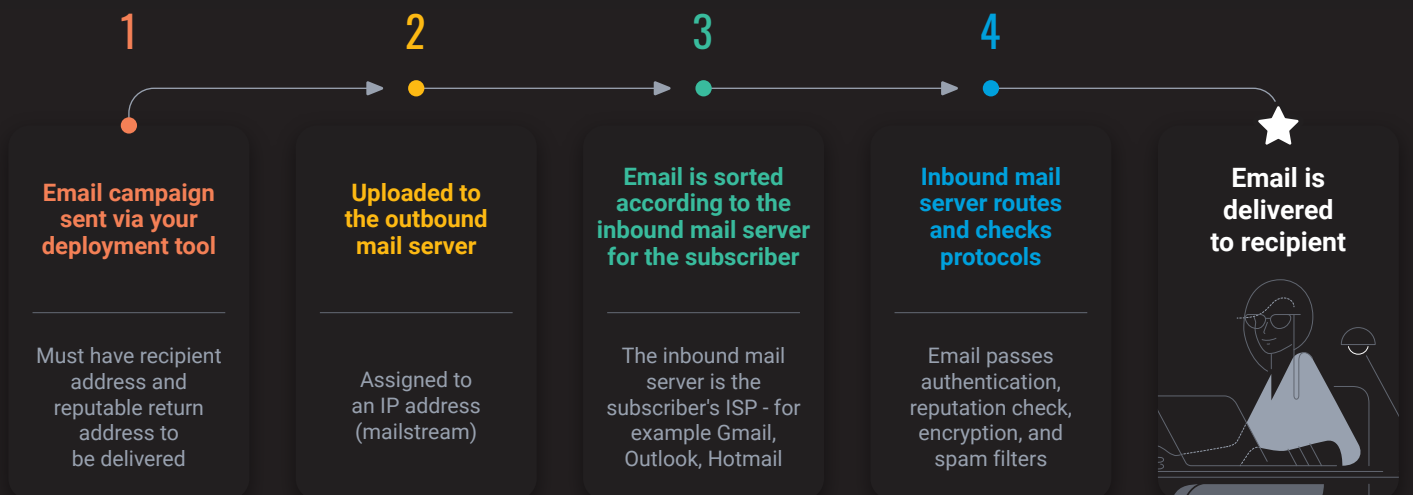
Bounce

An email that can't be delivered is said to have bounced (as in, bounced back to the sender).

- A **soft bounce** most commonly occurs when the address is valid, but the email couldn't be delivered because the mailbox was full, the message was too large, or the ISP server was down. These are short-term deliverability issues that can be resolved relatively easily. Soft bounces also occur when there are typos with the domain, which prevent a sender from connecting with the correct address.
- A **hard bounce** results from an email address that is either invalid or doesn't exist as recorded and shared by the ISP. These invalid email addresses should be removed from the subscriber list since they will never get delivered.

What happens when you send an email?

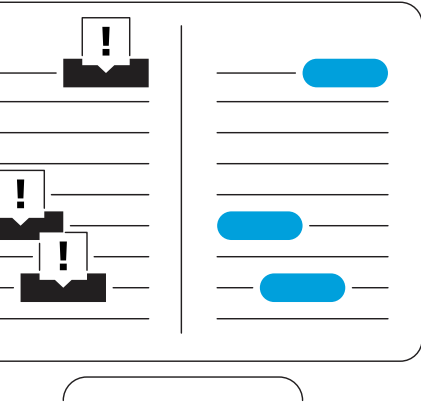
Individuals and businesses sent and received 306.4 billion emails each day in 2020.³ How did those emails make it to the inbox? To put it simply, the process looks like this:





How do ISPs decide which emails reach the inbox?

The four largest ISPs (Gmail, Hotmail, AOL, and Yahoo) use the following methods to evaluate marketing emails and decide whether they make it to the inbox:

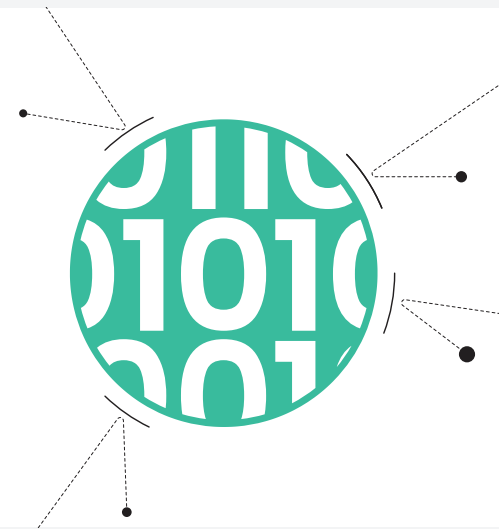


Authentication

Authentication protocols like SPF (Sender Policy Framework), DKIM (a combination of Yahoo-designed DomainKeys and Cisco's Identified Mail), and [DMARC](#) (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance) allow ISPs to identify legitimate senders and classify messages as safe. To protect users from forged or "spoofed" messages used for [phishing scams](#), ISPs will likely send unauthenticated messages to the spam folder or reject them.

Blocklist

A blocklist (f.k.a., blacklist) is a publicly available, real-time database of IP addresses that send spam. If you land on a blocklist, major ISPs will likely block your campaigns. Blocklisting generally results from a sender's poor list quality, an unexpected spike in sending volume, or end-user complaints. ISPs may maintain their own list or consult public lists when determining whether to block emails from a particular sender. Spamhaus and Barracuda are both examples of large public blocklist databases.



Encryption

Encryption protects users by ensuring that messages sent between the company and a subscriber cannot be tampered with and that another party cannot intercept those private communications. Any email that is not protected with [Transport Layer Security \(TLS\) encryption](#) is flagged by the ISP, making it unlikely for these messages to make it to the inbox. Even if it lands in the inbox, the email is flagged with an icon of a red open padlock, indicating that it could be malicious and decreasing the likelihood for a subscriber to engage.



Sender reputation

ISPs employ algorithms to give your IPs and domains a “sender score.” Your reputation is determined by how well you engage the ISPs’ users and follow email best practices regarding sending volumes, authentication, encryption, etc. If your sender score falls below a certain threshold, ISPs may send your emails to the spam folder instead of the inbox.



How many subscribers click the “spam” button



How many subscribers ignore the message



How long do subscribers view/read a particular message



How many subscribers move a message from the inbox to the spam folder



How many subscribers move a message from the spam to the inbox

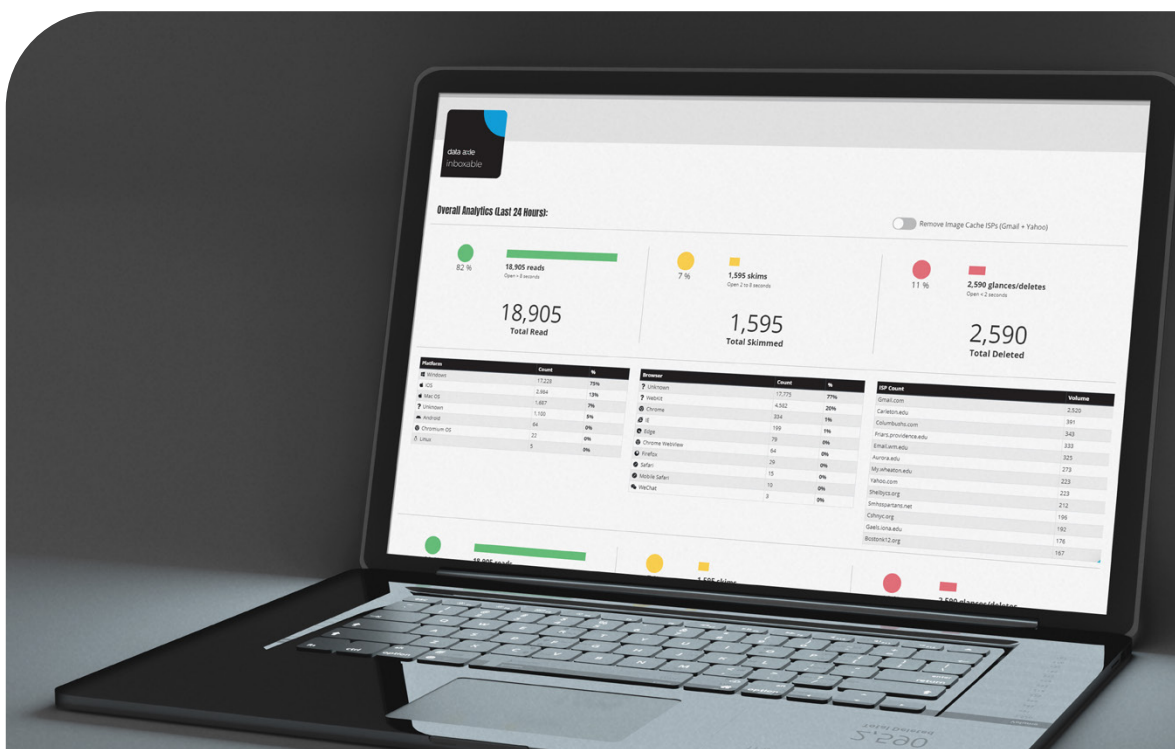
These metrics inform ISPs how their users interact with message from specific senders and, in turn, determine the rate at which a message will inbox



BRAND EXAMPLE ALLMEDX

ALLMEDX is a machine-learning-powered medical search engine that connects healthcare providers with clinical information from authoritative medical sources. The company partnered with Data Axle’s Inboxable team to make [deliverability enhancements](#) and improve their sending domain reputation. This included setting up authentication protocols to help ISPs (and subscribers) verify that emails were coming from a legitimate sender. Authenticating their emails helped protect ALLMEDX from spoofing—a particularly important consideration in the medical industry where spoofing and phishing are common concerns.

This approach, paired with engagement strategies and direct communication with ISPs, helped ALLMEDX achieve 100% inboxing rates across all major ISPs, generate industry-leading open rates, and increase its IP and domain reputation, including a 2-tier [Gmail reputation boost](#).





Part #2

The 3-tier approach to solving deliverability challenges – data, creative, and configuration.

Deliverability issues can usually be traced to three causes – **bad data**, **bad creative** (email content and design), or **bad email program configuration**. To consistently hit the inbox, you need clean, accurate data, the relevant messaging and creative, and the right program mechanics (mail stream separation, volume/frequency, etc.).

DATA: Improving inboxing with data

Marketers continually work to grow their subscriber base and keep it active, and rightfully so. Subscribers are the key to revenue as they progress through different stages towards conversion: from email opener to clicker, to website visitor, to purchaser. Yet bad customer data can land your business on a blocklist and lead to your emails being blocked by ISPs. It's hard to generate revenue and build relationships with your audience if your emails do not make it to the inbox. Companies can improve inboxing rates with the following data best practices:

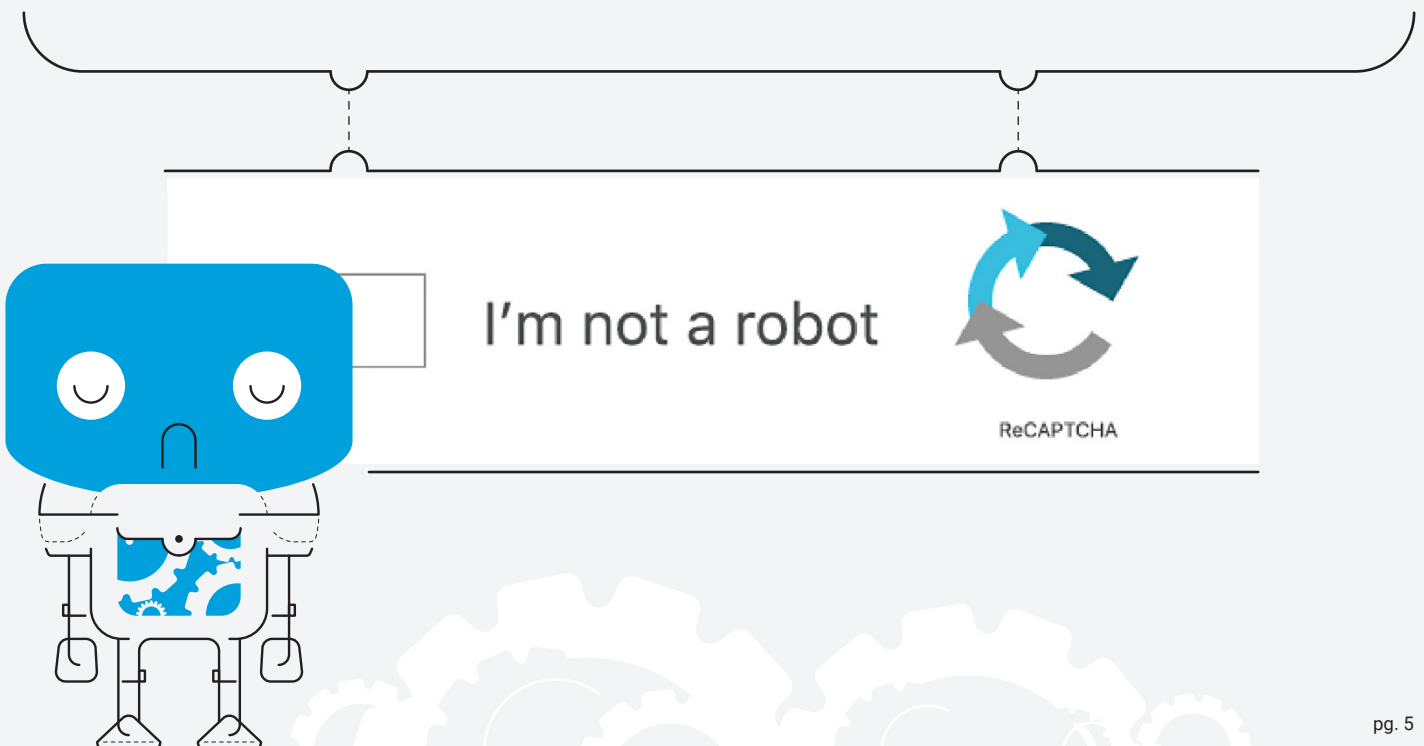
Verify email addresses as they enter your database

The best way to ensure that subscribers have knowingly opted into your mailing program is to validate each new email address when it is first provided, be it via a landing page, in-person at a brick-and-mortar location, or referral.

Verifying email addresses can be done in a few different ways:

Real-time verification – A real-time [email verification](#) tool can confirm new subscriber emails are properly formatted, spelled correctly, and coming from an active domain.

CAPTCHA – A CAPTCHA is a challenge-response test that prevents automated bots from subscribing to your mailing program.

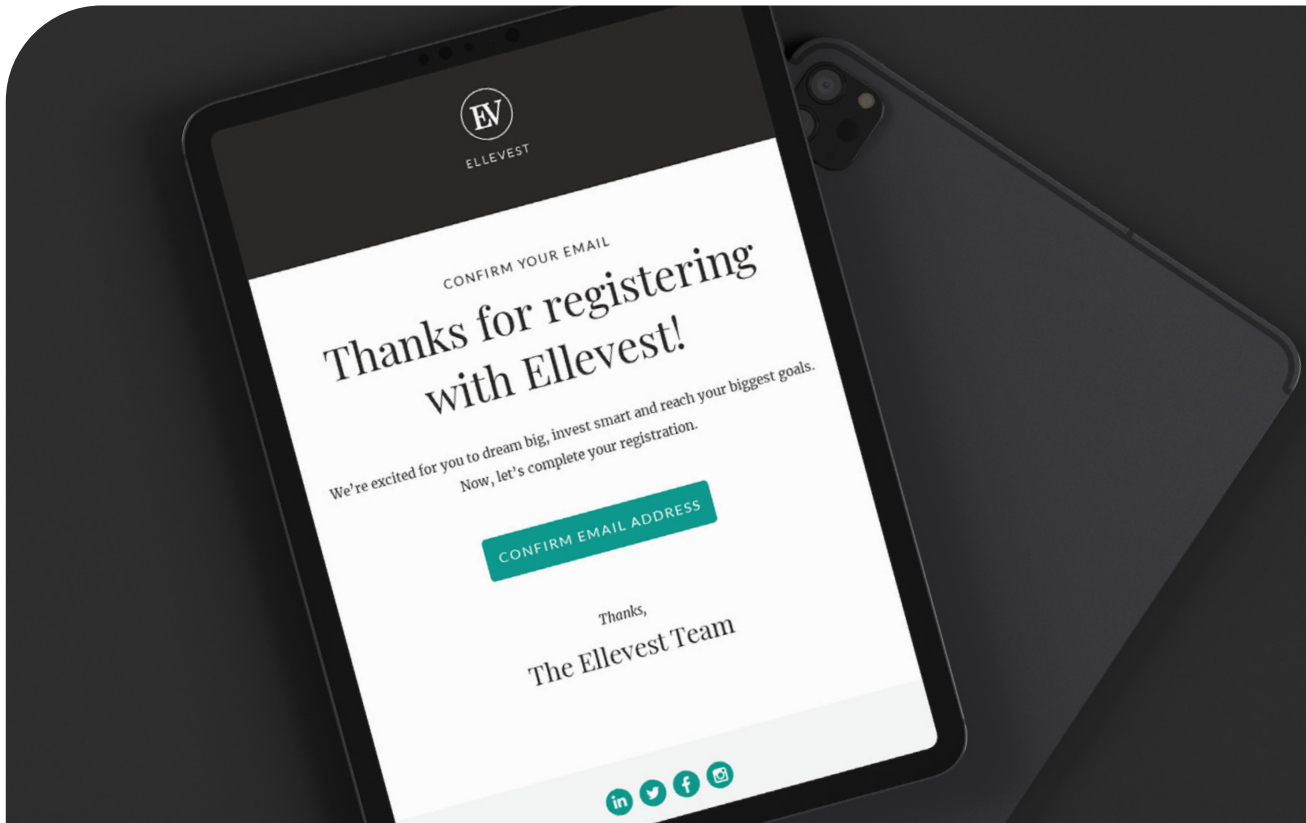




Confirmed Opt-in (also called double opt-in) – Subscribers receive an email with a verification link, which they must click to confirm their subscription. This two-stage process prevents an email from being added to the list without the account owner’s knowledge and ensures that the correct address is entered into your database. If the recipient doesn’t confirm by clicking the link, their subscription will not be activated.



BRAND EXAMPLE
Ellevest



In addition to having a clean database, these three practices safeguard against [list bombing](#), which occurs when malicious software attempts to mass upload addresses into a brand’s database, filling it with random emails that are fake, inactive, or belong to unsuspecting consumers.

“Data Axle’s **deliverability experts** have been incredibly proactive with their recommendations – before we even realize that a change is needed, they come to us with solid advice on how we can improve. Their expertise has given my team a better understanding of deliverability and – most importantly – increased our email program ROI by helping us **consistently reach each person in our audience.**”

Sr Director Channel Strategy, Lands’ End



Collect zero-party data through preference centers to know your audience's needs

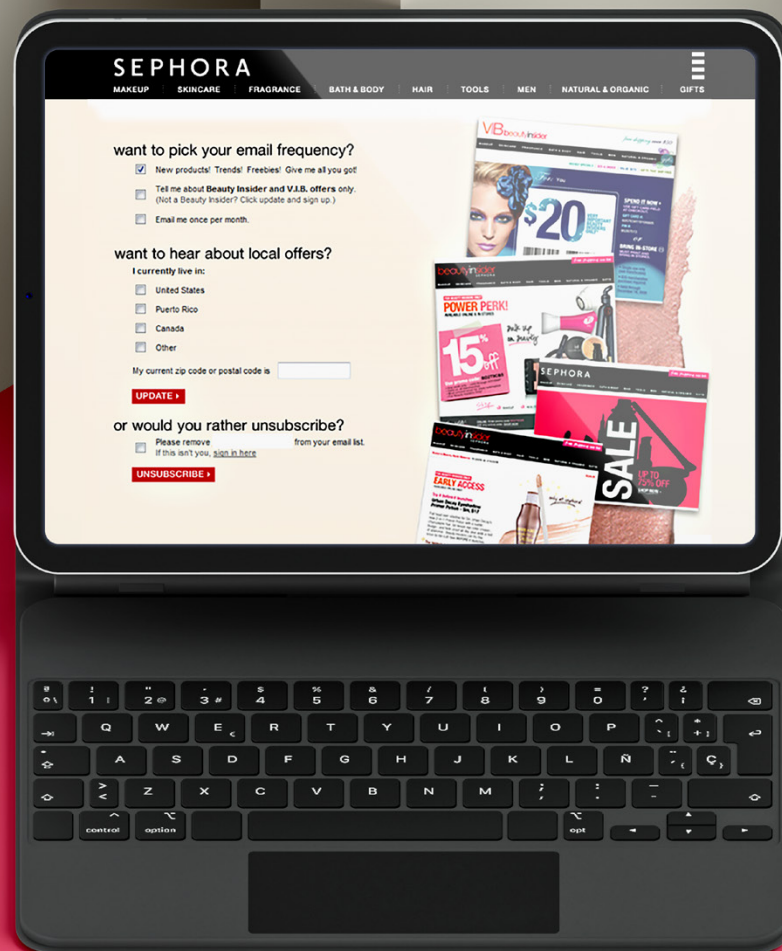
Zero-party data is information shared directly and proactively by your audience about their preferences and interests (e.g., surveys, polls, etc.). You can use [preference centers](#) to gather essential information about how your audience wants to hear from you. Putting your audience in charge of their relationship with your brand can increase engagement with your messages, help you identify the right sending frequency, and reduce the risk of emails being marked as spam – all of which affect deliverability. Preference centers let your subscribers tell you:

- What type of communications they want to receive (newsletter, promotions, sneak peeks, communications from specific divisions, etc.)
- When/how often they wish to receive messages
- What products/services/topics they are interested in
- Which email programs to unsubscribe from when they no longer wish to hear from your brand
- Personal details like their birthday, location, interests, and more

Another bonus for email preference centers: keeping your subscribers happy and mitigating unsubscribes. ISPs have made it [easier for users to unsubscribe](#) by adding buttons to the top of senders' email campaigns or suggesting which promotional emails to unsubscribe from based on engagement. Many savvy brands direct unsubscribe requests to preference centers where users can “opt-down” instead of unsubscribing from communications.



BRAND EXAMPLE Sephora





Practice regular data hygiene for a clean subscriber list

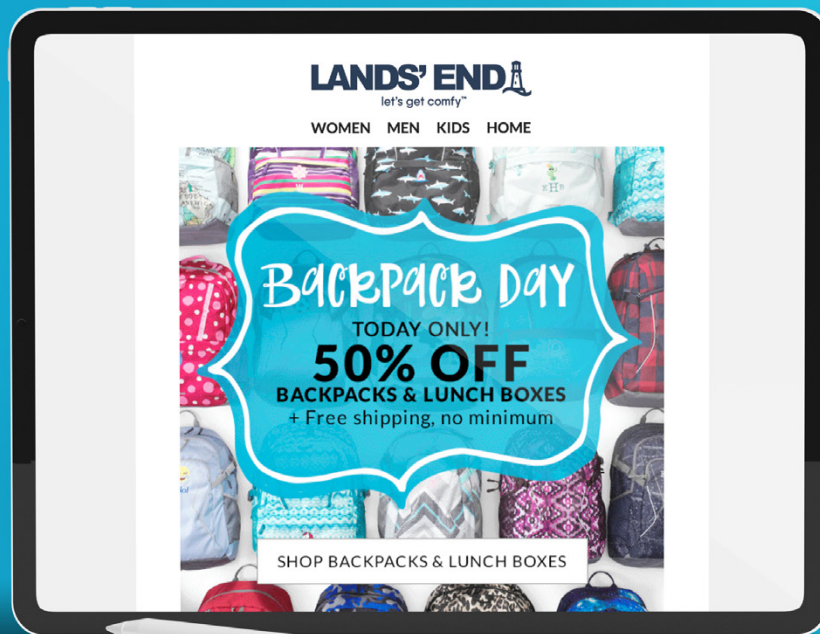
Over time, your subscriber list will end up with invalid or inactive email addresses. When you continue to mail to them, you risk an ISP block. To avoid this risk and ensure your emails reach the inbox, you need to perform regular [data hygiene](#). List hygiene can be accomplished through bounce-handling settings, establishing rules for reaching out to less active subscribers, and [using third-party data hygiene services](#) to identify closed or non-mailable accounts within your database. Regular list hygiene can help you keep tabs on the health of your subscription process and identify the following:

- **Invalid or incorrect addresses** that don't match existing email accounts. (e.g. Joe123@ghst.com)
- **Inactive emails** that have not opened or clicked emails over a defined period of time. (Note: Marketers can use [reactivation campaigns](#) to get these subscribers to engage, but if a consumer hasn't been active in over 12 months, removing them might be the best option.) Businesses without a confirmed opt-in process should be particularly vigilant about removing inactive emails, as they could be spam traps.
- **Role emails** that aren't associated with a real person but rather with a company, department, position, or group of recipients (e.g., info@ABCcompany.com)
- **Duplicate emails**
- **Temporary emails** typically used for a particular purpose (like Craigslist ads) that, if mailed, would result in a hard bounce.
- **Bounced addresses** (both hard and soft) that cannot be reached at the time of a mailing. Rules for removing these are generally customized based on the recommendations of a deliverability expert.



BRAND EXAMPLE Lands' End

When Lands' End saw a drop in their [Gmail reputation](#), they worked with Data Axle to improve their deliverability. Data Axle's experts suggested changes to Lands' End's targeting, frequency, and deployment strategies, in addition to a comprehensive data hygiene process that removed dead, closed, and spam trap accounts. These changes led to an 18% increase in Gmail open rates on their primary sending domain (used to send communications to their most engaged audiences), a 550% increase in Gmail open rates (and a 616% increase across ISPs) on their secondary sending domain (used for less-engaged audiences), and a 100% inboxing rate at Gmail. [Read the full Lands' End case study.](#)



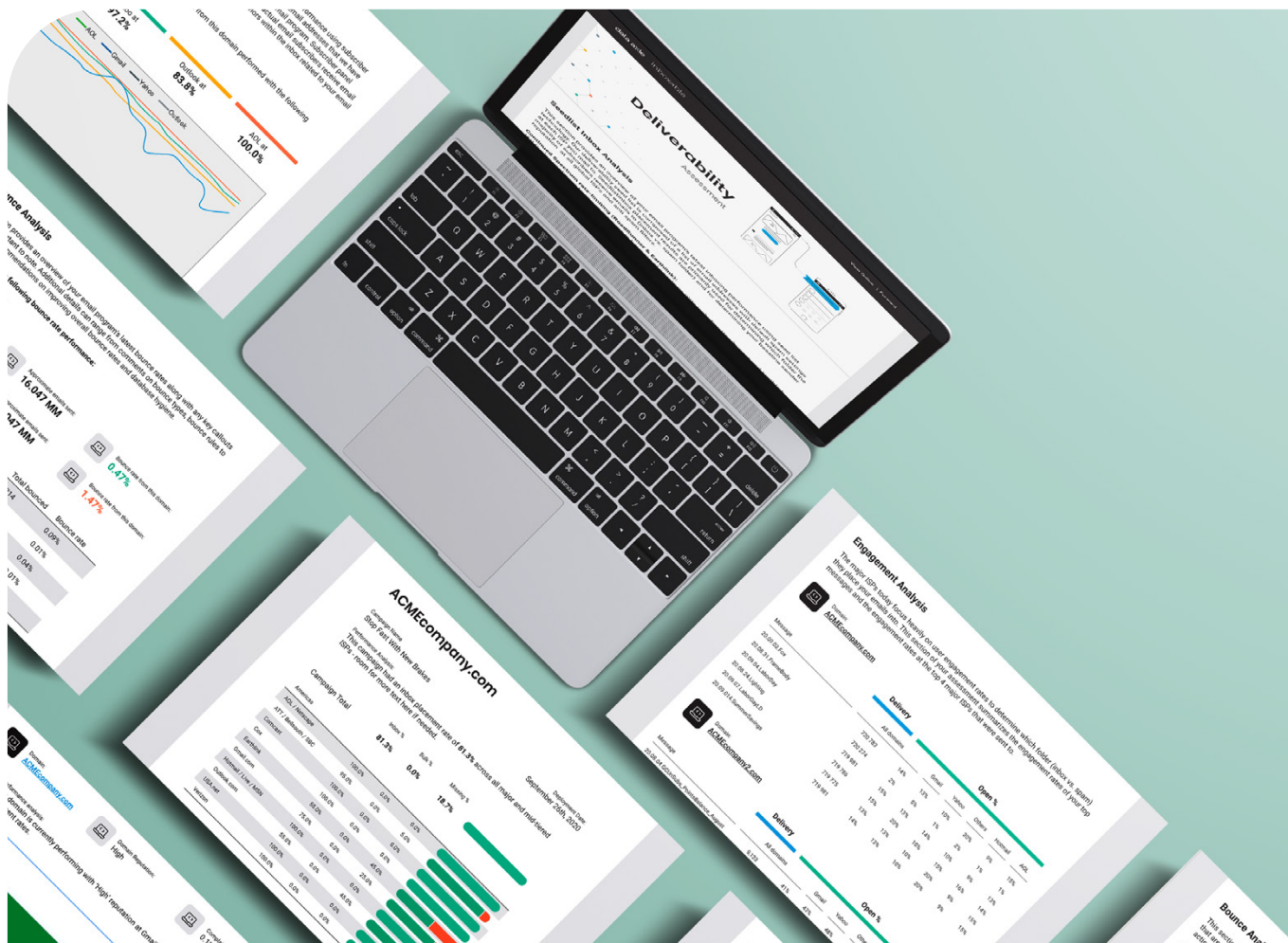


Capture insights beyond the open

Open rate is a great email metric, but it provides only a basic understanding of a recipient's interaction with an email. Inboxable's analytics capabilities can provide further insight into a subscriber's interests and engagement, including:

- how long a subscriber engages with a message
- which platform and devices are used by subscribers to interact with emails
- geo-tagging to learn where subscribers are opening your emails

These additional data points allow marketers a greater opportunity to connect with their subscribers resulting in a stronger bond.



“ We switched to Data Axle last December and haven't looked back. We've seen a major improvement in transparency and service. Over the course of a few short months, Data Axle's [Inboxable](#) solution **identified and rectified the long-term inboxing problems** we had been battling for years.”

Kyle Taylor, CEO and Founder, **The Penny Hoarder**



CREATIVE: Boost inboxing with well-designed email creative

To determine whether to deliver a message to the inbox, ISPs rely on engagement data. As a result, [email design and content](#) have a significant impact on deliverability. Marketers can use some of the following design and content strategies to improve engagement and, ultimately, their inboxing rates:

Leverage templates to create the right blend of text and images

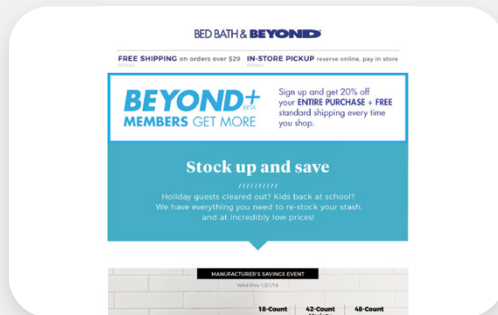
A study from Litmus revealed that 43% of Gmail users read their emails without images,⁴ and Outlook's desktop application has images turned off by default. Yet many brands continue to create image-only emails in photoshop. These emails may be good-looking in the Photoshop platform, but when a large portion of your audience has images turned off (or is waiting for the email to load) and can't see your copy or CTAs, they ultimately disengage, which hurts inboxing rates and revenue per email.



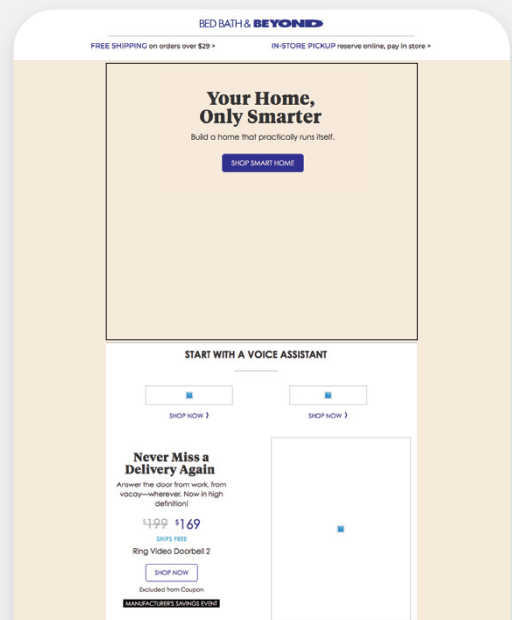
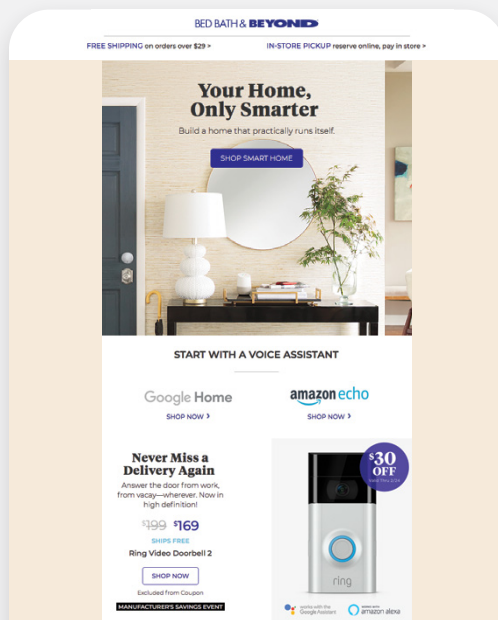
BRAND EXAMPLE **Bed Bath & Beyond**

When [Bed Bath & Beyond](#) worked with Data Axle to update their templates, they incorporated an images-off ready design with "bulletproof" buttons (buttons that are visible when images are off) to improve email engagement rates and user experience.

Image only design



"Images-off ready" design





Enhance the mobile experience with responsive design

Mobile opens account for 46% of all email opens.⁵ Yet a study from Econsultancy indicated that 40% of companies said their strategy for optimizing email on different devices is “basic,” with a further 10% describing it as non-existent.⁶ This poses a problem for brands; if your mobile email design is weak, nearly half of your email opens are likely not to convert into a click and, ultimately, a purchase. This, in turn, translates into declining engagement and rising unsubscribes, leading to deliverability issues.

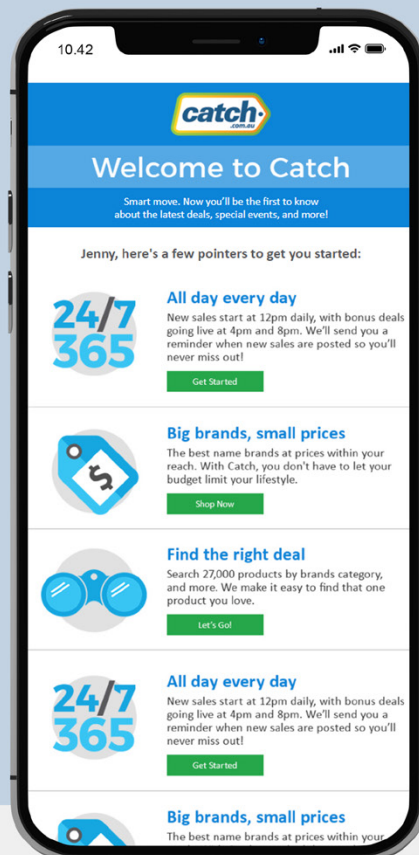
You can mitigate these issues by ensuring you have staff or tools that can implement responsive design. For example, Inboxable’s [email builder tool](#) has a drag-and-drop interface that automatically creates mobile-responsive templates. You can also instantly see how your messages will render across web, desktop, and mobile clients before deployment, which allows you to identify any issues and remedy them pre-flight to ensure emails and CTAs are readable and clickable in all environments.



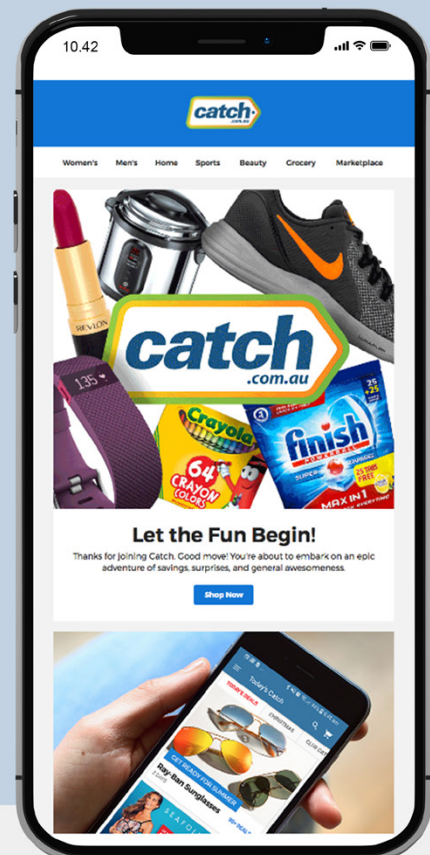
BRAND EXAMPLE Catch Group

Australian ecommerce powerhouse Catch Group worked with Data Axle to create a responsive email template with a mobile-first design that would optimize the use of space while encouraging readers to scroll all the way through the content. The new template vastly improved the mobile user experience and engagement, with initial tests showing a 143% increase in mobile unique click rate. [Read the full case study.](#)

Welcome email:
Old template



Welcome email:
New template





Optimize content for deliverability

When it comes to hitting the inbox, words matter. Many marketers know that using [subject line best practices](#) and carefully choosing copy in the body of their email can improve their inboxing rates. For example:

Avoid language that might trigger spam filters – Using certain terms that are common in spam emails can cause your legitimate communication to be flagged by ISPs. Examples include:

- Overusing exclamation points or special characters, particularly in your subject lines
- All-caps in the subject line
- Words like “free”, “winner”, “guarantee”, “check or money order”, “free trial”, etc.

Use care with your links – When linking within your emails:

- Don’t have an excessive number of links in the body of your email (i.e., use the right text-to-link ratio)
- Avoid publishing full URL links or links that are very long
- Don’t use generic link shorteners
- Make sure you are not linking to websites that are problematic or compromised

Create compelling CTAs – A call-to-action that drives engagement can boost your inboxing rate because your sender reputation is partially based on how ISPs interact with your emails. ISPs use metrics like unique click-through-rate and click-to-open rate to help determine sender scores. Some CTA best practices include:

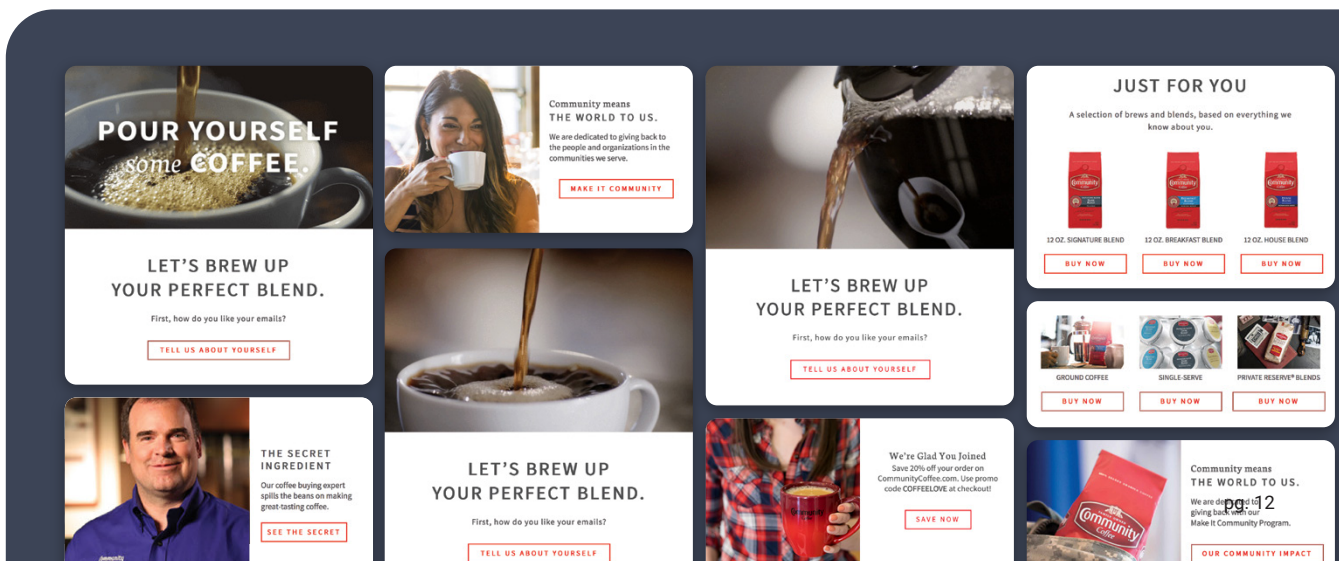
- Don’t be afraid to use some out-of-the-box copy on your CTAs
- Use action words like “book now”
- Use design to guide subscribers’ eyes towards your CTAs
- Avoid using too many CTAs, which can overwhelm your subscribers



BRAND EXAMPLE

Community Coffee

[Community Coffee](#) worked with Data Axle to redesign their subscriber welcome emails. The series incorporates succinct copy, compelling subject lines, and clear, eye-catching CTAs to drive engagement. New subscribers are encouraged to share their preferences for communication and products to guide future interactions. The redesigned email series has generated a whopping 47% average open rate and a 23% average click-to-open rate across all three touchpoints. Although the series’ goal is mainly to drive engagement, a dynamically personalized product recommendation module (based on subscriber preferences) garners a \$61 average order value.





Use predictive analytics and dynamic content to send the right message at the right time

Savvy businesses are using [predictive analytics](#) and [dynamic content](#) to reach audiences with highly [personalized content](#) at scale. According to research from Econsultancy, the use of predictive analytics for email (e.g., scheduling, product recommendations, next best action, etc.) has significantly increased, rising from 34% to 41% year-over-year.⁷

Using audience analytics to predict the best time to send emails to each subscriber or using dynamic content to drop personalized product recommendations into the body of your emails can boost engagement and, in turn, inboxes rates.

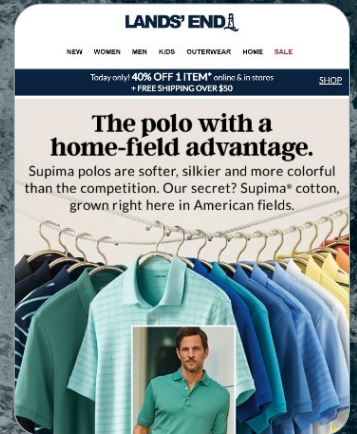
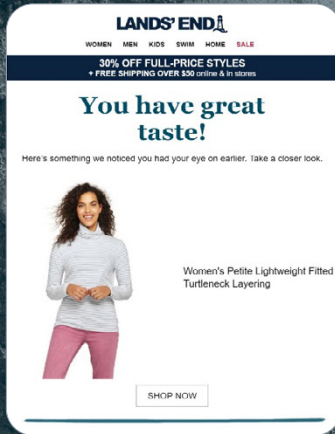


BRAND EXAMPLE Lands' End

Lands' End increases email engagement through a dynamic content module that features personalized recommendations. It enables [Lands' End](#) to automatically customize email content for more customer segments (and thus increase revenue) by populating product recommendations based on previous actions. For example, the Lands' End email campaign pictured in the center below used dynamic images (customized based on the subscriber's gender) and product recommendations to generate double the click-through-rate (CTR) and a 46% increase in revenue per message over the average marketing email.

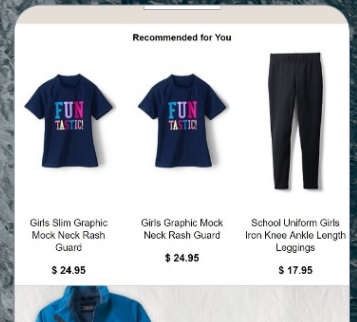
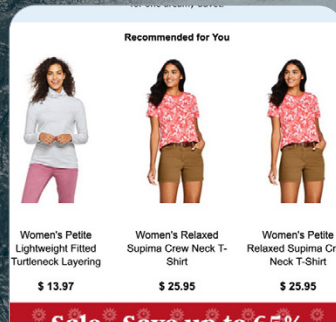
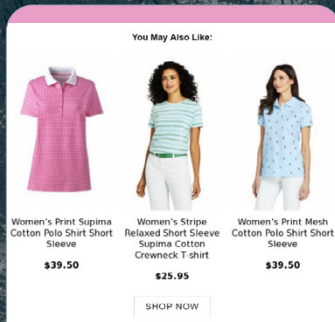
Dynamic banner

automatically populates latest deals. Eliminates the need to create banner images for each new promotion.



Dynamic module

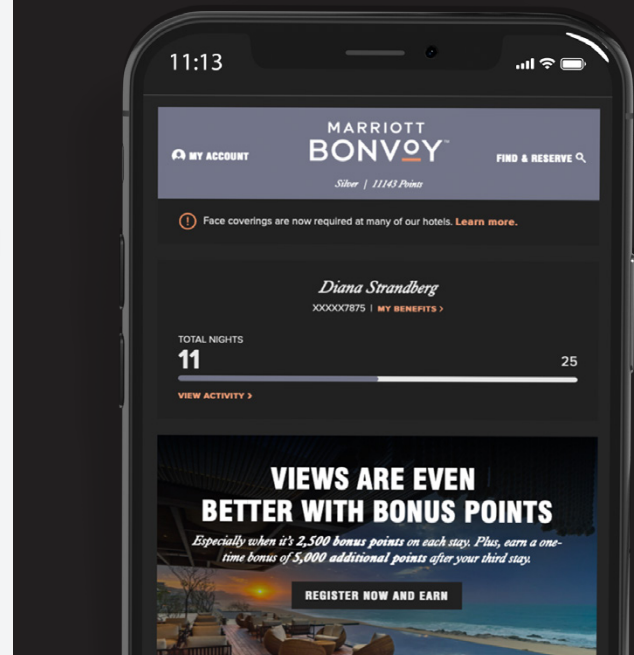
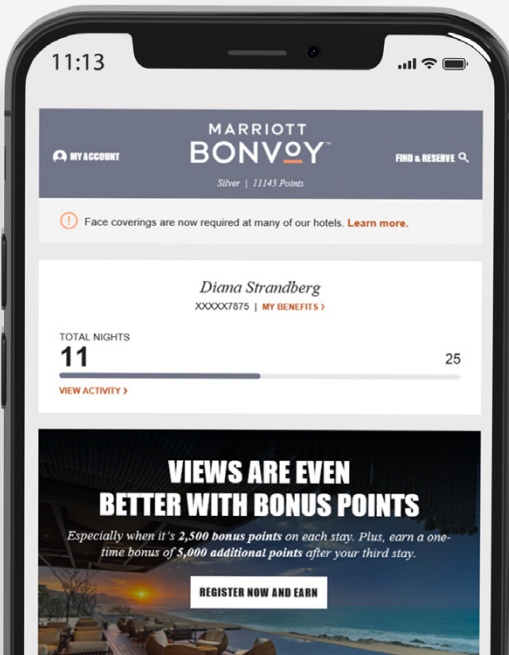
with product recommendations improves personalization and increases conversions.





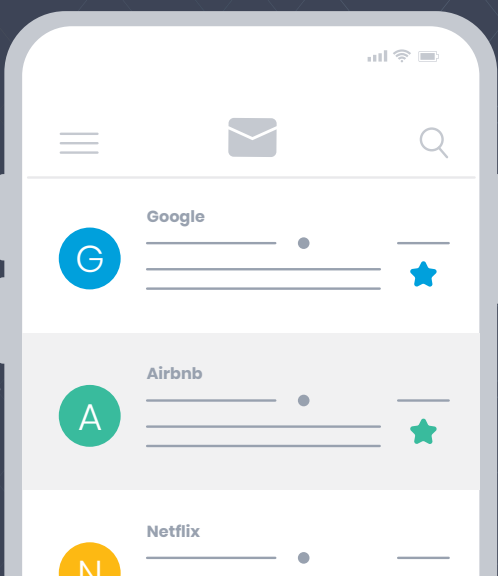
Keep up with emerging email trends

Email changes constantly. Marketers with their fingers on the pulse of the latest design best practices can help their brand stand out in the inbox to improve open and engagement rates. For example, dark mode has taken off as a popular choice for email users. Companies that [design for the dark mode inbox](#) can ensure their subscribers have a great experience, whether in standard or dark mode setting.

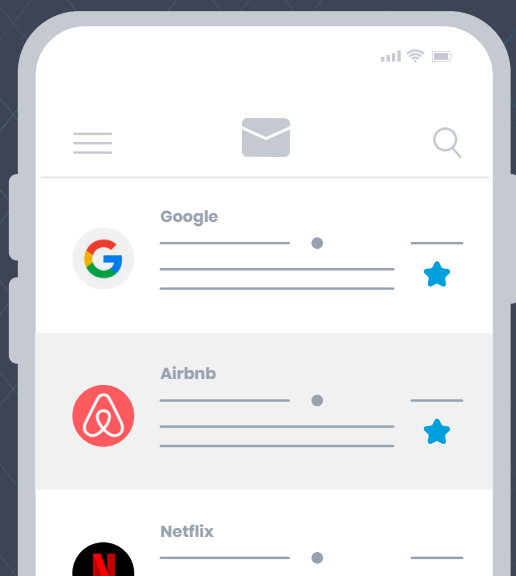


Another emerging trend for email that can boost engagement rates is [BIMI \(brand indicators for message identification\)](#). BIMI is a new form of authentication similar to DMARC, DKIM, and SPF, but it differs in that it allows companies to display their logo next to their message. This is beneficial to brands because it helps their messages stand out in the inbox, in addition to aiding deliverability and preventing spoofed emails.

Before



After





CONFIGURATION: Email program configuration tips from our pros

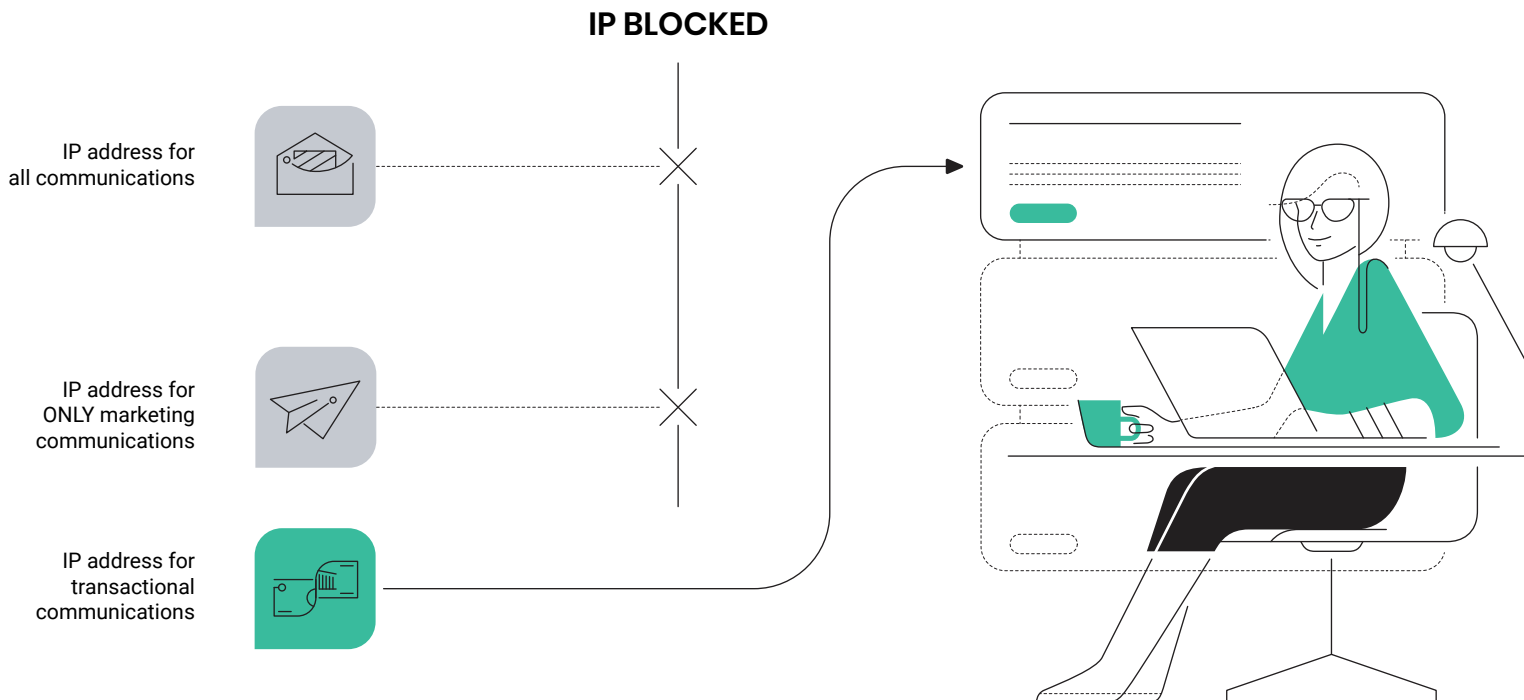
The right data and creative are key to a successful email program and high deliverability rates. To further prevent deliverability issues such as bulking, ISP blocking, and blocklisting and to ensure optimal inboxing rates, marketers should also consider using the following tactics.

Practice mail stream separation to protect your mailing program

While a single IP address might seem enough for a marketer's sending needs, the best practice is for brands to use separate IP addresses to send different components of their mailing program. These email streams can be dedicated to different types of messages like:

Subscriber retention | Reactivation | Marketing offers and communications | Transactional messaging

The idea behind mail stream separation is to prevent a deliverability issue from affecting all of a company's email programs. For example, suppose you practice mail stream separation, and the IP address off of which you send reactivation messages is blocked at Gmail. In that case, the block only affects the reactivation component of your mailing program and will not cause issues with the rest of your messages – like transactional, promotional, or lifecycle communications. If, however, you use a single IP for all communications, a Gmail block would mean that none of your campaigns make it to any Gmail users, which could cause major financial losses and damage to your brand reputation.



BRAND EXAMPLE Catch Group

In addition to email template work, Data Axle partnered with Catch Group to improve their email best practices and deliverability. The brand used the Inboxable platform and worked with its team to track how ISPs rated their domain and IP reputation, monitor any subscriber complaints, and implement segmentation practices across all Catch Group brands. Implementing mail stream separation on secondary domains and IPs allowed the brand to effectively run reactivation campaigns without risking deliverability issues for its main program. Together, these changes allowed the brand to reduce spam folder placement and improve its IP reputation and inbox placement rates. [Read the full case study.](#)



Review campaign volume and frequency

Marketers should strive to send a consistent email volume. ISPs reference your sending volume when determining your sender reputation, and their systems come to expect specific patterns from each domain and IP. Suddenly changing [send frequencies](#) or send volumes can have adverse effects on your sender reputation (and, in turn, your inboxing rates). For example, if a marketer usually sends 100,000 emails per day, but one of their campaigns is sent to 2 million recipients at once, an ISP may deem this a spam risk and block the sender.

A few techniques to follow when considering a change to your campaign volume or frequency:

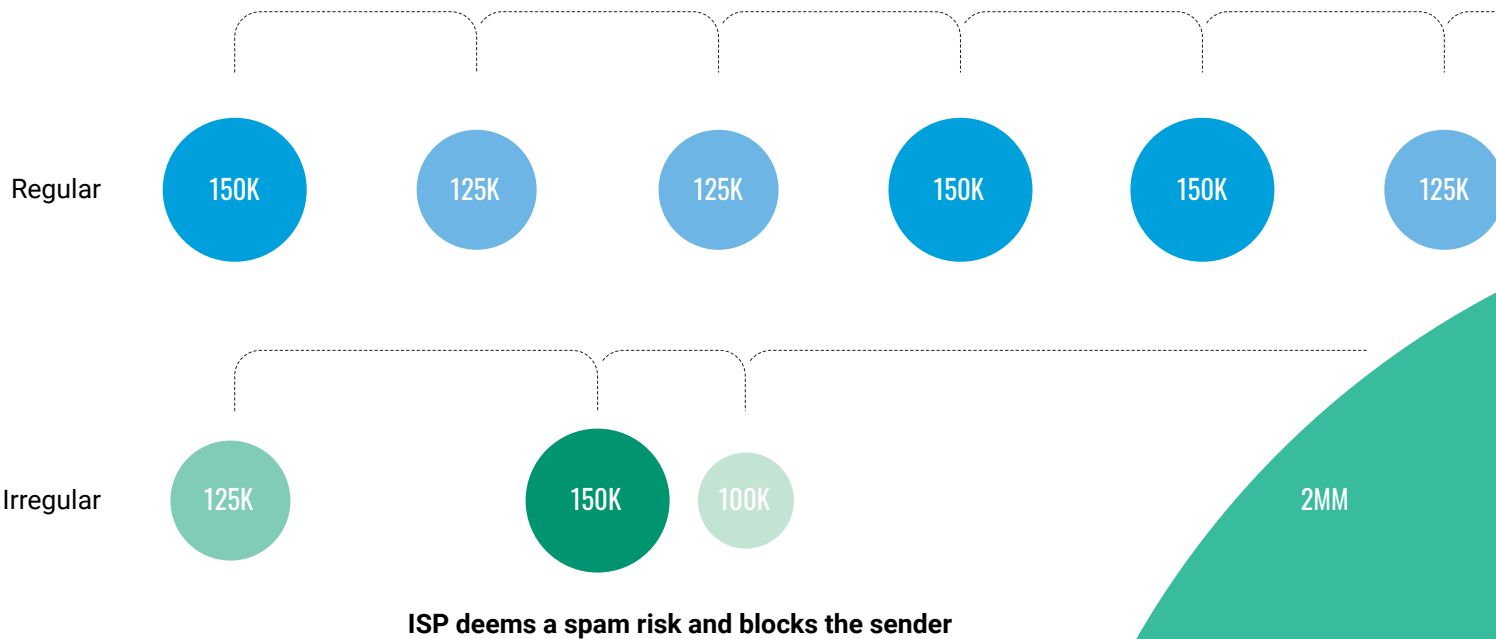
Gradually increase sends before your peak-season

If you work in an industry with a busy season (like retail), you can create a ramp-up strategy to prepare ISPs for increased sending volumes and frequency. This allows you to gradually increase your communications without the risk of negatively impacting your sender reputation.

Throttle your messages to avoid being labeled as spam by an ISP.

Marketers should set limits to the number of emails they deploy per hour and per day to ensure sending volumes remain consistent. This practice, called **throttling**, is especially important when a brand is launching a new email program or warming up an IP address.

Email volume and frequency



BRAND EXAMPLE UCLA Health

Data Axle client UCLA Health needed to send critical communications regarding COVID-19 to patients in the pandemic's early days. These crucial emails would require deploying to a volume that was significantly higher than their typical sends. Data Axle's deliverability team worked directly with ISPs to negotiate temporary IP and domain protection and coordinate delivery to ensure UCLA Health's communication reached patients.



Conclusion

Email continues to be a crucial channel for both B2C and B2B companies, yet deliverability challenges still plague many. Marketers need to invest in an inbox monitoring tool and implement data and design strategies that ensure their campaigns reach the inbox. By taking advantage of the deliverability best practices in this whitepaper, you can lay the foundation to achieve optimal deliverability and consistent email marketing ROI.

Need help leveraging data and design to boost deliverability?

Talk to Data Axle's Inboxable team to help you hit the inbox.

SOURCES

- 1 dma.org.uk
- 2 marketingcharts.com
- 3 statista.com
- 4 campaignmonitor.com
- 5 blog.hubspot.com
- 6 econsultancy.com
- 7 econsultancy.com



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