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The 8 Biggest Mistakes Email Marketers Make

& How to Avoid Them

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Unfortunately, we've all been there. Every now and then, we make cringe-worthy mistakes. But the mistakes that haunt us in our personal lives often aren't as public as email marketing mistakes, which go out to hundreds and thousands of subscribers.

This ebook will cover the eight most common email marketing pitfalls, including those related to deliverability, subject lines, design, and more, to help you understand how to avoid or fix them.

MISTAKE 1

Unclear Subject Lines

Unclear Subject Lines

Your subject line should be clear and consistent with the content of the email—no tricks, clickbait, or ambiguity about what the email actually contains.

In fact, a 2011 case study conducted by AWeber Communications found that clear subject lines received **541%** more clicks than clever ones.

Clever subject line examples:

⊗ "You're Not Alone..."

⊗ "It's finally here!"

⊗ "...this failed miserably"

⊗ "Still doing it the old way?"

⊗ "My Gift to You"

While clever subject lines might entice opens out of curiosity, recipients often fail to follow through once they open the email.

That means they're probably not going to trigger desired actions, such as click-throughs on your call-to-action (CTA). We know: clear subject lines aren't as "sexy" as clever ones, but they deliver the results you're looking for. Here are a few that have worked well for Marketo:

Clear subject line examples:

⊘ "9 Must-Try Email Subject Lines"

⊘ "5 Things Your Landing Pages Are Missing"

⊘ "Your Winning Personalization Strategy"

⊘ "8 Biggest Mistakes Email Marketers Make"

⊘ "3 Steps to Winning Customer Loyalty"

Clear subject lines received **541%** more clicks than clever ones.

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Unclear Subject Lines

Not convinced? We tested the following two subject lines when promoting our worksheet, Your Marketing Automation Checklist:

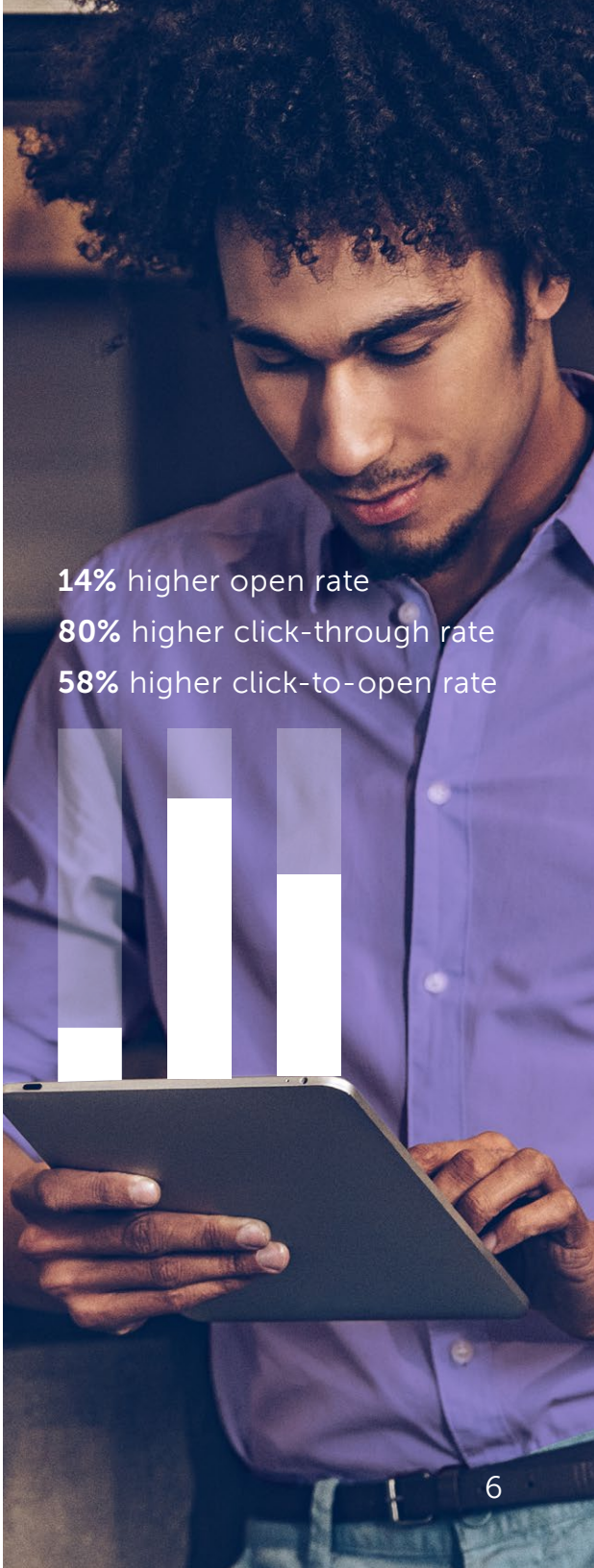**Subject line 1: Your Marketing Automation Checklist**
Subject line 2: Are You Evaluating Marketing Automation?

The first subject line clearly describes the offer and email content. The second subject line does not tell recipients what to expect from opening the email. For all they know, it could be a sales pitch or survey.

The results speak for themselves. The clear subject line beat out the other one on every measure, resulting in a **14%** higher open rate, an **80%** higher click-through rate, and a **58%** higher click-to-open rate. In other words, a strong connection between the subject line and offer leads to higher responses.

Subject Line	Open Rate	Unique Clicks	CTR	Click/ Open Rate
"Your Marketing Automation Checklist"	16.9%	211	1.9%	11.1%
"Are You Evaluating Marketing Automation?"	14.8%	117	1.0%	7.0%

So remember: You don't need to work that hard to write witty subject lines. By being straightforward with the subject line and following through within the email body, you can deliver on your promise and connect with an interested audience from the get-go. And by testing your subject lines, you can continually optimize for the best results.

14% higher open rate
80% higher click-through rate
58% higher click-to-open rate

Unclear Subject Lines

Best practices

Tell your recipients exactly what they'll get
by opening the email.

....

Front-load the most important words
(or numbers), such as "Tips" or "Tricks".

....

Focus on all metrics, not just open rate.
The best subject line in the world is worthless
if it doesn't result in click-throughs.

....

When in doubt, test it out.
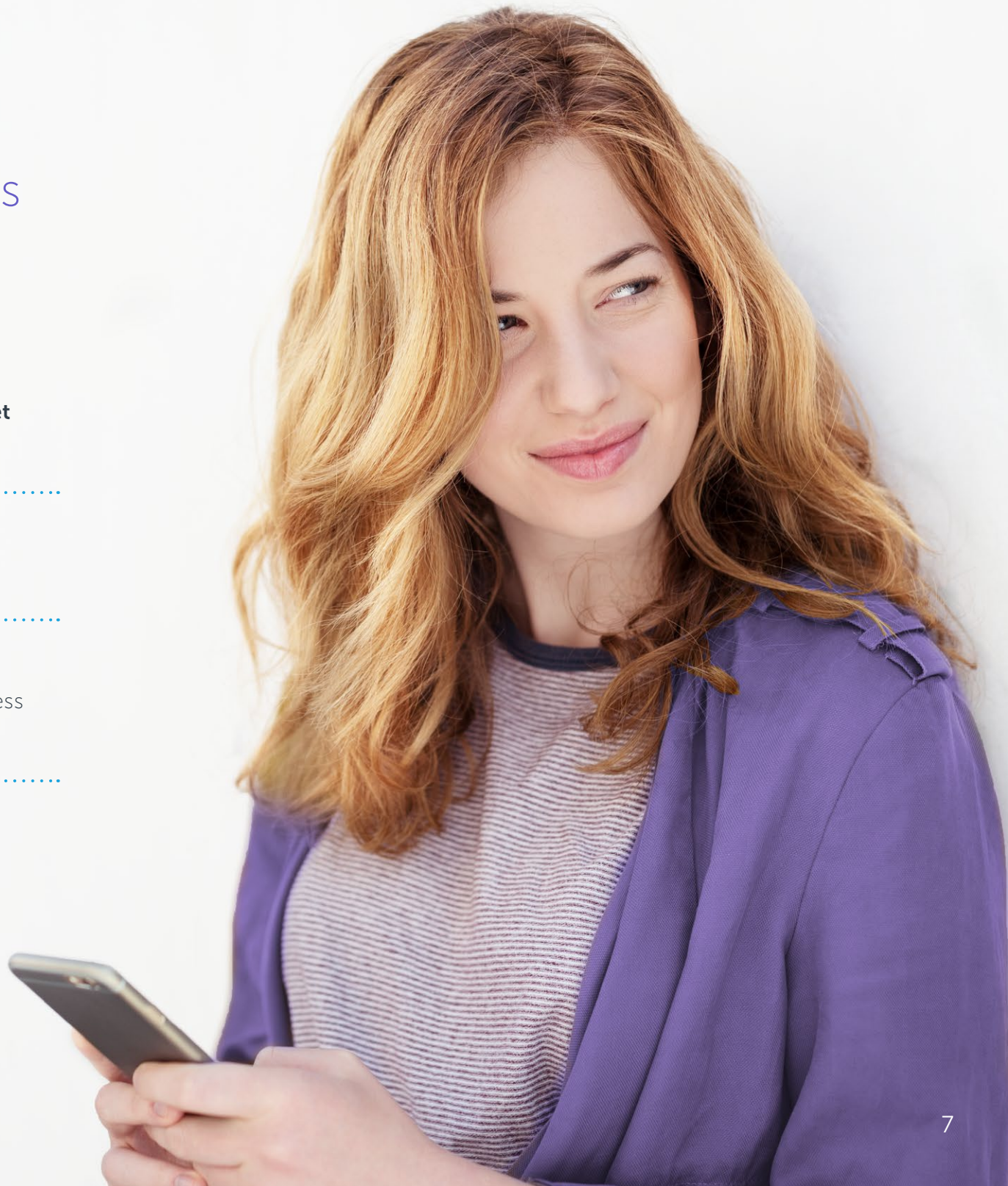
MISTAKE 2

Poor Email
List Hygiene

Poor Email List Hygiene

It's already a challenge just to get your emails seen, but today, getting your emails delivered is tougher than ever. Simply avoiding "spammy" words isn't enough to ensure you'll make it into the inbox.

Big email service providers have followed Gmail's lead when it comes to embracing an "engagement model." Gmail buckets emails into three separate tabs: primary, social, and promotions. Hitting the primary inbox is a challenge because Gmail evaluates these factors to determine which emails pass as "primary":

Continuously opened emails
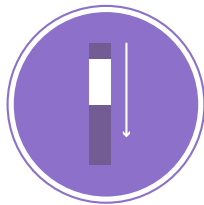
Scrolling

Unique clicks within an email

Frequency of engagement overall
(i.e., does the recipient open and engage regularly with emails from that particular sender?)

Multiple clicks within an email

3 Email Terms that Negatively Impact Deliverability and Sender Reputation:

Soft bounce: A soft bounce is a temporary problem with email deliverability, usually due to an unavailable server or a full inbox.

Hard bounce: A hard bounce is a permanent failure to deliver an email, usually a result of an email address that's non-existent, invalid, or blocked.

Spam trap: A spam trap is an email address traditionally used to expose illegitimate senders who add email addresses to their lists without permission. They are also set up to identify email marketers with poor permission and list management practices.
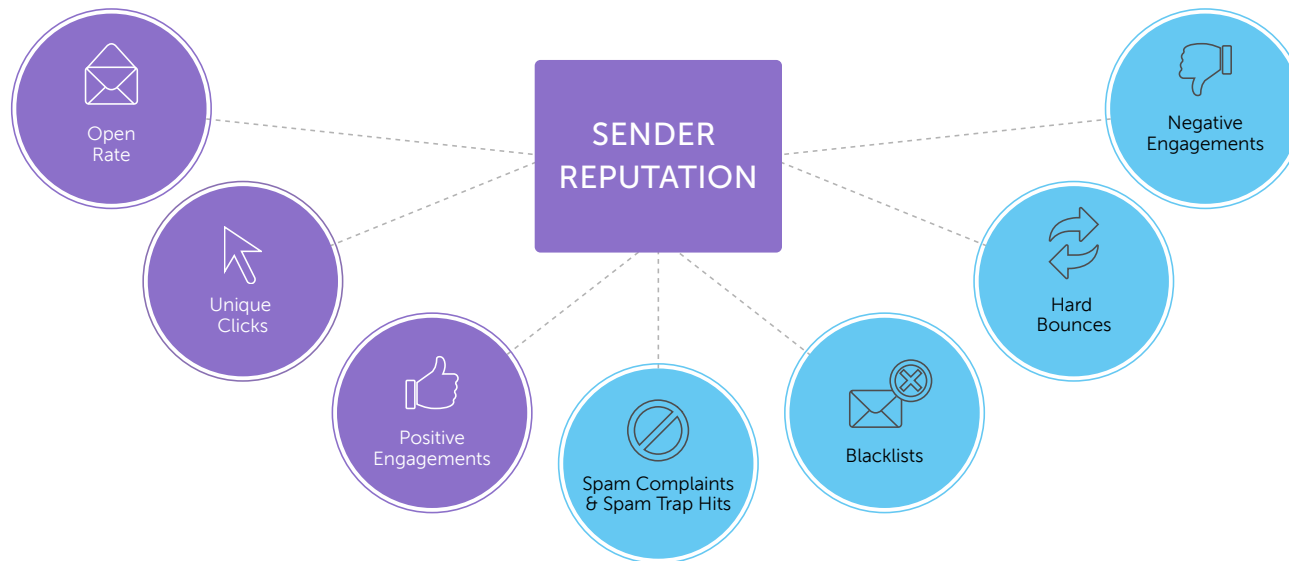
Poor Email List Hygiene

The key to making it through Internet Service Provider (ISP) spam filters is to keep your sender reputation as pristine as possible.

The most common factors affecting your reputation:

▸ **Subscriber engagements,** like opens and clicks

▸ **Positive and negative engagement signals**

▸ **Hard bounces, placement on a blacklist, and spam complaints**

The goal is to manage all of these to **keep positive engagements high and negative engagements low.**

SENDER REPUTATION

Open Rate · Unique Clicks · Positive Engagements · Spam Complaints & Spam Trap Hits · Blacklists · Hard Bounces · Negative Engagements

Wondering about your trustworthiness as an email sender?
Check out **Return Path's Sender Score.** It rates your IP address based on your email sender practices.
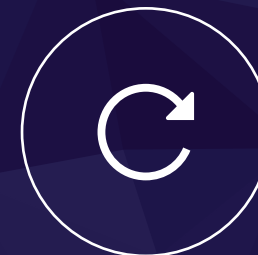
Poor Email List Hygiene

3 steps to a healthier (cleaner) email list:

1 **Run soft bounce management campaigns.**

Soft bounces aren't usually considered harmful unless they bounce continuously. Within your database, certain emails will soft bounce over and over again, which can be attributed to factors like a full inbox, a down server, or messages that are too large for the recipient's inbox. To mitigate that risk, you can use an engagement platform to run two types of campaigns to control your soft bounces:

▶ **A one-time batch campaign** to clean up existing emails that have repeatedly soft bounced in the past by identifying and retiring them from future campaigns.

▶ **An automated trigger campaign** to catch recurring soft bounces in real-time.

These campaigns clean up all the emails that have continuously soft bounced to date while automating the clean-up of emails that soft bounce in the future. The more emails you send over time, the cleaner your list becomes!

Poor Email List Hygiene

3 steps to a healthier (cleaner) email list:

2 **Remove role accounts.**

Role-based accounts are those not specific to a person, such as abuse@, support@, and info@. It's important to remove these accounts from your email list for the following reasons:

▶ It's impossible to prove that everyone who receives emails at these addresses has opted in.

▶ These email addresses commonly appear on websites, so they are more susceptible to being harvested off the internet.

▶ Blacklist providers like Spamhaus use role accounts as honeypot spam traps to catch spammers.

Using marketing automation, you can build automated campaigns that "listen for" and remove all new role account email addresses entering your database to maintain list quality.
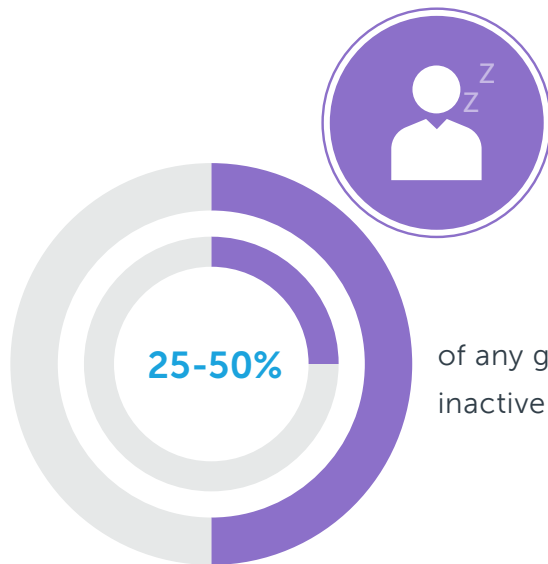
Poor Email List Hygiene

3 steps to a healthier (cleaner) email list:

3 **Run re-engagement campaigns.**

25-50% of any given marketer's lists regularly include inactive subscribers, according to Return Path. Re-engagement campaigns, which we'll cover in more detail, are a cost-effective way to determine which of these inactive subscribes still want to hear from you and which don't. This is critical for email deliverability, since an unsubscribe is better than being marked as spam, which could seriously hurt your sender reputation.

25-50% of any given marketer's lists regularly include inactive subscribers, according to Return Path.

Poor Email List Hygiene

Best practices

Use automated cleaning campaigns to avoid high bounce rates, as they lower deliverability and reputation.
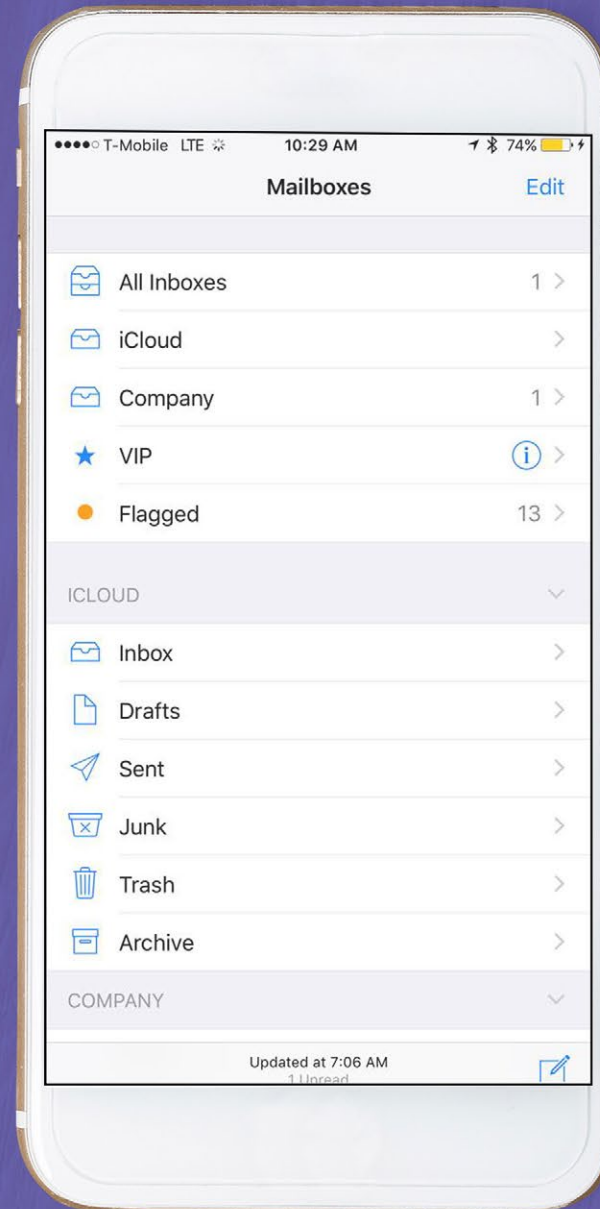
....

Aim for a good sender reputation because it helps your inboxing rate (more on that in the next section).

....

Improve list hygiene by managing soft bounces, role accounts, and unengaged subscribers.

MISTAKE 3

Failure to Measure Email Inboxing
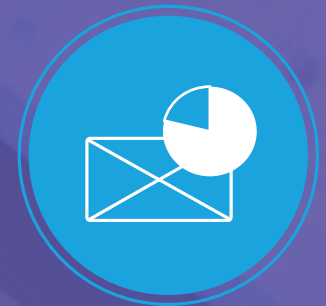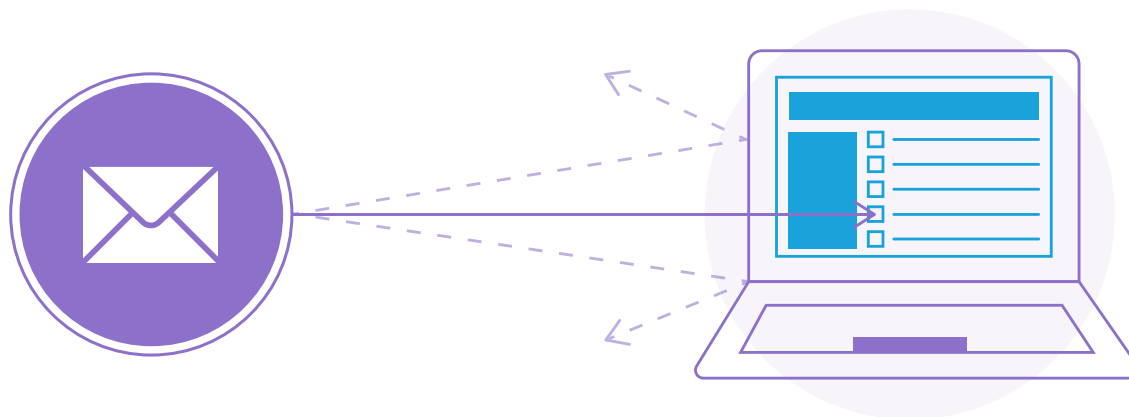
Failure to Measure Email Inboxing

According to Return Path, only **79%** of commercial emails hit the primary inbox. In other words, one in five emails end up in junk or spam folder, hard bounce, soft bounce, or go undelivered. That's a pretty big percentage of your outbound emails that are going to waste.

Here's the catch: When email goes to a junk or spam folder, it still counts as being delivered. Yet, few of us look at or click on any of the emails that end up in our junk or spam folders. Your email deliverability rate could be **99%** when, in reality, only **50%** of your emails make it into the primary inbox.

If, like most marketers, you're relying on email to help drive revenue, you can't afford to ignore the fact that half of your efforts are going to waste. That's why you need to look beyond the typical campaign metrics, such as sent, delivered, deliverability rate, hard bounced, and soft bounced.

These numbers don't tell you what percentage of emails actually hit the inbox instead of getting relegated to spam or junk folders.
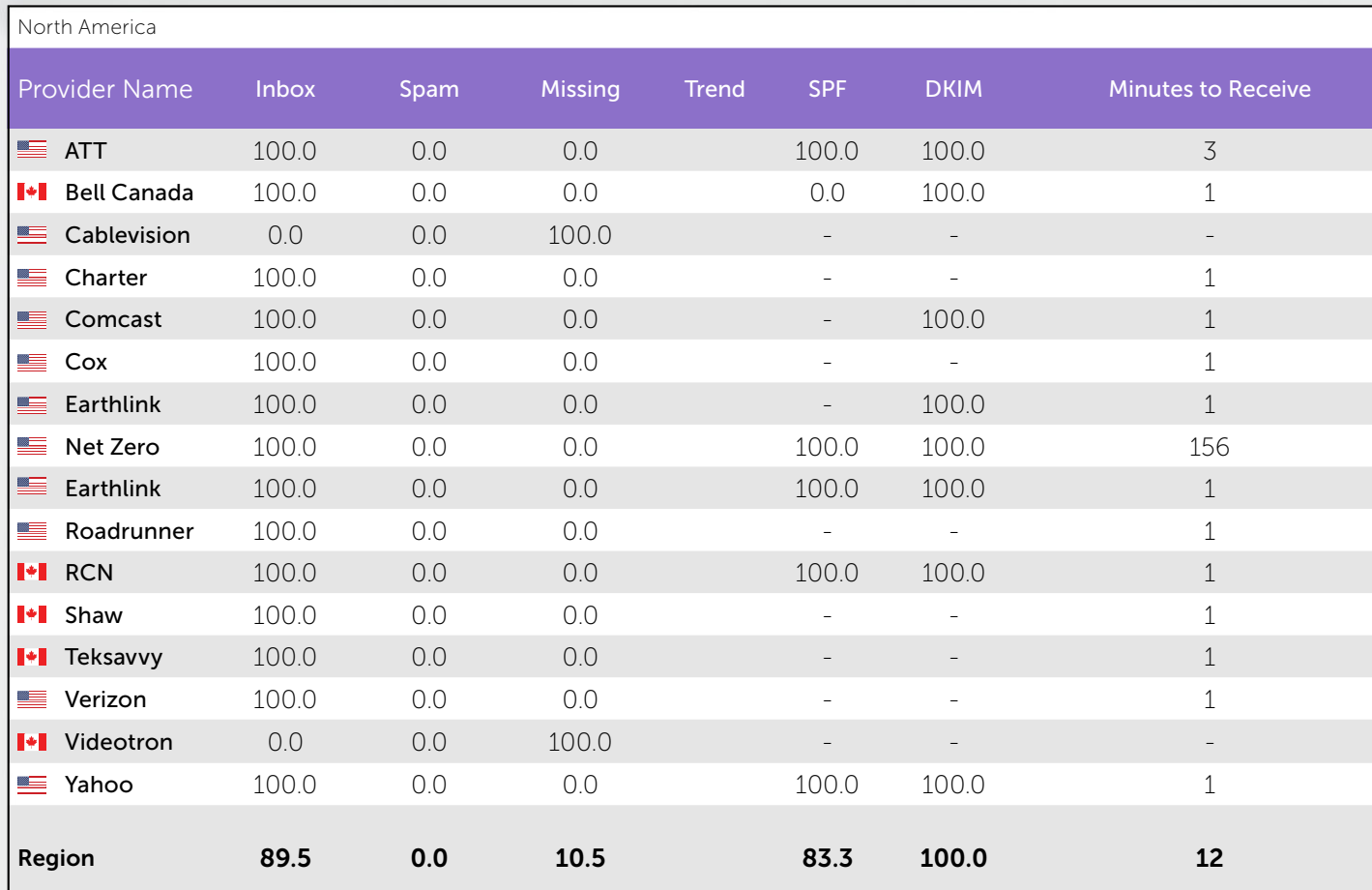
What is inboxing?
Inboxing is the percentage of delivered emails that hit the primary inbox. Only **79%** of commerical emails hit the primary inbox.

Failure to Measure Email Inboxing

To figure out where you stand, call upon tools that measure email inboxing. These tools break down deliverability at a granular level. Some even allow you to weigh domains so that what you see for inboxing aligns with the weight of domains in your email list.

Here's a screenshot from Marketo's integrated deliverability tool 250ok, which shows inbox placement, sender reputation, spam analysis, and design analysis. Certain inboxing tools even show how your email performed at the spam filter level.
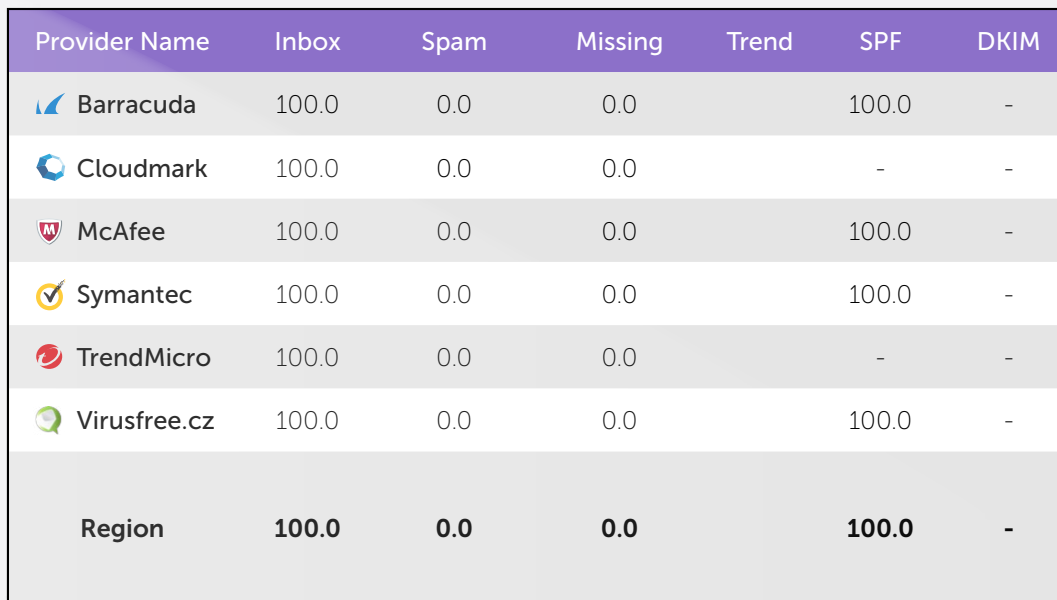
North America

Provider Name	Inbox	Spam	Missing	Trend	SPF	DKIM	Minutes to Receive
🇺🇸 ATT	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	100.0	3
🇨🇦 Bell Canada	100.0	0.0	0.0		0.0	100.0	1
🇺🇸 Cablevision	0.0	0.0	100.0		-	-	-
🇺🇸 Charter	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-	1
🇺🇸 Comcast	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	100.0	1
🇺🇸 Cox	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-	1
🇺🇸 Earthlink	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	100.0	1
🇺🇸 Net Zero	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	100.0	156
🇺🇸 Earthlink	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	100.0	1
🇺🇸 Roadrunner	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-	1
🇨🇦 RCN	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	100.0	1
🇨🇦 Shaw	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-	1
🇨🇦 Teksavvy	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-	1
🇺🇸 Verizon	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-	1
🇨🇦 Videotron	0.0	0.0	100.0		-	-	-
🇺🇸 Yahoo	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	100.0	1
Region	**89.5**	**0.0**	**10.5**		**83.3**	**100.0**	**12**

Failure to Measure Email Inboxing

By using tools like 250ok to optimize your list, you can quickly improve your inboxing results.

Provider Name	Inbox	Spam	Missing	Trend	SPF	DKIM
Barracuda	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	-
Cloudmark	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-
McAfee	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	-
Symantec	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	-
TrendMicro	100.0	0.0	0.0		-	-
Virusfree.cz	100.0	0.0	0.0		100.0	-
Region	**100.0**	**0.0**	**0.0**		**100.0**	**-**

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Failure to Measure Email Inboxing

Best practices

Introduce bounce management campaigns
to improve inboxing rates across ISPs.

....

Measure inboxing across ISPs to help
mitigate issues with specific ISPs.

....

Analyze emails for common spam triggers,
whether it's your copy, images, or HTML.
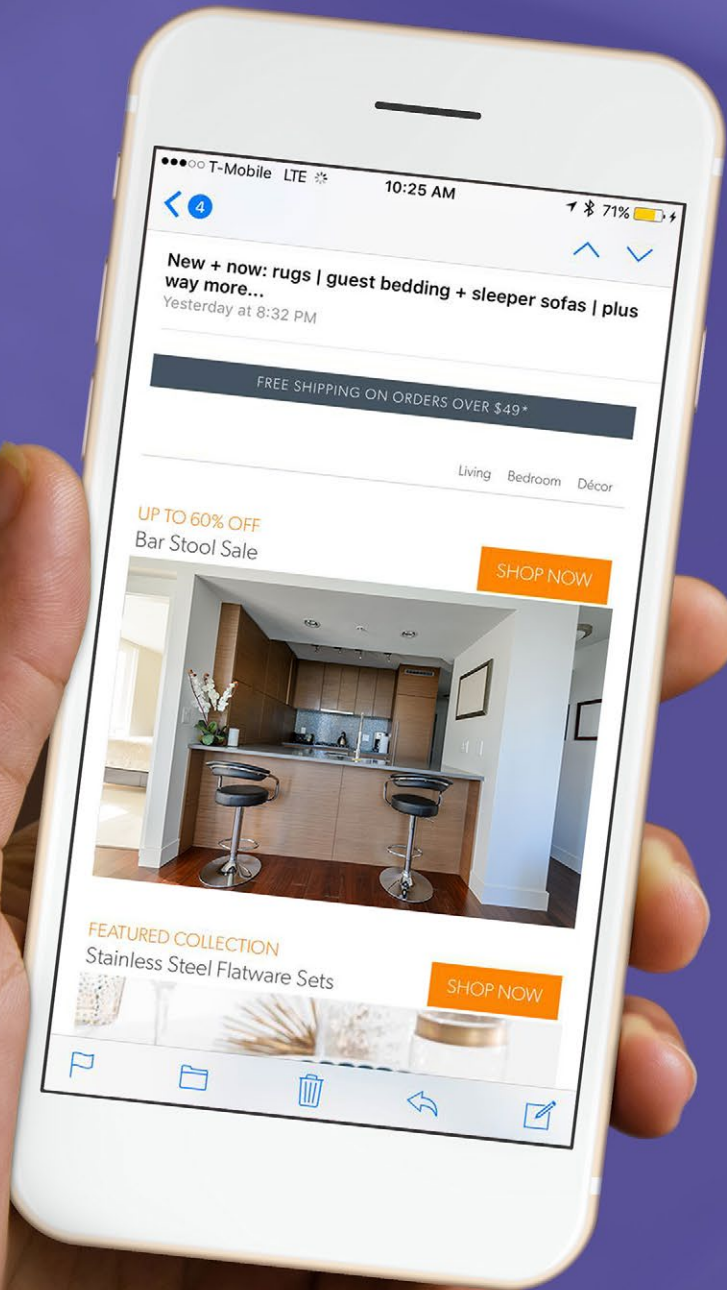
MISTAKE 4

No Engagement
Segmentation

No Engagement Segmentation

While all the practices we've covered are important, ISPs prioritize high levels of email engagement. In other words, they want to see that people are opening, reading, clicking on, scrolling through, and engaging with your emails on a regular basis.

When you maintain a high level of engagement, ISPs are more inclined to route your emails to the primary inbox. There are several ways you can reach higher levels of inboxing.

Take advantage of staggered sends

Let's assume that you regularly send emails to the 100,000 subscribers in your database. Within the last 90 days, 20,000 of those 100,000 (or 20%) have engaged with your emails. The other 80,000 (or 80%) have not engaged during that time.

Let's calculate key metrics based on industry averages and the assumption that engaged subscribers are less likely to opt out.

If you sent emails to only those **20,000 engaged subscribers,** the open rate would be **18%,** the click-through rate would be **3%,** and the unsubscribe rate would be **0%.**

If you sent emails to only the **80,000 disengaged subscribers,** your open rate would be **3%,** your click-through rate would be **0.2%,** and the unsubscribe rate would be **0.31%.**
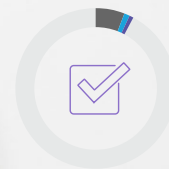
When you send to all your subscribers—which most marketers do—your open rate would be **6%,** your click-through rate would be **0.76%,** and your unsubscribe rate would be **0.25%.**

# of Subscribers

100,000

80,000

20,000

Engaged Subscribers

Unengaged Subscribers

No Engagement Segmentation

To drive better results across the board, stagger your sends. Send to the highly engaged subscribers first, wait 30 minutes, then send to the unengaged subscribers and you'll see higher deliverability rates and higher inboxing. Why? Because the ISP will see high levels of engagement when you send the email to the engaged subscribers first, which boosts your sender reputation score. Then, when you send your second email to the unengaged subscribers, the ISP will route more of those to the inbox because you just "warmed up" your reputation score.

	Last Engagement < 90 Days	Last Engagement > 90 Days	Total
Delivered	20,000	80,000	100,000
Open Rate	18.0%	3.0%	6.0%
CTR	3.0%	0.2%	0.76%
Unsubscribe Rate	0%	0.31%	0.25%
Inboxing	95%	55%	63%
Staggered Sends Inboxing	95%	70%	75%

Mail ▾

COMPOSE

Inbox (3,004)

Starred

Sent Mail

Drafts (67)

More ▾

No Engagement Segmentation

Separate email campaigns by IP address

If you're a high-volume sender, you can achieve similar results by dedicating separate IP addresses to your email marketing campaigns, such as by:

▸ **Subscriber importance**

Maintain an IP address for those that fit the right demographics, behaviors, and personas to buy from your organization.

▸ **Engagement**

Send emails to highly engaged subscribers for extremely high deliverability, engagement, and inboxing.

In both cases, you can assign those who don't fit your criteria to a lower-priority IP address.

▸ **Purpose**

For example, if you deliver event confirmations via email after a subscriber fills out a form, you'd want those emails to be sent from a pristine IP. If you sent those from an IP that doesn't have a decent sender reputation, you run the risk of those emails never getting delivered.

Separating email campaigns by IP address can help you mitigate the risks of spam traps, being blacklisted, and being marked as spam by subscribers.

No Engagement Segmentation

Best practices

Consider separating your email campaigns by engagement levels if you are a high-volume sender.

....

Stagger email campaigns by engagement to increase email inboxing.

....

Help mitigate business risk by segmenting IP addresses for engagement.

MISTAKE 5

No Re-Engagement Strategy

No Re-Engagement Strategy

You spend a lot of valuable time and money getting people to subscribe to your email list, so it's a problem when they stop engaging. Plus, those inactive subscribers drag down your open rates, click-to-open rates, email deliverability, and sender reputation.

The definition of "inactive" subscribers depends entirely on your organization's email cadence. If you regularly email your list two to three times per week, an inactive subscriber might be someone who hasn't engaged in the past 90 days or 6 months.

If you send emails monthly or quarterly, an inactive subscriber might be someone who hasn't engaged in a year or more. Either way, these people have been active in the past, either by showing intent, engagement, or making a purchase.

To extract maximum return on the time and money you've already spent attracting their attention in the first place, it's worth trying to re-engage those subscribers. In fact, according to Experian, thoughtfully planned re-engagement strategies can deliver 14 times the lift in email-influenced revenue.

Since the cost of acquiring a new customer outweighs the cost of keeping an existing one, you should do everything possible to re-engage inactive subscribers or customers. To wake them up, run re-engagement (or reactivation) campaigns. By doing so, you can:

▶ **Re-engage** those who still want to hear from you

▶ **Determine** who doesn't want to hear from you

▶ **Clean up** your email lists

▶ **Capitalize** on existing relationships to keep customer acquisition costs in check

Subscribers become inactive for various reasons, including:

▶ Interests change

▶ Subscription expectations not set appropriately

▶ Too many emails

▶ Job change

▶ Irrelevant content

▶ Too busy

▶ Email address change

No Re-Engagement Strategy
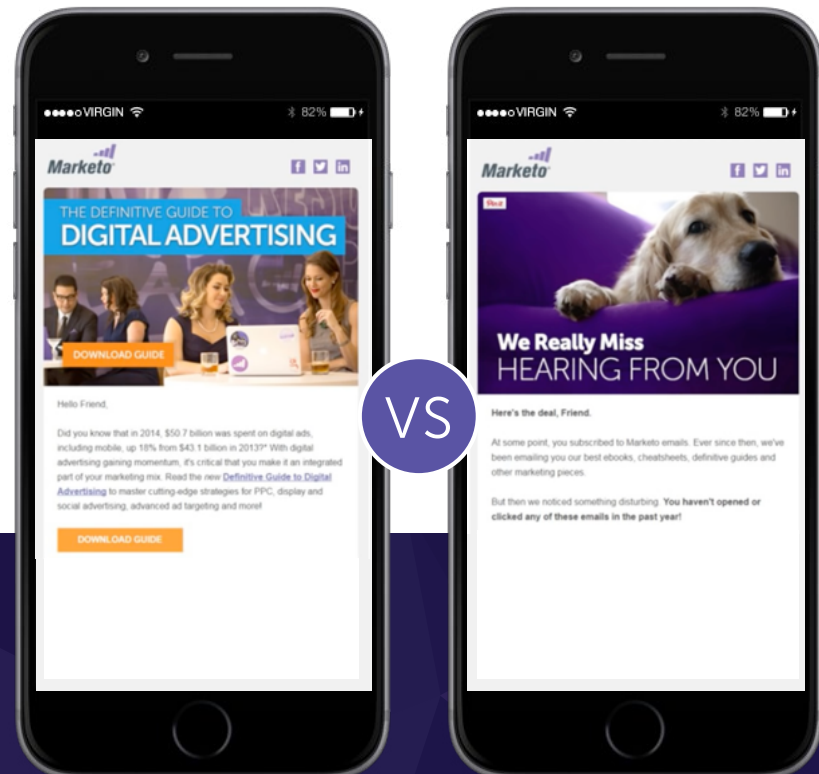
The value of reactivation campaigns

In addition to re-engaging subscribers, reactivation campaigns provide an opportunity for disinterested subscribers to opt out. Opting out and unsubscribing will not hurt your email deliverability and sender reputation, but being marked as spam does.

Clearly, the language and offers in your regular emails haven't kept these subscribers engaged. If they're getting tired of receiving emails from you, they might mark you as spam or stop engaging altogether—and that lowers all your email metrics. Instead, proactively ask if they want to continue hearing from you.

Here's an example of a test we conducted with a Marketo re-engagement campaign aimed at subscribers who had not engaged in a year or more. We tested two offers: a control email for our Definitive Guide to Digital Advertising and a more pointed, re-engagement email. The latter underscored the fact

that the subscriber had not recently engaged, asked whether or not they still want to hear from Marketo, and invited them to update their email preferences.

The re-engagement email reactivated **238% more subscribers than the control email.** In addition, it resulted in a 70% **higher open rate,** 325% **higher click-to-open rate, and** 621% **higher click-through rate.**

No Re-Engagement Strategy

Think beyond a one-and-done campaign.

Running a reactivation campaign once isn't sufficient. Every second of every day, it's quite likely that at least one email address goes inactive in your database. Every time that happens, you should run the subscriber through a reactivation series. The moment you let an email slip into an inactive state, it threatens your email health and reputation. By starting your reactivation campaigns sooner, you can mitigate many of those risks.

Using an engagement platform, you can listen for those who enter an inactivity window, automatically flag email addresses, and remove them from the normal email campaigns and instead drip them into your reactivation series.
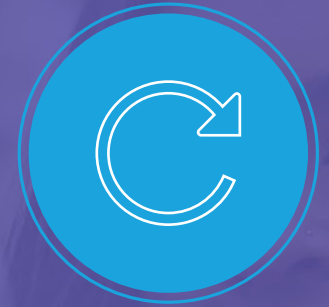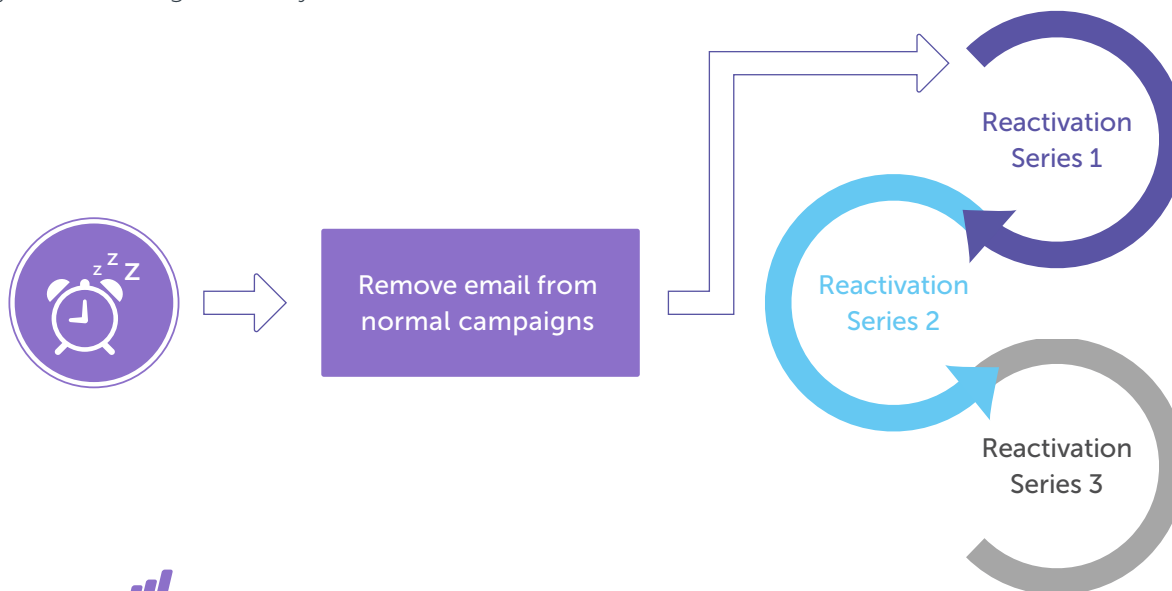
How to optimize your reactivation campaigns

As you're developing your reactivation campaign series, try to identify what your inactive subscribers share in common. Perhaps none of them saw your welcome email series, or didn't understand the types of offers they'd receive and the cadence.

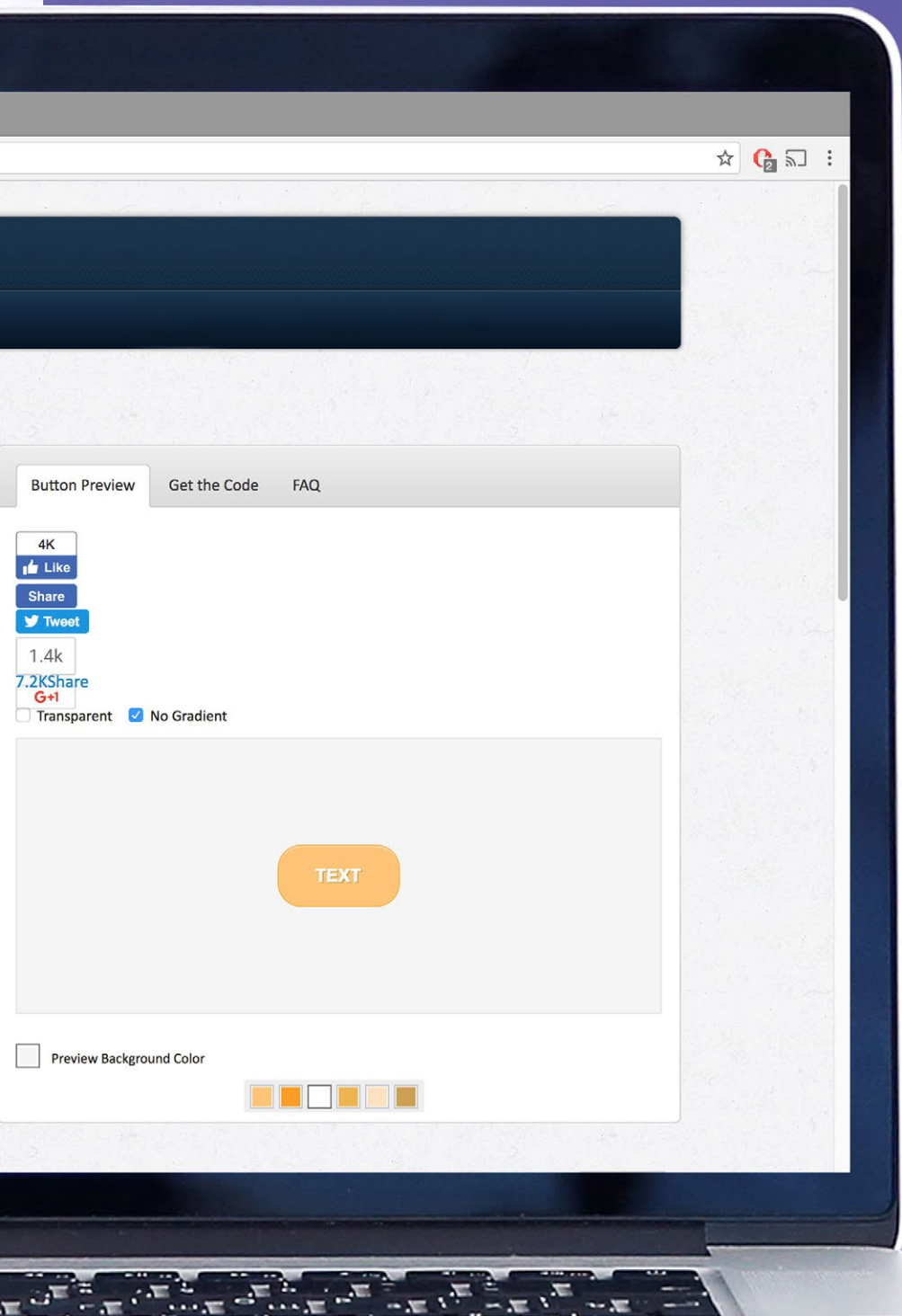Remove email from normal campaigns

Reactivation Series 1

Reactivation Series 2

Reactivation Series 3

No Re-Engagement Strategy

Key takeaways

Use reactivation campaigns to identify those who still want to hear from you and those who don't.

....

**Build out a series of reactivation emails,** not just a single email.

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Using Image-Based CTA Buttons

Using Image-Based CTA Buttons

For an email to be counted as opened, images need to be downloaded. However, unless the recipient directs the email client to download images automatically, the person will not be able to view the images upon opening your email.

In this example, Live Nation did a good job of using alt-text to explain the images, but the recipient still can't see the call-to-action (or CTA) buttons.
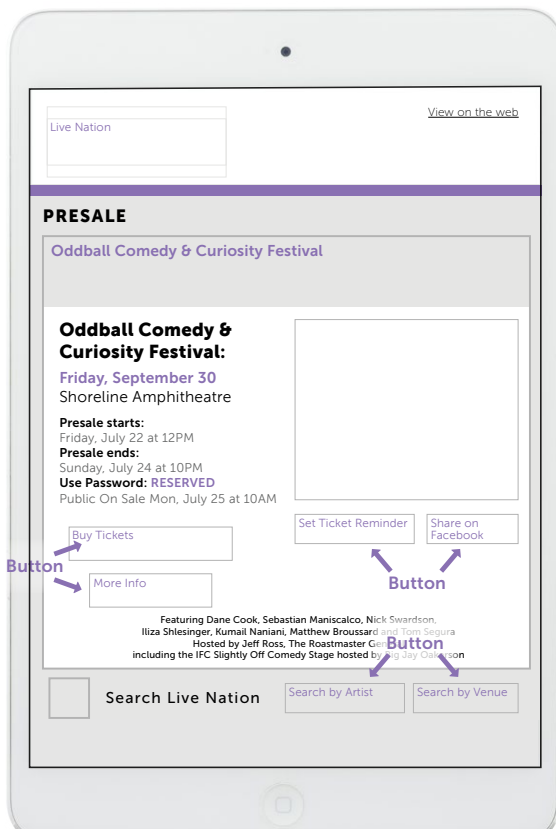
The remedy is an HTML button: a coded CTA button that looks and feels like an image button, but is just HTML and CSS code.

Depending on the end-user's browser or device, your HTML button will show up nearly identical to what the recipient would see in your image button. Marketo tested these two options with a control email featuring a JPEG image CTA against a test email featuring an HTML button. When sent, the coded button looks and feels just like the image button.

Control: Image CTA

Test: HTML Button

Using Image-Based CTA Buttons

However, only the HTML button—the main CTA of the email—renders when the email hits the inbox.

As a result, the user experience improved, which impacted all our metrics positively. With an HTML button, we experienced a **5% higher open rate, 20% higher click-through rate, and 15% higher click-to-open rate.** This test proved that we'd see a positive impact by rolling out an HTML button across all our emails.

Control:

Test:
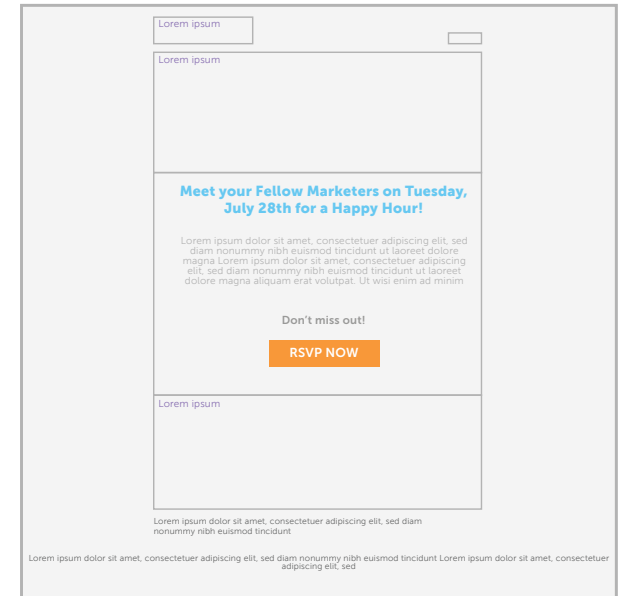
You can take advantage of these free websites to easily build HTML buttons that you can insert into your emails.

- **bestcssbuttongenerator.com**
- **dabuttonfactory.com**
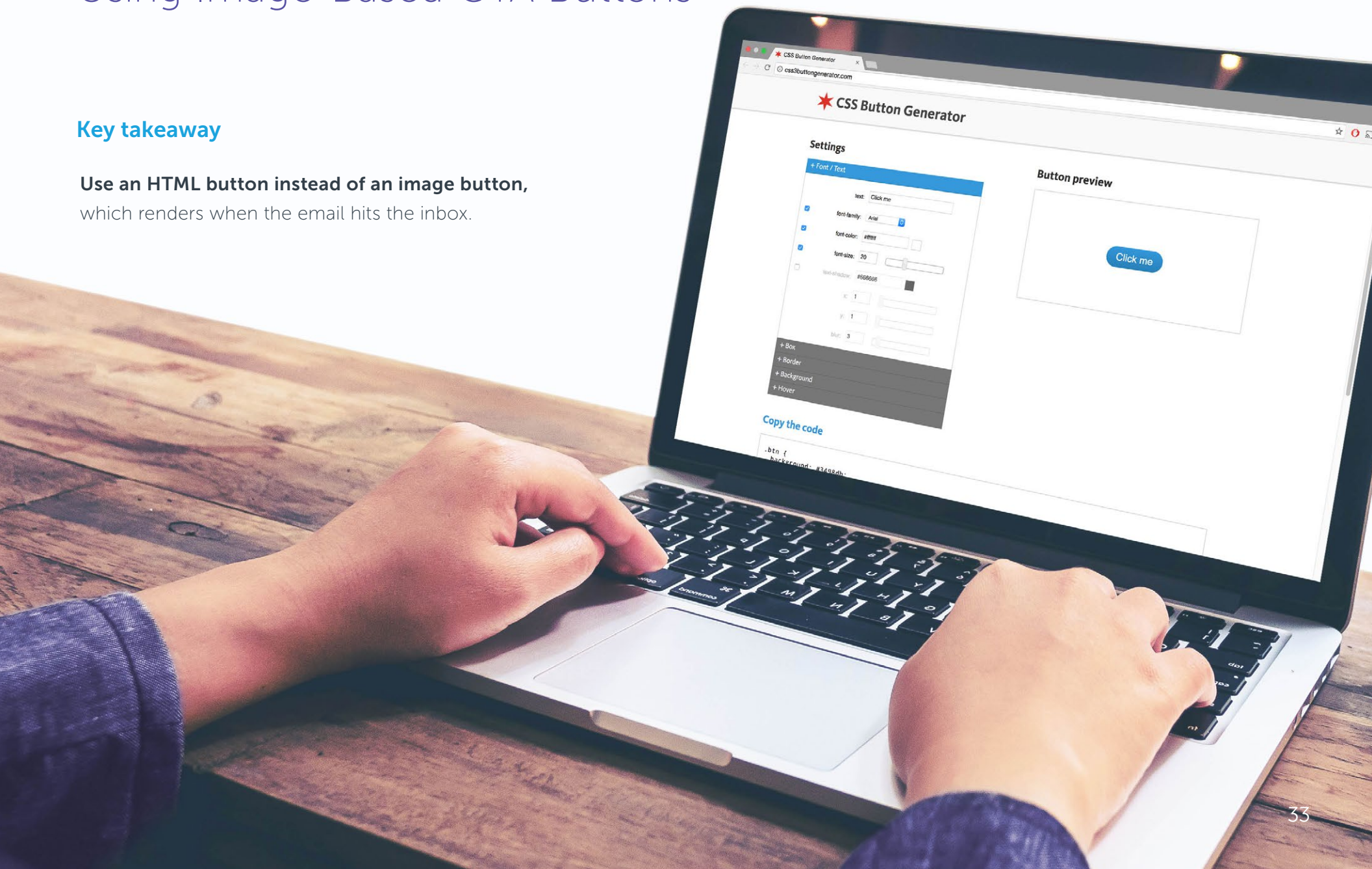- **css3buttongenerator.com**

Click me

Download Now

Save Your Seat

Using Image-Based CTA Buttons

Key takeaway

Use an HTML button instead of an image button,
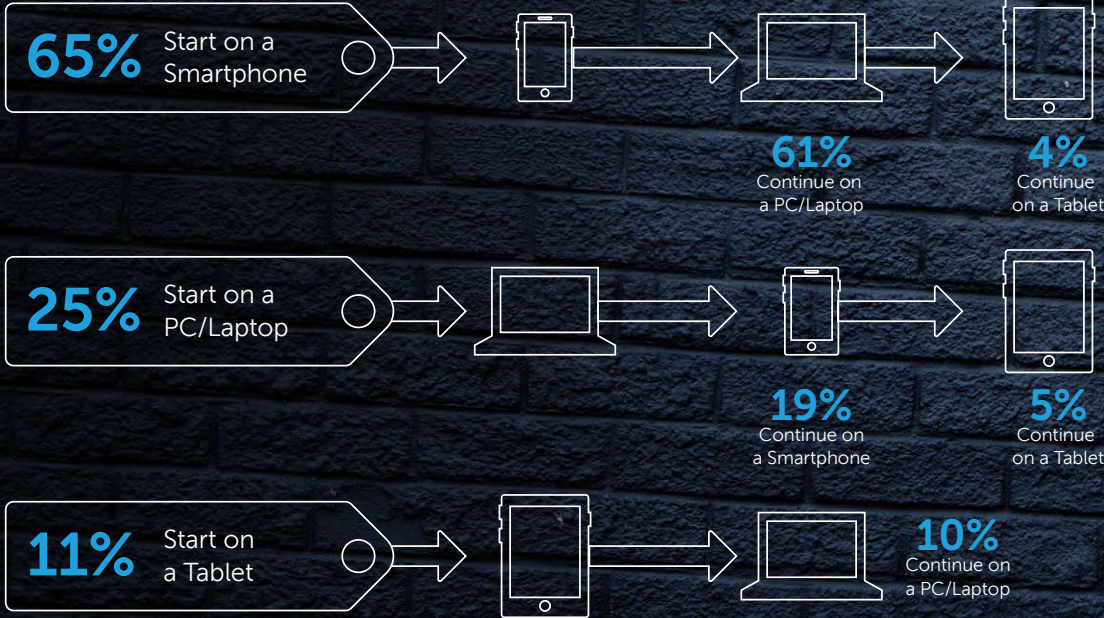which renders when the email hits the inbox.

No Mobile Optimization

No Mobile Optimization

Your buyers take a multi-device path to purchase, so there's no better time for marketers to be mobile.

65% Start on a Smartphone

61% Continue on a PC/Laptop

4% Continue on a Tablet

25% Start on a PC/Laptop

19% Continue on a Smartphone

5% Continue on a Tablet

11% Start on a Tablet

10% Continue on a PC/Laptop

Source:
Google, "The New Multi-screen World: Understanding Cross-platform Consumer Behavior"

One key is ensuring your templates accommodate every screen size as emails transition from desktop to tablet to mobile.

No Mobile Optimization

Components of a successful mobile-responsive email template:

1. **Ensure you have the right breakpoints using media queries,** which is a piece of CSS code that figures out the screen size the email is being viewed on and then displays the correct email. Using email templates optimized for mobile, Marketo improved its results with

27% higher
unique clicks
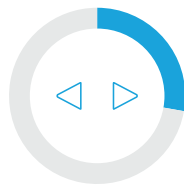
28% higher
click-through rate

31% higher
click-to-open rate.

2. **Use larger text/font size** on mobile devices.

3. **Make sure the CTA is above the fold** when opened, so people don't need to scroll to see it.

Here is the code we use at Marketo:

Desktop (default)

Tablet = @media-only screen and (max-width: 640 px)

Mobile = @media-only screen and (max-width: 479 px)

The tablet and mobile code ensure that when an email is displayed on a screen with a max width of 640 or 479 pixels, the email displays accordingly.

No Mobile Optimization

Key takeaways

Mobile responsive is no longer a nice-to-have, but an absolute must-have.

....

Think beyond the copy and images.
The template is a vehicle to deliver
the email results you hope to achieve.

MISTAKE 8

Bad Testing Decisions

Bad Testing Decisions

While the goal with email testing is to identify improvements that you can use across all your campaigns, you'll only benefit from testing when your tests lead to statistically significant results. With that in mind, avoid these common mistakes:

Sending at random times

Normalize your send times when A/B testing. Even a difference of 30 minutes can dramatically impact the results. Instead, send all emails together and at the optimal time for your subscribers.

Using a small sample size

If your sample size is too small, you might call an email a winner when it isn't. Our rule of thumb: gather at least 1,000 observations for every test. For example, let's say you're running a single-variable CTA test and care most about impact on the click-to-open rate. Your subject line should stay the same–the only variable is the email itself.

In this case, you'd want to see at least 1,000 open emails for each email to approach a statistically significant result. To enable that, choose a sample size based on being able to predict at least 1,000 opens per email from average open rates for the selected audience. Then, be sure to run tests 2-3 times to confirm the results. Also, aggregate the data and normalize your send times and days to validate that you can expect the same results when you roll out the approach across all your emails.

Using too many variables

It can be enticing to test more than one variable at a time, since you might think it could lead to big improvements much more quickly. The problem is that you won't know the individual declines or improvements associated with each variable.
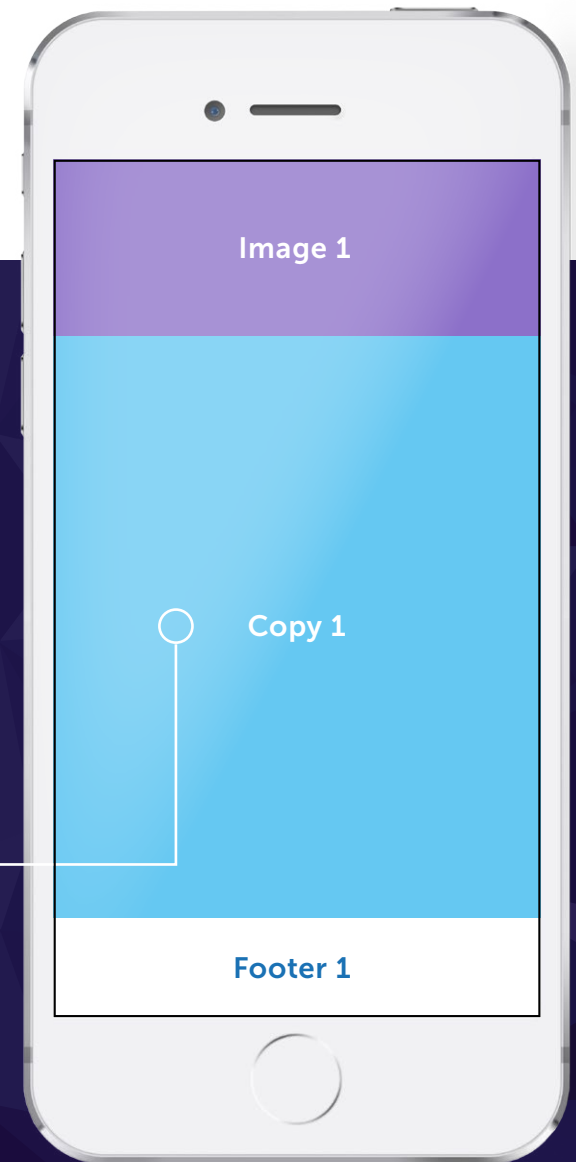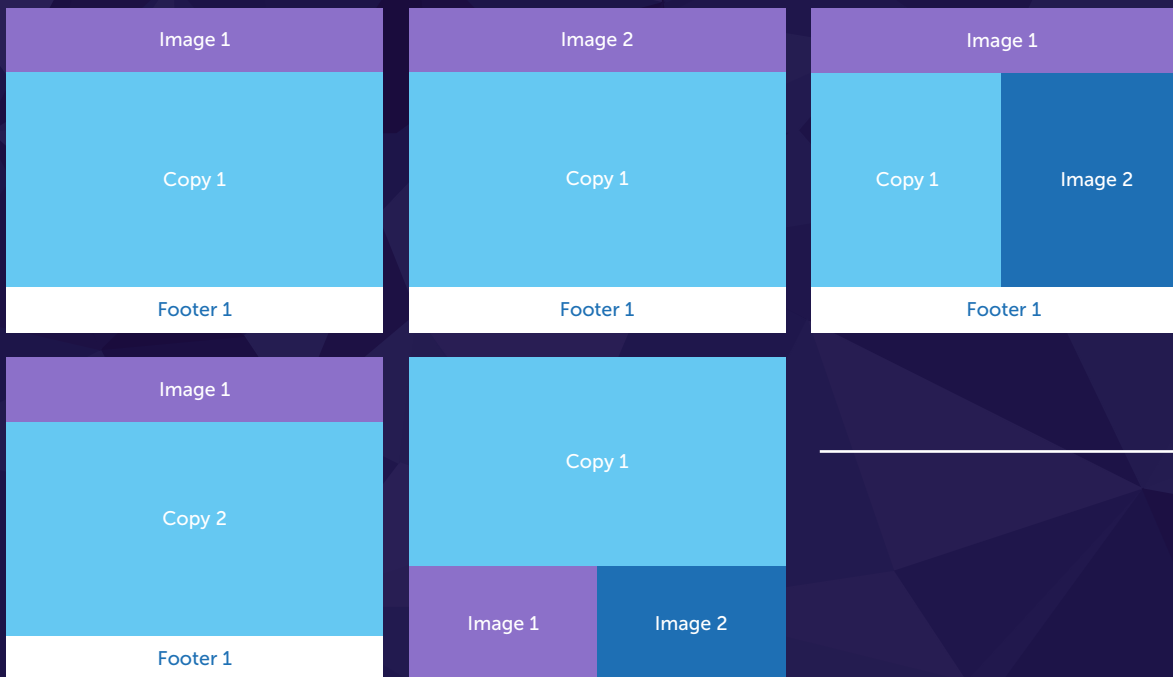
Bad Testing Decisions

Say you test three variables simultaneously–such as the copy, image, and CTA–against a control email. Even if you follow all the best practices and the test outperforms the control, you can't confidently say which changes most triggered the improvement– or that you'll see the same results across all campaigns—unless you isolate each variable.

Examples of different layouts to test your variables:

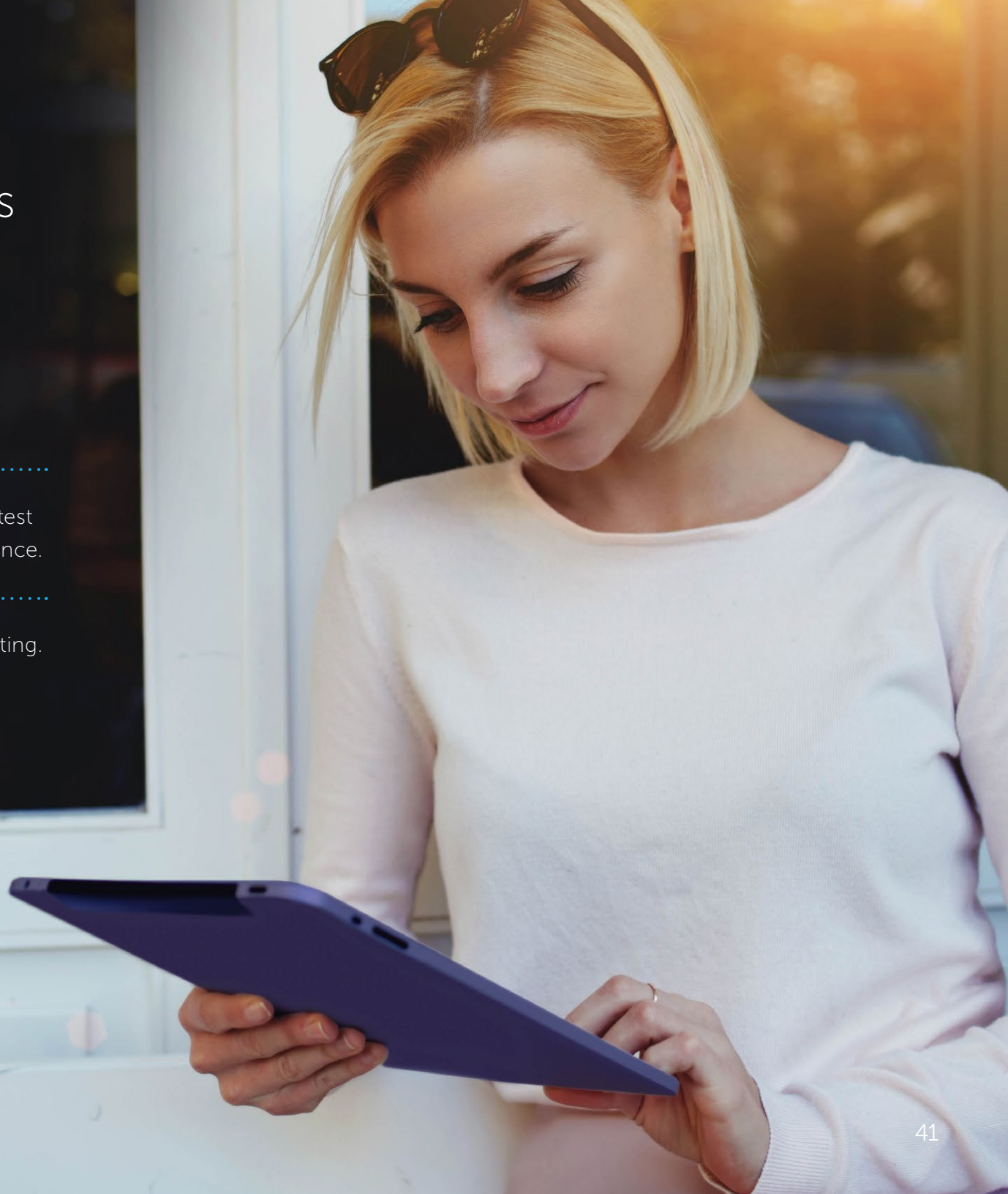**Remember to isolate each variable for a strong conclusion.**

Bad Testing Decisions

Key takeaways

Normalize test send times.

. . . .

Work with a large enough sample size and test more than once to ensure statistical significance.

. . . . .

Isolate tests to a single variable for clean testing.

Even the most seasoned email marketers have made mistakes. But the biggest mistake of all is not knowing what the biggest mistakes are so that you can avoid or fix them.

By following the tips outlined in this guide, you'll be well equipped to avoid major email marketing disasters that could hurt your success, sender reputation, and credibility.
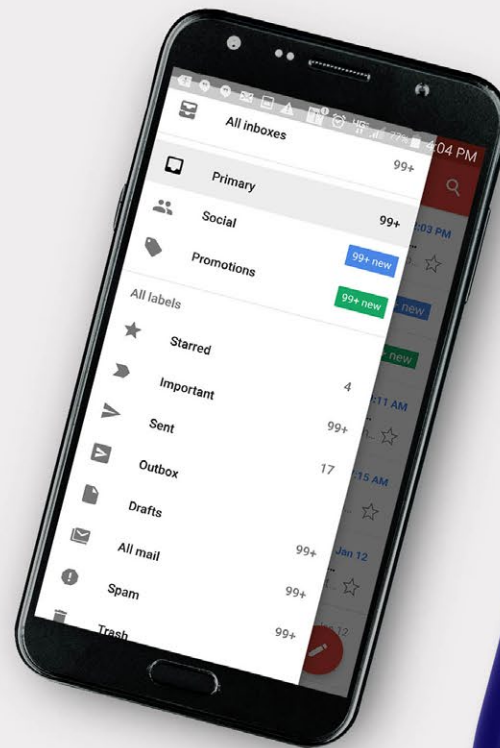
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