

LEXICON ESSAY: EMAIL MARKETING

Communication | System | Choice  
Quality | Technology | Sustainability

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Many of us spend a considerable amount of time each day attending to email. We may have one account or many accounts, for personal and business use, that link us directly to many invisible facets of the now seemingly “weightless” world that we have constructed, per the post-materialist description of contemporary society provided via the perspective of Mark Deuze (Deuze, 2009). The invention of the internet in the early nineties has propelled an expansive wave of digital innovation capitalizing on this invisible space from which we connect to the world, our personal and professional networks, conduct research, conceptualize our own ideas, seek out and consume information. Email, a direct and almost immediate product of that development, now provides a primary means of communicating and sharing information that far exceeds previous methods in innumerable ways. Because of its now omnipresent existence within our lives and its direct connection to the invisible digital environment that we inhabit, email marketing has become an integral aspect of any organization’s strategic marketing foundation. This paper will be analyzing the history and strategies of email marketing, illustrated with examples from one specific case study, and illuminated by six terms: communication, system, choice, quality, technology and sustainability.

Unlike person-to-person messages, email marketing typically entails sending one message to many people. As one of the most utilized methods of communication, it cannot be overlooked, and should be considered as a possible component for any marketing plan within the arts and culture field. According to some, email trumps other marketing methods for conversion, with the ability to produce and demonstrate tangible results in ticket sales, traffic and information consumption (Feldman, 2014). The Chicago Institute for the Performing Arts developed a report in 2003 highlighting best practices and the success of the email marketing program that they implemented to bring in outside audiences. The email program, which they

titled eCAPA, was the organization's first permission-based email marketing initiative. It helped them communicate with more expansive audiences, move further away from direct mail toward an email-based solution and consistently increase ticket sales (Hirsch, 2003). Email is one of the most cost-effective strategies relative to results, and it is fast, customizable, and easy to track, all valuable benefits to art organizations who are often struggling with small budgets, limited staff and resources. Email has become one of the hubs of our convergence culture, a sieve through which much of our communication is filtered.

Communication is fluid and constantly changing, and we are experiencing this fluidity more than ever before with constant developments in technology that are changing how we create networks, participate, create and share content. A simple exchange of knowledge or understanding, communication serves as the basis for how we interact with each other and our environment. There is also a strong element of choice embedded in communication as to what medium is chosen to convey an intended message. Until as recently as the early 1990s, the primary means of communication was through postal service or telephone. For marketing purposes, this was slow, costly and very difficult to track (Gao, 2015). With the invention of the internet in 1991, a whole new universe of immediate global communication was born, and soon after, email began to serve as a primary method of information transmission.

The new technology grew rapidly and while its availability was at first limited to students and corporate employees, Hotmail, the first web-based email system was launched in 1996, and it allowed for email to become available to the general public (Gao, 2015). Suddenly, email had shifted from an academic or professional tool to a platform for personal communication, generated and transmitted by organized systems built to manage the creation of text-based and graphic emails as well as their transmittal. Systems are essential to the email process, as they are

utilized to organize data (contacts and metrics in this case), simplify email creation and control email maintenance by managing addresses and reporting abuse. In a more physical sense, we utilize computer systems on a daily basis to manage email platforms. Furthermore, the process of email is part of a larger controlled communication system in which messages are transferred between devices in an organized manner.

Not long after email exploded, the marketing world caught on to the new opportunity, likely realizing that it would inevitably become the future of communication. With its ability for customization, segmentation, frequency, relevancy and tracking capabilities, email quickly became a medium for businesses to reach a much larger quantity of potential consumers. With little regulation, this privilege was quickly abused, and inboxes became cluttered with mass amounts of mail that had very little relevancy to consumers and no permission. A civil war commenced between the recipient and the sender, and in response, certain regulatory measures were enacted to protect email user privacy and preference. Email users were given the choice to block senders whose email they did not want to receive or could tag those emails as spam, which gave power to the user rather than the sender. Like many others, after the number of internet user had reached unprecedented levels in 2000, the Chicago Institute for the Performing Arts developed their eCAPA program in order to take advantage of the migration to email. They were also driven by the philanthropic community that was interested in seeing art organizations utilize new technologies (Hirsch, 2003).

User choice has become an important factor in email marketing because senders who are not wary of mass-mailing unsolicited emails could find themselves blacklisted. Choice refers to the ability one has to make a decision between various options. In terms of email, consumer choice is vital to consider when planning a marketing strategy as the email must be designed for

the highest likelihood that the recipient will choose to open it, click and engage with the content. Even the best designed digital communication is at the will of consumer choice, which may or may not be influenced by uncontrollable outside factors.

In 2004, AOL began to provide feedback to email providers allowing senders access to responsive data and better understanding of recipient response (Gao, 2015). Email marketing strategies finally began to center around user preferences rather than organizational marketing needs and assumptions, and those doing the marketing had to adjust in order to be more strategic. This is when the tables turned in favor of quality over quantity.

Quality email marketing can be described in terms of relevancy, high value content aligned with recipient preferences and interests, and responsive design that effectively highlights the contents of the email. Quality also can refer to physical or visual aesthetics that are appealing or well representative of an idea or aesthetic. For email marketing, it is essential that not only the content of the email be relevant and high quality, but that the images and design elements be clear, comprehensible, and formatted in an overall composition that responds well to a multitude of viewing devices. With the move from text based emails to graphic email marketing often hosted by an company, emails can be designed to look much more professional. Content is key. Emails should not be treated as ads but rather as unique individual communication with engaging content that someone would actually like to read. Not only that but it should be portrayed in a language free from cliché sales and marketing slogans. Author and Museum Director, Nina Simon, provides an analysis of “quality” in a blog post that emphasizes its relativity and fluidity, for it is dependent on the goals by which its subject is being defined (Simon, 14). The elements that are deemed as quality vary for different audiences. This is why it is vital for email senders to

pay close attention to the values and interests of their recipients, rather than sending blasts of mass emails to unauthorized addresses.

Quality of an email had to become transferable from a desktop or laptop to a mobile device with the onset of smart phone technology and social media. Email marketing was forced to adapt to these technologies early on as the first smart phone was launched in the early nineties, enabling email access through a mobile device. The iPhone was introduced in 2007 and in this same year, Facebook was publicly launched. Together the two created a digital explosion that completely changed how email was utilized, consumed, shared and connected to social media networks online. One author mentioned that since the iPhone has been released, “every year has been ‘the year of the mobile’” (Custer, 2014). More emails are being opened on mobile devices today than on desktops or laptops, and the iPhone alone is a large part of this.

Responsive email is a necessity to improve click-through rates now that mobile use is so predominant, and there are several things to be considered. It is important to understand how an email translates to a small screen, how much time it takes to load, and the layouts appropriate to screen size. Also, presenting touch-friendly links in small type typical for a desktop may be very difficult to access using a smart phone. The email must be designed with flexibility in mind, in order to be well represented on a variety of devices without excessive scrolling. Landing pages must also be considered as they will also be opened on a mobile device if the recipient clicks through in an email on a phone.

Technology is constantly developing, often in many facets all at once, and one innovation can sometimes open a multitude of doors for another. It changes the way that we navigate every aspect of our lives and it has transformed a culture from consuming information to creating

content that can then be shared in an endless number of ways. Advancements in technology will continue to arise, and organizations will have to adapt their email strategies in order to keep up with consumer and content trends. Email was born alongside the World Wide Web and there is no reason to think that it will not continue evolving along with it.

The state of email marketing today is characterized by a focus on specific needs and wants of the individual user, advanced segmentation, highly targeted communication, dynamic content, emphasis on relevancy and responsive design (Smart Insights, 2013). Its foundation is built on constructing a strong list of email contacts. Others have compared this to a bank account that needs to continually grow and collect interest (Feldman, 2014). There must be an exchange in order for an organization to acquire email assets. In return they must provide valuable content and incentives, typically at no cost. This content might take the form of videos, ebooks, podcasts, free templates, checklists and guides, archives, event announcements, information on performers, surveys, backstage interviews and anything that makes the cultural experience more relevant. Email communication might also invite feedback, encouraging recipients to share their experience and reviews of the organization. CAPA developed a strategic call for action around their email program, offering new email members notices and special offers for upcoming shows. They also clearly outlined the secondary benefits which included: no cost, advance ticket purchasing, email offers, the ability to opt out, and the promise of privacy. They made it a top priority to only send messages with perceived value to members (Hirsch, 2003).

It is important to establish why audiences should care by using captivating content instead of an ad or promotion (Evans, 2015). The newsletter is one of the more popular types of email to send, especially for organizations that are content marketers, but there is debate on its effectiveness. It is best sent regularly with links that circle back to the organization's website,

and a flexible format to serve various objectives (Feldman, 2014). Other types of email include the digest, a collection of recently published material, offers, auto-responders and transaction emails which are usually related to the fulfillment of a request such as sales or email sign up.

Strong content might utilize the “informational gap theory” in which viewers find something that interests them but are not given all of the information right way, compelling them to dig deeper to feed their curiosity. Not all content should be in the email, but instead should allow for links back to the website for ticket sales or more information. Opt-in forms should be kept simple with a direct call to action and clearly outlined benefits. It must be clearly conveyed to the viewer what they will be receiving in exchange for their email, and they must be assured that their contact information will be kept safe. This is generally conveyed on the organization’s website landing page, which is typically the most effective way to capture email leads. CAPA tried many different methods of collecting emails for its program but the most effective were lobby intercepts, inclusion on all print and electronic materials, collection at community events, promotional contests with partners to encourage signup, and the most successful was website signup (Hirsch, 2003).

Once the email has been designed and a strong mailing list is constructed, there are still challenges in regards to sending. A subject line may be the deciding factor as to whether the email is opened or ignored. It should communicate the message of the email, but in a way that is clear, simple and relevant. Even though email subject lines are distilled down to the simplest form, they must still be engaging. They are single-handedly responsible for conveying the content of the entire message in the hopes of capturing the attention of the reader in the few seconds that he or she may spend looking at the email before deleting or delving deeper for more information. As discussed previously, the choice of the recipient determines the outcome.



Timing is another common challenge when sending email marketing. Varying sources have different opinions on what days and times are best for optimal email performance, but the reality is that this depends on the organization and the specific audience that they are emailing. There seems to be a general consensus among several sources that early mornings and weekends are best for higher open and click-through rates (Feldman, 2014). It has also been suggested that evenings when the recipient is off work generates better results (Zarrella, 2015). Determining the best timing for email marketing simply comes down to researching audiences and experimenting with days and times. Frequency is similar in that there is not a specific number that works universally. It is also a matter of experimentation, although recommendations are approximately one to four emails per month unless the organization has new relevant content more often. Maintaining consistent communication can establish a rhythm that recipients come to expect and even look forward to if they find value within the emails

Lastly, email is very thoroughly measurable and can often provide valuable data to refine an organization's email marketing efforts and to establish goals, identify problems, and determine solutions. CAPA utilized an internet-based service provider to host its list, and while there was a monthly fee, the marketing, tracking and management benefits far outweighed the minimal cost. It even allowed their members to select which type of shows they wanted to receive information about. Metrics provide bounce rates, delivery rates, list growth, click-through rates (CTR), Conversion rates (the step beyond click through), open rates and unsubscribes. A small number of unsubscribes is not alarming to a point but a high number can identify a potential problem. Bounces need to be identified and deleted from lists if they are hard bounces, meaning that they are not valid (Feldman, 2014). A list with too many bounces or that is not used often enough to ensure accurate emails may become stale.

There are many elements that must come into play in order for email marketing to be sustainable for an organization. As outlined above, it is vital that marketers pay attention to current trends in technology and consumer habits in order to determine how email is being utilized or how it can be improved. Contact databases require continual management and emails must be consistently well designed and responsive to a wide array of mobile devices. Sustainable communications must be high quality, relevant and valuable, providing a captivating story rather than a one-dimensional ad.

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