

Email Marketing Best *Expected* Practices

**Lyris Technologies
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About the title: “Best” vs. “Expected” Practices

We’ve used the term “best practices” for this paper because it’s a common, well-understood one. But the reality of today’s environment is that the standards and advice presented here will no longer be considered “best” for long—they’ll be the **minimum expected** practices in the marketing environment just around the corner.

Take note, therefore: you may be able to avoid or postpone some of these best practices, but not forever. Start following them now, and you’ll have the experience and bandwidth to invest in whatever new “best” practices are coming our way.

Introduction

By now, it’s clear that the days of simple, open email exchange are a thing of the past. Since a programmer named Ray Tomlinson sent the very first email in 1971, it’s become an increasingly complex medium, both through its widespread popularity and the variation that tends to go along with that kind of growth.

These days, email publishers and recipients alike are trying to strike a delicate balance. Publishers want their messages to be delivered reliably and to be read, while recipients want their email to arrive in manageable quantities and to be free from fluff, filler, and hype.

This guide is a concise collection of the practices that promote that kind of balance. Many of the principles have withstood the industry’s own test of time, proving over and over again that they work in favor of both the people who create email messages and the people who receive them.

In addition to creating harmony between publisher and recipient, best practices help publishers accomplish their most important goals: keeping lists populated by active members, delivering mail without being inappropriately blocked by filters, and creating email content that’s opened and acted upon. Because they promote habits that meet or exceed most legal requirements, email marketing best practices also help publishers stay on the right side of ISPs and the law.

This guide also includes some information on worthwhile industry trends such as the shift toward smaller, more strategic campaigns. Like the best practices themselves, this information appears in this guide in the interest of making the sending and receiving of email as easy and rewarding as possible—for all.

Section One: Email Marketing Terminology

Put two email marketers or vendors in a room, and listen to them talk about their work. They'll likely find common ground on many ideas and issues, but they'll also have a few questions here and there about terminology. In our experience, every organization uses slightly different words to describe the fundamental components of an email marketing program. This short section clarifies what we mean in the Best Practices that follow.

Email, Mail, Messages, Mailings, and Campaigns

We use the first four terms above somewhat interchangeably, to refer to electronic mail sent over the Internet. "Campaigns" has a broader sense, connoting that the mail was sent with a particular strategy behind it and, we'd expect, serious analysis afterwards.

Databases and Lists

These terms refer to methods of storing email marketing information. A database is an organized collection of information, such as names, email addresses, and other demographic data. In its most basic form, a list is simply a collection of email addresses. In our consulting business, we might say "database" when speaking with IT administrators and "list" when working with marketers—but that habit depends on the organization we're helping and its particular context. In the Best Practices below, we use "list" most frequently, and "database" when describing mailings based on demographics.

Marketers, Publishers, Businesses, and Organizations

These are the professionals and entities that send email for commercial, promotional, or other extra-personal reasons. "Marketers" connotes direct selling, based on strategic planning and results tracking; "Publishers" certainly might send email in this way as well, but the word has a broader, less explicitly commercial sense. To generalize: Marketers send sales offers, and Publishers send newsletters. They often work for "Organizations" (catch-all umbrella) and, in some cases, "Businesses."

List Members, Subscribers, Recipients, Customers, and Prospects

We use all of these words to refer to people who receive commercial email. Some of the connotations are obvious—"Customers" have likely made a purchase from a business—while others are open for nuanced interpretation. But the common denominator is that the publisher has obtained, in one way or another, their email addresses. In a simple scenario, a publisher's list could be comprised of subscribers (list members) who have opted-in via a Web site form. Alternatively, a business's database could include some combination of customers (who've purchased), subscribers (who've opted-in), and prospects (addresses rented from another list owner).

Email Service Provider, Email Marketing Software, and Email List Hosting

"Email Service Provider" is a common term for companies like Lyris Technologies, which offer "Email Marketing Software" and/or "Email List Hosting." Software is a computer application that you run on your organization's hardware, while Hosting is a service that runs the Software for you (such that you typically just need to log-in to a Web interface in order to conduct your email marketing activities).

Spam, Unsolicited Commercial Email, and Junk Mail

All of these terms refer to email the recipient doesn't want—period. Some publishers rationalize that if they use an opt-in process, if they have an existing relationship with customers, or if they don't break the law, their email is not spam. This couldn't be further from the truth; as we'll discuss in the Best Practices, the practical definition of spam has grown to include *any* mail that's unwanted.

Section Two: The Master Practice

A large-scale study of online marketing activity recently made the surprising announcement that *Monday* is the best day of the week to send commercial email. So pervasive was the belief that *Tuesdays* and *Wednesdays* were optimal that Monday marketers were secretly enjoying a total lack of competition.

But rather than interpret studies like this as the absolute truth, the most successful online marketers have learned that any given campaign does best when it's designed specifically around their organizations' own internal goals, as well as the needs and interests of their list members. An approach that works well for one publisher may be a dismal failure for another, and third-party surveys end up being far less useful than each publisher's in-depth knowledge of her own clientele—their explicitly stated interests, observed tendencies, and implied preferences.

For example, a national movie theater chain may get a great response from Friday morning promotions because that's when their customers make weekend plans. Alternatively, an entrepreneur's newsletter featuring seasonal recipes might fare best on Wednesdays because an embedded survey indicated that his list members prefer to do their grocery shopping on that day.

And days of the week are just the start. A Caribbean tourist board might enjoy a surge in response rates by customizing its content to each recipient's region, while a political fundraising group may get greater contributions if it asks list members to indicate their preferred frequency of contact (and then follows through with those preferences!).

In each of the examples above, the organizations highlighted have different contexts and goals, but their campaigns are successful for the same primary reason: respect for the recipient's preferences and tendencies, and an enduring respect for each individual list member.

We call such an approach the "Master Practice" because it works best when it informs and permeates every other practice that the email publisher employs. What's so worthwhile about respecting list members is that it tends to work in favor of both the recipient *and* the publisher alike. A well-timed, well-crafted email is much more likely to accomplish the publisher's goals while simultaneously holding more appeal for the reader as well. On the other hand, a steady stream of opportunistic, impersonal, or out-of-context messages will not only fail to capture the recipient's interest—it may actually harm the organization's reputation and alienate its readership.

It's worth remembering that when it first came into use, the word "spam" meant simply *unsolicited* commercial email—email for which the recipient never asked. Lately the meaning has expanded to include, at times, *unwanted* commercial email, even that which the recipient did ask to receive at one point. Effective campaigns, therefore, now depend entirely on the publisher's ability to deliver messages that are both within the realm of expectation, and of distinct interest and value to the reader.

Section Three: Eight Fundamental Email Best Practices

This section covers the essential email marketing best practices that, collectively, will increase your list size, improve your response rates, and help you stay on the right side of Internet Service Providers and the law.

We've organized these eight best practices in a logical order—from initial list creation to results analysis—and suggest that novice email marketers read them straight through. If you're seasoned, of course, just select the topics that are most appealing.

1. Mail with permission
2. Set and meet expectations
3. Test your HTML formatting
4. Optimize for delivery
5. Optimize for the inbox
6. Cultivate industry relations
7. Comply with the law
8. Analyze results and close the loop

Best Practice 1: Mail with permission

Best Practices start with the manner in which you create and build your email list. The most effective approach is to use an "opt-in" or "permission based" subscription process, such that individual people give you their explicit permission to contact them via email.

Use a "double opt-in" subscription process.

The highest, most ethical subscription standard is called *double opt-in*, and it requires prospective subscribers to actively confirm their memberships before receiving your next mailing. In this process, prospective subscribers submit their email addresses, and then receive confirmation requests to which they must reply in order to join your list.

Requiring prospective members to confirm their memberships protects them from receiving mail they didn't sign up for—say, because someone made a typo when entering the email address, or because someone thought it was funny to add a "friend" to your list.

Best of all, those who confirm their subscription are most likely to remember it when they receive your email, making it less likely that they'll report the message as spam.

When you make your list double-opt in, tell your prospective members to expect the confirmation email and the address from which it will come. Explain why you do it this way, and why this practice protects them. You might also suggest at this point that the recipient "white list" you by putting your "From" address in their address book to assure your mail is always received in their main mailbox.

Also be sure that the marketing software or service that handles your email subscriptions delivers the confirmation request to prospective members very quickly and reliably, so that their desire and intention to join your list is still top-of-mind. Recipients who receive confirmation requests within a minute or two of subscribing will be far more likely to complete the confirmation process.

The double opt-in subscription process offers many benefits:

Pros

- Builds an audience that truly wants to hear from you. These people have joined *your* list because they believe *you're* going to send them something of value.
- Increases mailing delivery rates because double opt-in lists are inherently comprised of valid, deliverable addresses (at least until some addresses are canceled in the normal course of Internet life).
- Keeps your list clean. Clean lists are delivered faster, because the list server doesn't spend time retrying bad addresses. And if you use an Email Service Provider that charges based on your membership, clean lists mean lower hosting bills because you aren't sending messages to recipients who don't exist.
- Helps maintain good ISP relations. By maintaining a list comprised of legitimate addresses, most of your mail will be delivered successfully. If you send large quantities of mail to invalid addresses, ISPs or other email providers may blacklist you and block *all* of your mail.
- Increases response rates. Double-opt in not only confirms a recipient's email address, but that recipient's interest in what you have to offer.

Cons

- Some prospective list members will not confirm their subscriptions. (You don't want these people anyway; if they can't be bothered to complete their subscription, how likely is it that they'll *buy* something from you?)
- Requires more patience to build a large list. If you have 10 thousand addresses and want to grow to 1 million, the double opt-in process will take some time. It can be very tempting to take a shortcut and rent or purchase a list of addresses, but those are not Best Practices.

Alternatively, use a "single" or "confirmed opt-in" subscription process.

Some email marketers and publishers choose a simpler subscription process. The *single opt-in* method consists of one basic step: a subscriber provides his email address to you through a Web form, email, or some other channel, and then receives your next mailing with no further administrative steps. If you add another step—sending the subscriber a one-time confirmation message (e.g., "Thank you for joining...")—then you're using a *confirmed opt-in* approach.

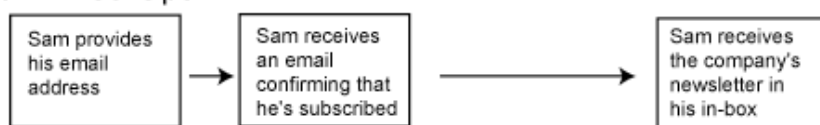
While these two approaches have good intentions, they still allow non-permission-based subscriptions to occur. With either good, humorous, or malicious intentions, a user may sign up her "friend" to your list; that person may then react negatively towards your organization if they don't expect (or object to) your mailing.

There are circumstances where single-opt in makes sense, such as for a trade organization that requires a login to access the subscription form. In this case, the opportunity for mistakes or abuse would be remote.

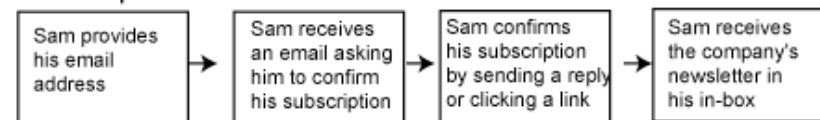
Single Opt-In



Confirmed Opt-In



Double Opt-In



Include valid, easy-to-use unsubscribe instructions in every message.

Permission to send mail is not permanent. Over time, some number of people in your database will no longer want to hear from you, for any number of reasons. Enabling these members to remove themselves from your list easily and promptly will maintain the trust you previously established, and perhaps leave such a positive feeling that some of them re-subscribe at a later date. By including a one- or two-click unsubscribe function in the footer of each message, you'll show the public that you're an ethical marketer, differentiate yourself from truly unsolicited email, and comply with the law (see Best Practice #7).

Don't use an "opt-out" subscription process.

Some Web sites include "opt-out" checkboxes or radio buttons on their e-commerce pages, such that shoppers are automatically subscribed to a mailing list upon checkout—unless they notice that part of the form, and select the alternative.

This subscription approach may lead to a larger initial number of addresses if you have an active shopping site, but may lead to complaints down the line. If your recipients don't *remember* asking to receive your email, they may consider the appearance of your messages in their inboxes as an intrusion, and a breach of the trust they placed in you when they placed an order on your website.

Sometimes salespeople are tempted to dump their entire list of contacts and prospects into their mailing list, reasoning that anyone on the list must still be interested in their services, and can always opt out when they receive the messages. Just because someone has contacted you in the past does not mean they wish to continue that contact in the future!

Don't rent or buy address lists.

It may be tempting to reach out to an interested audience by renting or purchasing a list of addresses. Don't do it.

Is someone who checked off a box saying he's interested in receiving messages about financial services going to connect that action with receiving an email about your offerings? Probably not. And who will be seen as the spammer—the site from which you purchased this "opt-in" address, or *you*? Sending to a rented or purchased list may promise additional leads or sales, but will certainly generate anger and ill will from recipients who see your message as no different from all of the other junk in their inbox.

That said, if you're intent on trying this approach, we strongly recommend that you audit the address vendor carefully (get references) and consider using a prefix or introductory clause that explains *how* you obtained the rental addresses and *why* you are mailing them.

An alternative to renting or purchasing addresses is to advertise on a Web site or in another email newsletter; if you include a clear call to action—such as, "Join our list for special savings"—you may end up with a small net increase in names, but you'll be far more assured that those people actually *want* to hear from you.

Best Practice 2: Set and meet expectations

One of the easiest mistakes list owners make is to send content their list members don't expect to receive. This happens most often when subscriber expectations aren't well managed from the start; if the sign-up form doesn't describe what they'll receive—or offers a vague promise of “news and special offers”—each subscriber will make his own assumption of what the email announcements will (or won't) include. By not setting expectations well, or by not meeting those that *are* set, marketers inadvertently cause people to delete their messages, unsubscribe from their list, or tag their mail as spam. Following this Best Practice is easy enough to start, but it requires good discipline to follow through.

Describe the topic, format, and frequency of the mailings you will send.

When creating an email sign-up form, publishers have a perfect opportunity to define their email newsletter or promotion to prospective subscribers. We recommend including brief text that describes the topics covered or type of content sent, the email formats offered, and the mailing frequency.

For example, a publisher could indicate that subscribers will receive “a monthly, plain-text newsletter that discusses Issues A, B, and C.” Likewise, a marketer could say that customers will receive “a weekly HTML alert of special, time-limited offers.” To further illustrate their cases, they could both link to previous mailings or samples of the type of content they distribute.

Reassure prospects about their privacy.

As mentioned in Best Practice #1, the sign-up form is a critical place to reassure subscribers that you respect their privacy and the trust they show you by providing their email address.

If you're using a double opt-in process, indicate on the sign-up form that new members should expect to receive a confirmation request; give them the email address it will come from, and suggest that they “white list” that address or domain.

Next, make your organization's policy about email addresses readily available to prospective list members. Either as stand-alone text or within your larger privacy policy, be crystal clear about how you treat the email addresses and demographic information that list members provide you. Whether you use it internally only, share it with selected affiliates, or offer it to list brokers, let people know what they can expect.

We also recommend that you explain to prospective list members that they may unsubscribe easily from your list—or be removed from your database, or otherwise stop receiving communications from you—at any time. The current CAN-SPAM legislation requires such unsubscribe instructions to be included within *messages* (see Best Practice #7), but you build additional good will and trust by explaining them upfront, before people actually submit their personal information to you.

Deliver what you say you will—not much more, and not much less.

If you tell list members that you're going to send them a monthly text email with non-commercial content, don't send them weekly HTML messages with sales offers. Follow through with what you promised. And if you ask for personal information or preferences—for example, text or HTML email format—make sure you actually *use it* (in this example, send each group their requested format). If list members get something markedly different from what they expected, they'll likely be surprised, frustrated, or disappointed, and you'll miss

your chance to build trust. In fact, you might even move the opposite direction and *harm* your organization's reputation.

Also note that *exceeding* expectations isn't the only pitfall. If you've promised anything on a regular basis—certain content, delivery frequency, etc.—and then deliver *less* than that, you may also jeopardize your customer relationships. Anticipation of and interest in your next mailing may drop, or recipients may altogether forget that they'd heard from you previously. If you intend to send a monthly mailing, and then take a six-month break, be prepared for a surprised audience.

Watch out for negative feedback if you bend—or break—your habits.

On occasion, you may find it necessary (or at least very tempting) to send content that doesn't fit your typical practice or subscribers' expectations. In these cases, proceed carefully and watch out for negative reactions; direct complaints will be obvious, but a higher than usual unsubscribe rate or lower than normal click-through rate may be signs that list members did not like your "special" message.

In order to minimize fallout, we recommend that you preface your email with a clear indication of why you're sending the anomalous message; don't apologize for it, just present your rationale succinctly. A simple "We're sending all regular subscribers this one-time, special announcement about..." can preempt negative reactions—as long as you really mean "one time." If you expect to send similar messages to your entire database in the future, the best practice is to let recipients know of your intended permanent change in advance.

Ask for topic and frequency preferences—and use them!

If you have a wide range of topics to discuss or offers to promote, or a very aggressive mailing schedule, consider offering subscribers a choice of what they want to receive and how often. You can then use the segmentation function of your email marketing tool to send specific content to the subscribers who've requested it. This approach helps prevent list burnout, and shows your list members that you recognize their personal interests.

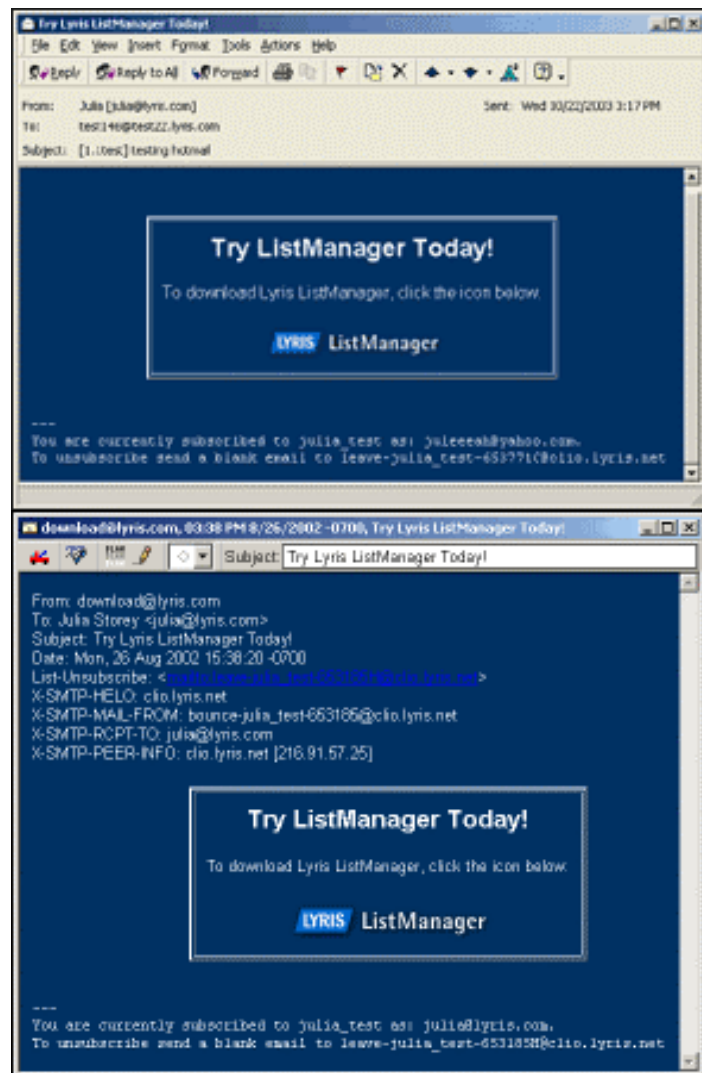
Best Practice 3: Test your HTML formatting

When you are preparing to send an email message using text and HTML versions, Lyris highly recommends that you test your messages on *multiple email clients* before you send. This is because many people use many different email applications, similar to how many people use different browsers. (Just like there are multiple versions of Internet Explorer, Netscape, and Opera, etc., there are different kinds of applications people use to send and read email — for example, Eudora, Outlook, Hotmail, etc.) Several email client applications are available to download for free, which makes them especially useful for testing purposes.

The screenshots below are samples of the *same* email message sent to accounts using five different email clients. These samples illustrate the variances between different clients, and highlight the need to test your messages before you send them to your “live” list.

Sample tests that match the original

The test message looks correct in both Outlook and Eudora...



Sample tests that do NOT match the original

Notice that this email client, Goldmine Sales and Marketing, can read HTML, but does not display the graphic. These days, more email clients are hiding graphics, so make sure your message looks right with or without graphics. In some cases, HTML "alt" tags may be displayed even if the graphic is not, so be sure to include them.

With Yahoo!'s email client, the dark background appears white, and the white text appears black! This is another reason why testing your email messages on multiple email clients is highly recommended!

AOL 9 will pop-up a warning if HTML email messages contain images, prompting the recipient to select "yes" to open the message or "no" to skip the message. After clicking "yes", the HTML version will be displayed *without* images, as shown above. (To view the images the recipient will have to click another link for "show images & enable links".)



Best Practice 4: Optimize for delivery

Email content that *looks* great but doesn't actually *reach* its intended recipients can't be called successful. Best Practice #4 is to optimize your messages for successful delivery, a key issue in today's highly charged anti-spam climate. "Successful delivery" has a couple of different meanings; in this section, we describe critical first-tier efforts you can make to optimize your messages' chances of reaching your list members *at all*. In Best Practice #5, we cover second-tier actions you can take to help your messages get to recipients' *inboxes*.

Use a professional, dedicated list management software or service.

This will sound obvious to most readers, but we'll state it anyway: the first step towards successful commercial email delivery is to use a professional, dedicated software application or hosting service. The days of using a desktop email client and sending a "BCC" message (or worse, a "CC" message) are over; even if you only have a couple hundred people on your list, don't do it! Sign up for a monthly service that offers proper list management, and you'll save administrative time, minimize the risks of alienating both list members and ISPs, and position yourself well for future list growth.

If you use a hosting service, or are in the process of selecting one, confirm that the ASP requires all of its clients to follow industry Best Practices. Ask about the service's blacklist record: when was the last time they were blacklisted, and by whom? Why were they blacklisted in the first place, how long did the block last, and what did they do to resolve it?

If you use a hosting service that's less than selective about the clients it takes on, you may find that your legitimate opt-in email is filtered or blocked due to the failure of *other* clients to follow Best Practices. Remember, though, that every email sender may be blacklisted at any given time, no matter how scrupulous they are. The real issue is how often this occurs and why.

See Best Practice #6 for more about what you should expect from a professional Email Service Provider.

Create good—complete and consistent—headers.

The *headers* of your email messages are critical components for successful delivery. Some of the most important headers are the From, To, and Subject fields, all of which are scrutinized by automated anti-spam filters that protect ISPs and individual mailboxes. The human beings you're trying to reach also scan headers, of course.

First, it's very important to use a clear and consistent From header in each of your mailings. Use your organization's name and a valid email address, and then make sure you stick with that choice in each mailing; this consistency will help you encourage list members to "white list" your address, such that your legitimate, opt-in mail will ideally pass through successfully. If you want recipient replies to go to a different address than your From address, make sure the Reply To field is also valid.

Next, the industry standard is to include recipients' name *and* email address in the To field (e.g., "John Doe" <johndoe@example.com>). You can obtain names via the subscribe form on your Web site, and then use a "merge tag" in your email marketing or list management tool to personalize the To field for every recipient. The syntax of such a tag might look like this: %name% %email%; when you send your mailing, the email management application will merge each list member's name and email address into the To field.

Last, your subject line should be accurate and, ideally, compelling. Accuracy is a key Best Practice; otherwise, you may appear to be intentionally deceptive and misleading. Compelling isn't necessarily a requirement, but it will certainly help increase the number of recipients who open your mail.

Some list owners include a special Subject prefix for each mailing, to increase the ease with which recipients may identify their messages (or, to help aid passage through anti-spam filters). For example, the publisher of a daily foodservice newsletter could add the prefix "[The Daily Dish]" to the subject line, so it can be readily identified in a recipient's inbox. If you distribute adult-oriented material, you may be legally required to include such a prefix to warn recipients of the content within.

Headers are also a key mailing component with which to experiment, for example, to determine which From address or Subject text is most effective at increasing your delivery or open rates; see Best Practice #8 for more about testing.

Write content that doesn't look like spam.

As a legitimate, permission-based publisher or marketer, it's very likely that you have substantive content to share via email. That said, your mail can still *appear* to be spam if you inadvertently use certain words or formatting that's indicative of truly unsolicited email. These days, words such as "free", "mortgage", and "prescription" are so commonly used by spammers that your mail may be undifferentiated if you use them without caution.

The Best Practice here is to create messages that have a good balance of text, graphics, and links, avoiding excessive use of words that are typically associated with spam. You might be able to gauge this on your own, but the true test is to...

Test your messages against spam filters.

Use an online "content checker" that processes your draft message, and then gives you a report of how it did against anti-spam rules. These tools often use a points system, and score your message against a large number of rules. Every time your message triggers a rule, it's assigned additional points; messages that accumulate more than a certain threshold of points are tagged as spam.

Adjust your headers and content to minimize chances of blockage

After you've run your test message through an anti-spam filter, edit your content to reduce definitive red flags. Note that some of your copy may have characteristics representative of spam, but it may not be worthwhile (or possible) to remove all of them. For example, if your business provides marketing consulting services, you may have no choice but to use the word "marketing" and accept the fact that some anti-spam filters may flag your mail because of it. (And if that's the only area of concern in your test messages, you likely have little to worry about!)

Best Practice 5: Optimize for the inbox

Once you've optimized your messages for general delivery—e.g., testing them with a content checking service to see how much they *appear* like spam—you're ready for the next step in fine tuning. These days, many ISPs and mail providers offer their users a folder for mail deemed spam, junk, or otherwise "bulk." Unless your subscribers are diligent readers, they may simply delete mail that's automatically routed to these folders. You, therefore, want to do as much as possible to insure that your legitimate opt-in mail reaches the inbox.

Use test or "seed" addresses at key domains.

First, see what domains are predominantly used by your audience, and get at least one address at the major ones. Most list owners have many members at Yahoo!, Hotmail, AOL, and MSN, but you may find others on your list. Sign up for at least one account at each of these providers, and then send your email campaign to yourself as part of your testing process. Make sure to use the same email marketing solution for this test as you'll use for your actual mailing, in order to keep that important variable constant.

After you've sent the test message, check your various seed addresses to determine if your mailing was delivered to your inbox or to the spam, junk, or bulk folder. If the message was delivered to your inbox, you're likely in great shape to launch your campaign; in contrast, if the message was automatically routed to your spam folder, you should reevaluate and edit the headers and content. (You should also consider speaking with your internal IT department or that of your email hosting service, to see if the problem lies not with *your* message, but rather with the relationship between your hosting service's domain and the receiving ISP. See Best Practice #6 for additional recommendations.)

Consider using a third-party delivery analysis service.

If you send very large and/or frequent marketing campaigns, you may want to consider outsourcing the seed address process to a third-party. This kind of testing can be time consuming, and it's possible that your hosting provider can do it for you.

Best Practice 6: Cultivate industry relations

While it's tempting to see ISPs and other email providers as an obstacle between you and your target audience, they, like you, want to make sure that their subscribers receive legitimate, opt-in email. Any ISP that didn't care about this and rejected too much valid mail would soon find itself losing clients. But unlike you, they also need to protect their subscribers from the current tidal wave of truly unsolicited, unwanted mail. As spammers get craftier, ISPs are forced to enforce stricter rules to filter out mail that looks like spam. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, it's your mail that gets filtered. How, then, do you make sure that your mail isn't such a "false positive" on a regular basis?

Be sure you're missed.

ISPs are in the business of delivering email people want—so make sure *your* email is something your customers want. When your message is interesting and relevant every time, recipients are unlikely to report it as spam to their ISPs. Indeed, if your customers look forward to receiving your email, they're more likely to miss it when it's not there, and to let their ISP know they're unhappy that it's been blocked.

Establish your own relationships.

If you send your email campaigns from your own servers, establishing contacts at major ISPs and email providers can help you resolve delivery problems more quickly—or even preempt them from happening in the first place.

If you have a very large list or send high volumes of opt-in mail on a regular basis, it's worthwhile to establish a point of contact at each major ISP or email provider. Some of these mail receivers maintain "white lists" of known senders who have met certain permission-oriented criteria; mail sent by white listed senders may not be filtered as aggressively as that sent by unknown senders.

Don't think of white listing as free license to send anything you want. No ISP will give you total autonomy; if you rack up enough complaints or bounces, you'll be blocked like everyone else.

Also, use an email marketing solution that provides good delivery and blacklist reporting. It's not enough just to know that you're having a problem; you need access to detailed information about *why* mail isn't getting through, so that you may explain your situation clearly to the ISP or other domain in question. For example, there's a difference between mail that's blocked and mail that isn't getting through due to technical difficulties.

Once you've identified the reason your mail is being blocked, you can contact the ISP to resolve the problem. If you've been following these Best Practices, and if the ISP knows you as a reputable sender, you should be able to get back on track fairly quickly.

Ask your hosting service to represent you.

If you're using a list hosting service (ASP) or Email Service Provider (ESP) to send your email, find out what kind of relationships they have with the major ISPs and email providers. Ask your current or prospective ESP about its relationship with the major mail receivers, and find out what procedures it has in place to identify and resolve delivery problems. ESP's that are "white listed" may help deliver more of your mail, but remember that such a positive relationship with the ISPs does not mean that you can send unsolicited or unwanted mail without negative consequences.

See also Best Practice #4 for more recommendations about hosting services.

Best Practice 7: Comply with the law

If you've sorted through the spam in your inbox and thought, "there ought to be a law," you'll be glad to know that many countries now do have anti-spam legislation. (See <http://www.spamlaws.com> for more information.)

Although the effectiveness of these laws in stopping spam has yet to be demonstrated, they have been effective in scaring many email publishers—scared of breaking the law, scared of lawsuits. But if you're already following the Best Practices above, you'll find it's relatively easy to comply with the law.

Comply in six steps.

The recommendations that follow are for email marketers in the United States, and are based on the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 (<http://www.spamlaws.com/federal/108s877.html>). It requires email publishers and marketers to comply with certain mailing guidelines:

- Don't "harvest" email addresses from the Internet or generate them via a "dictionary" process for commercial mailing purposes.
- Don't send commercial email via a computer that you don't have proper authorization to use.
- Don't falsify or obscure the header information in your commercial email messages; always use a valid From: address and an accurate, non-misleading Subject: line.
- Include a valid postal mailing address and a functioning opt-out mechanism in every commercial email message you send.
- Don't continue to send email to a recipient who has opted-out of your list.
- If you send adult content (i.e., sexually explicit material), use a warning label of that fact in your subject line.

As an ethical publisher or marketer, you're probably already following the provisions of the law; they're simply good practices, and we've discussed many of them in this document. For more detailed information, see our CAN-SPAM FAQ at <http://lyris.com/CAN-SPAM/>.

Please note that Lyris is not a legal expert, and we offer this information with no implied or express warranties; *it is for informational purposes only*. We encourage all of our clients, customers, and other readers to speak with their own legal advisors to understand how email legislation may apply to their businesses in particular.

Don't forget your postal address.

In our experience, the one step that many legitimate commercial senders have failed to adopt is the inclusion of their valid postal mailing address in every message they send. Insert this information into your standard unsubscribe footer and you'll be all set.

The law is important—but it's not everything.

While laws like CAN-SPAM may not be very effective in stopping spam, they have helped email marketers think about their mailing practices; some are considering adopting a Best Practices approach for the very first time. But others have the mistaken impression that obeying the law is synonymous with ethical email marketing, and that's just not the case. You may alienate your customers, get your mail blocked, and tarnish your reputation if *all* you do is obey the law. That's just one part of your Master Practice. If you skipped to this section, don't forget to read and follow the other Best Practices outlined in this paper!

Best Practice 8: Analyze results and close the loop

Many publishers and marketers are so busy they don't make the time to analyze their campaigns to see what's working, and what's not. They go by accepted wisdom for sending (e.g., mail on Tuesday, not on Monday) or use conventionally popular metrics to gauge their success (e.g., open and clickthrough rates). This final Best Practice advocates budgeting enough time and thought to identifying relevant success standards for *your* email publishing or marketing program, and then using those insights to *improve* it.

Identify key goals and associated metrics.

It's hard to know if you've been successful if you haven't identified specific goals for your organization, as well as the relevant metrics for those goals. The first step is to think about *why* your organization is publishing an email newsletter or marketing via email. Is it to drive Web site traffic? Build sales? Generate advertising revenue? Inform users of new products? Demonstrate your authority in your field? The more concrete the goal, the more likely it will be that you will be able to prove you've achieved it.

Once you've identified your goals, you can identify the metrics that will show whether you're meeting your objectives. Here are some examples:

- Goal: A professional organization is trying to increase attendance at its annual conference.
Metrics: Subscriptions, colleague referrals, clickthroughs on conference links (which topics are of most interest?), conversions.
- Goal: A consultant wants to demonstrate her expertise to a select clientele.
Metrics: Clickthrough tracking, whitepaper downloads, conversions.
- Goal: A restaurant wants to promote business on its "dead" days to increase profits.
Metrics: Coupon redemptions, location visits.

Benchmark your campaigns.

Your first mailing or two will establish benchmarks for your chosen metrics. If you don't establish some initial reference points, it will be difficult to know if your campaigns are really generating desired results. The hypothetical restaurant owner above may *think* he's getting more business after sending a few campaigns and seeing full tables; but if he discovers that the increase in "dead day" business cuts into the rest of the week, he may simply be moving customers from full-price to discount nights.

With benchmarks in hand, you can test different variables to see which creates better results. Pick one or two of the following, and watch your metrics carefully: Pitch, Offer, Formatting, Text/HTML, Time/day of publication, and Content/style. See Jim Sterne's book "Advanced Email Marketing" for further discussion.

Feed results back into subsequent campaigns.

Success breeds success, if you know what was successful. Once you've identified the key components of *your* email messages, or the primary needs and wants of *your* audience, feed those insights back into your next campaign. Closing the loop from sending to receiving is what the Master Practice is all about, as in doing so you're both satisfying your list members and generating the results *you* want.

Conclusion

We tend to talk about the recipients of your mailings as a group, but each individual wants his personal preferences noted and respected. These Best Practices demonstrate your *respect*: your respect for privacy, your respect for preferences, your respect for the privilege you've been granted to be allowed into the "privacy" of a person's inbox.

Subscribers who are sent irrelevant mail too frequently will (rightly) feel the sender is at best careless and at worst contemptuous of their time—and trust. They may show their displeasure by unsubscribing. Or, if they no longer trust the sender, they may choose to stop the mail by deleting it, blocking it, or by reporting it as spam to their ISPs.

When you follow these Best Practices, soon to be *Expected Practices*—when your email is requested, interesting and valuable—recipients will tend to open and act on it. It's more likely to be delivered and received in their inboxes, too. And you'll stay in good standing with the law.

Your recipients are judging the value of your messages every time they receive one, so don't get complacent. Conduct regular reviews to be sure you are continuing to follow these Best Practices, and, as the Internet evolves, to be sure you adopt the new Best Practices that will surely follow those we've outlined here.

Your audience's inbox is a crowded place these days, but by following these Best Practices, and the overarching Master Practice, your email is more likely to be welcome and even much-anticipated.

About Lyris Technologies

1. **Nobody knows email like we do.** After 10 years of developing the world's best-selling email marketing software and services, we have the largest, most diverse installed base in the industry—4,200 customers and counting! So whether you're an independent newsletter editor or a Fortune 500 marketing director, we have the experience to meet your email needs.
2. **We just say no to spam.** From the very beginning, Lyris has advocated "double opt-in" as the best way to communicate via email. We make it easy to administer opt-in databases, and we extend our hosting services only to permission-based marketers. The net result? Great relations with ISPs and among the best delivery rates in the industry.
3. **Our products are incredibly scalable.** Whether your database has a few thousand or several million addresses, Lyris software and services will support it. And as your database grows in size—or as your marketing needs increase in sophistication—we'll scale upwards with you, with ease.
4. **We're blindingly fast.** Large databases are great, but what if the mail doesn't get out? Our high-performance ListManager software and ListHosting service can send up to 300,000 unique messages per hour from a single server, enabling prompt delivery of your most time-sensitive content. Your mailings get there on time, as intended.
5. **We help you mail more strategically.** Our mission is to help you reach the right person with the right message at exactly the right time. To that end, our solutions feature an array of savvy targeting capabilities, including one-to-one personalization, demographic segmentation, frequency limits, and address suppression techniques.
6. **We're cost effective.** Email may be an inherently practical medium, but today's marketers still need to meet budgets. We offer a wide range of competitive price points for both software and hosting, and our maintenance agreements let you upgrade to the latest product releases while keeping your total cost of ownership in control.
7. **We take great care of our customers.** We back our comprehensive support packages with a knowledgeable and responsive in-house team that has more than 30 years of collective Lyris experience. Our tech support staff provides a wealth of practical assistance on everything from installation to integration, training to customization.
8. **We're fluff-free.** We're known for a down-to-earth communication style that speaks directly to your real-world publishing and marketing needs. Browse our Web site (<http://www.lyris.com>) and you'll see: no hype or hollow jargon, just loads of substance.
9. **We have rock solid financials.** Lyris has maintained a profitable bottom line for 10 years, and is one of the fastest growing private businesses in the Bay Area. We're still owned by our original founders, are completely free of outside investors, and have plenty of resources for more than another decade of development.
10. **We're leading the way.** Lyris has driven three generations of email marketing technology: the reliable but impersonal blast; targeted mailings; and, now, behavior-triggered communication based on recipient *interests*. These days, even opt-in mail from trusted brands can be seen as spam if it comes too often or isn't relevant. We're enabling marketers to evaluate customers' *implicit* preferences and send conditional messages based on them. Email so relevant they buy, subscribe, or contact you *now*.