

10 Golden Rules to Boost Email Deliverability and Online Reputation

Introduction

Companies today spend millions of dollars building trust with their customers. Why invest so much? Simply put: because if your customers don't have a basic trust in your business, you won't keep them for very long.

Trust is developed from a combination of reputation and direct experience. Your company's overall reputation has been built carefully over time through various channels: by your sales team, by the quality of your products and services, by your call center, by your marketing staff and most importantly, through your *customers*. And now, with the influx of social media, your customers have significantly more power to affect your company's online reputation. Through social networks, blogs and other user-generated content, customers can share information and opinions about your company at the speed of light. In this age of social media, it is more critical than ever for a company to proactively manage its online reputation.

So how does email and deliverability fit into all this talk of reputation and trust? Well, just as overall reputation affects trust in a company, *online* reputation affects customer or prospect trust in an email marketer.

Each day, email marketers play an important part in building (or degrading) a company's online reputation. A company's online reputation significantly affects email deliverability. And email deliverability affects ROI.

Building and maintaining your company's online reputation requires a commitment to follow email marketing best practices, including best practices for [email deliverability](#). These deliverability best practices should be used each and every time you launch a campaign.

Deliverability best practices change over time, and can be complex. So, to help you stay current and execute email campaigns with good deliverability, we've compiled a list of the top 10 golden rules you can follow to improve your deliverability. Keep in mind that overlooking any one of these can affect your email ROI, damage your online reputation and affect customer trust in your organization.

In this guide, we'll cover:

- The definition of reputation and why it matters.
- The cost of a poor online reputation.
- 10 golden rules to help you boost email deliverability.

Additionally, we'll provide access to a useful bonus tool:

- [Lyris ContentChecker™ for Email](#) - An easy-to-use utility that helps you spam-proof your email campaigns and identify content issues before you hit "send". It's a great way to improve deliverability.

The Definition of Reputation and Why It Matters

Rampant spam and e-mail fraud – like spoofing and phishing – have severely damaged the public's confidence in email. Despite a multi-million dollar anti-spam software industry and many attempts to eradicate spam with regulation, spammers and fraudsters continue to make life difficult for email marketers. But email marketers have a tool in their arsenal that can be the difference between messages that arrive at the Inbox rather than the spam folder. That tool is your reputation.

Reputation is simply an opinion or perception that the public at large has of your company. It's an identity as *defined by others*, that is *ubiquitous* and that can have deep effects on the success of your business. Your company's overall reputation has been built over time through your organization's own efforts, but also by the public at large. But how does your overall reputation affect deliverability? Let's say a customer calls your company with an issue about your product. If your customer service team handles this issue poorly, the customer has the ability to tell colleagues about his negative experience, post negative comments on numerous online forums and so on. These comments can circulate to thousands of people. The next time you send out an email campaign, recipients believe your company isn't reputable. They'll toss your email to their spam folder, affecting how Internet Service Providers (ISPs) filter future emails from your company. A strong, positive overall reputation is the bedrock upon which your online reputation and your email deliverability are built.

In the online world, your *online* reputation is similar. It has likely been developed over time through thousands of online activities: email marketing, social media engagements, company blog posts, search engine advertising and so on. Like your overall reputation, your online reputation has also been built, in no small part, by the public – from social networks to consumer, press and analyst reviews to forums and blogs. This has made managing your online reputation trickier and riskier than ever.

The Cost of a Poor Online Reputation

In a wired world where a single customer post can travel the globe within a few hours (or less!), using best practices to manage your online reputation is absolutely critical to create the invaluable customer trust that can launch your company past its competition. If not managed properly, your online reputation can have far-reaching, negative effects that can be difficult and costly to rebuild – damaging to your brand integrity, diminishing the effects of your marketing efforts, and costing your company in lost sales opportunities. Has

someone said something negative about your company on a widely-read blog or forum? Prospects use the Web to do research that helps them make buying decisions. Have you been blacklisted? Then your emails won't reach the Inbox.

Deliverability is a significant area in which email marketers can have a direct impact on their companies' online reputation. By following the best practices and utilizing the bonus tool provided in this guide, you'll be taking significant steps to manage and maintain your online reputation.

10 Golden Rules to Boost Email Deliverability and Online Reputation

Following are 10 golden rules you can execute today to combat deliverability challenges and conquer the Inbox.

Golden Rule #1: Manage and Maintain Your Overall and Online Reputation

How is your company perceived in the marketplace? Are you listening to your customers, competitors and industry analysts as they write and talk about you in the public sphere? Your company has spent valuable time and money to create a positive overall reputation, but you can't stop there. Industry sentiment and opinion changes, so you must consistently manage your reputation. Create customer and prospect surveys to gather thoughts and opinions about your company. Create opportunities for customer support or help desk staff to share front-line customer feedback. Actively engage with industry analysts to gain insight into your place in the market. These activities will help you keep a pulse on your most current reputation.

In the online world, check Google or other popular search engines to see what's being said about your company. Find the social networks where your industry influencers and potential customers interact and participate strategically in those conversations. Foster good relationships with industry bloggers that write about your market space.

By diligently managing and maintaining your reputation over time, you'll build invaluable trust that will help create strong business relationships and close sales.

Golden Rule #2: Gain Opt-in Permission and Provide Options to Change Subscriber Preferences

While the necessity to gain opt-in permission may be obvious for any veteran email marketer, you'd be surprised at how many companies attempt to circumvent or loosely interpret "opt in" to grow their prospect list. But this avoidance tactic is ultimately counterproductive and could even lead to legal action. When you send unsolicited email, you risk future communications with your recipients who will delete, mark as spam or even help blacklist your company – hurting your sender reputation and damaging customer trust in your organization.

Some best practices with regard to opt in include:

- Be sure to use a proper, double opt-in process. Double opt-in is the verification process that guarantees authenticity of a subscription request for email or mobile content by confirming it twice. For example, a new subscriber asks to be subscribed to your mailing list. A confirmation e-mail is sent to verify the subscriber's identity and provides an additional opportunity for the new subscriber to confirm that they want to subscribe. Only after both opt ins have been received should an address move into your database.
- Ask subscribers who have been on your list for more than 12 months whether they want to continue receiving your emails and then retain all the permission data on each subscriber.
- Give your subscribers ongoing opportunities to change their subscription preferences.

Golden Rule #3: Meet Recipient Expectations on Content, Frequency and Value

Email marketers must meet the expectations of opt-in subscribers in every email they send. As in any marketing effort, delivering on a promise over time helps build trust, and trust gets your email communications into the Inbox.

- During the opt-in process, provide subscribers with preferences regarding content, format (plain text or HTML) and frequency of contact – and honor those preferences.
- Be sure to provide value with relevant messages and offers.
- Be truthful and keep your word. If you say you'll deliver a weekly newsletter, deliver it weekly. If you say you'll deliver a guide when the recipient fills out a form, make sure that guide is delivered.

Delivering on simple preferences and agreements like these shows that your company can deliver on greater promises, such as product or service features and benefits.

Golden Rule #4: Send from a Recognizable "From" Address

If you've gained opt-in names and properly set expectations, subscribers will more quickly and easily recognize your company name. Subscribers are more prone to open messages and enable links from companies they know and with whom they have a relationship. Use your company's name and a valid email address in the "from" line, and then remain consistent in each mailing. This will encourage list members to "white list" your address, better ensuring that your legitimate, opt-in mail will be delivered to the Inbox successfully.

Golden Rule #5: Format and Test Emails Across All Major Email Clients

HTML emails – with pictures, colors and graphics – can look and behave very differently when viewed in different email clients. Email clients are applications used to send and receive e-mail such as AOL, Outlook etc. To increase your email deliverability:

- Be sure your HTML is validated against current industry standards.
- Consider working with an HTML designer who is versed in the latest spam filters.
- Test for the correct rendering of your email messages across numerous email clients – AOL, Gmail, Yahoo! Mail and Outlook – to uncover broken links, poor rendering or other formatting issues.
- Design the header of your email to deliver your message, regardless of the email client. For example, if you know that there's a good chance your image-rich header will not be viewable in most email clients, use an Alt Tag that "sells" the idea or offer your image header is conveying.
- See the Lyris guide: [Email Design No-No's for Non-Designers](#) for more information.

Golden Rule #6: Ensure Search Engine Marketing Best Practices

Your search engine marketing (also known as SEM, pay-per-click or PPC) campaigns can have a significant impact on your online reputation and email deliverability. For better or worse, everything that is associated with your company and domain is trackable in the online world. Because search engines rely heavily on relevance in order to serve up organic and paid ads, your online reputation expands every minute of every day. Shore up SEM so that it improves your company's online reputation and supports the likelihood that your email messages will be delivered properly.

- Make relevance the priority. If your listing or paid ad features your company's new skin care product, make sure that the landing page concentrates on that skin care product. If your content is not in alignment with your PPC ad, a customer will consider future ads irrelevant and avoid clicking on them. Search engine algorithms will then label your company's ads as irrelevant, suppressing SEM/PPC conversions. If a prospect has determined through your PPC ads that you are misrepresenting your offering (an ad for skin care but a landing page that sells Cialis), trust in your company is tarnished and this prospect is likely to ignore or mark as spam any incoming email from your company.
- Ensure continuity. Continuity is related to, but distinct from relevance. Continuity is the flow of information from one source (your PPC ad) into all related sources (your landing page, your confirmation page, your links and your website). If your ad promises information on skin care products, don't serve up pages that sell candy. Your abandonment rates will soar. Your conversion rates will be low. And your online reputation will suffer because ISPs gather detailed information about recipient behavior (such as when an email is printed, or which links are clicked within an email).

Golden Rule #7: Re-familiarize Yourself with Spam: Who Defines It and Why That Matters

Do you truly know how spam is defined? Many email marketers think they know... "It's sending unsolicited emails, right?" If that's the first statement that comes to mind, it's time to re-familiarize yourself with what spam really is and who defines it. Knowing the definition can mean the difference between email deliverability success and a damaged online reputation.

[CAN-SPAM laws](#) are created and enforced by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and crafted with the assistance of consumers and online industry experts. CAN-SPAM laws provide the ultimate definition of spam by outlining

what is (and is not) permissible when sending emails. The laws, enacted in 2004, were updated in 2008 to include the following:

1. The unsubscribe process must be as simple as possible.
2. Clarification of who the “sender” is in the relationship. The definition now allows for a “primary sender” or a “designated sender” as the only one bound to comply with the CAN-SPAM rules. It is this sender who must include their physical mailing address and unsubscribe method on the email message.
3. Senders of commercial email are now permitted to use an accurately-registered PO Box as a valid physical mailing address.

CAN-SPAM laws are a complex topic unto themselves. For a detailed description of the new laws, read the [“New Rules for Email Marketers”](#) located on the Lyris Blog.

But the FTC isn’t the only body that classifies spam. ISPs also have a large part in determining what is considered spam. ISPs don’t rely on CAN-SPAM to define spam because, in their eyes, *spam is, first and foremost, defined by the user*. If a user classifies a message as spam by putting it on their blocked senders list, dropping it in their spam folder or simply not opening it consistently, then it is considered spam by the ISPs – regardless of whether it adheres to each and every CAN-SPAM rule.

Secondly, ISPs use various automated filtering techniques that are not entirely accurate and can produce false positives. These subjective and indefinite determinations of spam can pose a major challenge for email marketers seeking to increase their deliverability.

But email marketers can address these seemingly stiff deliverability challenges. Here’s how:

- Stay current on CAN-SPAM laws and double check that every email campaign adheres to those laws. Don’t take liberties with these laws. It’s not worth the risk.

- Follow the email marketing best practices outlined in this guide to build and maintain the positive online reputation and trust that will get your emails delivered, opened and acted upon.
- Be sure to regularly audit your unsubscribe methodologies for CAN-SPAM compliance. Be sure recipients can opt-out easily. Document recipients who have unsubscribed and the date their unsubscribe request was fulfilled by your company. Don’t use unmonitored mailboxes; those that, when replied to, take a user to a “donotreply@xyz-company.com” address. Remind recipients of the address they used to request your information. These are just a few suggestions to help you consistently and thoroughly audit your unsubscribe process.

Golden Rule #8: Incorporate Authentication Methods

Entire technical tomes can be dedicated to authentication, which is the act of verifying that email senders are who they say they are so recipients can decide whether they want to read an email. But the most important thing for email marketers to know is that authentication is an essential piece to getting your emails delivered.

On a practical level, you and your IT staff should develop plans for incorporating authentication into your current IT infrastructure. Or easier still, work with a reputable email service provider (ESP) that has authentication methods included in their solutions.

Golden Rule #9: Develop and Maintain Good ISP Relations

As you read in the above section on spam, ISPs can make or break your deliverability efforts. So it’s important that email marketers either build and maintain good ISP relations, or work with an ESP that has established positive relationships

with ISPs. ISP relationships are often the last line of defense between you and an ISP that wants to pull your Internet service because of a spam complaint. ISP relationships help you stay up-to-date on public blacklists, ISP filters, spam filters, spam traps, content filters, bulk folders, junk boxes, email authentication and certified mail. ISP relationships also create established feedback loops (FBLs) so that you can automatically receive complaints whenever an ISP's users click on the "this is spam" button. Most importantly, with a good relationship in your pocket, you have a direct line of communication into ISPs should big issues arise that need immediate and swift attention.

Golden Rule #10: Practice Consistent and Thorough List Hygiene

As any seasoned email marketer knows, it is vital to keep your lists up-to-date so you can optimize response rates, conversions and overall campaign performance. But list hygiene also plays a crucial role in your deliverability and sender reputation. Remember to:

- Consistently update your email list to help minimize bounce rates, undeliverable emails, unopened emails and unsubscribes.
- Be sure your source for rented or purchased lists is trustworthy and vet lists before sending out your campaigns.
- Review your list often to determine which recipients haven't opened or clicked for the last six months, and then provide them with a compelling offer to re-engage. Recipients who have not engaged after that time should be removed from your list.

Save time and effort by using tools that automate the unsubscribe process and handle hard and soft bounces and time outs. Any reputable ESP can help you with any one or all of these efforts.

Key Takeaways and Tools

Email marketers face tough challenges today – swimming upstream against a negative wave of distrust created by fraudulent email senders. But by following the *10 Golden Rules to Boost Email Deliverability and Online Reputation* outlined in this guide and applying other best practices, you will not only contribute to your own email marketing success, but to your company's positive online reputation and overall level of customer trust, as well.

For more free guides, tools, webcasts and best practices on email marketing, deliverability, online marketing and more, visit the [Lyris Resource Center](#).

Bonus Materials

Lyris ContentChecker™ for Email

As a permission-based email marketer, you may have experienced the frustration of having your email messages mistakenly delivered to the spam folder. There are many reasons this can happen – because spam filtering is intricately complex and ever-changing.

But you can take proactive steps to ensure that your content is compliant – even as content filtering becomes more and more convoluted. Spam-proof your email campaigns by using the Lyris ContentChecker for Email – a free, easy-to-use utility for checking email content that helps you identify any content issues and improve your email messages *before* you hit the send button.

Click here to get unlimited access to the [Lyris Content Checker for Email](#).

About Lyris

Lyris is your partner in email marketing and integrated online marketing success. Founded in 1994, Lyris has been leading the way for more than 15 years with innovative, award-winning Internet-marketing tools and professional services. Lyris HQ™ is a groundbreaking integrated online marketing suite that combines email marketing, deliverability tools, social media, content creation, Web analytics, search marketing and mobile marketing into *one* unified solution. Lyris' seasoned marketing experts bring years of experience and insight to our Professional Services Group. We have the real-world experience and technical know-how to help you conquer all of your deliverability challenges. For more information on Lyris solutions and services, visit www.lyris.com.