

04/04/2012 3:30 PM: Getting the Most Out of Your Email Communications

Track: Communications

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Notes:

Step 1: Build your list

- Clearly, you can't send email messages if you don't have a list.
- When do you focus on building your email list? Always.
- List churn happens. TechSoup gets 3-4K new subscribers per month, but is also losing people all the time. Keep an eye on this, analyze it, know what's driving it.
- Engage people as soon as they get to your website. Having a prominent email signup form on your site is one of the cheapest and most effective ways to build your list.
- Engage partner organizations to help build your list. Peer organizations can be a very effective way to spread the word.
- Once you develop partnerships, make sure the relationship doesn't wither after the first conversation. Keep in touch with them. Make it easy for them to spread your content -- send them pre-edited blurbs and images for their e-newsletter or website.
- Engage your colleagues in this process. Get them thinking in a programmatic context how they can integrate efforts to grow the list. (They may be meeting people who may also serve as future content partners.)
- Put out a signup sheet at your events. Yes, pen and paper - it's a low barrier to entry. Send a follow-up email within a week, invite them to subscribe. (Cary's Tip: Paper evaluation forms for events are also a great way to get better response rates, and ask for subscriptions.)

Ask the audience: How do you grow your list?

- Contests - be clear about what email communications people will receive from you if they participate in the contest. It helps also to make it clear they can unsubscribe when they like.
- Petitions
- Staff in the community - go out, collect business cards, bring them back to the office and send an invite.
- Short quiz on website with an email signup form at the end

Survey your peeps (and then segment them!)

By doing a survey, you can learn what kind of information your members are interested in, preferences in communication. Great if you're interested in knowing how frequently people would like to be communicated with.

For new lists, you want people to self-select right away if possible to indicate their interest in different subject matter. A very short list of selections with check boxes on your email sign up form is a great option. Please do not make the mistake though of describing those lists only with the names of the enewsletter. Be descriptive! People might not understand your title without a description.

Ask questions that you can act on as you can ask too many questions. Is the information you are putting in the survey information you can act upon? If not, put this question aside. We recommend you ask your peers to review your survey.

Ask the audience: How do you survey your peeps?

- Org that works with families with disabilities, segment by disability they're dealing with
- Clickthroughs - look at what people are actually reading, build list segments by most popular topics
- Leave the driftwood behind - recipients that aren't active enough to click through or respond to calls-for-action, let them drop off the list.
- Require zip code on signup. Segment by geography.

Measure It

- If you're not using an enewsletter client yet, start using one! MailChimp and Vertical Response both have free plans. There are many, many others to choose from. These clients offer you access to analytics that can help you gauge audience engagement.
- Be wary of comparing analytics from different enewsletter clients.
- What should you measure? Measure interest. Measure performance. Measure ROI.
- Tracking tags, like those you can build with [Google's URL builder](#), allow you to identify what links in your email campaigns are directing traffic to your website. It's an extra layer of work, but it allows you to see all your data within your [Google Analytics](#) data for your

site.

Are your messages carried through to different channels? Make sure your website's got your email message's back and vice versa.

What kind of open rates can you expect? TechSoup tends to see 18-20% on general emails, and up to 50% on really targeted messages. The more targeted you can be, the better metrics you'll see.

How do you share analytics with your staff members? TechSoup team has monthly meetings to discuss what worked, what didn't. Very transparent about both success and failure.

A/B Testing

What is A/B Testing? It's when you test the success of a message or other content strategy by sending an email to test group with your variation, and another group (control group) that do not have the variation.

Some newsletter clients like Convio and MailChimp give you tools that allow you to do this testing more easily.

Be aware of the size of your sample though. If you don't have a large enough test group, you may not find a result when there really is one because the test group size simply wasn't large enough to create a big effect. A possible solution is to do the same A/B testing multiple times. (But be aware of confounding factors like time of day.)

Additional Resources:

- [Idealware and Groundwires' Report on Enewsletter Clients](#)
- Email subject line testers -- see how your subject line looks across different email clients like Outlook, Gmail, etc. [Here's an example.](#)
- A/B significance calculator - will help you determine if your A/B test results are actually significant (i.e., actually tell you a result you can rely on.)