

Five Things Consumers Really Want from an E-mail Marketing Relationship

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The return on investment in e-mail as a sales and marketing vehicle continues to be high, which is lulling many retail and consumer-based companies into a false sense of security. Don't let the numbers fool you – your relationship with consumers may still be in jeopardy. In fact, if you're not thinking about what consumers really want, chances are you're soon to be a jilted brand.

Today's consumers are looking for value in relationships with their favorite brands, more than just a discount or a transaction. They want you to learn from each other in an open, interactive exchange, the kind of exchange for which e-mail is ideal. They want you to take the time to understand what is important to them, have more meaningful interactions, and exceed their expectations. And sometimes they just want you to leave them alone, at least for a little while.

Without a strong push to be more relevant and sustain long relationships with customers, the burnout rate will quickly overcome the short-term gains. Customer e-mail lists are not growing at the same rates they once did, and acquisition costs are escalating. In order to retain quality leads, customer satisfaction and retention must be more of a focus in your e-mail campaigns.

Start by thinking about what you want as a consumer. What are your expectations of your favorite brands? How likely are you to share your vendor recommendations and experiences with others? When are you most likely to respond to special offers or once-in-a-blue-moon opportunities? Knowing how your customers would answer these questions is essential to infusing your e-mail marketing with greater relevance. In fact, the answers translate into five basic truths about consumers that every e-mail marketer must know in order to build lasting relationships.

1. *When a customer engages you, she doesn't want to wait.*

Be prompt when you respond to a customer, starting with your "welcome" message. This is your only opportunity to make a first impression, so make it a good one. Welcome messages have the highest open rates of all message types – her curiosity will never be higher than it is when she receives your first message. Don't disappoint. Provide immediate value. Set positive expectations for the relationship by presenting her with a gift, offering up something educational or engaging, or giving her ample opportunity to talk about herself. But above all, don't be late.

Here are some simple but effective rules to help you perfect your welcome message:

- Confirm that the customer's action was successful. Set clear expectations for content and frequency and include instructions for modifying a subscription or giving feedback.

- Take the time to thank the customer like you really mean it. Use a warm, friendly tone and a personal signature from an executive or customer relations representative.
- Remind the customer of the benefits they will enjoy. Reward her for her interest with a sign-up bonus or an interactive feature that enhances her experience.
- Use the opportunity to educate the customer on how to use your Web site. Familiarize her with your business and reassure her that you are a good match for each other.
- Provide a link to surveys or profile information and encourage the customer to tell you more about her. Let her know the benefit will be more relevant communication.

Beyond the welcome message, remember that e-mail can be used as a tool to build and sustain a long-term relationship with customers. It can be more than just a means to promote a sale or fulfill a transaction – it can also be an educational offering or quality survey. These types of messages, known as “goodwill” messages, enhance your brand’s reputation in the minds of customers, and in many cases leave them with the impression that you are exceeding expectations.

2. The customer wants you to be observant of things.

Being on a first-name basis with your customer is only a minimum requirement for a long and prosperous relationship. The online consumer is past the “creepy” factor previously associated with implicit data that is gleaned from Web analytics or click-based activity. Now he expects you to use that data as a means to deliver targeted messages, so don’t be afraid to tell him what you are up to. It’s all about providing him with the best service and opening up the relationship.

Behavior-based messages that respond to the customer’s action are extremely effective; for example, abandoned shopping cart campaigns are among the highest in ROI, delivering as much as four times the return over typical promotions. A customer also appreciates recommendations based on past purchases, which are consistently among the most popular behavior-based campaigns. But nothing turns off a customer like getting his first name wrong. If you want to build trust, focus on getting the little things right first when it comes to personalizing your messages.

3. The customer wants to tell you more.

Who doesn’t like to talk about themselves? The customer wants your best, and she understands that in order to get it you need information from her. Once the customer has opted in to your program, follow up immediately with requests for additional information that will help you serve her needs. But only ask for information that you plan to use, and make sure you use it.

The key is to make it as easy and convenient as possible for customers to provide information. Here are some proven tactics for information gathering:

- Reach out to customers with incomplete profiles and specify what is missing. Be forthcoming about why sharing this information is important to both of you.
- Use polls and surveys to narrow profiles according to demographics and interests. Employ polls as a means to periodically measure customer satisfaction, as well.
- Establish a preference center that consolidates profile information into one location. Encourage the customer to use it as a means to manage her own account.

How important is it to ask your customer what she wants? Lack of relevant content remains the number one reason why customers unsubscribe from e-mail programs. She wants a meaningful relationship, which means she should be willing to take the time to fill out a profile, visit a preference center, and respond to polls and surveys – as long as she is confident that it will lead to good things for her. Remember, it doesn't have to feel like a business transaction.

4. *The customer wants to brag about you.*

With social networking approaching its peak, chances are your customer is going to be talking about you anyway. Why not be involved? A long-lasting relationship is based on communication, and no marketing medium makes it easier to communicate than e-mail does. Create a dialog with your customer from day one, and use the resources available to sustain it – viral programs, product reviews, user blogs, and more.

Here are some engagement tactics to encourage customer communication:

- Viral marketing and forward-to-a-friend programs provide customers with an incentive to spread the word about your products. Offer a reward to the forwarder and her recipients.
- Encourage customers to submit product reviews. Studies show that online customer reviews have a tremendous impact when shoppers are evaluating brands for purchase.
- Host blogs that encourage customers to share their thoughts about your products and service. Even negative comments will help you identify opportunities for improvement.

Brands need to learn how to behave more interactively if they want to be successful in the emerging social computing era. Customers' influence on brand identity is only going to increase, and savvy marketers need to understand how that can translate into a valuable selling tool.

5. *Sometimes the customer just wants to be left alone.*

It's not you, it's him. The nonresponsive customer makes up a growing portion of every marketer's database, and most hesitate to stop mailing to him for fear of missing a potential sale. The truth is that in most cases it is already too late – you're just not his type.

There are some useful tactics you can use to sift through non-responders and find the customer who still wants your business. But it's important to be honest with yourself. If these tactics don't work, it's probably time to move on.

- Send him an offer he can't resist. Even the most reclusive customer can be influenced by a substantial discount or free gift.
- Ask him why he has been so distant. Send the nonresponsive customer a short survey. At the very least you will be able to apply what you learn.
- Give a nonresponsive customer the option to reduce the frequency of your e-mails. He may like you more when you give him a little space.

Be clear about the steps with a non-responder. Confirm his status if he chooses to opt back in. If he doesn't, provide a definitive deadline for removing him from your list. But most importantly, have the programs in place that will prevent him from wandering away. Strong relationships buoyed by relevant communications will help you achieve a happily ever after with any customer.