

Best Practices in Mobile E-mail Marketing: Leveraging the World's Most Highly Individualized Marketing Channel


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It's time for U.S. marketers to take heed of what European marketers have already learned. Mobile e-mail marketing is no longer a "future" opportunity. Until now, mobile e-mail adoption in the U.S. has been primarily limited to the youth market and business users, the chief purchasers of smartphone devices.¹ The onset of HTML e-mail enabled smartphones such as the Apple iPhone, however, represents a flashpoint in the mobile e-mail market. As the number of consumers armed with smartphones increases, so to does the need for more creative, eye-catching HTML-enabled messages. "Traditional" mobile marketing is no longer enough.

Adoption of smartphones, which had already been on a steady rise, promises to be widespread as the devices become more attractive – in features, usability, and price. Already a \$6 billion industry in 2007, the mobile e-mail market is expected to grow to nearly \$27 billion in 2011. Which means U.S. marketers must now beware. If you have not applied best practices in a mobile e-mail marketing strategy, you are in real danger of being outdone by your competition.

How is that possible? Could the mobile e-mail market be more mature than we think? The short answer is yes. While smartphone usage is growing at twice the rate in Europe compared to the U.S., IDC believes that 70% of mobile devices will be smartphones by 2010. On top of that, the introduction of more sophisticated devices like the iPhone will likely speed adoption. Meanwhile, mobile network carriers are pushing Internet service heavily in order to improve revenue.

¹ While the definition of a smartphone remains somewhat open-ended, for purposes of this discussion, smartphones are mobile devices with an identifiable operating system as well as full-featured e-mail capabilities.

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Because of its comparability to desktop browsing, HTML-enabled devices like the iPhone will have a significant impact on the number of Internet mobile users, especially when it comes to e-mail responsiveness. Assorted research suggests that, although Internet use is limited to less than 10% of the mobile device population, a surprising 47% are using these devices to access and respond to e-mail. Consumers are not just using smartphones to “surf the Web” as some experts suggest.

Understanding the consumer value

Mobile e-mail marketing is a growing channel; however, it is not without obstacles. Even with smartphone use on the rise, most U.S. consumers say they are annoyed by the idea of mobile e-mail marketing. That should not be surprising – to many, mobile e-mail appears to be a new and far more intrusive avenue for spam messages. By contrast, however, consumers are becoming increasingly dependent on mobile devices as they advance towards HTML capabilities.

For example, JupiterResearch estimates that by 2011, 54% of European mobile users will access the Internet on a regular basis. Internet use among U.S. consumers is still very low, but that gap is expected to close, and quickly. That should bring smiles to the faces of marketers worldwide.

The reason why is clear-cut. HTML-enabled mobile devices present a very private and highly individualized medium that can – and should – be leveraged by marketers. Consumers are learning that, because of its abbreviated approach and unique targeting advantages, mobile e-mail marketing can offer real value by delivering a more personalized and relevant experience. In particular, certain groups of consumers are primed to benefit from precise mobile marketing. For example, business and sales executives who travel consistently, “road warriors” who need fast access to information but are rarely tied to a desktop, and the Generation X/Y youth market who are technically proficient and never satiated for information, entertainment, and pop culture.

Are we there yet? Best practices for mobile e-mail marketing

For mobile e-mail marketing, the future is indeed now. Savvy marketers have already implemented best practices to support a mobile e-mail marketing strategy, in part because many of the best practices around traditional e-mail marketing apply for mobile distribution, as well. Conversely, marketers who fail to factor mobile devices into programs are finding themselves shorthanded in the competition for attention in the customers’ inboxes.

The reality is this: if you have not implemented these fundamental best practices around mobile e-mail marketing, your organization is in danger of being left behind.

Remember that the mobile device is not replacing the PC. Send messages in multi-part MIME format in order to ensure that they render clearly in both environments. This allows the customer's e-mail client to identify the most complex version that can be rendered, and proceed accordingly. In the near future, integrating e-mail with SMS and MMS will be necessary to support multi-channel programs. For now, however, multi-part MIME works best.


Continue the best practices you have implemented around relevance, frequency, and preferences. What is best for e-mail and your clients' interests is still what is best for mobile. The goal should be to augment what you are already doing, and capitalize on the immediacy and flexibility of mobile devices as a vehicle for marketing programs that might otherwise falter.

Ask your audience if they are receiving e-mail on a mobile device. When you know which customers are reading e-mail on a mobile device and when, you can maximize efforts to segment and personalize messages. Special offers and messages can be designed just for mobile users. Also, take the opportunity to ask customers what their preferences are around frequency. With mobile devices in the mix, it is more important than ever to offer customers control.

Get your branding in early. Make sure your brand is visible in the "from" field or in the first 40 characters of the subject line. Customers are more likely to open an e-mail from a brand they trust, which means you need to identify yourself early and often in abbreviated mobile messages.

Exploit the mobility of the devices in your campaigns. Design your campaigns to be timely, concise, and individualized. Mobile e-mail presents a unique format with which to interact with your customers, but only if you let the format guide your creativity. Now is the time to think outside the box (and the desktop, and the cubicle, and the office) and design campaigns that are urgent and personal. Mobile devices offer a tremendous opportunity to leverage location you're your campaigns. Also, make sure the call-to-action click is featured prominently in the first paragraph of text, which is reminiscent of the "above the fold" strategy in standard e-mail. Furthermore, some devices by default may not download the entire e-mail.

Know how to take advantage of multi-channel marketing opportunities. Mobile e-mail is another tool you can use to elevate your brand in customers' eyes. Consider ways that you can position mobile marketing efforts as a valuable service to your customers. As a rule, customers are more likely to deal with mobile e-mail they consider urgent rather than commercial. Focus on programs that are worthwhile, engaging, or provide a service that makes customers' lives easier.

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Test, test, and re-test. Measure and analyze the results of your campaigns to understand what is working on mobile devices and what is not. The main reason customers ignore mobile e-mail is because they have had a bad experience in the past. Test your messages in order to understand when they are too image-intensive, poorly rendered in HTML, or just too difficult to read.

Moving forward, the key for U.S. and European marketers is the same: find ways to inject creativity and value into your e-mail messages on mobile devices. As a medium, it holds enormous potential as a means for customers to maintain a relationship with your brand. Entertain, provide a service, reward participation – engagement will be the key to success.