

The Hunt for E-mail Relevance: Gathering Relevant Customer Data

By John Rohloff, *Account Director, e-Dialog*

The secret to relevant e-mail marketing is really no secret at all: it begins with understanding your customer through the data you have gathered. There is likely any number of data collection sources at your disposal – customer profile information, testing data, and perhaps Web behavioral data. If you are like many e-mail marketers, however, you may be overlooking the most valuable data of all – the activity information you could be gathering every time you send an e-mail. E-mail activity is immediately actionable and is readily available with every campaign. Additional data sources are good, but relevance really begins with the data you already have.

Beyond e-mail activity, there are a number of data sources every e-mail marketer should be able to turn to today as a means to fuel e-mail relevance, including testing data, customer interaction data, and non e-mail behavioral data. Each is a powerful friend to your marketing efforts and yields useful information about customers that allows you to personalize your messages, target specific needs or interests, and increase the individual significance of the e-mails you send. To achieve e-mail relevance, however, it's always best to start at the beginning.

Don't ignore the data you already have

It may seem elementary, but e-mail activity is too often overlooked as a source for e-mail relevance. Every e-mail you send provides an indicator of your customers' interests: where they click, what they purchase – even no action at all can provide valuable information. This is the easiest and most immediate data available that can help you guide relevant content. For example, you can learn about an individual based on what they clicked on in last week's campaign, and insert similar content in this week's campaign. You've just become more relevant. So if you don't think you have the data you need today to improve e-mail relevance, you soon will – just pay attention to e-mail activity in your next campaign, and you've already begun.

Using testing data to improve future relevance

If you are ready for more sophisticated sources of relevance, testing data is an excellent next step. E-mail campaigns should include testing programs designed to measure and analyze the performance of

individual elements, such as audience, subject line, offer, content, frequency and creative. The goal is to understand what's working (or not) in the deployment of these elements.

Start by benchmarking existing programs according to average response and conversion rates, both overall and by message type. This data will provide a useful benchmark against subsequent test results. Next, establish your test and the test group or audience on which you wish to observe the impact of the tactic you are testing. Also establish a "control group" by withholding from the test audience a customer group which will not receive the element(s) being tested. You should test only one element at a time to limit the potential variables. Then measure the post-mailing response results. The comparison in response performance between the test and control audiences will reveal whether the tested relevance tactics are having a significant impact on your results, and will help guide your strategies.

Customer interactivity can yield an abundance of data

E-mail is an excellent opportunity to engage customers and allow them to pursue interests and activities or indulge their curiosity. Think about the types of calls to action that, when delivered via e-mail, could compel customers to provide relevant information about themselves in exchange for education, entertainment, or an exclusive offer. Below are a few suggested tactics:

Polls and surveys: Asking a simple poll question in your e-mail can capture important information about your client: preferred fashions, favorite travel destinations, demographics, and more. In much the same way, customer feedback surveys allow you to zero in on a customer's likes or dislikes and focus messaging on the topics that are most relevant to him or her. Even unsub surveys are helpful – determining why some customers are unsubscribing from your e-mail will help you guide efforts to improve the relevance of future e-mails to active customers.

Web applications: There is nothing wrong with offering a little something in exchange for information. For example, ask your customers to complete a short profile, and in return offer a special discount, or access to an exclusive report or even an online video or game.

Preference centers: Let your customers be in charge of the content they receive. An online preference center is one of the most direct ways to ensure customers receive relevant messages. It allows them to configure the content they receive – these are the products groups, discussion topics, or travel destinations I'm most interested in – and it also ensures that you are only referring to specific interests or needs. It is the most targetable data available to e-mail marketers.

Leverage existing non e-mail data collection

You may be collecting some form of Web site data: site analytics tools such as Coremetrics or Omniture or internal tracking systems such as Web or referral logs. This behavioral data is invaluable in determining your customers' preferences and can easily be leveraged in the creation an e-mail audience. Insight Builder, e-Dialog's powerful data segmentation tool, makes it easy to integrate Web analytics data when building audiences.

Mind the gaps when managing your data

Now that you understand the value of these common data collection sources, the next step is to evaluate your current programs and determine what data you need to enhance. At the same time, consider the programs you will be developing in the near future. What data will be required to support new programs, and how practical will it be to collect it? The goal is to focus on gathering the data you can actually use. Answer the following questions:

- Which of your data sources are limited? How valuable are they to your campaigns?
- Is the data collected from your sources reliable? Is it in a format that is actionable?
- What are the challenges to optimizing these data collection sources?

Once you understand the limitations, it's important to manage your current data collection methods while setting goals for improvement. Short-term goals should include capturing e-mail activity, elements of personalization, and subscriber preferences – data that can be had quickly with minimal technical or strategic implementation.

Long term, your goals should focus on integrating customer behavior and modeling, which may require time and additional resources. But the simple things you do today will have an even greater impact on e-mail relevance than you can imagine. After all, data collection is not some kind of magic bullet. Success depends on how you analyze the data and apply it. Data tells you more than who should get e-mail – it can also tell you what to say and when to say it. Only by using it wisely can you measure and improve the impact of your mailings every day.