

A decorative banner with an orange-to-yellow gradient background. It features a central envelope icon, a globe, and a series of binary digits (0s and 1s) at the bottom.

Using Customer Data to Create Relevant E-mail

By Millie Park, *Account Director*

Let's face it. The e-mail inbox of today's consumer is a very noisy place. Yet among all the e-mails we receive and choose not to open – or that we choose to unsubscribe from – There are always the select few that we open, read, and react to on a regular basis. Heck, we look forward to receiving them. What is it that makes these messages stand out from all the rest?

Most likely it's because these e-mails consistently make an offer that pertains to our interests, and do so in a timely and personalized fashion. In a sense we've been trained to open them because we have come to expect value inside, whether it is intrinsic or explicit. This is the power of relevant e-mail – the ability to influence behavior through customized content and interaction.

The key tenets of direct marketing – the right offer to the right person at the right time – have never been more attainable than they are when applying relevant e-mail. It can affect a dramatic lift in response and, unlike direct marketing, is easily measured and highly actionable.

While there are several elements that you can implement in order to improve relevance, there are four that, when applied, can have direct and considerable impact. Any one of them will drive a stronger connection with your customer and ultimately reinforce your brand relationship.

Simply segmentation

Everyone can agree that all customers are not created equal. Yet many e-mail marketers treat their best customers the same way they treat a one-time purchaser. There is data available that will help you determine how customers vary from one another, and you can use that data to categorize them into defined groups or audiences. It doesn't have to be complex; even simple segmentation (e.g., men vs. women, first-time versus repeat buyers) can have a dramatic impact. The key is being able to vary your message to an audience segment in order to drive relevance.

Though segmentation models can range from simple to complex, it's better to start with a basic approach and build on your success. For example, a follow-up e-mail regarding a sale can be

segmented between two audiences: those who opened the offer and those who didn't. You can make the e-mail more relevant by reminding those who opened the previous that the offer is ending soon. Non-openers, in turn, receive a more enticing "not to be missed!" subject line.

As you become more segmentation-savvy you can increase the sophistication of your relevant programs; for example, using RFM metrics and online behavior to target audience attributes. However, even the simplest segmentation exercises can significantly increase the relevance of your campaigns in the short term, and spell additional revenue for your business.

Go ahead, get personal

"Dear Valued Customer: the content you are about to read is generic and unlikely to resonate with your specific needs or interests." Obviously not the message you want to send, but it is the message your customer receives when an e-mail fails to address them personally.

Using what you know about your customer to personalize content is a simple yet dramatic step towards more relevant e-mail. After all, if you want your customer to be on a first-name basis with your brand, shouldn't he expect your e-mail program to do the same? Creating a feeling of familiarity with your customer will make it that much easier to build a lasting bond.

From there you should explore the use of profile information and preference center data as a means to target the customer's needs. For example, you can reference the customer's last transaction and offer a discount on a complimentary product. If you have a loyalty program you can remind a customer of their current points balance and what her points are worth. Either way, presenting customers with offers that are created "just for them" will enhance the relationship.

Stop stalling and pull the trigger

Timing is everything in business, and e-mail marketing is no different. When an offer is made at the right time it further drives relevance and increases the likelihood that the customer will take the desired action. The question is how do you ensure that your timing is on target?

Implementing triggers is the most effective means of automating e-mail delivery and connecting it to the most appropriate timing. Through automation you can trigger an e-mail to be sent based on a customer's behavior – from registering for a newsletter to an online purchase to transferring to the next level of a customer loyalty program. Triggers can also be a valuable tool for awakening lapsed customers who have been inactive for an extended period of time.

In fact, when it comes to managing the lifecycle of your customer, triggers are the go-to solution. You can be confident that messages are getting to your customers when they are at their most receptive, which is sure to spark a considerable increase in consumer activity.

Hitch a ride on the customer lifecycle

Ask yourself this question: what are the steps I want a customer to take as they develop a relationship with our brand? Understanding the customer lifecycle will help you determine how and when to interact with your customers along the way. More importantly, it will help you identify the various transitions you want them to make, and what tactics you can use to move them forward in the lifecycle continuum. In many cases, it's as simple as a timely offer.

It's equally important to understand the lifecycle of the product or service that you sell. For example, if your product marketing strategy involves a tryout, you can implement triggers that move them through the trial period and offer an incentive to buy at the end.

Even something as simple as a transactional e-mail should be considered a valuable contact point in the lifecycle. Take advantage of transactional e-mails as an opportunity to cross-sell and up-sell, or create goodwill around your brand by highlighting valuable customer service.

Do I have what it takes to be more relevant?

The important thing to remember is this: relevance is an evolution, not a revolution. It's best to always start simple and have a plan for increasing relevance in a manageable timeframe. Work with your team to prioritize your available relevance tactics: which ones are the most feasible? What will have the most significant impact? What types of data will help us take the next step?

A data audit will help you make some of these decisions and identify what other data types you may want to collect in order to continue segmentation. You should also commit to testing and measuring your results in order to understand what relevance tactics are generating the best return, and where you should focus your next relevance-related program.

Most importantly, remember this: sophisticated Web behavior and click stream data are great. But for building relevant e-mail, the only data you need is right under your nose. Start with the data your e-mail programs generate every day – you'll be surprised by what you can achieve today.