

A decorative banner with an orange-to-yellow gradient background. It features a grid pattern, a globe, and several envelope icons. A line of binary code (0s and 1s) is visible at the bottom of the banner.

## Is It Time to Close the Door on Open Rates?

*By Joe Alfano, Senior Account Manager*

In the world of e-mail marketing, one metric has somehow emerged as one of the most important measurement of an e-mail campaign's success. I'm talking, of course, about open rates, those magic numbers that are supposed to tell you everything you need to know about the success of your e-mails.

But do open rates deliver on this promise? And should they be the key metric you use to evaluate success or failure? After all, open rates tell you whether an e-mail was opened, not whether the user read, clicked or even converted into a customer as a result. They represent a single piece of information – clearly not the whole story. And as it turns out, open rate calculation has become more difficult to accurately depict how many people opened your e-mail.

The problem with open rate calculation starts when the e-mail hits the inbox. Two critical elements of your users' environments can affect the accuracy with which they can be reported. The first is the preview pane. If users view e-mails in a preview pane, the e-mail is registered as an open, whether the user reads it or not. Second, if images are blocked on your recipient's computer, the e-mail won't register as open, again, whether or not the user has taken the time to read it. E-mails only register as opened once graphics are downloaded from your server.

### **Good for something**

Before you throw open rates out the window, bear in mind that they do provide valuable feedback on your From and subject lines. If users aren't comfortable with who sent them an e-mail, they'll be less likely to open it. A familiar, easily-identifiable From line is a must. And if your subject line isn't compelling, users will just move on to the next message in an overflowing inbox.

So how much importance should you give open rates when evaluating the effectiveness of your e-mail campaigns? Understanding their limitations and finding ways to work around some of the challenges they present is a good place to start.



### **Step 1: Acceptance**

The first step is accepting that you can't predict or control how users will receive your e-mails. This is because of differences in hardware, ISP or e-mail client software, user comfort level and experience, and myriad other unknowns. The only thing you can be sure of is that you don't know what your users' environment looks like.

### **Step 2: Make the preview pane work for you**

MarketingSherpa estimates that 40 percent of e-mail recipients use the preview pane, whether via horizontal or vertical layout. Recognize that you may have a very small window of real estate to make a connection with your customers. In this limited space, it's vital that your offer and company information — logo, address, phone number — appears where users are likely to see and act upon it. You can also add an extension of the subject line to the area of the e-mail that is visible in a typical preview pane, further drawing recipients into the e-mail and giving them more incentive to interact with you.

### **Step 3: Got an image problem?**

Make sure that users who have images blocked by choice or default still receive valuable content. Again, your company information should be front and center. You can also use HTML "alt" tags, which are used to display a text description of an image when either the image does not display or when a mouse is scrolled over a displayed image. You can also include links to an HTML version, and design the e-mail so that relevant copy appears where the majority of users are likely to see it.

### **Step 4: Keeping it clean**

It's a pretty simple equation — the more up-to-date your e-mail list, the fewer bounces and undeliverables you'll get. This is perhaps the easiest way to improve open rates and maximize the value of your marketing dollars. Ideally, a once a year list scrub is recommended. This not only encourages customers to update their contact information and preferences, it keeps your list clean and sure to hit a viable inbox. If you're experiencing a 10 percent decline in your open rate, it could be attributed to an equal if not greater percentage of your list which is no longer active. Regular list hygiene can improve the value of your open rates.

### **Step 5: Test is not a dirty word**

You're not in high school anymore, so it's time to stop being intimidated by tests. As we saw earlier, open rates really only tell you how effective your From and subject lines are performing. They can



provide quick and easy reads, but testing shouldn't stop there. Once you determine what drives the open you can test offers, link placement, copy length, navigation placement — you name it. And as you learn more from testing, you can refine your campaigns to provide more relevant e-mails that connect with your customers.

**Step 6: Make it matter**

Relevant e-mails will always positively affect open rates. In addition to typical promotional communication strategies, relevant e-mail marketers are also delivering customized, behavior-driven transactional messages that boast open rate percentages in the 60s. Customers are looking for these messages in their inboxes on the heels of a transaction. If I purchase a plane ticket I am going to immediately check my inbox for the e-mail confirmation.

Open rates aren't perfect, but they're not going away anytime soon. Savvy e-mail marketers recognize their limitations and evaluate them in concert with other metrics such as click-through and conversion rates to gain a more accurate, comprehensive picture of an e-mail campaign's success.