



List Management: Think Less, Not More

By Joe Alfano, *Account Director*

Most organizations today share a similar problem when it comes to e-mail marketing: the parties not responsible for sending e-mail or building lists remain fascinated with the size of the total list over everything else. “How many contacts do we have?” they’ll often ask. “What are we doing to grow the list?” The response is often used to determine success.

At first glance, it may seem like list size – the bigger the better! – would be the most important criterion. Instead, the opposite is true. You shouldn’t focus on the size of your total audience; you should concentrate on keeping your list updated with active, engaged customers. It’s the classic “quantity vs. quality” argument, and here it’s all about quality. The size of the list doesn’t matter nearly as much as how well you manage it and how effective you are in engaging active customers and prospects. A recent OpenDialog article, [“Seven Steps to an Effective E-mail Powered Loyalty Program”](#) has practical advice on effectively engaging active customers.

No matter how hard you work to protect your list and earn customer loyalty on all fronts, sometimes it simply isn’t meant to be. So while it may seem counter-intuitive, you will need to make the effort to reduce your list. Experience tells us that as much as 20% of your mailing list can become inactive every year. If you don’t cut back, you are burning budget, hurting deliverability, and damaging your company’s reputation in the process.

With all this in mind, let’s explore some simple tactics that will help you protect the loyal customers on your list, cut your losses, and improve your overall list-management efforts.

Make the important first impression

A new customer opts in to your e-mail because she perceives your brand in a positive light. She has seen you at your best and nothing more – at least, not yet – which is why your approach to the ongoing courtship between brand and customer is so important.

To reinforce your first impression as much as possible, create a welcome message that clearly restates what she signed up for, what types of messages she’ll receive, why she should add you to her address



book, and how she can unsubscribe – now or later. You may even want to sweeten the deal with a special new-customer offer she can act on now, or as a way to lure her back to complete a more detailed preference form. These types of communications solidify the customer’s positive impression and help her stay engaged in the future.

Is it meant to be?

What do you do when a previously engaged customer goes dark? Sometimes you can rekindle an old flame; other times things simply don’t work out. It’s important for you to understand when you can re-engage customers and when it’s time to cut your losses.

Try sending an e-mail message to remind the customer what he signed up for and why this content should still be valuable to him. At the same time, you can offer him the chance to tell you what the problem is and how he’d like you to solve it. Again, consider including a special offer inviting him to update his preferences and make the mailings more relevant. Finally, you can direct him to your unsubscribe page and let him remove himself.

This really is your last shot with this group, so you have nothing to lose. You will retain a few, and who knows – you may learn something that will help prevent future customers from disengaging.

Kick out the deadbeats

Lastly it’s time to identify inactive, non-responsive customers in your database – for fun let’s call this group our deadbeats. Because engagement can decline significantly in as little as a month, it’s important to assess your list to determine when a deadbeat’s attention first begins to wane.

You can do this by segmenting your list into time periods that measure regular intervals from the time the deadbeat first opted in. For example, divide it into periods of two weeks, a month, three months, and six months post-registration. Then compare their activity history, including opens, clicks, and conversions. This can be done quickly and easily using Insight Builder™.

By way of example, you can use these results to create a subset of all customers who haven’t opened or clicked within three months of opt-in. You may want to send them a reminder inviting them to return and update their preferences, or perhaps you could create a special promotion to lure them back. You will get some to re-engage with you, so look to identify patterns and best practices as to why they returned.



If after a week you have not succeeded in re-engaging inactive or non-responsive customers, it's time to eliminate the deadbeats. Like the song says, breaking up is hard to do. At first it will hurt to delete valid e-mail addresses and thereby reduce the size of your list. But you can take comfort knowing that in all likelihood these deadbeats essentially removed themselves already.

Be strong. To implement an effective list-management strategy today, you have to come to grips with purging what may seem like a large percentage of your list. Take a deep breath, swallow hard, and hit the "opt-out" key. Less really is more, and rest assured you're doing the right thing.

After all, these are not lost opportunities if you never really had their attention in the first place. These so-called deadbeats weren't opening or responding to any of your e-mails, so why do you still want to spend your valuable time and money on them?

Consider these parting tips to help you build more lasting value in your customer list:

- When people opt in, treat it like a sacred trust. Their time (and yours) is extremely valuable.
- Offer your customers nothing but value. Leverage relevant content and meaningful offers as a means to build better relationships.
- Come to terms with letting go of disengaged customers after a certain amount of time. Expect that the relationship will someday end and use that as a motivation to avoid.

Managing your list starts from day one and is an ongoing process. But as you proceed, you need to be ruthless in deciding which customers are worth keeping and which are better suited to letting go. It really is an opportunity. The balance of your list – those you want to connect with anyway – will thank you for it because you'll improve their experience with more engaging and relevant messages.