

E-mail Frequency: Dos and Don'ts in a Down Economy

By Courtney Harvey, Program Manager

As 2007 drew to a close, nearly 60% of e-mail marketers cited “managing e-mail frequency” as one of the biggest marketing challenges they expected to face in the next two years.¹ And that was before we could even fathom 2008’s economic outlook. In a tough economy, it may be tempting to dial up the frequency on your e-mail programs to gain a short-term boost in revenue. But is this really the best path to take? The answer is...it depends.

According to Forrester Research, 60% of online consumers feel that they receive too many e-mail offers and promotions.² However, an important 31% of those same consumers value e-mail marketing.³ So how do we grow that 31%? As marketers vie for eyeballs in increasingly cluttered inboxes, relevance continues to be of utmost importance. Communicate the right message at the right time, and you’ll probably make a sale or at least build on positive brand perception. Batch and blast without adding any real value, and you’ll probably create an unhappy or even former customer. To help you avoid this slippery slope, we’ve compiled some dos and don’ts to consider before you hit send.

Do: Increase frequency and engagement

While increased frequency may have a positive impact on the bottom line in the short term, it is important to consider the long-term consequences to your customer relationships. The now defunct online music store, CDNow, learned this lesson the hard way. In response to successful monthly e-mails, the company increased the frequency to twice a month, then once a week, then every three days. Subscribers ignored the too-frequent e-mails, and CDNow went out of business.⁴ On the flip side, increasing frequency and relevance can yield positive results. One e-Dialog client in the health and beauty space recently doubled their frequency from four to eight messages per month over a 15-month period, but did so with highly targeted messaging. While frequency went up, spam complaints were cut in half from .098% to .047% — all due to relevance.

¹ Forrester’s Email Wave Online Survey, Q4, 2007.

² “Winning Email Subscribers In A Down Economy”, Forrester Research, Inc. December 24, 2008.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Break Free From Bad Email: Introducing Forrester’s Four-Step Process To Intentional Email”, Forrester Research, Inc., April 16, 2008.



Don't: Overlook your best customers

If you haven't already, now is the time to cement your best customer strategy. We've said it before: retaining and rewarding your best customers is a critical strategic move, especially in a volatile economy. In uncertain times, consumers seek the products that are touchstone to them; brands that they know and trust. Find opportunities to increase frequency with best customer programs such as real exclusive offers and private sales, simple loyalty programs, or invitations to participate in product development. Ultimately, taking the time to get them engaged with the brand will lead to more sustainable loyalty.

Nike's Air Jordan Flight Club is a prime example of creating a "members only" experience. Nike identified potential members by analyzing e-mail response rates and referrals to their site. They sent these 30,000 loyalists a unique single-use entrance code to gain access to exclusive offers, contests, and product releases, as well as invitations to regional Air Jordan events. Subsequently, the only way to join this exclusive community was to be invited by an existing member through a limited-distribution referral code. Since the start of 2008, membership has doubled to over 70,000, generating over a million visits at five minutes each and a high ROI since launch.⁵

Do: Look for opportunities in the customer lifecycle

Take a closer look at each stage of your customer lifecycle, and you will likely find multiple opportunities to bump up your frequency. For example, perhaps it's time for your new customer welcome message to become a welcome sequence. Follow up the first feel-good message with a second touch touting a compelling offer. Or in the case a multiple purchaser who has left items in his shopping cart, use an abandoned shopping cart (ASC) program to draw him back in. It doesn't have to be complicated – just a simple reminder message. Retailers have seen revenue increases as high as seven times greater for an ASC message when compared with a standard marketing message.⁶ If you already have an ASC program, kick it up a notch from one touch to two messages and consider adding an incentive. A micro-test conducted by Marketing Experiments Journal found that a second touch can increase ASC conversion rates by 26%, and that adding an incentive can boost the recovery rate by nearly three-fold.⁷

Don't: Make yourself look desperate or risk deliverability

What you view as increased frequency may be seen by your customers as constant bombardment. This can lead to consumer fatigue and ultimately unsubscribes. Furthermore, you don't want to diminish your brand's reputation by constantly pushing "specials," "FREE offers" and "discounts." Overuse of these terms, amongst others, could trigger spam filters, have ISPs block you, and negatively impact deliverability. Remember that industry bloggers and media are consumers too. They are most certainly on your e-mail lists and will take any opportunity to either praise or criticize.

⁵ http://www.forrester.com/Groundswell/energizing/flight_club.html

⁶ "Break Free From Bad Email: Introducing Forrester's Four-Step Process To Intentional Email", Forrester Research, Inc., April 16, 2008.

⁷ <http://www.marketingexperiments.com/improving-website-conversion/shopping-cart-recovery.html>



Do: Test different perspectives and contact strategies

While mulling over the frequency question for your e-mail programs, don't be afraid to do some testing. And by testing, we don't necessarily mean a complicated multi-cell extravaganza. It could be as simple as an A/B split comparing two different contact strategies (e.g., daily vs. weekly or two-touch vs. three-touch program). Or you could try sending the same offer in a different wrapping such as an e-newsletter against a short promotional blurb. Even simple tests can provide meaningful direction as you formulate your program strategies.

Don't: Forget to give your customers a voice

Perhaps the best way of meeting customers' frequency expectations is to simply ask them. According to Forrester Research, 52% of consumers would like to control the frequency of the e-mail messages they receive.⁸ Provide choices in your opt-in language or preference center so customers can select their preferred frequency level (e.g., would you like our daily specials, or monthly newsletters?).

The same applies if you've got a special promotion in the works where you plan to increase the frequency. A good example of this is T.J.Maxx's 2007 holiday program where customers had the opportunity to sign up to receive a series of 12 daily holiday e-mails. The 12 e-mails had an average open rate of over 23%, and an average unique click rate of over 5%. And in a follow-up survey, most customers said they enjoyed the program and would like to see it come back the next year.

Conversely, Restoration Hardware was flogged in the blogs for sending seven semi-identical e-mails over the course of five days to promote their friends and family event. In this case, customers had not opted-in for a higher frequency of communication and it left a bad taste. Whether you collect the data through an opt-in or a special poll, it is all about managing expectations. But a word to the wise — if you ask customers what they want, be prepared to deliver.

As the economic showdown unfolds, the temptation to boost frequency will be omnipresent. Keep in mind that increasing frequency alone probably won't give you the results you want, but increasing relevance should. After all, as they say, "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

⁸"Winning Email Subscribers In A Down Economy", Forrester Research, Inc., December 24, 2008.