Five Steps to Successful Prospecting With Email Marketing

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Email marketing is soaring. Now firmly proven to generate the fastest direct marketing return on investment, it is successfully used in both customer acquisition and retention. For the most part, commercial email has evolved over the past decade into a legitimate and highly accountable marketing channel based on the principles of *permission*. The concept of obtaining permission to send marketing messages to recipients, and of encouraging prospects and customers to proactively and affirmatively provide information about themselves to enhance targeting and message relevancy remains the bedrock of its foundation.

While seeking *customer* email addresses and the permission to use them is a fairly common and achievable practice, *prospecting* via email can require more planning and strategy than simply emailing to a house list. Further complicating the landscape is the fact that email marketing to rented lists has been cited as both a best and worst performing online marketing tactic. So which is it?

Since most marketers know a lot more about their customers than their non-customers, there are many unanswered questions when it comes to prospecting with email: Where do you find permission-quality email lists and how do you then construct and send a marketing campaign to an audience who may not know you? How do you entice an audience who hasn't done business with you before to not only trust, but also engage with you online? And what must occur at your response destination (Web page or otherwise) to ensure that responders *convert* into customers?

Read on to learn the five most important steps to successful prospecting with permission email:

1) **Get To Know Your List**

   Just as there is a universe of direct mail lists, there are now hundreds, if not thousands, of email lists available for rental. But all email marketing lists are not created equal. Permission is even more critical when emailing prospects than customers. After all, a customer who has an established relationship with you may forgive an initial or occasional unsolicited email message – but a prospect will not. If you are not using 100% affirmative consent opt-in lists for email prospecting you not only risk the damage to your brand caused by being labeled a spammer, worse yet you negatively impact your deliverability thus killing the potential for subsequent email marketing efforts to the same audience.

   After ensuring that your list sources are genuinely 100% single or double opt-in, your most important consideration should be the *relevancy* of your offer to the audience. For

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example, an email marketing campaign from an airline offering a vacation package to Orlando is appropriately targeted to a list of people interested in Travel & Leisure, but may be considered spam if sent to individuals interested only in Business Travel. A critical step in ensuring your email marketing adheres to permission marketing standards is knowing your target audience is *specifically interested* in what you have to offer. The more specific their stated interests, the better, even if this results in smaller list inventories.

Finally, since a prospecting effort implies the use of another company's (or division's or affiliate's) customer list, the more detail you can glean about those list members, the richer your targeting will be. Whether you're working directly with an email list owner or through a broker/manager, don't be shy about asking lots of questions.

Email List Rental Questions

❑ What is the source of the names on the list? (This may be obvious – such as a company that rents its customer file – or less so. If you don't ask, you won't have a basis for understanding the type and degree of permission used to build the list)

❑ How often is the list mailed?

❑ Have list members indicated a preference for when and how often they'd like to receive email, and are those preferences adhered to?

❑ Which percentage of the list can accept messages in HTML? Text only?

❑ What's the average monthly unsubscribe rate and what was it the last time the list was mailed?

❑ What's the average monthly undeliverable rate?

❑ Have companies like mine (or offers similar to mine) rented or been mailed to the list before? If so, what sorts of click-through and conversion rates were achieved?

The more you get to know the list owner or can be sure that your broker does, the more informed and precisely targeted your email marketing campaign will be. Speaking of targeting . . .

2) **Tailor Offer and Creative to Both Your Audience and the Channel**
   Remember – you're reaching people who have specifically stated they want to receive marketing messages in their inbox – so simply retrofitting a direct mail piece or print ad won't cut it. You need to think in a whole new medium and craft your campaign

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accordingly. The rule of the game is customization, and since technology makes this not only possible, but also easy to do, you have no excuse for ignoring this vital step.

When devising your offer, the more exclusive you can make it to your target audience, the better your response is likely to be. If you have a standard offer running in print or broadcast, kick it up a notch for email marketing. Maybe your normal 15% discount becomes a 20% discount for the email channel. Perhaps there's a free gift with purchase not available via other offer redemption methods, or the ever-popular free shipping for online orders only.

There are many ways to tweak an existing offer. Better yet, come up with a completely new one that's not only relevant and exclusive to your audience, but also timely because it's themed around a buying season, holiday, or known past behavior.

Once you've finalized your offer, it's time to write and design your message, and this is where it's paramount to be "thinking online". The attention span of the average person when online is drastically shorter than their attention span when interacting with offline media such as direct mail, catalogs, or print ads. And with growing email box congestion, you have only seconds to make an impression and get your message opened. Leverage your offer and, if you have it, a well-known brand name in your subject line to improve open rates.

Once you get prospects over the first hurdle of opening your message, you need to hook them and keep them reading. Short, digestible blocks of copy and bulleted lists often work best since most people scan email before reading it, or never fully read it. Providing your audience with graphic cues that draw the eye toward clear calls to action will increase response. So will constructing your message with a single, focused objective (remember – you don't have to cram multiple offers into one message – you can always email again) and providing multiple links for response. Within text copy you'll want at least two action-oriented click-able links: one toward the top and the other at the bottom of the message. It also pays to make HTML components like photos, buttons, logos and banners clickable links leading straight to your landing page(s).

3) **Test, Test, Test!**
   There's no question about it – email is *the* ideal marketing test channel because there are a wide variety of elements to test, it's easy and cost-effective to create multiple segments and message versions, and the results are virtually instantaneous. If you're committed to prospecting with permission email, by all means use your campaigns as an opportunity to learn exactly which combination of audience, offer, creative and delivery variables drives the best response.

Testing lists and audience segments is usually the most logical place to start. Because you may be renting multiple lists, all of which will yield different response rates, it's worth your while to isolate those that perform best. After all, an email marketing campaign with your strongest offer and the most ingenious creative will be useless – or worse yet, considered spam – if it's not targeted to individuals *for whom it is relevant*. Test to find out exactly who those individuals are, and on which lists or list segments they reside.

While many email marketers choose to begin testing in the audience segmentation area, it's certainly possible to test offer and creative variables simultaneously if not subsequently. Some of those that impact performance most are subject line, offer type (free vs. paid), and landing page. Ironically it is the landing page, not even part of the email message, which nonetheless plays a monumentally important role in the success of nearly all email marketing campaigns.

4) **Don't Let Your Site Let You Down**
Steps one through three focused on email campaign and message development and will largely impact click-through rates. But click-through is only the beginning of the response process in email marketing. True response, also known as *conversion*, occurs 95% of the time in this channel on a Web page. If you're like most email marketers you'll be driving campaign responders to your Website via click-able links in an email message. Unless your ultimate objective is simply to generate site traffic, what happens when those prospects arrive on your landing page(s) makes the difference between a successful email marketing initiative and a flop.

That's because what happens on landing pages is the process of *conversion* – the completion of your desired call to action, whether that be registration, purchase, download, or some other transaction. It is vitally important that after the monetary and time cost that goes into an email prospecting campaign, your site validates your offer and supports your conversion process quickly, seamlessly, and without distraction.

To be sure it does, follow these four steps:
A. If you don't already have a page on your site that specifically relates to the primary call to action in your email campaign, develop a landing page (or "bridge page") to literally "bridge the gap" between your message and your standard Web site. If your email marketing campaign is deployed in HTML, then ideally your landing page creative will mirror its design.

B. Don't send responders to your home page or they could end up almost anywhere on your site and probably won't find the path to conversion on their own. You'll likely end up with a high abandonment rate and frustrated visitors if you "dump" responders onto a busy or cluttered home page.

C. Outline the optimal conversion path/process you'd like responders to take on your site, then *test it yourself* to be sure it is fast and flawless. Ensure data fields and forms work, electronic payments can be handled, and page load times are not too long. The *more efficient* your conversion process, the *higher* your conversion rate.

D. You'd be amazed at how one tiny flaw in the programming of an order entry or registration page can kill conversion from an email marketing campaign. You can't work too closely with your IT or Web group and in fact, the more you involve your developers in understanding your marketing objectives and online conversion processes, the more interested they'll be in helping you succeed.

5) Track Beyond the Click-Through
In the online world it's possible to track and gauge a wider range of response behavior than in the offline world. For example, we know it is difficult if not impossible to discern the extent of interaction occurring with a direct mail piece prior to conversion. We know some level of involvement with the piece happens (it may be opened, it may be read), but almost never know at what point that engagement ceased if the prospect does not ultimately respond.

So it's essential in email marketing to track a variety of response actions in order to evaluate the performance of both the email marketing message and the conversion destination(s). Open rate, click-through rate, and conversion rate each play a critical role in determining ROI, which is why it's not enough to measure click-through alone. It is possible and not unusual to see high (by offline standards) click-through rates in email marketing, often upwards of 10% or 20%. But unless conversion is also measured, you'll never know if your email campaign delivered on its promise. You also especially need to track conversion – and all the steps involved in it – to be able to diagnose a potential problem with your landing page, Website or payment/sign-up process.

Finally, even tracking online conversion isn't the final frontier. Studies have proven that email marketing influences both instant and latent responses, both online and offline. Only by tracking conversions within and across response channels (if distinct multiple channels exist) can you measure the totality of your campaign's performance.

The beauty of any direct marketing medium lies in its accountability, and permission email is no exception. In fact, email marketing is *more* measurable, *more* accountable, and *more* instantaneous than almost any other direct marketing channel. What other marketing activity can not only give you a birds-eye view of exactly what's working and how well, but also deliver lightning-fast results and insight you can quickly apply the next time around? Done right and with a little practice, prospecting with permission email will allow you to reap the benefits of direct marketing in the burgeoning online world.

About Synchronicity Marketing

Synchronicity Marketing is a leading provider of email marketing training, professional education, coaching, and consulting. The company is dedicated to enlightening brands, business owners and independent professionals on better use and alignment of email, social, and content marketing **to create improved customer engagement, more revenue and higher ROI**. Founded and led by Karen Talavera, a 20-year email and direct response marketing expert, Synchronicity Marketing offers structured coaching and training programs for professionals who need support and direction implementing email marketing in their organizations. The company is a founding and current member of the Email Experience Council (EEC) of the DMA.

Talavera has worked with clients ranging from A&E, Kaiser Permanente, ServiceMaster, Texas Instruments, Applied Materials, and the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau to agencies, associations and solo-preneurs. Karen designed – and actively teaches – the email marketing training and certification programs for the Online Marketing Institute, the Direct Marketing Association, MarketingProfs, and the Association of National Advertisers. Prior to founding Synchronicity Marketing in 2003, Karen held senior marketing positions at YesMail, Acxiom Digital, and Experian.

Karen shares email and digital marketing insights on the **Enlightened Emarketing** blog (http://www.synchronicitymarketing.com) and welcomes connections there as well as on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Synchronicity Marketing was founded in 2003 and is located near Miami Florida.

For a free consult to learn more about the company's training, coaching or consulting services contact Synchronicity Marketing at 561.967.9665 or via info@synchronicitymarketing.com