

# We're not in Kansas anymore.

A hands-on guide to successfully navigating  
email marketing's new set of rules.



### want to ensure this eBook is useful?

Check the summary below to determine if your level matches the content you are about to read.

#### resource level: **introductory**

This 101 intro information is for smart marketers who are starting to dabble with components of email marketing. This content typically includes basic nuts and bolts information to help kick-start success. You'll walk away with a solid understanding of fundamentals to build upon. Giddy up.

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what it is, what it isn't and why it works
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“Email marketing’s ROI is **strong**: it returned an estimated average of \$32.36 for each \$1 spent in 2012.”

DMA National Client Email Report 2013



## Our roots are in email marketing.

So we want to help you do it right — and do it now. A **GREAT** email marketing strategy will offer you a level of engagement with your potential customers on a level you might have never thought possible.

You see, when executed correctly, email marketing offers you a massive opportunity: the opportunity to build a solid, lasting relationship with your potential clients. Email marketing is a method for nurturing that relationship from seedling to sprout to beanstalk. The end result: you don't just get the one sale. You get a loyal customer who returns again and again.

PLUS, you gain the ability to analyze what components of your email marketing are working — and which ones aren't, to better focus your future marketing efforts.

It's time to learn the ropes.

And hey, email marketing has changed over the last few years. So, if you were previously fairly knowledgeable on the subject, this eBook might also be an opportunity for you to explore new tools and tips of this evolving trade.

As we said, we're not in Kansas anymore.

Grab Toto. **Let's go!**

# 1 Email marketing 101:

what it is, what it isn't and why it works

“Data is the currency of the new millennium: if it’s clean, usable and you know how to profit from it.”

**Johnathan Crawford**  
*VP of Marketing Services  
Cultivate Communications*

It’s true: Email addresses are valuable currency — but you need to understand both how to use this currency to your advantage and just how damaging improper use can be.

So what’s all this about “email marketing” I’ve been hearing about...?

Sending emails to promote your business? Sounds old-fashioned to some. But there’s a reason email marketing is still around and still in use by the majority of the most successful businesses out there.

Put simply: **Email marketing works** — and there’s much more to it than shooting out a bunch of random emails. Email marketing has come a long way from long, blinking emails screaming BUY BUY BUY! Nowadays, email marketing is an extremely useful tool to attract and nurture more business — and that means more money in your pocket.

We're not going to waste any time: the key to successful email marketing is developing a relationship with each potential client. You can't just send out emails to anyone and everyone. You have to draw in your target market first, through great content strategy, to build a strong (e)mailing list.

To encourage further interaction over time, you're going to want to engage your audience by:

- **Writing killer subject lines.**
  - o (After all, what good is your email if no one's opening it?)
- **Showcasing a memorable and unique company brand through a consistent "voice" and effective messaging.**
  - o Creating engagement and brand trust is a process, so you want to be solid every step of the way.

## TIP

GREAT email marketing is just one part of a GREAT content marketing strategy! Download our Content Marketing eBook here: [Side Door Thinking](#)

- **Sharing content your well-targeted niche market loves to read and loves to share with others.**
  - o A social share, an email forward or a word-of-mouth referral is **GOLDEN!** Think about how often your personal purchases are the direct result of a referral from a friend. Yea, shareable content is **BIG TIME** valuable.

*More on Email Content and all that fun stuff in Chapter 2...*

Let's get back to basics...

## Rewind: What you should and shouldn't do

Before you start creating your brilliant content and engaging your ever-awaiting audience, you need to know the basic DOs and DON'Ts of email marketing.

*(Trust me, if you don't read this section, it's definitely gonna cost ya.)*

Back in 2003, the FTC enacted the CAN-SPAM Act, a compliance guide for businesses that use email marketing for commercial purposes.

We're talkin' businesses that send email marketing with the primary purpose of distributing:

- **Commercial Content:** Content advertising or promoting a commercial product or service, including content on a website operated for a commercial purpose;
- **Transactional or Relationship Content:** Content that facilitates an already-agreed-upon transaction or updates a customer about an ongoing transaction; and
- **Other Content:** Content that doesn't fall into the commercial or transactional or relationship categories

Download a PDF version of the **CAN-SPAM Act**, and read all about it [here](#).

Businesses must adhere to these guidelines or risk facing fines of

**up to \$16,000 for EACH separate violation!**

That's no small potatoes! Some examples of these guidelines include providing a means for someone to opt-out of your email communications and including a valid physical postal address within your correspondence. Following the compliance guidelines isn't complicated, so familiarize yourself with them to avoid unwanted headaches.

## Building your list...

To send out your email marketing, you're going to need people to send it TO, right? How you build your (e)mailing list depends on how you run your business and your overall marketing strategy.

But, really, the possibilities are endless!

## It's time to get creative.

Here are a few ideas:

- Offer a sign-up form at industry trade shows
- Put a fishbowl on the counter so visitors and customers can drop in their business card for a free product or service
- Have your sales team gather email addresses at off-site meetings
- Add a sign-up form right on your website
- Use social media to grab attention!
  - Add a sign-up link on your Facebook and Twitter pages
  - Ask your employees to share email content and sign up information in their LinkedIn groups and across other social media
- If you already send out or hand out mailers, postcards or brochures, include an easy link for entering an email address.
  - Better yet, offer a QR Code, it's scannable by cellphones for super-easy sign up!

## Chapter 1: Now you know...

- Email Marketing WORKS, especially when you know how to create great content to engage your audience.
- You need to read the CAN-SPAM Act! (Go do it right now—this eBook will be here when you get back. We promise.)
- How you build your list is up to you. Get creative, but don't be shady!

If you haven't figured it out already, there's definitely a right way and a wrong way to do all this great email marketing stuff. Which leads us to the next chapter...

## 2 Current best practices: do it right and get results

“The smart money is on a content strategy.”

**Bob Wendt**

*President*

*Cultivate Communications*

As we discussed in Chapter 1, the number one rule in email marketing: **don't show up uninvited**. When you build your own lists using form data from your own website, you bypass a lot of the no-nos that will get your email marketing categorized as spam (and could potentially get you into very expensive legal trouble).

Before we dive in and explore modern email marketing best practices, here's what you need to know NOW:

- Email marketing always has been and always will continue to be a retention-based medium — meaning email marketing allows you to stay top-of-mind with the people you're already engaged with at some level.
- Email marketing is NOT an effective lead generation tool in and of itself.

Got it? Good. Now let's dig in...

## List renting: Tread carefully

Let's talk about an age old email marketing debate: When is it ok, if ever, to buy an email list?

The short answer: **Never. ...EVER.**

In fact, the only time it's appropriate to ever exchange money for email data is when you're **renting** a very targeted list from a **reputable managed list broker**.

You see, there's a publication for just about every industry that's out there. Over time, these print publications and their paid subscription bases have migrated online. These online publications draw a very specific type of audience and they typically rent out their subscription lists to companies offering **specific content relevant to their audience**.

For example, let's say your company develops sophisticated 3D Computer Aided Design software for product development in the aerospace industry. That's a very targeted market you can tap into by selecting various criteria to match your campaign objectives, then paying to **rent** an email list.

Here's the deal: managed list vendors are **very critical of what type of content they allow** to be sent to their audience and typically offer their lists on a rental basis only. So renting lists is definitely NOT FOR EVERYONE.

### TIP

For more info on list renting, check out our blog post on email lists [here!](#)

## The opt-in process: Yea, do it

Awhile back, we asked a group of email marketing professionals to name the email marketing best practices they now considered outdated. Strangely enough, quite a few of our fellow email marketing professionals named the opt-in method as a thing of the past.

As data driven marketers, we decided to investigate and get down to the numbers.

Get this: In case after case we reviewed, lists built using an opt-in method outperformed all other methods across the board. We also learned most people based their decisions about the opt-in process purely on assumptions — and not hard data. At the end of the day, **opt-in lists perform better** because the people willing to jump through the opt-in hoops end up being more engaged. “Hoops,” such as follow-up verification emails and clickthroughs to confirmation pages, act as a filter of sorts.

Opt-ins separate the folks who really want your content from those who may have signed up on a whim and will likely become unengaged list fluff.

## Email content

As you capture all that useful opt-in data, you're building a valuable database of potential customers interested in your content. Now's the time to capitalize on that pipeline and provide even more targeted content to keep them interested.

SO, it's time to create **GREAT** email content to nudge those opt-ins down the path to making the purchase.

We like to say, "Email is a vehicle to take you from one place on the web to another." Your website should be the hub of your content marketing efforts, so structure your email with short scannable content that drives people back to your blog or website with strong calls to action.

Avoid the urge to "show up and throw up" with lengthy emails that scroll. If it's absolutely necessary, consider using a table of contents in your template.

Studies show you've got an average of 5 seconds before a person decides to read or delete your message. **FIVE SECONDS!** Better make that hook amazing and that content darn good. When you take into account that a ton of people are consuming your message on a mobile device while on the go, that window for attention gets even tinier.

Need to read: [5 Email Pitfalls to Avoid!](#)

As a general rule, each of your emails should contain:

- **An Irresistible Hook.** If you can't catch their attention in 5 seconds with a great email subject line, you've lost them for good.
- **A Strong Call to Action.** Be sure to include a call-to-action in each email to encourage your potential customers to further engage with your company. Place the call-to-action button "above the fold" so it's hard to miss.
- **Great Writing.** Engaging copywriting is essential to grabbing their attention — and keeping it. Break your email into sections so it's easy to scan and stick with the "5 Cs" — great copy is: clear, concise, compelling, consistent and correct.
- **Simple Design.** Yea, make it look good, but don't overdo it. Follow [email design best practices](#) for optimum results.

*We just can't stress this enough...*

**Any email marketing effort is only as strong as the content strategy driving it.** More often than not, we see businesses that struggle with content creation and end up creating "me, me, me" content.

**Guys: It is SO NOT about you.**

No one cares how great (you say) your company is or how fabulous (you say) your widgets are. At the end of the day, what a potential customer really wants to know is not how awesome your company is, but **HOW** your widget is going to **help them solve a problem**. How can your company make someone else be a hero?

The smart money is on a content strategy that serves the needs of your audience. Understand **what motivates a buying decision** with your target audience and **tailor your content** to their needs. These needs will vary, so instead of the “fire hose” approach of sending everything to everyone, segment your list so you can send specific content to different groups.

## Let's talk triggers.

You're going to want to set up automated emails to follow-up with your subscribers, but in a way that makes them feel LOVED and not WATCHED.

Read: [Don't be creepy, people...seriously.](#)

The best way to send the right message at the right time is to set up automated

email triggers. Triggers are “sprung” by customer-initiated actions. So maybe that subscriber provides you with their birthday, or checks a box indicating a particular product preference, or enters in their location. **Bam!** Now you've got some very specific information you can use to offer a personalized follow-up email, based on that info.

Because the customer is the one who started the interaction with your company, it's far more likely that he or she will open, read — and then **act** on — a trigger message than on an unsolicited email or direct mail piece.

## Chapter 2: Now you know...

- Never buy lists, maaaybe rent lists, ALWAYS go opt-in.
- Email marketing is about retention. Keep 'em happy, keep 'em interested, and keep 'em hooked with GREAT content.
- Always tailor your content to your readers. Help them. An easy way to offer snappy content is to set up trigger emails.

Trigger happy? Check out [Be Sure Your Next Message Gets Opened – Use Triggers.](#)

### 3 The nitty gritty: tools and tricky stuff

“Do you know your  
email sender score?  
***You should.***”

**Mike Kissel**  
*Digital Marketing Specialist*  
*Cultivate Communications*

While we use a program (*like Outlook*) or a webmail service (*like Gmail*) to send a message to a colleague or client, sending a commercial email to many people requires an email service provider that can do a lot of the heavy lifting.

Enter Email Service Providers (ESPs)...

#### **Email Service Providers (ESPs)**

have technology platforms capable of sending what’s known as “multipart/alternative” format messages, which entails embedding both an image-heavy HTML template along with a plain-text version of the same email. When people on the receiving end of your email don’t have the capability to view HTML email, the plain-text version will display instead. (Hey, it’s not all that common anymore, but it’s still a thing.)

Here are just a few things ESPs can do...

### Authentication

Email service providers have other whiz-bang technology like servers that can authenticate your messages, which helps prove you're not a spammer. Because email is a very easy way to communicate with people, it's also very easily spoofed. Authentication is a digital way of preventing spam from leaking in, so Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and corporate email servers use authentication to control inbound spam.

### Tracking Activity

Email service providers also enable you to track exactly who's opening your messages and what they're clicking on. These tools are a great indicator of not only what your subscribers are interested in, but also a method for determining what's working in your emails — and what's not.

For those of you who don't know how this tracking works it's not black magic, but it is pretty neat.

**TIP**

Learn more here:

[Demystifying Email Open and Clickthrough Tracking](#)

The answer lies in the way images are handled in an HTML email message. The nice images you see in an HTML email are not actually physically sent along for the ride through cyberspace. The file size to transmit a message like that would simply be too large. (It's for this same reason we can't embed a video directly into an email, and instead have to link to it.) For images to show up in an HTML email, we must give them what's called an absolute file path. (That's fancy talk for giving each image a dedicated URL.)

With this in mind, email tracking makes a bit more sense. Open tracking only works for people who view an HTML version of your email message. Prior to sending your email, a small 1x1 pixel clear image is automatically placed on the bottom of the HTML file. Whenever the email is opened and viewed, the email program calls to the servers where the images are hosted at an absolute file path. When the images get served up, the server is able to tell the 1x1 pixel was downloaded and counts it as an "Open" in tracking reports.

**...told you it was neat.**

## Tool time.

There are a bunch of great Email Service Providers (ESPs) and Email Marketing Tools out there to help you manage your email marketing campaigns.

Here are a few we like that you may want to consider:

- [VerticalResponse](#)
- [Silverpop's Engage Email Marketing](#)
- [MailChimp](#)
- [iContact](#)

Most are reasonably priced, but be sure you research thoroughly and seek out the email marketing services that best suit your company's long-term email campaign management needs.

**Want more than just email marketing management? You're looking for automated marketing solutions. Download our Content Marketing eBook for a taste of the action: [Side Door Thinking](#).**

To step it up, hit this up: [9 Tools for Successful Email Marketing](#)

What do the new Gmail tabs mean for your email marketing? [Find out HERE](#)

## Tricky stuff: Staying on the bright side (of ISP performance tracking)

Being a successful email marketer means navigating some unique challenges. The entire industry has been shifting away from practices that were considered acceptable just a few years ago. For example, 10 years ago you may have been handed a packet of papers filled with keywords certain to get your email blocked by content filters. Today, it's just not that simple.

While this content filtering still happens to some degree today, Internet Service Providers with webmail products have started placing a greater importance on what are known as **engagement metrics**, or things like:

- Whether your messages were read, then deleted **OR** deleted without ever being read
- Whether your messages were replied to
- The number of abuse (spam) complaints
- The frequency of receiving/reading a message from a source
- The number of hard bounces

Some of the worst offenders on the list are hard bounces and spam complaints, which are commonly associated with purchased lists and spammers. All of these engagement factors provide signals that get logged against the IP address of the server used to send your email.

This data is then used to create a **sender score**, which is very much *like a credit score for email marketers* that shows you're a legitimate and trustworthy sender (or that you're not) and affects whether your messages land in the inbox, or are dumped into the junkmail folder.

Sending to dead email addresses is a bad thing, but equally as bad is sending email to people who haven't given you permission to do so. Every time someone

hits a "This is Spam" button, that information is relayed back to the Internet Service Provider through what is known as a feedback loop. (All major internet service providers offer them.) You can and should tap into this feedback loop reporting so that you can immediately purge people from your list that mark messages as spam instead of unsubscribing.

**Too many spam complaints logged against your IP address and you can find yourself blacklisted.** (Yet another reason why an opt-in approach makes sense!)

Be in the know. [Find your sender score — Now.](#)



## More tricky stuff: Design woes

Something else to think about: Just creating an email can be a challenge in itself. Email service providers provide helpful canned templates you can drag and drop images and text into, but if you want something custom with a high production value you'll need someone who can code HTML.

\*Not any old HTML, but web design ninja from the 90's HTML. Seriously!\*

The programs we all use to read our email messages (A.K.A. email clients) all have various limitations with regards to interpreting code and no standardization whatsoever. This means that the same code that renders

fine in different internet browsers may go wonky in totally different ways when viewed in Outlook 2003 vs. Outlook 2010 vs. Gmail and so on.

Many talented web developers have been frustrated by the limitations of email clients. For example, where a web developer may use DIV tags to organize content, the email client may only read email content organized using tables. Also, much of the super-fancy stuff you can do with CSS or JavaScript in an internet browser simply isn't supported by email programs.

### **The more you know... right?**

## Chapter 3: Now you know...

- ESPs are the way to go. They'll help you track all kinds of great information to better optimize your future content. They'll also make this whole email marketing thing way easier, for a multitude of reasons.
- Do your homework: Research your ESP before committing to save you headaches in the long run.
- Avoid getting into tricky situations by following our best practices recommendations. Track your sender score to nip problem areas in the bud.

## 4 The right stuff: examples of GREAT email marketing



### Example 1 Zulily

*Transactional email, automated send  
based on trigger date*



[View the Zulily email on Pinterest](#)

### What makes this email ROCK

- The shop and share button is above the fold. So, even if this message gets truncated by the customer's email browser that primary call to action will show up.
- Zulily.com showcases their primary call to action as a visual button and a second time as a text link within the copy of the ecard. This ensures they capture the attention of visual and contextual customers.
- The primary call to action button is RED. It screams "click me."
- This email is ALL about the customer: their accumulated credit amount is at the top right hand corner (encouraging them to shop), their name is dynamically generated within the above the fold copy, a "social butterfly" comment boasts their ego, and the invitation section is written from the first person "my invitations." All and all, stellar!
- The primary audience is moms, so the imagery and cute copy are perfect.

- They've done a great job incentivizing the customer to continue sharing. Above the fold they remind the reader they will get a \$20 credit for referrals. The dynamically generated credits amount in the header and invitation number in the footer let the customer know where they stand. Even the secondary call to action is written within the copy "Remind them" and then presented again as a button. They utilize the red again within the button drawing attention to the request. Using the red for the label, rather than the button color itself, lets it stand strong, but still play second fiddle to "shop and share."
- The cherry on top of the sundae? Zulily.com keeps their automated refer-a-friend emails creative to ensure their customers don't get bored with their re-occurring messages. They continue to swap out the primary image and copy every time they send the message. Click to see [six examples of the main portion](#) of this transactional email. Hot dog!

## Example 2 Kiwi Crate

*Promotional email, sent April 10, 2013*



[View the Kiwi-Crate email on Pinterest](#)



## What makes this email ROCK

- Logo is in prime real estate (top left hand corner).
- The primary call to action is showcased visually as a play button and also as "watch now" text.
- The company is playful with their email branding and uses unique items like hand drawn play buttons, promotional pushboxes (top right corner), and a creative footer.
- Kiwi Crate gives their customers value added content. Not only do they promote the theme of their next crate, they provide parents with free DIY resources.
- The company showcases their big-wig retailer partner Pottery Barn Kids to build authority with their target audience.
- The circle for the "\$750 value" and the play button are parallel in size and color pulling the eye back and forth between the primary and secondary call to action.
- Orange is said to be the most clicked on color of the web. Even though the craft room campaign is the secondary call to action the headline and "enter now" orange demand your attention.
- Faces! Heat map studies show people gravitate towards faces. Kiwi Crate does a great job of mixing promotional imagery (polished video clip) with everyday kids (DIY section).
- Kiwi Crate doesn't just say "follow us on Pinterest or Facebook," they showcase the awesome content they are sharing on the social network to entice parents to connect.

## Example 3 Land of Nod

*Promotional email, sent during holiday season*



[View the Land of Nod email on Pinterest](#)

## What makes this email ROCK

- This showcases the classic theory K.I.S.S. Keep it simple (and) silly.
- This is a wonderful visual play on traditional text-only email. The simple header brands it Land of Nod and makes it easy for customers to shop without taking away from the content itself.
- The content rocks. What I love? The general nature of the “to” field and the play on words with the intro “Deer Holiday Shopper.”
- The non-traditional blue link color of the primary call to action coordinates with the secondary gift card call to action, drawing your eye back and forth between the two.
- The shipping deadlines remind customers it is still ok to shop online and ensure holiday delivery.
- Many companies have abandoned the “forward to a friend” button. However, when sending customers something humorous it never hurts to ask them to share (whether it be forwarding or on a social network).
- The green forward to a friend button stands out in contrast to the rest of the email brings attention to the call to action. The green is also complimentary to the holiday red!



# 5 Looking ahead: what's new and what's up

“By 2016 there will be over 10 billion devices worldwide...that's 1.4 for every person in the world.”

Cisco Global Mobile Data Traffic  
Forecast Update, 2012-2017

## The big picture.

Let's look into our crystal ball and offer some insight as to what the future of email marketing holds. As we said earlier, the industry will continue to shift towards a permission-based model. If you haven't revisited your strategy for collecting email addresses in awhile, now's the time to start looking for bad eggs in your data and consider an opt-in process. You'll want to look for inactive subscribers and dead email addresses to purge from your list. If you have the ability to segment your database, pull inactive subscribers into a special segment and try to re-engage with them through a special offer, or ask them politely to unsubscribe. Keep tabs on your sender score — if you regularly purge hard bounces and abuse complaints from your list, you'll avoid signal spikes that can bring your score down.

## So go mobile.

With the explosive growth in mobile devices projected in the next few years, “responsive” is a term you’ll start hearing more of (if you haven’t already). Mobile devices were a game changer for email. Mobile changed the context of how people interact with your content and the way we design. No longer are we chained to our desks with big monitors — today’s small screens let us read work email from bed. (You know you’ve done it.)

This means the HTML template you’ve been using that worked great on a desktop may not work out so well on a smaller screen. Enter [responsive email design](#). It’s no silver bullet, but responsive email design can work wonders with viewing on small screens. Essentially, a responsive template is able to detect the screen size of a mobile

device, then resize itself to look best on that device. Responsive design can also serve to increase font size so it’s legible at arms length, expand previously-mouse-clicked buttons to be taller and more thumb-friendly, resize images, and much more.

**The bottom line:** Responsive email on a tablet or smartphone makes the viewing experience much better.

As our technology continues to accelerate and proliferate into all aspects of our lives, email has stood the test of time. We can probably expect to see more new devices that require exciting new and interactive formats, some beyond our wildest dreams at this point — but they’re coming, and quickly. Just look at cool new tech like Google Glass. I mean, whoa.

What else is on the horizon, and what does it mean for email marketing? Stay tuned. We are.

# Go forth...

connect

When it comes to email marketing, the foundation of an effective strategy ALWAYS comes down to GREAT CONTENT and EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT. Start with a great content strategy paired with an awesome ESP, and you're on a roll.

Keep on top of your performance with tools right within your ESP and by staying on top of your sender score — and ALWAYS use legitimate practices to build your mailing list. Seriously, don't come crying to us if you tried to cheat the system and now you're being punished.

But really, if you need help — please seek out a qualified professional. You're looking for an email marketing ninja who can get you set up and skipping down the path to email marketing success. Get to it!



We're not  
in Kansas  
anymore.

*A hands-on guide  
to successfully  
navigating email*

*marketing's new set of rules.*

by Mike Kissel

Mike comes from a new breed of technical marketing professionals, with the breadth and depth of knowledge to take your digital marketing project full circle, from strategy to execution to analytics.



# connect

Cultivate Communications is a content marketing agency of artists & scientists.

We believe modern marketers need to be artists and scientists. The staff at Cultivate Communications creatively builds campaigns that engage consumers. Then we measure, analyze and calibrate marketing strategies based on data. Technology transforms the marketing environment on a daily basis. Our goal is to help you take advantage of new tools, techniques and strategies.

## connect



## link up

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We measure engagement and quality through your feedback.

Stop by our [comments](#) page and let us know what you think.

**Put an end to your reclusive streak.**

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**C**