Building Creative Email Marketing Strategies

iContact

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It is easy to understand why successful marketing professionals love email marketing. You are probably one of them.

Email marketing is a low-cost, high-return marketing channel built on a solid foundation of permission, which virtually guarantees significant levels of engagement.

Carefully targeted campaigns can be deployed rapidly, with initial campaign analytics showcasing successes within minutes of delivery. This data can then be utilized to improve future campaigns or made available across your organization to aid your sales and/or customer support teams with their daily interactions with potential and existing clients.

Okay, you know this already. But be warned—familiarity can lead to contempt.

The fact that email marketing works so well "out of the box" and can even deliver respectable returns from less than optimized campaigns means that is very easy to become complacent about the channel.

It is perhaps the success and relative ease of email marketing that can lead to one of its greatest failings. It can become something of habit, churned out to suit marketers' schedules, rather than the recipients' needs. In such cases, your email marketing will deliver less than optimized results. When this happens, you need to ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I giving my email marketing campaigns enough thought and attention?
- Could I be producing more creative, targeted campaigns?
- Am I engaging with my clients or just broadcasting?

With a little additional strategy, email marketing can exceed your already elevated expectations of this high-performance channel.

This guide has been developed to help you maximize your email marketing potential through the deployment of creative list building, scheduling, and content marketing strategies. Depending on your available resources, all of the strategies featured here can be executed either in-house or with the support of iContact's advisory services or customer success teams.

Eight Steps to Driving Success from Your Email Marketing Campaigns

Step #1 **Get to Know Your List a Little Better**

A big email marketing list is a good thing, right? Not always.

Too many marketers view their email marketing list in terms of size alone and not by the quality of the individuals (e.g., your existing and potential clients) that make it up. If you don't take time to get to know the people in your list, you stand the risk of sending irrelevant, untimely, and potentially boring emails to the majority of your subscribers. This will result in poor engagement—sometimes referred to as email fatigue—and will lead to declining open rates and click-throughs, and ultimately poor sales. Remember, if you are sending irrelevant emails to your list, you will not only see limited success from your current campaigns, but you also risk your future campaigns.

Get to Know Your List by Identifying the Following People:

- **Customers/Clients:** The further you can segment your customer lists the better. Segment by purchase type, frequency of purchases, purchase value, time of purchase (highlighting any seasonal activity), and any recent purchases.

- **Hot Prospects:** These are people who have expressed an interest in your company by joining your mailing list, but have yet to make a purchase. Again, you should look to segment your lists by product interest and potential opportunity (e.g., a B2B marketer might want to create a list featuring SME prospects versus enterprise prospects, whereas a B2C marketer might want to segment by sex, age, or geography).

- **Brand Ambassadors:** This group of people might never become customers. They could be made up of students researching a particular topic, consultants in your industry, competitors, business partners, journalists and bloggers, etc. While they may never pay for a product or service, they can be very useful in helping you distribute your message and influence new customers along the way.

- **Dead Wood:** This group is unengaged, disinterested, or simply just not there anymore. Either reengage these people or get them off your list. They are costing you money and could potentially damage your reputation.

Only once you have segmented your lists into these various groups (and subgroups, remembering the same names can appear in multiple lists), can you start effectively planning truly engaging campaigns. This doesn't mean you need to create a bespoke campaign for each group. Instead you should look at tweaking the message depending on the list. Remember, a regular customer may need less of an incentive to make a purchase than a less frequent buyer, so be careful how you distribute discounts and sales promotions. A simple change to a subject line, call to action, or offer may be all that is needed to optimize your message accordingly.

> ⭐ **Important:** Your entire list does not need to receive every email you send. Make sure your subscribers only receive messages that are relevant to their interests. You should also be careful not to flood your subscribers' inboxes, so be sure to spread your campaigns out.

Who Can Help?

- **Your CRM System:** If your business uses a CRM system like Salesforce.com correctly, most of the information you will need to segment your list down to the finest detail will be stored within this system.
- **Your Ecommerce Platform:** Depending on how sophisticated a platform you are using, a great deal of the information you will need to segment your lists should be available within your ecommerce software.
- **Your Accounting Software:** Again depending on the sophistication of the software being used, you may be able to pull usable data from your accounting software to help you get to know your lists a little better.

> 👍 **iContact Tip:** Learn how one iContact client got to know their list a little better and drastically improved their segmentation and targeting by running a simple email competition in "What Kind of Fisherman Are You?"

Step #2 Break a Few Bad Habits

Bad habits could include the shotgun approach to email marketing—the ill-planned, hastily produced monthly newsletter and the end-of-month panic when less-than-optimized campaigns are fired out indiscriminately in an attempt to bolster sales figures.

These bad habits are nothing short of lazy attempts at marketing, and you should try your best to break them before they destroy your reputation.

The good news is, now that you have taken the time to get to know your list a little better, it should be much easier to build a proper plan, allowing you to hit that list more effectively.

To build a successful email marketing plan, you'll need to set some objectives. These could include:

- To increase sales by a percentage/unit number or revenue figure
- To drive a specific number of leads into your sales department
- To improve email marketing engagement by improving both open and click-through rates
- To increase social media engagement, resulting in more followers and greater visibility on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, etc.

Once you have set these objectives, take a look at your email marketing history and make an educated guess at how your future campaigns will help you reach these goals. You'll have to guess if you're just getting started and you have no history, but be ready to adjust your targets after your initial campaigns have gone out.

When building a useful email marketing plan, you will want to take note of how any increased activity will be handled across your business. Make sure you have enough resources to handle an increase in sales inquiries, additional orders, etc. A successful campaign can quickly turn sour if you are unable to fulfill your promises to your customers.

⭐ **Important:** While you should include colleagues in helping you build an efficient plan in terms of resources available, try not to involve too many people in the creation or sign-off of your campaigns. As a marketer, this is **YOUR** responsibility. Involving other people will only serve to delay the delivery of your campaigns, as different opinions regarding content and design are aired.
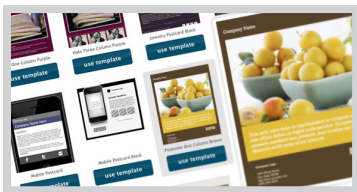
Who Can Help?

- **Merchandisers/Buyers:** The people who buy your stock and merchandize your store. They should be able to give you detailed information about stock availability, pricing, and any special offers that you could potentially create new email campaigns around.
- **Sales Managers:** Nobody will scream louder if their sales department is starved or flooded with leads. They should be able to help you plan on ensuring a steady flow of leads that can be followed up in a timely and professional manner.
- **Warehouse Managers:** Will be able to advise on peaks and troughs on sales, allowing you to plan campaigns around available resources to get your goods out of the door.
- **Customer Support Managers:** A great barometer for the health of your business. Don't be afraid to put campaigns on hold if customer support is facing significant problems from your customer base.

Step #3

Update Your Creatives

When was the last time you took a critical look at your email marketing creatives? Do they portray your business or organization in the light you would want it to be seen in? Do they offer the most optimized delivery mechanism for your content? Do they work in the mobile environment?

While many aspects of design are subjective, there are a number of basic rules you should follow when designing highly optimized email marketing campaigns. These are as follows:

- **Maintain Consistent Branding:** When a user clicks through from your email to your website, they should be reassured by a consistent look and feel to your design. Logos, corporate colors, basic navigation, etc., should be in harmony with each other. But, do not try and replicate your website completely in your email design. This will confuse the recipient and detract from the email's specific call to action. Due to the restricted environment of email, any website-type navigation should be either completely stripped down or entirely removed. In terms of size and functionality, this is especially true in the mobile environment.

- **Text First:** Graphics, including your company logo, will not be seen until the recipient has selected to download images. Therefore, it is incredibly important to include text as close to the top of your email as possible. Don't let your graphics push a good benefit headline out of the picture.

- **Mobile Friendly:** Ensure your email creatives are easy to interact with. In the mobile environment, this means bigger, finger-friendly buttons.

- **Easy Editing:** Because you want to remain agile and take full advantage of any new opportunity that comes your way, your email templates should be easy to customize with text and images without the need to speak to your graphic designer. This will also ensure brand consistency.

- **No Fancy Coding:** Email is not the environment to show off with fancy coding or design elements. Things like JavaScript and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) may prevent your emails from being delivered or make them unreadable. Keep it clean and simple, and if you are producing your own code, stick to plain HTML and basic tables.

Who Can Help?

- **Your Colleagues:** Ask your colleagues to view your existing emails across a range of email clients and mobile devices, and report any issues. Better still, get them to take a screen shot and email it to you.
- **Your Web Designer:** A good Web designer should be able to produce a clean, simple, and easily editable email template for you to update when required.
- **Your Email Analytics:** These will show what areas of your email campaigns are being clicked on and, equally important, what areas aren't. Use this information to guide your design and remember to test new designs before releasing to your entire list.

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iContact Tip: Check out this video, "Make Your Email Mobile-Ready," to find out how to prepare your emails for mobile devices

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Step #4

Improve Your Landing Page Experience

A landing page is the page your subscriber is directed to after clicking a link on your website. For many email marketers, the landing page is normally just a standard page on their website. But, this might not be the best strategy if you want to maximize conversions from your campaigns (a conversion can either be a sale or the generation of a new lead).

A great landing page experience will focus on winning the conversion by stripping out any distractions, such as unneeded navigation or links. When someone lands on your page, you want them to hit the buy button, fill out a Web form to generate a lead, or pick up the phone and call you. Any other interaction is a distraction and could potentially cause you to lose the sale.

Best Practices for Highly Optimized Landing Pages Include:

- **One Way Home:** A simple link to your home page should be the only navigation not related to your offer on your landing page. Other links could potentially lead your customers away from your promotion and may make it difficult for them to return and convert.
- **A One-Stop Info Shop:** Include all the information a potential customer will need to complete a sale on your landing page, including details like payment options, shipping costs, and delivery schedules. It's also a great idea to feature product reviews or customer testimonials.
- **Simple Web Forms:** Your sales director might insist on detailed Web forms requesting information like mobile telephone numbers, company size, turnover, etc. But remember, fewer people will fill out your

form if it is too long and intrusive. It's time to look at alternative methods of qualifying leads. Business social networks like LinkedIn can prove very useful when vetting leads.

> ⭐ **Important:** No matter how well planned and executed your email marketing campaigns are, a poorly optimized website will drastically reduce your success and affect your long-term strategy.

Who Can Help?

*   **Your Website Designer:** A good website designer should be able to produce optimized landing pages to run alongside your email marketing campaigns.
*   **Your Ecommerce Platform:** Many ecommerce Platforms, such as Magento, offer the ability to create customizable landing pages.
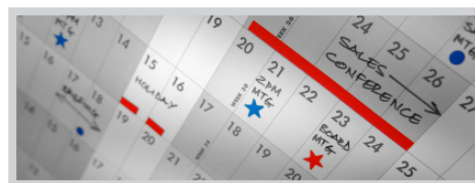
> 👍 **iContact Tip:** Learn how to keep your landing pages relevant even after your promotion has ended in "Suggestions for Expired Landing Pages."

Step #5 Increase Your Volume

You wouldn't dream of running a paid search or comparison shopping engine campaign on just one or two days of every month. So why limit your email campaigns to specific days? There is a lot of debate about the best days to send emails. But, if your emails are targeted, timely, and feature a great offer, every day is a great day for email. In the mobile age, where people consume emails anytime and anyplace, this has never been more true.

Email marketing is about people, emotions, and relationships; when it is managed correctly, it should never be thought of as a mass communication tool. Think about the following scenarios:

*   **Email Marketing as a One-to-One Sales Tool:** A carefully crafted, targeted, and personalized email will help your subscribers understand you are interested in doing business with them and not just with a list of nameless recipients. People do business with people they like, so be prepared to get personal.
*   **Targeted Email Campaigns Will Give You More Opportunities to Sell:** If your recipients know your email campaigns are targeted and relevant, they will open more of them and welcome an increase in volume.
*   **Waiting Is a Risky and Expensive Game:** If you have a great offer to share, get it out there. Sitting on an offer provides no financial rewards and presents your competitors the opportunity to get in there first.

> ⭐ **Important:** Customer loyalty in the online world is an extremely rare commodity. Try to take advantage of every opportunity as it arises, but be careful not to swamp your subscribers' inboxes with irrelevant offers, as this will damage your reputation and risk future opportunities. Increased email marketing activity will undoubtedly place additional pressures on your time. But when something works as well as email, it's worth the extra investment.

Who Can Help?

- **Your Customers:** Listen to what your customers want from you. Are they looking for great deals, amazing insight, or help in solving a particular problem? If you don't know what your customers want, it's time to ask them. Online tools like www.surveymonkey.com can be useful for surveying your customers' needs, but nothing beats picking up the phone and speaking to them.

- **Your Colleagues:** Your sales and customer support teams talk to your customers every day. They know what your customers are looking for and, equally important, what they are not looking for. They can also help you plan your campaigns around peak trading periods. Remember, if you cannot deliver on your marketing promises due to a lack of resource, such as staffing, stock levels, or bandwidth, you're heading toward a marketing fail.

> 👍 **iContact Tip:** If you are struggling with ideas to increase the volume of your email campaigns, check out the "Crash Course in Email Marketing."

Step #6   Engage the Autopilot

Email marketing technology means you don't have to be sitting at your desk to reap its rewards. Campaigns can be planned and scheduled for deployment weeks or even months in advance. Scheduling will also prove useful if targeting subscribers across multiple time zones or during out-of-office hours, and, of course, even the most dedicated marketer deserves a holiday from time to time. Tools like iContact's Autoresponder also allow you to automatically deliver a predetermined series of sales or information-based emails over a specific time period.

Ideas for autoresponder messages could include:

- **After-Sales Service Reminders:** Emails could be sent at a specified period after an initial sale to remind customers about servicing, warranties, upgrades, etc. There are huge opportunities in this area

for medical practitioners (e.g., dentists, opticians, etc.), as well as for more traditional businesses (e.g., motor dealers, electrical/gas appliance suppliers, etc.)

- **Feedback Generation:** An email could be sent seven days after a product has been shipped asking the customer to leave feedback or post a review.
- **Thought Leadership/Educational Programs:** A great way to reuse content and educate your clients about your products and services.
- **Thank You Messages:** Thanking your customers/prospects for joining your list and showcasing other opportunities available from your company.

Who Can Help?

- **Your Company Blog:** A good blog provides an amazing content resource, which can be raided and redistributed by your autoresponder messages.
- **Your CRM System:** Should have all your details of after-sales reminders and appointments.

> 👍 **iContact Tip:** Automating your email marketing campaigns can help you optimize the global reach of your campaigns and help you find a more positive work/life balance. Learn how in "Successful Email Marketing—Rule#6—Automate, Schedule & Mobilize."

Step #7 The Online, Offline Opportunity

Email marketers have multiple opportunities to target new subscribers and build their lists. It's amazing how many marketers completely ignore their prospective subscribers and, as a result, struggle to develop new leads. Email capture forms should feature prominently on every page of your website. You should also be prepared to sell the benefits of subscribing to your email lists. Benefits could include discount vouchers, subscriber-only offers, etc. Remember "Free Newsletter" is not a benefit.

But, there are also multiple opportunities to engage with subscribers in the offline environment. The following scenarios and locations provide amazing opportunities to grow your list:

- **Tradeshows:** Collect the business cards or scan the badges of everyone who visits your stand or booth at a tradeshow and then add the names to your list. Follow up any tradeshow visit with an email thanking them for their visit and offering additional information, such as a white paper or product information sheet. You can then use the analytics from this initial campaign to either qualify or further segment your leads.

- **At Point of Sale:** How many retail outlets collect email contact details? Not many. This is a huge lost opportunity. It takes seconds to ask a customer for their email address, and if you sell the opportunity correctly (e.g., special offers, discounts, new stock announcements, etc.), you'll find it is an unobtrusive and productive way to win repeat business.

- **The Telephone:** Again another underutilized list-building resource. You should aim to end every new telephone conversation with the question "Can I take your email address and add you to our database?" It's really that simple.

- **Old Contacts:** Although it is not good practice to automatically add old contacts to your email marketing lists (e.g., people with whom you have not had contact for more than six months), it is possible to reengage them via email or telephone.

> ⭐ **Important:** The success of email marketing is based on the permission the subscriber has given you to contact them with marketing messages. Never add an address without the owner's permission, never share contact details outside of your organization, and do not add subscribers' details to lists that will result in them receiving irrelevant communications.

Who Can Help?

- **Your Colleagues:** Sales is often reticent to ask their potential customers for additional contact information. A little training and demonstrating how email marketing will help them close more deals will go a long way to solving this problem. It may also be possible to incentivize your colleagues to collect email addresses by running a competition with a small prize at the end of each week.

- **Tradeshow Organizers:** Many tradeshows organizers hire out badge scanners that can be set up to automatically segment contact details according to product/service interest. Once this information is downloaded into a spreadsheet, it can easily be added to your relevant email marketing lists.

> 👍 **iContact Tip:** For more great ideas on growing your list both on and offline, check out "Grow Your List the Right Way."

Step #8 Build Better Content

Building better content may sound like a task that is easier said than done, but there are numerous resources available to marketers to help devise and create content that helps your email marketing campaigns convert (the iContact blog is constantly updated with inspiring articles to help you produce better content). Before you start collating your content, it is always best to have a workable plan in place. Your plan should detail peak trading periods,

holidays, special events, product releases, annual sales, etc. Once you have this information, you can start filling in the details.

The type of content you produce will depend largely on the nature of your business. However, the following may give you a good starting point for your campaigns:

- **Daily/Weekly/Monthly Deals:** The daily deal sites have received some negative press in recent months. However, if you control the number of emails that go out and the general availability of the offer yourself, the daily deal route can be a successful driver of business.
- **The Blog Roundup:** A roundup of your recent blog posts. If you are not blogging, it's time you started thinking about it. Not only will blogging provide excellent content for your email marketing campaigns, blogged content will improve your SEO rankings and could help you build your lists with carefully positioned subscription forms on every page of your website.
- **Product Launches:** Your existing clients represent the best opportunity to sell to when you have a new product or service come online.
- **The Monthly Newsletter:** Don't forget the humble monthly newsletter. Although you shouldn't rely on this as your sole email marketing effort, the monthly newsletter can be an incredibly valuable resource and is the one campaign that can go out to your entire list.
- **Events:** If you attend tradeshows or industry events, tell your subscribers about it. Offer to buy them a coffee if they visit your stand or booth. Sell the benefits of doing business face-to-face.
- **The Problem Solver:** Potential clients like nothing better than a business partner who can demonstrate that they understand their problems and have the expertise to help them become more efficient and profitable. Email offers a great opportunity to demonstrate that you are the expert they want to work with.

Who Can Help?

- **Your Suppliers:** Your suppliers should be able to provide details about product availability, release dates, and actual content (e.g., words and pictures) for your email campaigns. Some suppliers may even help out with the cost of creating and distributing your marketing message—this is known as cooperative advertising.
- **Your Customers:** If you are really struggling to come up with content, simply ask a few trusted clients what makes their lives difficult. They will probably give you a list to work from. Take these problems, come up with solutions, and you will be halfway home to producing some killer content.

iContact Tip: Don't let your content become an afterthought. Learn how to create content that helps you increase engagement and increase sales in "Increase Engagement, Increase Sales, Stop Selling."

In Summary

Creative email marketing goes beyond your latest offer or newsletter. It's about engaging with your clients (and potential clients) and contributing to a conversation that leads to them making a positive action. Great email marketing will reaffirm that you understand your clients' needs and offer trusted solutions to their challenges. It is best delivered at a time to suit your clients' busy lifestyles and should be accessible via their preferred technology (e.g., Laptop, tablet computer, or mobile device).

Building a successful strategy will take time and effort as you plan, develop, analyze, and learn from your best (and worst) attempts. You already know that email marketing works for you. Now think, what could an increase in your creative email marketing strategies do for your business?

iContact Advisory Services

iContact's Advisory Services team is available to help you build and deliver more success email marketing campaigns. For more information about how iContact's advisory services team can help your business with any of the strategies detailed in this whitepaper visit our email marketing services page.

About iContact

Since 2003, iContact has helped small and medium businesses share their stories, ideas, and products through email and social marketing. We take what we know about our favorite small and medium businesses—a trendy boutique hotel in South Beach, the online poster store that helps us decorate our cubicles, even the local coffee shop you'll find us at on Saturday—and we build the online marketing features we know those businesses need to succeed. We then pair our tools with award-winning support and expertise, so our customers never have to go it alone. And we top it all off with great personality, energy, and a commitment to creating a positive wake in our community. For more information, visit us online at www.iContact.com, on Twitter @iContact, at our LinkedIn, and at our Facebook page.

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