Email's Midlife Crisis

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Facebook is now a publicly traded company. No longer is Mark Zuckerberg the friendless whiz kid sitting in a dorm room theorizing cool while banging out code. He's grown up, has lots of friends, and is looking at a $95 billion IPO. If Facebook is officially entering adulthood, where does that leave email?

Using "electronic mail" sounds more akin to wearing electronic adult diapers than utilizing an effective form of communication. On this proverbial timeline of life, is email being relegated to the old folks' home?

As you will see below, email is not entering grandparenthood, nor is it on life support. Email is far from dead, as the blogosphere has been claiming for the past five years. Granted, email is no cyber spring chicken. Literally, it is a spritely 41 years old: the first email was sent in 1971 (1).

Email is just going through a bit of a midlife crisis.

Proof?

Several studies reveal email is as alive as ever. Exact Target performed a study in April, 2012, in which 77% of respondents favored email as a means for receiving permission-based promotional messages. Surprisingly, the other channels break down with single-digit percentages: direct mail at 9%; text message and SMS at 5%; and Facebook at 5%. Remarkably, as phone and Facebook use continues to grow, so does the preference to receive permission-based promotional messages via email. Email preference grew from 7% from 72% of respondents in 2008, while preference for direct mail promotions has plummeted from 26% to 9% in the same period (2).

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Further driving the nail into the coffin of the email-is-dead rumor, 87% of North American respondents surveyed in the Epsilon Global Consumer Email Study, found via Marketing Charts, claimed email is their online communication channel of choice (3).

Can Email Make You Money?
Okay, you say, so it's not dead. But, will it make me any money? Exact Target conducted a study looking at that, too. The results suggest that email drives more return on investment (ROI) than any other marketing route. This includes PPC (pay-per-click) advertising and social media. Furthermore, in a survey by Econsultancy, conducted in 2011, 72% of responding advertisers described email ROI as good or excellent (4).

Midlife Crisis? But The Kids Still Love It
If email is going through its midlife crisis, does that mean it's only popular with the middle-aged? Surprise! It does not. According to Marketing Vox, a study conducted by the Participatory Marketing Network (PMN), in partnership with Pace University's Lubin School of Business' IDM Lab, revealed that Gen Y's spent an average of 33 hours per month on social network sites, as compared to 31 hours for email. It is incredibly surprising that there is only a two-hour difference amongst this age group, given the hype behind social media (5). Young people responding to the study made one thing abundantly clear: social networks are for communicating with friends and family. It is not a place where they want to be hit with marketing messages.

Young people responding to the study made one thing abundantly clear: social networks are for communicating with friends and family (not marketing).

The point is made: cyber age 40 is the new 20. Email has plenty of life left. But how does one use it properly? Dissected into sections, it must: (1) be mobile-device compatible; (2) have a familiar preview; (3) have effective design; (4) be targeted, personalized and relevant; (5) have proper text-to-image ratio; (6) have effective calls to action.

Mobile-Device Compatibility
A survey conducted by Return Path, an email delivery firm, suggests that the majority of emails will be viewed on mobile devices by summer 2012. Citing the survey, Marketing Vox states: "It will be a quiet shift, but a huge one" (6). Direct Marketing News also references the survey, stating that the survey, "which Return Path compiled by examining 500 different clients from Oct. 2011 to Mar. 2012, the company concluded that mobile email views increased 82.4% year-over-year from Mar. 2011 through Mar. 2012, and that 88% of people check their email via mobile device daily" (7).

Be Prepared for the Shift
If your marketing efforts are not prepared for this shift, you will likely find yourself in a precarious position. Your website and emails must be optimized for mobile device viewing, which includes image and text sizing. If an email and/or website is not compatible with a viewer's mobile device, you may forever lose that viewer.

Familiar Preview

According to the Email Sender and Provider Coalition (ESPC), approximately 69% of receivers decide whether they will report an email as spam or junk based on the subject line and sender's email address. Think about your own inbox. What emails do you open most often? Most likely, you open the ones from senders you recognize. After sender recognition, you probably look at the subject line to decide whether you are interested in the content. Thus, your email address must be visible and trustworthy, and your subject line needs to sum up the content of the email, be short (fifty characters is a good rule of thumb), and never use all caps. Exclamation points should be avoided, as well, as they set off spam filters.

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Don't Get Filtered

Speaking of spam, keep it in the can! Of course, you don't want to end up in a spam filter. All Spammed Up released a report with ten words and phrases likely to alert filters (8):

1. Meet Singles
2. Work From Home
3. Business Opportunity
4. Buy Direct
5. Clearance
6. Pre-Approved
7. Hello
8. You Have Been Selected
9. Weight Loss
10. Limited Time

Many platforms allow for an email preview, in which the receiver can view the first sentence or two of the email content. Utilize this space to give the receiver a reason to open your email.

Effective Design

You've sent an email that is recognized by the receiver, has been opened, and is mobile-device compatible. Next, you must ensure the email has effective design. It is generally accepted that a sender has only three seconds to catch a receiver's attention upon opening an email: the three-second rule. What constitutes effective design? It is a combination of factors, including proper copy-to-image ratios, as well as horizontal and vertical sizing.

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Size Always Matters

According to Cynthia Fedor's article, Best Practices for Effective Email Design, a good rule of thumb to follow is maintaining slightly more text than imagery: 60% text and 40% imagery is generally accepted by most marketers. As for the size of your email, try not to exceed 600 pixels of width, as it is likely to require horizontal scrolling.

Beware the fold—the area that an email ceases to be visible within the viewer's screen. To view content below the fold, the viewer must scroll down. Keep pertinent information above this region, as some viewers many not bother to scroll down. The size of the area above the fold varies according to the viewer's screen resolution and the sender's email platform. Fedor recommends 750 pixels (9).

Another important factor to be mindful of is many receivers have their image-viewer setting turned off. Microsoft Outlook, Hotmail, Gmail and others now block images by default. In these cases, the viewer must click a download button. Alt-tags behind images will appear where the image is turned off. Offering a text-only version of the email is an effective backup plan (10).

Relevance

You've heard about the three rights, right? Send the right message to the right person at the right time. Proper data makes this easy. See DealerSocket's white papers, Cleansing Customer Data and Data Mining, Target Marketing for more information.

Call To Action (CTA)
Calls to action are an often-overlooked aspect of email marketing. This is unfortunate, because CTAs are incredibly important. How important? Let's look at some numbers (Relax! There aren't too many.)

75%: That's how much a particular click-through-rate (CTR) increased when the CTA "Follow me on Twitter" was changed to "You should follow me on Twitter here" (11).

51%: The increase in the amount of clicks when ESP Campaign Monitor sent an email with a survey-completion request and changed the CTA from "Give us your best Campaign Monitor ideas!" to "Tell us what we can do better" (12).

200%: The increase in sales reported by Obox when they changed a button CTA from "Visit our theme shop" to "See Options and Pricing" (13).

Crazy, right?

Proceed with Caution
The take away is you must choose your words carefully, and test for what works best for your audience. According to a publication by HubSpot, "An effective call-to-action should provide you with an opportunity to go beyond the transactional act of 'clicking' on an offer, and create a relationship with a prospect. It's just the beginning of someone's journey with your brand." This might seem to be a lot to ask of a short sentence or phrase, but this is the reality of a CTA.

To pull the plug on it (email) as a primary marketing channel would be an ROI death sentence.

HubSpot recommends taking one of three routes when developing a CTA (14):

1. Emphasize the benefits by clearly stating what the viewer will gain by clicking. This CTA style often includes a number. Example: Download this Free Whitepaper: Discover Email Techniques and Increase CTR by 150%

2. Word the CTA as a question, engaging the viewer and creating a sense of urgency. Example: Are You Emailing Effectively? Download Our White Paper and Increase CTR

3. Use a customer testimonial to establish trust and credibility. HubSpot recommends using the word "today" to create a sense of urgency. Example: Email Marketing Is Complicated. DealerSocket Made It Easy for My Company. CTA button: Learn How We Can Help You Today

No Right to Write Off
Just because Facebook made Zuckerberg a billionaire doesn't mean it will make you one, too. It would be a detrimental wrong to write off email. Email's vital signs are strong. To pull the plug on it as a primary marketing channel would be an ROI death sentence.

Don't pull the plug!

Just because Facebook made Zuckerberg a billionaire doesn't mean it will make you one, too.

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