

Email Marketing for the Small Business

insight

Whitney Hutchinson | May 2008



From insurance and real estate agents to the florist down the street and the local café, small businesses are all around us. Recently I've had a lot of inquiries about how, if at all, a small business should utilize email marketing.

First, unequivocally, small businesses should utilize email marketing. It's inexpensive, relatively easy to execute on, and a great way to keep in contact with your customer base. The key for the small business owner/marketer is to create a plan, keep it relevant and don't overcomplicate things.

So where does a small business start with email? Begin with a plan. Make sure that you don't just start "blasting" email to your customer base – instead sit down and create a clear plan of attack. Write down your goals and objectives and then start building a contact plan and calendar that makes sense (see my Email Insider article dated 6/11/07 about building a contact plan). Make sure you think strategically about your customers, such as how they might be segmented and what messaging will be relevant to them. Finally, make sure you are very specific in your goals and objectives – sales, cost savings, growth, retention – and that for each goal you have a measure for success.

Once you have a plan and a supporting calendar, you can start building out your creative. There is a mass of free information in the marketplace to help you learn best practices: Email Experience Council (www.emailexperience.org), Direct Marketing Association (www.the-dma.org), past Email Insider columns, your Email Service Provider (ESP) if you have one, or just simply search on "email creative best practices" and dive into the many whitepapers on the subject.

The key is to keep it simple. It may be that you build a one-size-fits-all template to use for your newsletter and promotional messaging. Or better yet, tap into one of the many tools available specifically for small business email execution. Many of them have ready-made creative templates you can use or adapt. Whichever way you go, make sure the template supports your brand, and that the creative is easy to navigate and read. Also ensure the body content and calls to actions are relevant to your customer base and support your business objectives.

If you don't already have a database and/or want to expand your list, start thinking of ways to collect email addresses. Your web site, in-store point of sale, phone calls and direct mail can all be great touch points for acquiring email addresses. Think creatively about where you might collect addresses and then simply ask your customers or prospects for them. It doesn't have to be more complicated than that.

Next you need to find a solid deployment solution. As I said previously, there are quite a few solutions out there specifically for small business. These companies can assist you in

deployment, database management, creative and measurement. Most are extremely cost-effective and can be a great starting point for your program.

Lastly, don't forget to measure and optimize. Strive to test as often as possible – that's the best way to improve performance on an ongoing basis, which is ultimately the goal.

So let me leave you with this thought, Mr. or Ms. Small Business Owner: email is a great tool for you! Start with a plan, utilize turnkey execution, ask for email addresses when you talk to customers, and measure the results of your efforts. Remember not to over-mail or under-mail, and only send relevant and timely information. Most importantly, keep a focus on your customers and what they want and need from you. With that focus, you can't go wrong.

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About the Author

Whitney Hutchinson – Strategy Director

As Strategy Director, Whitney is responsible for overall strategy and campaign planning for client's eCRM/Email campaigns. Whitney has over 15 years of marketing experience, with her primary focus in direct marketing. Prior to joining Avenue A Razorfish, Whitney managed the direct marketing efforts for Airborne Express, a Fortune 500 transportation company, where she was responsible for the small business customer communication as well as all direct marketing for the corporation. Whitney is a past board member of the Seattle Direct Marketing Association, and a graduate of the University of Washington. Whitney has been with AARF for 7 years.

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Avenue A | Razorfish
821 2nd Avenue, Suite 1800
Seattle, WA 98104
Phone: 206.816.8800
Fax: 206.816.8808

For more information please visit: avenuea-razorfish.com.