

Inbox Marketer: How we get them to open the e-mail

By Neil Sutton • April 19, 2005

4/19/2005 9:00:00 AM - q&a Randall Litchfield discusses strategies for creating a "closed loop" marketing process, the rise of mobile campaigns and getting noticed amid all the spam

When two-thirds of your inbox is spam, how likely are you to read a marketing pitch?

That's a situation Randall Litchfield, president of Toronto-based Inbox Marketer Inc., faces every day. His company helps clients create e-mail and Web-based campaigns for everything from golf to health care. The spam problem isn't trivial, he says, but with attention to detail and tailored contents, it is possible to get targeted users to open marketing e-mail—and keep them coming back for more.

Litchfield spoke to Pipeline recently about campaign creation, text vs. Flash and how to market to the mobile crowd.

Pipeline: How can e-mail be used as an effective marketing tool?

Randall Litchfield: Basically, e-mail is a community-builder. E-mail's suitable for any business or organization that has a community that it needs to communicate with. The advantage of e-mail is that it is highly interactive and two-way. So if you send messages out—unlike direct mail or print publishing—when people react to messages by opening them, clicking on the links and so forth, that information comes back to the publisher. You can refresh your customer profiles with that information. What you end up with is a closed loop marketing process. As you send out information, information comes back. It constantly enriches your customer profile. Information can be more targeted, more

relevant and more useful to the recipient. Once you embark on that process, you've really engaged the customer in a consensual marketing process.

Pipeline: What sort of packages do you prepare for your clientele?

RL: We're a full service e-mail shop. We have a self-service solution where some of our clients just use our Web-based interface and deploy their own campaigns. (We also have) full serve where we do everything. Like, we'll prepare an e-mail marketing and publishing strategy for them, we'll design the templates for newsletters and alerts, we'll write the content for them, we'll help them acquire and build a mailing list and so forth. Maybe a quarter of our clients are pure self-serve, a quarter are pure full-serve and the others are somewhere in between.

Pipeline: In terms of full-serve, are there any specific guidelines or templates that you look at when you're putting together a solution for clients?

RL: In an ideal world, we like to start off with a strategy of best practices. The industries that clients are in vary and different strategies are appropriate for different industries. We'll prepare a best practices report, we'll examine what a client's competitors are doing in the e-mail space and how they're integrating with other marketing, like search engine optimization and direct mail and print

advertising and so forth. We're members of the Direct Marketing Association, so we have access to the DMA library and archives of previous award winners. We subscribe to a lot of research. We pay a lot of money for research, basically, to keep ourselves updated on best practices. We'll do a lot of research for that client and on the basis on that we'll create a strategy for them that meets their goals. That's where we like to start. Not all the clients want to start there, but the bigger ones do. We've done that for Bell South and Altamira Mutual Funds and ATS Automation and Johnson & Johnson.

Pipeline: In this age of spam, how can ensure that your message is actually getting through?

RL: First of all, we're entirely permission-based e-mail marketing. Any mailing list we may mail to has to have prior permission. The recipients must have agreed to receive information from that company. On Web sites and so forth we have permission pages and opt-in pages that talk to our database. Spam is of increasing concern, so with our system that we've developed it automatically produces evidence that people have opted in to a certain communication for a client. It'll record the date they did it, how they did it—whether it came through a Web page or from another e-mail or so forth.

Deliverability is probably the No. 1 concern right now. Deliverability is kind of a symptom of spam. Spam is a big problem

for ISPs so they're constantly tuning their systems to filter out spam. Really, when you send out a campaign, you really have to be aware of the many variables that can block your message. It's getting to the point where unless you have a full-time staff that do nothing but e-mail and monitor delivery, it's next to impossible to run large-scale campaigns.

Pipeline: What criteria would you use to measure a successful campaign?

RL: It depends on the ultimate objective. When you say "campaign" it almost sounds like a one-off objective. I guess what we consider to be ultimately successful is creating a long-term relationship with a customer's client. In providing that customer with better and better information on the basis of feedback—so you'll send an offer out and realize (end users) are clicking on this link and not that link, so you might start customizing a newsletter on the basis of what they're interested in. Altamira Mutual Funds, for example, has a whole variety of customers: some are interested in retirement, some are interested in education, RRSPs, and that kind of thing. It's really important to groom the interests of their e-mail clients and constantly record what they're interested in, so when you do send out information it's pretty much customized to them. A hallmark of a successful campaign would be customized information, so the ideal is that everybody's getting unique information—there are no two newsletters alike in your database.

There are more surface measures like open rates and response rates and click-through rates and things like that. Those are the things we measure, but the long-term objective is really customers more loyal to you because you're communicating effectively with them and they spend more and spend more often and they don't leave.

Pipeline: Do you advise people to use multimedia tools like Flash or just keep it simple?

RL: Multimedia works well on the Web. It doesn't work particularly well with e-mail. There's a reason for that. In the Web, it's pretty much a universal world now. It's a Microsoft/Explorer world. There's browsers like Firefox emerging, but they basically adhere to the same W3 standards. With e-mail clients, they are different. They actually interpret HTML differently. We test all our messages on various e-mail clients because they have to render exactly the same. Some of those clients will not process Flash, for example. I think Hotmail is one of those. There's a number of Web-based clients like Hotmail and Gmail which are really grabbing a large percentage of the market. AOL is another one that does not handle rich media very well. You have to be careful. We advise our clients not to use Flash or Java script.

Something in the last year that's been increasingly common is you have new e-mail clients that block images. Gmail, by default, does not except images. In this case, it's viruses they're looking for. Also, the latest versions of Microsoft Outlook

and Outlook Express block images by default. The user has to manually go in and change the default so it will accept images. We just did a campaign—a well-known automotive manufacturer—announcing a new vehicle. We notice that there was a link on it that allowed you to get a version off the Web site if you didn't see the graphics. Ten per cent of the audience clicked on that link. It really means that at least 10 per cent of the audience had graphics disabled, for whatever reason.

Pipeline: What impact do wireless devices have on e-mail and Web-based marketing? Do cell phones and PDAs influence how you create a campaign?

RL: They do in a sense. It goes back to that graphics point. I'm a heavy user of BlackBerry and of course it's purely text. It's one more reason to make sure all your e-mail messages are multi-part. If you're doing HTML, you automatically want a text version if the HTML doesn't display. On another level, we're waiting for SMS (short message service) marketing to take off. Technically we can do it, but we don't. Our customers haven't asked for it yet. Europeans are quite ahead of us on that that score. That hasn't really impacted North America yet, but we think it will.



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