

Transactions Don't Happen In the Inbox

David Baker, October 2008

As practitioners of the art of email and eCRM (*I love that phrase*) we continually try to expand how we test and evolve the channels to show this value exchange between a consumer business and email/site. One of the things I've put a lot of thought into is whether the email itself is the container of the message and content — or is it simply the messenger, and the site is the true catalyst to the experience? Sometimes we get so drawn into our world of email, we think email is this Holy Grail of the message and forget about the rest of the experience that drives the real value in the brand connection. There is a latent effect of bad site experiences on email, and I believe we lose sight of this over time.

Let's think about a few types of commercial email you may send.

Notifications: can be account notices, event notices, transactional notices or alerts that are specific to your business/partners/product updates (B2B), or simply site or community updates. The goal of many of these notices is to deliver a message; not persuasion, not motivation, not emotion, but a functional tie to a business exchange or value. Is your goal to get consumers back to your site to entrench them in a new site experience? Is the message designed to build value in other connections they can make to your brand? Where is the content value, the best expression of your business, in the inbox or on the Web site? How much information do you need to put in the email to get consumers to this value exchange you are driving, and what is the effort to construct this email and make it relevant? We can test timing, subject lines — but the real cost saver in email production is content development and production. If you can put less information in an email and the site supports your experience, then brevity and simplicity in email may be your most effective marketing tool.

Promotional Emails: they can be discounts, sales, product releases, the list goes on. The goal is to motivate a buying behavior. In B2B this may be calling a call center, salesperson or company about the sale/event or buying cycle or attending an event. In retail, it may be about redemption at the Web site or store level, but the value exchange is simple: timeliness/motivation/relevance to buying interest = transaction for business. In this scenario, your challenge is to understand what is really driving conversion: the email, the subject line, the landing page or the shopping experience? I see too many marketers try to do too much with promotional email, but then have a poor site experience to support this dynamic personalization. There is a delicate line you must walk to test this appropriately. If you have declining open rates and declining clicks, but your site-side conversion numbers were staying the same or at parity with the other channels, to what would you attribute the breakdown?

If you said relevance of messaging, you've been reading too many analyst reports! You aren't looking at the cause and effect of the entire experience. There are latent effects of bad messaging, and the channel can be a barrier to the buying experience. By recognizing and

testing the balance of email messaging (content, tone, brevity, targeting, personalization) and site messaging and experience, you can find the optimal mix of content, frequency for each part of your email portfolio and begin to repair this hole. Unfortunately we live in a dependent marketing world and while we can iterate rapidly with email, it may not be in the best interest if you can't slow down enough to see the real connections you are making. You may find you have more reasons to communicate and have more resources to implement by simplifying your approach to messaging and content development.

Remember, Web sites are passive experiences — you need something to trigger a reason to go there and in many cases an email notice can be just that, simple, relevant, yet doesn't need to be award-winning design or dynamically personalized.

As is the case with all marketing, one thing doesn't work for all, and in testing there isn't a right or wrong, there's only iteration. Testing the amount of content in newsletters vs. what's on the site (making the user go to the site for the in-depth content and experience) may pay off in production. Same applies to promotional messaging. Some of the most effective retail emails simply had a big red SALE sign with a brand logo. Doesn't apply to all, but you should question how much personalization you need vs. the value it really draws — and you may find it's incremental compared to the value you could drive by improving the site experience that supports the email experience.

Bad landing pages = low conversion.

Bad email = no people hit the pages.

Bad experiences = no one sees value in the email you send.

Too much complexity = you learn nothing.

Simplify your approach, diversify your email portfolio (reasons to communicate) and strive to understand the balance in experience (site/email). This will drive those open and click rates upward. Transactions don't happen in the inbox!

About the Author

David Baker is the Vice President of Email Solutions for Razorfish. Baker's responsibilities include expanding email marketing offerings and expertise across the agency and tightly integrating programs into the current and future global digital marketing initiatives of clients.

Baker is an accomplished speaker and a weekly "Email Insider" columnist and advisory board member for Media Post. He frequently presents at industry conferences, including the ad:tech, OMMA, DMA, Inbox and International Conferences. Currently, he sits on two email sub-committees for the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), and participates in several Email Round Tables with the Email Experience Council (EEC).

Baker has more than 15 years of experience in marketing and advertising and hails from Agency.com where he served as the vice president of email and analytical solutions. In that role he was directly responsible for developing the email and analytical business practice for seven of Agency.com's national and international offices. He helped build brand recognition for clients including VISA, Ladbrokes, 3M, UPromise, Shutterfly, Miller, CNN, Maidenform, Energizer Brands, Del Monte Foods and others. Prior to his position at Agency.com, Baker worked for Targetbase another OmniCom agency building out integrated email services into their direct marketing service practice.

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