

eMarketing: email

While the traditional mailshot still has its place in the marketing armoury, electronic forms of communication have both taken over much of this role and developed it significantly. In this article, we will have a brief look at the opportunities email offers for marketing professional services.

The use of email for has a number of important differences when compared with paper based mailshots. These can provide major advantages, but can also be negative factors if the emarketing strategy is not thought through properly. It is not enough to simply transfer a paper based mailshot to email; not only will the benefits of email not be utilised, but the poor use of the medium is likely to reduce the overall effectiveness from the paper based campaign.

The main advantages detailed below have been separated out for clarity, but it is the possibilities that arise when they are combined that make email such a powerful tool for marketing.

Low message cost

Probably the best known fact about email marketing is that the low message cost means that millions of emails can be sent for very little money. Within the realms of the marketing activity of a professional services firm, who we can assume are not working on the basis of random mass mailings, this means that the amount of email sent has no impact on the cost of that mailshot.

This low message cost leads to two main benefits. The first is that a wider mailing may be possible that would have been affordable with a paper based mailing, especially for smaller firms. This wider mailing may be to a larger number of organisations, or it may include a larger number of individuals within any organisation.

The second benefit is that emails can be sent more frequently to each individual recipient. Coupled with other advantages such as the low campaign cost and the ability to personalise mailings this can deliver hugely more effective marketing messages.

Low campaign cost

The campaign cost in this context is the cost of putting together a mailshot. A lot of this cost when using paper based mailings is the time taken to design it and to prepare it for print. While modern digital printing has reduced the cost of small print runs, an email campaign still misses out all the setup costs associated with printing (as well as the actual print costs, which leads to the low message cost above).

The nature of an on screen message also means that the design side is simpler, and arguably more forgiving. This is not to say that the graphic design of an email is not important. Due to a lack of experience there are probably fewer designers who can produce a really good looking email than can work with paper, but getting the design right will always pay dividends.

Overall, the low campaign costs means that more, smaller campaigns can be run, which in turn means that they can be more specific and more targeted. This can mean that an email may be more specific in terms of subject matter and sent to a particular group, with a different email being sent to other contacts, whereas in the past they may all have received a more general paper based mailing. Alternatively, it may mean that content that may have formed a large newsletter before may be split across several separate messages, or that a campaign may now consist of a series of messages (perhaps a teaser, the main message and a follow up) whereas this would not have been cost effective before.

Another benefit of the low campaign cost is the ability to trial a mailshot with a small set of users before committing to sending out a larger mailing. If some feedback on the effectiveness of the email can be gained (see below), then this allows small or even large adjustments to be made, increasing the quality of the campaign.

Simple personalisation

Personalisation of mailshots is not new. The advent of digital printing allowed paper based mailings to be correctly addressed directly to the recipient, even if only on a covering letter and not the main brochure or newsletter.

With email this can be taken a step further. Not only can aspects of the message be personalised, but the actual content of the message can be more accurately targeted at the recipient. Additional information can be included for clients as opposed to potential contacts, or newsletters can be customised to match the particular interests or industry sector of a recipient. If this type of personalisation is added to smaller mailshots, taking advantage of the low campaign cost, the actual emails received may be almost unique in content for each person who receives one.

Note that, in general, personalising emails is likely to reduce the chances of the message being caught by spam filters at the recipient's organisation. Mailings using bcc addresses to send the same message to lots of people are not only likely to fall foul of these, but even where they are received they give a bad impression of a firm who does not care very much.

Active feedback

The biggest problem with any mailshot is that you cannot tell who has read it, what they read, or whether it was just thrown in the bin. With email, and particular with HTML, it is possible to gain a lot of information about what actually happened, which can be used to modify the marketing message or home in on those who seem to be interested.

As well as the obvious gathering of delivery success or failure receipts and read receipts, where these are sent, further information can be gathered if the reader can be encouraged to follow internet links. Generally these can be provided by including some but not all of mailshot within the email itself, and providing a link to more complete information on the web site. Users will normally be happy to follow such links if they are interested, and the hits can be logged and analysed to see who is reading which sections of the email.

It is important to be careful when setting up emails in this way. Messages that embed links to download graphics or other content automatically will more than likely fail with the trend in default settings being to disable this feature. It is also worth bearing in mind that some organisations will not receive HTML mail at all, although this is probably not a significant proportion. The ability to send differently configured emails (plain text, rtf, html) to different users will give the greatest flexibility.

There are specialist software packages and services available to create emails that can be tracked in this way that can provide unique links in every email sent out, although it is not too hard to accomplish this as part of the normal personalisation. Some additional support on the firm's web site may be required to track the use of these links and direct them to the right page, but nothing that should prove expensive.

Summary

This has been a very brief overview of the use of email as a marketing tool, and only covers a few key features offered by the technology. The article has not touched on how content may change to make use of these features, or how email may provide a route for creating two way interactions with prospective clients.

What should be taken away from this is the fact that the use of email for marketing is very unlike the use of paper based mailshots, and can be an incredibly powerful tool if used well.

As a wider concept, an emarketing strategy should also encompass the use of the web site, including extranets and personalised sites, as well as other electronic communications such as text messages and even instant messaging.

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