Improve Your Survey Email Invitations and Deliverability Rate

🎓 Leading Practice

Below, you will find some helpful tips on improving your email invitations and the deliverability rate from a blog post by our very own Sandy McKee.

Additionally, check out our Email Deliverability article.

We would like to share these email best practice tips with you so that you can increase the likelihood that your survey invites make it to your respondents' inboxes. Let's start by defining what spam is and reviewing the federal CAN-SPAM regulations in case you are not already familiar with them.

What Classifies as Spam

Spam is electronic junk mail. Unsolicited email that is sent out in bulk mailings is classified as spam.

Spam is the main reason why some folks avoid email and prefer to communicate through other channels. But these other channels are not as effective when it comes to reaching your customers, especially when it comes to your survey invitation.

CAN-SPAM Regulation

The CAN-SPAM Regulation sets the rules for commercial email and gives recipients the right to stop commercial messages being sent to them. If you fail to comply, there are penalties of up to $16,000 per violation.

The Act applies to all unsolicited commercial messages whose intent is to promote a product or service. It applies to B2B as well as B2C messages and includes messages to your former customers.

It does not restrict you from emailing your current customers and others who you have an existing relationship with (such as your partners, affiliates, etc.). These are classified as "relationship" messages that preclude you from needing to seek email permission. But you do need to seek permission to email those who you do not have an existing relationship with - if you are promoting your business.

7 CAN-SPAM Requirements

Besides needing email permission, there are other requirements you need to comply with. Below are the main requirements for CAN-SPAM compliance outlined by the FTC:

1. **Don't use false or misleading header information** - Your 'From' 'Reply-To' and routing information (originating domain name and email address) must identify the individual or business who initiated the email message. Learn how to update this information in our Change From Email Address Tutorial.

2. **Don't use deceptive subject lines** - the subject line must reflect the content of your message.

3. **Identify the message as an ad** -If your message is an advertisement, identify it as such.

4. **Tell recipients where you are located** - Your message should include your address. Learn how to update this information in our Customize Email Invite Footer Tutorial.

5. **Tell recipients how to opt out of receiving future email from you** - Your message must include an explanation of how the recipient can opt-out of future mailings from you. If you are using Alchemer, your unsubscribe link and address information will be automatically included in the footer of your email message.

6. **Honor opt-out requests promptly** - Your opt-out mechanism must be able to process opt-out requests for at least 30 days after you send your email message. The opt-out request must be honored within ten business days. If using the Alchemer Email Campaign, we include an unsubscribe link in your emails - if a person clicks on the unsubscribe link, they will be taken off your list, and you will not be able to send further emails to them using Alchemer

7. Monitor what others are doing on your behalf.

Email Reputation - Why Emails Might not be Delivered

So now you know the CAN-SPAM requirements to be in compliance. But following these regulations is not enough to get your email message delivered to your recipient's inbox. Certainly, it will improve your chances that it will be received (and keep you from getting fined), but it does not guarantee that your email won't end up in your recipient's spam (junk) or bulk folder. Heck, you might consider yourself lucky if your email gets that far – your email might go "missing" which means it has been blocked by your recipient's ISP.

What you need is a good email sender reputation.

Your email reputation is based on a sender score. This score is a set of metrics that include:

1. **Compliance Rate** - If more than 1% of your recipients complain or flag your emails as junk, then your score takes an immediate hit.

2. **Bounce Rate** - Bounces are those emails that do not make it to the recipient's inbox and are 'bounced' back to the sender. It is an indicator of the quality of your list. If a high number of your emails bounce back, it means your subscribers aren't engaged, or you're not keeping up with them.

3. **Blacklistings** - If you have a high complaint rate or have hit a spam trap, you will be blacklisted. If your IP address appears on one of the leading blacklists, your emails will likely be blocked.

You can check on your email sender's score by using a free service offered by Return Path called Sender Score. Sender Score rates the reputation of every outgoing mail server IP address on a scale from 0-100. A score between 90 and 100 is considered very good.

At Alchemer, we take great pride in our high score and work hard to maintain it by following the tips listed below. You can help us keep our high score so that your survey invites reach your respondents by following these tips as well.

Even if you are not using Alchemer for your survey invitations, we encourage you to follow these email best practice guidelines so you can maintain your email sender reputation.

Deliverability Tips

The following tips will help you improve your sender reputation and increase your email deliverability rate.

- **Do not use purchased lists**
  If you purchase industry lists or some other customer list, you are setting yourself up for trouble. While the vendor may have permission to email those contacts, that permission is not transferable.
  If you still decide to purchase a list, make sure it is from a reputable source. Know that some list providers do not collect email addresses in an ethical manner. Shadier vendors scrape email addresses from chat rooms, websites, customer lists, and newsgroups.
  ISPs have caught on to this practice, and have set up spam traps. If they detect a spam trap or "honey pot" in your email list, your email reputation will immediately take a hit and result in email deliverability issues.
  The use of general email addresses rather than personal email addresses is a warning to ISPs that an email list was harvested by spambots. (Spambots are viruses that automatically comb websites for email addresses.)
  Group/role-based email address inboxes often go unmonitored; this can mean that the email will bounce. Also, emails sent to group email address are likely to result in spam complaints (sometimes more than one), and it only takes one report as spam to ding the sender IP. As a result, as of May 23, 2016, group email addresses are no longer allowed within Alchemer.
- **Use double opt-in**
  Confirm email addresses. Have your new subscribers confirm that the email address they entered on your sign-up form is correct at the point of submission. You can then display a "Thank You" page that instructs them to check their inbox for a confirmation email.
- **Send a validation email**
  It is good practice to generate a confirmation email or "Welcome" email after a new subscriber signs up. This message has several benefits:
  - It allows you to validate a new email address immediately.
  - It sends a positive brand experience.
  - It allows you to request that you be added to their trusted sender's list.

- It provides you with an opportunity to collect more information from the new subscriber such as their preferred contact method, frequency, subject, etc.

- **Avoid trigger keywords**

  Certain keywords are known to be spam flags. By avoiding these words in your email subject lines, you can dramatically increase your chances of getting past spam filters.

  Here are a few examples: cheap, discount, free, winner, deal, clearance, affordable, etc. Check out HubSpot's email-spam-list for more examples.

- **Use a valid from/sender email address**

  The "sender" field is the first to appear in an inbox. Use your name or your company name, so the recipient recognizes who it is from. Unrecognized senders quickly get deleted or sent to the junk folder. Do not use updates@, reminder@, noreply@.

  This applies to both the "From" address and the "Reply-To" address.

- **Include a text version when using HTML emails**

  Not all email clients support HTML. If you send an HTML email to one that does not support this format, you email is going to end up in the spam folder. It is good practice to include a text version as a backup in case your recipient happens to be in a location that does not allow them to see the HTML version. Make sure this it is properly formatted!

- **Send Good Email**

  The content of your emails needs to be relevant, interesting, informative or entertaining so that you engage your recipients. Otherwise, you risk losing them.

- **Spikes in volume**

  If you have a large email marketing campaign to send, consider staggering it. Sending more than about 1,000 identical emails at a time is a red flag to ISPs. Once they suspect bulk email, the emails are more likely to turn up in spam filters.

- **Keep a clean list**

  Remove hard bounces and disengaged subscribers from your list. These will eat away at your sender score.

- **Re-engage**

  If you have subscribers that have been inactive for a period, send out an email asking if they would like to continue to receive your emails or change the frequency of your messages. It is better to unsubscribe those who are not interested than to keep them since they are the likely ones to make a spam complaint.

- **Allowlist**

  Make sure that you have a Sender-ID/Sender Policy Framework (SPF) record in place. This allows the receiving email server to validate whether the domain name that the email claims to represent is associated with the IP address that the email has been broadcast from.

  If a lookup can't be validated, then your email will likely end up in the spam folder. Contact support if you need to add Alchemer to your allowlist.

You need to make sure that your or whoever is sending your emails not only follows the rules set forth by the CAN-SPAM Act but is also adhering to deliverability standards. Check your or your email sender's score. This will let you know if you need to make some changes.

Spam Complaints

Despite following regulations and the tips listed above, you will still get the occasional spam complaint. These usually come from disengaged subscribers who:

- Didn't subscribe (i.e. you made a mistake in who you sent the message to)
- Didn't recognize you as the sender
- Forgot that they signed up

Improve Your Email Deliverability Rate

At Alchemer, we understand how frustrating it is to have your email list audited, or your email campaign paused because of a high bounce or spam rate, or your campaign throttled if you have over 2000 invites. But it is only by following good email practices that we can keep a good sender reputation so that we can deliver all of our customers' survey invitations.

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