

CREATING AN EMAIL MARKETING PLAN



Step 1: Who Is Your Audience?

For this six step course on creating an email marketing plan, several Benchmark Email bloggers have been rounded up, and each will weigh in on the various components involved in making a winning [email marketing campaign](#). Being the musician of the bunch, I get to start things off by answering the question: who is your audience?



Wait, you're not playing in a band. You are a real, live, hard-working businessperson. I get that. We have over 73,000 users that have that in common with you. But whether you are a musician or a business with a service or goods to sell, you have the same charge: find an audience and give them what they want. If you substitute the terms "readers," "subscribers," or even "customers" in place of "audience," you'll see exactly what I mean.

Established Businesses Should Play to Their Existing Audience First

We're not all starting at the same place here, are we? Some of us have established businesses and some of us just might be starting a brand new enterprise.

If your business is established, you should know who your audience is because you sell to them everyday. So before you look for new business from new customers (which we will cover later), the question is, "Can I sell to my current customers more often?" If you now do little or no email marketing, just collecting your customers' email addresses (with permission, of course) and sending attractive newsletters filled with sales info, product news and "expert advice," will do wonders in getting your existing customers to act positively more often.

But How Well Do You Really Know Your Existing Audience?

If you think that because you have a pizza shop, then your audience is solely "people who love pizza," you might be so focused on the big picture that you're missing the details. What are the demographics of the people who frequent your business? Can you make generalizations based on age, income level, or location? How about the psychographics of your customer base? What are the lifestyles, interests and values of your customer base? If you can figure out both who buys your product and why they buy it, you can craft some pretty effective emails for your very singular audience.

Does Your Audience Have Segments?

If you can firmly say that all of your customers are “middle class families that live uptown who value great service and family traditions,” then you can just write that newsletter to that group over and over again. But what happens if you can’t generalize? Well, then, segmentation is your friend.

Do you have a way to track zip codes with your transactions? Can you track which customers only show up for the really big sales? How about brand preferences? Document the transactions well. Even if you can’t see the patterns with your eyes in real time, an analysis of the sales data later can show you how your customers fall into groups. You can enter all this information as fields in your email lists. Send news about a new style of spinach pizza specifically to people who continuously buy vegetarian items. Send a [video email](#) containing a product demo to a segment of your list that’s interested in high tech items. People who only show up to your big sales will probably really respond to email coupons of discount offers. Send brand specific campaigns targeted to the people who love them. It’s not just every transaction that can segment, but every meaningful contact. This means online sign up boxes, raffles and in-store events too.

How Do I Know My Audience if I Don’t Have Customers Yet?

Isn’t this the million dollar question? If your product or service is so unique that no one has come before you to offer it, congratulations. You deserve a whole new blog dedicated to your trailblazing ways. But chances are you are doing something that someone also has at least attempted – maybe in the same way or maybe in a new way. The question is how are you positioning your offering?

It’s not only what you are selling that determines who your audience is, but how you plan to sell it to them. Just selling high-end running shoes might tell you that you want to attract the attention of athletic types. But selling those same shoes at discount rates tells you your audience is value conscious and deal motivated. Selling at no discount, but rather focusing on service and information means you are looking for a whole new audience. We can go further: specializing in wide or large shoes means you’re looking for the person with a certain type of foot. But even if you don’t specialize in any size, you might have good luck segmenting your marketing approach to the multiple types of athletes if a generic approach doesn’t work.

Great. How Do I Find Them?

It’s simple. You have to put yourself (or your [signup boxes](#)) in the places where your audience hangs out.

Step 2: Reaching Your Customers

Your Email Newsletter



An [email newsletter](#) is one of the most powerful tools in your email marketing campaign. Newsletters not only build relationships with clients you already have, but also attract new customers by offering them your latest products and special discounts. Add testimonials from happy customers to your newsletter to really drive home the fact that you are a company worth keeping an eye on.

Spread the Word

But how do you actually get future clients to sign up? Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are invaluable when you want to expand your contact list. Post testimonials on your home page or tweet about a new product. Include newsletter [signup forms](#) on all your social media profiles and make sure that they are easy to fill out. Some people can be wary of subscribing to a newsletter that requires too much information. Make sure to include social sharing links in all of your newsletters. If a customer sees something they like, they are more likely to spread the word if all it takes is the click of the mouse.

Strong Content

Once you have your subscribers' attention, it's time to show them the goods. You want to engage the reader by keeping your newsletter chock full of interesting, relevant content. The key here is relating to your readers. You need to show them that you value them as customers and that you want them to value your company and its products.

Avoid including too many eye-catching graphics in your newsletter. Instead, use keyword-rich text that highlights what it is you are offering. An easy way to add relevant content is to preview articles or reviews that are featured on your site, then add a link to the full article or review. This not only beefs up your newsletter, it also drives more traffic to your site.

Most importantly you need to give them what they want. Whether it is information on upcoming events related to your industry or discounts on merchandise, make sure that you are offering your readers something they believe is worth their attention.

The Next Step

Once you have sent out an email newsletter, don't let it disappear never to be heard from again. Old newsletters still have the ability to satisfy customers you already have and

attract new ones. Make your old emails sustainable by archiving them on your web site. This will give your customers a chance to see previous email campaigns they may have deleted from their inbox. Archiving can also increase the possibility of prospects finding your newsletters through a random Google search, not to mention positively affecting Google ranking - especially if you are using the keyword-rich text we spoke about earlier.

The end goal of any email marketing campaign is to have the prospective customer look to you when they are ready to buy. Consumers only buy from companies they trust and relationships lead to sales. It's as simple as that. A solid newsletter is one of the best ways to start a relationship, build trust and solidify your reputation.

Step 3: Who Is the Competition?

The Athenian playwright Aristophanes stated: "The wise learn many things from their enemies." In order to concoct a proper and effective [email marketing plan](#), email marketers must identify who their competition is and what they are doing. Fortunately, you can find countless free online tools that allow you to locate your competition, primarily by their use of site keywords. If another company is using online keywords to identify their business that are similar to yours, it's a good bet that they are indeed your competition.



Google Is a Primary Source of Competitive Info

There are a number of related link suggestion tools readily available on various SEO sites at no cost. You can enter your keywords and locate competitors who are using those same search terms to drive traffic to their sites. As befits the search industry's 900 lb. gorilla, Google has a wealth of tools to assist you in determining your competition. Google Trends allows you to determine where searchers for a particular website have also visited and what they've searched for. Proper analysis of these results can mine a considerable amount of golden data on your competitors. To stay right up to the minute on the competition, Google Alerts sends reports on specific searches directly to your email address. As soon as any relevant online results develop, you'll be notified at once. Another superlative Google tool is the Insights For Search where you can determine search volume patterns across geographical regions, time periods, and a broad variety of categories.

Dig Up Virtually Endless Data on Your Competition's Traffic & Audience

If you want to venture outside the Googleplex, there are a vast number of sites offering

a broad range of free web analytics tools. All of these tools can be used not only to determine who your own competitors are, but also how they're doing what they're doing. Using these sites you'll be able to find what keywords your competitors are buying; how much traffic they're deriving; track keyword rankings to discover how your competitors are applying them; and even dig up affiliate data, cached ad copy, and more. Naturally, you'll want to use one of the numerous online free backlink checkers and link harvesters to derive a complete perspective on the links that generate the traffic for your competitors.

In order to keep abreast of what they're doing day to day, there are also a number of sites that take snapshots of your competitor's website code and inform you whenever any changes are made.

Discover Competitors You Might Not Even Have Been Aware Of

Alexa and Quantcast are excellent sources for competitive traffic and demographic information. Both these sites show search queries that land onto the sites, and Quantcast has a very handy "Audience Also Likes" feature that shows the categories and sites that site's audience also visited, along with an Affinity rating. This data can be a powerful way to discover competitors you might not even be aware of.

It may seem impossible to believe, but there are still some companies in this day and age that do not take advantage of [email marketing](#). The best way to discover this fact is simply to visit their sites and seek out their email subscription page. If it's not there, they likely aren't engaging in email marketing.

Online Tools to Reveal the People Behind the Company

Once you have a fair grasp of who your competition is, it is always worthwhile to research the company itself. There are various sites that can facilitate this research. Running a Whois check should provide information on any website owner, but with the proliferation of domain privacy this process does not yield as much information as it once did. However, if your competitor is sizeable enough to have outgrown shared hosting, you may want to utilize one of the many online IP Domain Tools that will reveal other domains hosted alongside your competitor. This process may help you in determining other projects they're involved in and thus give you additional leads to discover the people behind the facade.

If your competitor is a publicly traded entity, you'll be able to discover extensive information through The Security & Exchange Commission's EDGAR database. Since many email marketers are privately held companies, you'll find that researching the Better Business Bureau and Dun & Bradstreet may be the best way to obtain this data.

You can also easily perform online checks of any trademarks or patents they have filed, or enter their information into database searches such as KnowX to find out any of their legal entanglements.

Your research into the competition can be as simple as just checking the Yellow Pages all the way to extensive information gathering about the company and its executives. In this highly competitive age, every byte of data should be carefully considered to determine what competitive advantage it can provide your company.

Step 4: What Is the Ultimate Goal?

Marcus Tullius Cicero said it best: "Before beginning, plan carefully." These are the words of warning we are advised to heed whenever we set out to accomplish something important.



You have already learned the importance of identifying your target audience, getting your customers to take specific actions, and sniffing out the competition. Now I'm going to cover the most important part of your email marketing plan up to this point - determining the ultimate goal.

Why Are You Here?

Are you leveraging email to generate traffic to build your presence on the [social networks](#)? Spread awareness for a nonprofit cause? Boost your sales numbers? Whatever goals you have defined for your business, rest assured that this flexible tool can help you reach them. The benefits of an ultra-focused, well designed campaign may be a high rate of conversions, up-selling and cross-selling opportunities, and customer retention. Perhaps the real benefit lies in being able to keep your brand in front of an audience who, when fully engaged, could become loyal enough to share your marketing message and sell it to others.

Businesses of all sizes can benefit from the agility of email marketing. It has easily adapted to today's ever-evolving business climate and complements other marketing methods.

Are Your Goals Realistic?

The problem isn't having goals, it is setting goals that are overly difficult to achieve and quite frankly, unrealistic. There is, however, a simple solution. Instead of aiming for the sky right away, set smaller goals, and set the bar higher at each milestone.

For instance, if you are new to [email marketing](#), generating 100 conversions a week may be unrealistic. Maybe 50 every two weeks is easier to achieve. If that seems too

farfetched, set your sights on generating 25 conversions a month. Setting your goals too high sets you up for failure. Be realistic about your objectives and real success in your email campaigns will be much easier.

Set a Time Limit on Your Goals

Lay your goals out in a timeline format that allows you to visual them. A timeline is effective for setting deadlines, working towards your goals, and actually getting them accomplished. When you can see that an end to your objective is within reach, you can be positive that you are focusing your investment, time, and effort in the right direction.

Laying out a timeline for your objectives is as simple as firing up your favorite spreadsheet program and entering the tasks you want to accomplish. You could designate goals to be completed in a certain number of days, weeks, months, or whatever it takes. It pays to be realistic here because while trying to accomplish goals too quickly could put you under immense pressure, setting them too far away might cause you to miss out on the benefits you're after. Find that perfect middle ground.

Realizing the Value of Statistical ROI

For most businesses, getting a return on what they put into marketing is among their key objectives. Tracking ROI is essential because it determines how much you should be investing to accomplish your goals. While measuring ROI can be a tricky endeavor with more complex campaigns, the comprehensive reporting tools you have at your disposal can dramatically simplify the process.

Combine the statistics in your reports with a commitment to actually analyzing them. The performance data from [email campaign reports](#) can give you more metrics than you know what do with, but being able to identify the numbers that really matter is critical. When it comes to ROI, those measurements should be tailored to the business and its goals. Therefore, in order to accurately calculate the return on your investment, you must determine which metrics provide a true snapshot of your campaign results.

Are You Ready?

Some companies are certain that email marketing is vital for staying in touch with customers, maintaining sales, and the longevity of the business. Others view it as a short-term solution that will enable them to accomplish short-term goals. Whether you plan to take the full plunge or get in and out, the real question is, are you ready to commit yourself to the process? Are you ready to do what it takes to see your goals through to the end?

Step 5: Design and Content

Some say email marketing is a lot like getting free tickets to a movie. Your [subject line](#) convinces people to go inside, but your email and layout keep them from walking right back out. In other words, if you can't immediately dazzle with your words and design, you'll never sell your goods, promote your event, or show your subscribers why you're sending to them in the first place.



Fortunately, creating an email campaign that bears a decent response and click-through rate can be done by following some easy to remember, similar rules for both layouts and verbiage. Use the tips below to cut the clutter and clean up your campaigns and you'll send more subscribers back to your website, landing page or other preferred location.

Streamline Your Email Copy

If you have to come up with a phrase that perfectly describes the nature of email copy, "less is more," though cliché, is 100% accurate. Most subscribers are ruthless, spending just a few seconds reading emails before moving on, so email copy has to be active, light and skim-able. Here's how to create crisp copy that keeps recipients engaged:

- **Be a heavy handed editor.** Unnecessary words can bloat your emails into a blocky, cluttered mess. Write all your copy and go back – more than once, if necessary – to cut out the excess. By ditching phrases like "in order to," "in regards to," or "to enable you to" in your campaigns, you will improve your copy flow, engage your readers and make your emails easier to digest all around.
- **Bust up your paragraphs.** The days of droning on in five-sentence paragraphs are over. Thanks to everything from smartphones to social media, humans are more pressed for time than ever before. When you present a large-yet-well-written paragraph to your subscribers, prepare to be ignored. To combat reading fatigue, use no more than two streamlined sentences in a paragraph, and use links to send people to the director's cut.
- **Speak directly to your audience.** Are you speaking directly to your subscribers or speaking about something and letting them listen in? Your readers want to know that you understand their needs, so write like you're speaking directly to them. Instead of writing "it is easy to understand problems retailers face regarding inventory management," write something like, "we understand your inventory management challenges." Show readers that you've walked in their shoes and you'll see more action on the response front.

Focus Your Email Layouts

Packing your email with tons of images, dozens of links and a tumult of info will not only confuse your readers but chase them off in no time flat. Instead, you want your [email template](#) to convey your message as efficiently and elegantly as possible. Here are three ways to focus your email layouts for easier consumption:

- **Use a liberal amount of white space.** The best way to showcase graphics, text and video in your emails is to add plenty of breathing room. This can mean adding more free space between images, paragraphs and graphics, but not so much that your layout looks unfinished. If you've done your job right, your readers will quickly and easily absorb your images and copy when they open your emails, but not feel like they're missing part of the meal.
- **Be disciplined with images.** The vast majority of email layouts need images to both present a product and break up text content. But while eye-popping images can captivate your subscribers, too many will turn them off. Instead of cramming your layout with eight or ten images, use five, four or three solid ones instead. Think quality - not quantity - when you choose your email images.
- **Focus on the essentials.** Are you dying to talk about the fifteen new products in your catalog, or the dozen or more services you've just started offering? Before you sit down and work on your layout, list the items that will take top billing in your [email newsletter](#). Remember: too much choice is a bad thing. If you create a great email layout that gives three to five things their proper due rather than twelve that have to share that small space, you'll see more click-throughs, sales and attention from your valued subscribers.

Finding a right balance between too much and too little is an ongoing challenge for even the most experienced email marketers, but the tiny screens of smartphones, tablets and netbooks make sleek layouts with tight, snappy text more important than ever. If you use the tips above to cut your campaigns down to size, you'll easily see the fruits of hard work in your reports, response rates and sales.

Step 6: Go Viral with Social Networking

So far you've learned how to target your audience, how to reach that audience, identify the competition, solidify goals and design content. In this final step we will discuss how [social networking integration](#) can take your email campaigns from successful amongst your subscriber list to viral across the entire web.



The first key to going viral with social networking is being sure your content is such that

people will want to share it. You aren't going to become a web sensation with stale or boring content. It needs to be something so interesting, funny, unique or engaging that people will be discussing it around the water cooler. And it doesn't just have to be your copy. Embedding a great video is another powerful way to engage your subscribers. Email recipients need to be moved to the point of wanting to share it socially with their friends and followers. Give them the tools to do so.

Including buttons that link to your social networking pages (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.) is a great way to inform your email subscribers about your social presence. Creating email templates inviting your subscribers to follow you on a specific social media channel is another way to do this. Conversely, it's also a good idea to promote your email campaigns through your social channels. Some ESPs will automatically post a link to your emails when they are sent out.

[Social sharing buttons](#) are similar to the forward to a friend button. Except instead of one friend, it's your subscribers' entire social network. This gives your email campaigns reach beyond your own subscriber list. It can be passed to your subscribers' followers, their followers' followers and on and on.

Integrating your email and social channels is the conclusive step in crafting a successful email marketing plan. When done correctly, your email campaigns can go viral with social networking. Master this and your emails could be the next big thing the web is buzzing about. *B*

About Benchmark Email

Take powerful features by the dozen, sophisticated list management, hundreds of email templates, ultra-precise reports and dazzling email and video email. Now, package all that together for an extremely affordable price. Sound appealing? That's us.

There's a reason – or 100 – that more than 73,000 users trust us with their email marketing campaigns. With a second-to-none feature set, headache-free tools that make every campaign a snap and extremely reasonable price plans, we're the email marketing service for businesses of all shapes and sizes.

At Benchmark, we're more than email marketing experts, we're innovators. Our main aim is to perfect our email marketing service, but we also follow social networking, search engine optimization (SEO) and Web 2.0 just so our 100% Web-based software is completely compatible with the ever-changing Internet world.

No other service gives you this robust, standard range of features for just \$9.95 a month to start. Find out for yourself by enrolling in our free, 30 day trial www.benchmarkemail.com/register.

Contact Benchmark Email

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