

The background of the entire page is a dark, textured surface. In the upper half, several glowing white envelope icons of various sizes are scattered. A hand is visible on the left, with a finger tapping a large, glowing white envelope icon on a tablet screen. The tablet is held by another hand on the right. The title text is centered in a blue horizontal band across the middle of the image.

How to Write Compelling Email Subject Lines

LORMAN[®]

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How to Write Compelling Subject Lines

One of the biggest hurdles in email marketing is getting potential customers to actually open the message rather than send it straight to their trash folder.

Unfortunately, this hurdle is harder to cross than it might seem. Some estimates say the average user gets over a hundred offers a week in their inbox. You might wonder what chance you have when the market is that flooded. The answer is sobering: not much of one. That is, unless you can hone your headline skills until you can effectively compete. You can do this with several years of trial and error, or you can use these tips that will help you push your way to the front of the pack right away.

Why the Subject Line Matters

The subject line is often your first contact with a potential customer. You wouldn't dream of downplaying the importance of your first handshake with an important client. You wouldn't have any trouble understanding why it's bad to have a retail store in disarray when a customer walks through the front door. This is no different. In fact, your email subject line is even more important because, unlike the other two situations, the customer has no reason at all to be interested. You have to create that interest, reach an audience who is already being constantly bombarded with endless marketing, and get past the spam filter in one fell swoop. Can it be done? Absolutely.



Let Them Know Who You Are

Would you open the door to your house to someone who wouldn't identify themselves? While a person's safety isn't quite as paramount when opening an email, people are hyper-aware when it comes to internet communication. When you obscure who you are, you send your chances of being dumped into the spam folder skyrocketing. You can use the subject line for identification, but you might find it a more economical use of space to simply make sure the "From" line is used well.

Create Your Subject Line Last

A wise writer once said that the best stories are crafted by starting at the end and working backwards. What this means to you is waiting until after you've written your marketing copy to go back and fill in the subject line. That way you avoid two common mistakes. One, you aren't trying to write marketing copy that awkwardly stays chained to a subject line you already committed to. Two, you won't have a headline that bears little relevance to the content. Both of these mistakes are made frequently and they can be easily sidestepped by creating your subject heading last.

Personalize When Possible

This is far from an uncommon tactic, but it is seldom used effectively. Once again, you aren't trying to obscure who you are, which is something far too many spammers attempt to do. Using the customer's name introduces a level of comfort, but you can't make it look as though you're trying to masquerade as one of their friends. Think of a car dealership sending you a letter with a handwritten address, a return address that says "You know who!", and a frivolous sticker sealing the envelope. You would be bitterly annoyed to open it up and see it was from some company. But at the same time, a letter addressed to your name will be opened a lot sooner than one addressed to "Current Resident".

Sparse Use of Capitals

Capital letters like "STOP RIGHT NOW!" can be effective under certain circumstances. It can be a disaster in others. Let's face it: most people know advertising when they see it and they associate capital letters with advertising. Same with exclamation points. Does that mean they can't be effective? It depends on how savvy your audience is. If you're marketing to a tech and internet-savvy group, dispense with this kind of cheap salesmanship. If you feel, however, that your audience would be susceptible to that kind of flashiness, it can make for a good hook.

Giveaways

If there is one constant among nearly every demographic it is that people like to get something for (nearly) nothing. This is why advertising free services or products can act as a powerful email subject line. Of course, people are as jaded as they are receptive to gifts. They know they will be required to do something for the free gift and, often, it is something they won't want to do. Make sure your gift is commensurate with the requirements. For instance, you can't offer a 2 liter of Coke for attending a weekend timeshare seminar. But a free report for signing up to another free service? That can definitely work.

Use the Question Approach

Questions are used a lot in advertising for one very good reason: they work. If you ask a question in your subject line that piques your customer's curiosity, you have them. Is the cure for male pattern baldness finally here? If your potential customer suffers from that condition, they are not going to be able to resist clicking. The ethics might be debatable (unless you have an article that lives up to the promise of the headline), but the effectiveness isn't. Of course, this isn't the only method of asking a question. Even a simple, Are you someone who...type of format can be effective. People like to see themselves in the marketing and you will have instantly formed a connection.

Give Them What They Want

This is where knowing your audience pays off. While mass-mailing to anyone with an address can have its benefits, you'll get much better results if you can tap into a specialized list. But these specialized demographics are only helpful if you market to them specifically. Sending out an email headline crafted to appeal to those living a Lexus lifestyle to an audience more comfortable in a pickup truck is not going to work. You have to offer your potential customers something they might actually want in the first place. You might fancy yourself as someone who could sell ice to an Eskimo, but you'll probably be more profitable selling a heater.

Be Very Specific

What's more interesting: a subject line that says, "Click now for some ways to make more money!" or one that reads, "5 ways you can make \$3,000 this month!" Specificity is your friend when it comes to writing compelling email headlines. Not only does it put your concept in concrete terms, it gives you the weight of authority. And having that weight can make a big difference when it comes to attracting readers.

Honesty is the Best Policy

If you think of honesty as your enemy as a marketer, you're quite mistaken. Not only will it ensure that you stay within reasonable ethics, it can engender trust with your customer base. Trust results in repeat business. Trust is what keeps subsequent emails out of the Trash folder. Trust, frankly, is everything when it comes to building a lasting business, online or in the brick and mortar world. And honesty starts with the subject line. When you headline your email with something like, "Hey, you forgot this at the office," what do you really hope to accomplish? Even if you get a few more clicks, you're going to turn off more customers than you attract. Always be completely honest when writing your email headlines and you will eventually earn the trust of the email recipients.

Avoid Spamminess

In 1996, you could send emails that looked like the dictionary definition of spam and still get a respectable return on your time. Today, not so much. Even the least savvy internet users are familiar with the basic “look” of spam and you should do everything you can to avoid being identified as such. This is why you need to be careful about overusing capital letters, promising ridiculous things (Millions have won the lottery with my foolproof system!), and misspelling words. That’s right: spelling matters. Flagrant spelling mistakes not only look unprofessional, but they make people think they were written by those for whom English is a second language. There’s nothing wrong with this being the case, of course, but people are trained to regard this as a sign of spam. So double-check your spelling and have it proofread by others before you send it out.

Writing Irresistible Headlines

Of course, not every tip included here can be used simultaneously, nor should they be. This is a toolbox for you to pick from when you need to improve your headlines. Sometimes, personalization might be the key to increase your success rates. Other times, advertising a giveaway will be the ticket to getting your customers to read the material you’ve sent them. Other than these tips, your best strategy is to use tireless testing. Keep detailed notes about every email marketing campaign you send out. Create A/B headline campaigns and note how each set of emails performed. The more information you can gather about what works and what doesn’t, the more streamlined and successful your future campaigns will be.

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