

How to develop a successful e-mail marketing campaign

By John Deveney, APR

While the Internet offers many powerful tactics for practitioners, differentiating those that can have a huge impact on your bottom line from those that will have a big impact on your budget can be a challenge.

Direct e-mail is one of the revolutionary tools at the top of my list of favorite Internet marketing tactics. It can help you capture new audience members and qualify leads. It accomplishes this at a lower cost, with a higher and faster response rate than its print-and-postage cousin, direct mail — the process I refer to as “mail and pray.”

To develop a successful e-mail marketing campaign, I recommend evaluating your database options, integrating your campaign with offline communication efforts and segmenting your audience. Ready to get started?

Your database is essential

First, look at the audience members you want to reach. Are they online? Do you have a database of targeted e-mail addresses?

Current industry wisdom recommends starting with a database of at least 5,000 individuals from your target population. The larger your pool of target population members at the start of the campaign, the greater your eventual reach and results. If you do not have an existing database, you can purchase one. The cost, availability and specificity are comparable to purchasing addresses for direct mail. While the availability and specificity of e-mail lists are improving, they may be affected by legislation aimed at combating spam. Also, as your list selectivity increases, so can your cost.

With that said, I strongly recommend not purchasing a list. It is far more effective to build upon established relationships than to reach out to strangers. Focus on the database of contacts you already have, and call or write additional audience members to ask them for their e-mail addresses. You can also reach these individuals through the audience that you can currently contact online by incorporating viral tactics. (Know somebody who would be interested in this information? Please forward this e-mail on to friends and colleagues.)

An overview of a campaign for the Louisiana Physical Therapy Association (LPTA) provides a sense of how successful e-mail campaigns can be conducted without the benefit of a robust contact database. The LPTA struggled unsuccessfully for 20 years to pass Direct Access legislation, which allows patients to receive physical therapy without the considerable time and

expense of having to see a primary care physician for a referral before every third physical therapy visit.

Physicians, particularly orthopedists and chiropractors, had squelched Direct Access at every turn. Consistently, Direct Access was denied before it could exit House and Senate committees, sometimes sitting for years without review. We needed to make the case for Direct Access so compelling to legislators that, regardless of the opposition's political clout, superior financial gifts and inside information, the campaign would prevail.

Three-fourths of the way through the campaign, we learned from the opposition's newsletters that they were mounting an expensive television advertising blitz to derail support. LPTA's campaign budget was minimal, and responding with advertising was out of the question. We used research and media coverage on the topic to convince the client that we could combat an expensive television campaign with an e-mail campaign.

We developed a direct e-mail campaign and Web catch page to educate the public about the need for Direct Access and the reasons to change Louisiana law. The page also encouraged constituents to contact legislators to express support for Direct Access with the click of a button.

Since the organization's e-mail database was only a few hundred strong, we had to either buy a list or work around it. We chose the latter: By asking LPTA members to forward the inaugural message to everyone in their personal databases, we were able to exponentially expand LPTA's reach. As private citizens learned of the movement, they joined the catch page database. With every successive message, we gained new supporters who could forward the message to their contacts. The e-mail campaign was a resounding success with a response rate that ranged from 44 percent to 56 percent for each e-mail solicitation, compared to the 2 percent to 3 percent response rate that is typical for a direct-mail effort.

These results were significantly better than industry averages in terms of cost — since we purchased no lists, this 12-message campaign was completed for two-thirds the cost of doing a single direct-mail piece to the same audience — response rate, response speed and growth of the issue's significance among our target audience. Our use of this technology was even greater by comparison to direct mail in terms of cost, response rate, speed of response and our ability to focus public response with complete control to representatives, senators or, ultimately, the govern-

nor. The campaign Web site offered voters a central location to go to for information on the issue, to tell others about it and to e-mail legislators. The lobbyists were able to use this tool to exert pressure when needed and to stop it when silence was called for strategically.

After passing in the Louisiana House of Representatives and the Senate, the Direct Access legislation went to the Governor's desk. The well-organized opposition pressured the Governor to veto the legislation. Ultimately, the legislation became law without the Governor's signa-

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ture. The Governor's Office commented that the only reason the legislation was not vetoed was because of how strongly the general public supported the legislation through e-mails to his office. Louisiana became the 36th state to have Direct Access to physical therapy after a 20-year struggle.

Integrate your campaign

We integrated this new technology element later in our campaign, benefiting from the success we had already achieved through media relations, community relations and events. Elements such as media relations (the responses and individuals you recruit through a direct e-mail campaign can be great fodder for journalists) and events (direct e-mail can be an attendance driver) are easy to integrate.

Advertising can also be incorporated, serving the same role as the initial e-mail: to create a desire in the audience for more information. The catch page is crucial to this tactic and is often where many people falter when integrating traditional advertising with online promotions.

Let's say you are in the market for a small hand-held video camera and come across a magazine ad for exactly the product you need. The ad offers a Web address, but when you go there you find the company's general Web site. It takes more than a dozen clicks before you find the product

mentioned in the ad. You have gone from elation to frustration.

A Web catch page should fulfill your promise to the audience that when they go to the address, they will receive information on the offer that brought them there.

From the catch page you can invite them to click to a more general Web site to make a donation, send a letter, sign a petition, learn who has endorsed your effort or learn more about related causes, sales or promotions.

Audience segmentation

Another strength of direct e-mail is its ability to qualify leads. Appropriate software allows you to track who is reading and responding, along with the types of responses. This enables you to segment your audience accordingly, targeting future communications based on recipients' self-reported priorities.

For example, LPTA tracking reports showed which audience members responded to, and pursued information on, the economic element of our effort (increased cost of health care, insurance); who responded to the issue of quality health care; who responded to the business issue (attracting and keeping workers and companies in Louisiana); and who responded to the altruistic element of access to care for the indigent, migrant workers and uninsured.

As the campaign progressed, we continued to qualify and segment our growing audience based on what was most important to them as illustrated by their responses. Instead of sending out one general message, we tailored the next message to resonate individually with discrete audiences based on their priorities.

Direct e-mail is an extremely flexible and adaptable tactic, allowing you to respond immediately to changes in a situation. Once the catch page and software are in place, you can contact your audience members as frequently as their interest in your issue allows, all with the relative ease of sending an e-mail.

So whether you are a nonprofit trying to raise funds, a start-up building a constituency or a cause looking to gain momentum in public opinion, direct e-mail can be a perfect match. **T**



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