

Email marketing 101 writing tips

What you need to know before you write

Anatomy of an email marketing message

When writing for email marketing, you must focus on three key areas: the "Fields"; the "Body Copy"; and, if applicable, the "Landing Pages". All require virtually equal attention.

Understand the "Fields"

These are what you see when an email drops into your inbox. Like an envelope, the Fields give you a hint of what's inside. Fields of most concern to email marketers are the FROM field, the TO field, and the SUBJECT field.

Set a singular objective

Email is the wrong media for a diluted marketing message. Your purpose for writing — whether that be to make an offer, or announce a special — should be strong and crystal clear. The reason is, many Internet users will quickly scan your email message to determine if it's worth reading. If it doesn't come to the point your prospect will simply delete your message and move onto the next.

Used effectively, email is a powerful relationship building medium.

Target. Target. Target.

The flexibility and economies of email allow you to target with precision. So, make the most of this advantage. For example, if you are making an offer applicable to two different audiences — IT professionals and marketing managers, for example — write two versions of your email marketing message.

Write to target

Develop a thorough understanding of the needs and sensibilities of your target market before you write. This will help you select a style and tone appropriate to the audience — be it business professionals, college students, or homemakers.

Focus on building the relationship

Each time you write an email marketing message, remember that you're building a relationship in addition to trying to generate a lead, hit, or sale. Building a solid relationship with your email marketing list will lead to higher response rates in future campaigns.

Plan for rapid fulfillment

Sluggish fulfillment leads to dissatisfied customers. So, make sure you have all the internal resources in place to handle fulfillment of premiums, leads and other responses to your email marketing campaign.

Think in two parts, not one

An email marketing campaign has two parts, not one: the email your customer receives; plus the hyperlink embedded in the email that he or she clicks on to respond to your offer. This link takes the customer to a web page with a reply form (to email marketers, this is called the landing page). The landing page requires almost as much attention to writing and design as the email itself.

A friendly, conversational tone works best in most email marketing messages.

Style, tone, and formatting tips for email marketing

Avoid using ALL CAPS

In dealing with the limits of plain text, many copywriters are tempted to apply all caps to words and phrases for emphasis. In one or two areas of your email, this is fine. But don't overdo it.

Easy on the exclamation marks!

In general, you should never overuse exclamations in any form of marketing communication. This is especially true in email marketing for two reasons: One, the "!" symbol is used as a spam filter in many email software programs. Like copywriter Herschell Gordon Lewis says, "If you emphasize everything, you emphasize nothing."

No long paragraphs

Long paragraphs are intimidating. A rule of thumb for sales letters and other marketing materials is that no paragraph should be longer than seven lines.

Like a good sales letter, your email should look like one-to-one communication — not advertising.

Use a standard letter format

Standard letter format is best for practically all email marketing audiences. This means starting with a salutation and ending with a signature. Remember, email is personal communication — even more personal these days than mail delivered by post.

When to use non-letter formats

In some forms of email marketing, however — such as catalog updates, special announcements, and email newsletters (ezines) — a standard letter format is not necessary. But I would use one anyway. Even in an ezine, leading with a friendly note from the editor will help build the relationship with the reader.

Don't send advertising

Don't design your email message to look like a print advertisement or banner ad. Write for the email medium.

Watch the margins

If your email program has this option, set the margins for outgoing email to 20 and 80. This will make the text easier to read. If you don't have this option, consider manually returning each line at about 55 characters (an average of 12 words.) This will present your text attractively without displaying any weird line breaks.

About fonts

Readership studies indicate that the best fonts for email communications are Arial 10pt and Verdana 10pt. If you decide to send your email message in 12pt, use Arial.

A hyped, aggressive selling tone is rarely effective in email marketing.

No icons, cartoons, or emoticons

If you're writing an email in plain text, avoid using the ASCII characters on your keyboard to create icons (smiles, winks). Even cartoons (dancing letters, flashing fonts) available to you with HTML email can have a negative effect.

No jokes, puns, or cute praises

For some reason, a joke can be too easily taken the wrong way in an email. Be conversational and friendly, but don't joke.

Don't send file attachments

File attachments of any kind should be avoided in email marketing. If you have information to share that requires a file attachment, turn it into a web page instead. Then add a hyperlink to it from within your email marketing message.

Hype doesn't work

In general, the tone of your email should be friendly, informative, and helpful. Avoid the hyped benefits and empty promises found in so many (poorly written) sales letters.

Select a conversational voice

Scholarly, "corporate-speak", technical, and other formal writing styles don't work well in email marketing. The best writing style for this medium is conversational and to the point.

Avoid empty praises

"Quality service." "The best." "Leading-edge products." These are empty phrases when not supported by specifics and proof. Avoid traditional marketing communications text in email marketing.

Words don't speak down; tone does

In direct marketing, we often say to write at a grade five level. I think this is an over simplification. The axiom here is to write in a clear, conversational manner, using everyday words and phrases your target audience are familiar with.

HTML gives you more formatting and visual options — but plain text can still be effective.

Plain Text or HTML?

Plain text is okay. For now.

Many email marketing messages are still sent in plain text (ASCII) format. Internet users are comfortable receiving email in this format, so plain text is usually not a problem. Not now, but in a few years, I suspect, plain text marketing messages will seem amateurish and cheap.

Writing in HTML

Email sent in HTML format — the same code used to display most web pages — gives you the opportunity to apply fonts, backgrounds, graphics, and even animations to your email marketing message. Use this capability to enhance the presentation and readability of your message.

The simplest way to enhance an HTML marketing message

When constructing an email marketing message in HTML, consider adding size and color to the headline and subheads. Whenever I have tried this — using no other graphics or effects — response improved. In HTML email you can also include a picture of your product.

Drop-text the images.

A drop-text is a text message that appears when your cursor hovers over a graphic. Here's an example: Your reader opens your email message, sees a picture of the white paper you're offering, instinctively hovers the cursor over this image and (surprise) a special message appears. Very powerful.

Do fancy fonts and graphics improve response?

To date there is no slam-dunk hard data to indicate that fancy beats plain in email marketing. In some cases, a visually enhanced, effects-filled email will improve response dramatically. But I have also seen the opposite happen. My best advice is this: visuals are only effective if they motivate the reader to read the text. After all, if the text isn't read, your email marketing efforts will fail (no matter how pretty your message looks.)

The FROM line is more than a return address — it's an introduction of you and your company.

Customizing the "FROM" field

Don't settle for an email address

Virtually all email software is capable of customizing the name that appears in the FROM line of your email marketing message. So, instead of "From: mail@steveslaunwhite.com" you can send an email that says "From: Steve Slaunwhite, Copywriter".

Make it personal

If possible, use a personal name in the FROM line of your message. For example, "From: JaneStrong, ABC Inc".

Include your company name

Whether or not you are able to include a personal name in the FROM line, always include your company name and department name. For example: "From: ABC Inc. Customer Service".

Consider using the word "TEAM"

Team is a terrific word. So, consider using this word in the FROM field of your email marketing message. For example: "From: The ABC Product Upgrade Team".

Take advantage of brand recognition

If your company or product has strong brand recognition, use it to your advantage in the FROM field. For example: "From: Ignite Software: A Certified Microsoft Partner".

Work with the list owner

If you're renting an email list, the list owner — not you — may be identified in the FROM field. Be sure to ask the list owner what information is displayed in the FROM field and, if you don't like it, ask to have it reconfigured. Keep in mind that the list owner may have recognition in the target market your sending the email to. For example, if you rent a list from a well-known professional association, it might be advantageous to have that association's name in the FROM field, and not your own.

The SUBJECT line is a determining factor to whether your email marketing message gets opened and read.

Customizing the "SUBJECT" line

It's important

Your customers and prospects will base much of their decision on whether or not to open your email based on what is written in the SUBJECT line. Like the headline of a print ad, the SUBJECT line copy is vital to the success of your email marketing efforts. So, pay due attention.

You don't have much room

My email software will allow me to type a long sentence into the FROM line, but most recipients will only receive part of it. The rest will be cut off. Realistically, you have only about 60 characters in this area to write a message everyone on your list will be able to view.

Ask a question

This almost always get the email opened. It's a natural way to begin a conversation. Just be sure your question is honest and straightforward — not cryptic, hyped, or suspicious.

Avoid cryptic or clever phrases

These can sometimes work well in conventional direct mail, but rarely works with email. What arouses curiosity or intrigue on a printed envelope may be greeted with suspicion when used in the SUBJECT field of an email.

If you have a terrific offer, highlight it in the SUBJECT line, don't bury it in the body copy.

Avoid hype and empty promises.

Hype rarely works anyway. Why use it in email? We've all received these types of messages in our inbox: "Subject: Double your income in one month!" Such marketing messages are usually greeted with skepticism and deleted.

Teasers work well

An attention-grabbing teaser works very well in email — perhaps more so than in conventional direct mail. I once wrote a SUBJECT field copy that read: "Guess who's reading your email?" It was for a company that marketed email encryption software. The campaign did very well.

Why not write what the field says to write?

Often, the most successful approach is to write exactly what the field is asking for: the subject. Simply state the subject of your email, clearly and succinctly, without clever wordplays, teases, or cryptic phrases. This often works surprisingly well.

Start with the benefit

Highlighting the key benefit of your offer can be effective in the SUBJECT field. avoid a promotional or hyped tone. State your benefit simply.

Use a deadline

If there is a time limit to your offer, including this in the SUBJECT field can be motivating. For example: "Subject: Renewal notice. Deadline noon tomorrow."

Remind them they asked for it

It can be frustrating for marketers when customers ask to receive information or notifications — and then don't read the subsequent email. In these cases, remind your recipients in the SUBJECT field that this is requested information. People forget.

Consider using the customer I.D.

If your email is customer communications, consider adding the customer ID numbers in the SUBJECT field.

Be careful using the word FREE

There is a debate raging in the world of email marketing concerning the word "free". Email is a relationship, not an advertising, media. I suggest you keep the word "free" out of the SUBJECT field, and use it only once or twice in the body of your email marketing message — and only when appropriate. Try alternatives like "no cost" and "complimentary".

Customizing the "TO" field

Avoid using the email address

Email addresses do not always include a proper name. In popular email services, such as AOL and Yahoo! it can be difficult to get your name within your email address because someone else has already taken it. As a result, addressing someone by his or her email address can have the same impersonal effect as "Occupant" in conventional direct mail. So, if possible, always customize the TO field.

Consider using the proper name

Email is personal communication. More personal, in fact, than mail delivered by post. So, if available, use the recipient's own name in the TO line. Unlike conventional direct mail, it's difficult to overuse personalization in email marketing.

Avoid using first name only

I regularly receive email marketing messages from a company that says: TO: STEVE. I find it too personal, too soon. Would you put a first name only on a printed envelope or even a letter?

Avoid using the word "LIST"

Some email marketing lists will actually say "list" somewhere in the TO line. For example: "To: TravelRight_List". This is very impersonal and gives the impression of mass mailing, or worse, spam.. Ask your list owner to change it.

When you can't personalize — individualize

If, for technical reasons, you cannot include a proper name in the TO field, consider individualizing this section. For example: "To: Valued CMA member".

Always begin your email message with a salutation — personalized, if possible.

Body Copy: The Salutation

Always use a salutation

Although it's an informal medium, some marketers make the mistake of being too casual. Some email marketing messages have no salutation at all, appearing more like a flyer than one-to-one communication. Like any good sales letter, always greet your customer or prospect with a friendly salutation.

If you can, personalize

If available and practical, always begin your email message with the proper name of the recipient. Use both the first name and last name if possible.

If you can't, individualize

You may not know the proper name of your recipient. Or, if you do, you may not be able to include this name in the salutation for technical reasons. In these cases, consider individualizing the salutation. For example: "Valued UPS Customer:"

Dear, hello, or hi?

"Dear John Smith" is best. "Hello John Smith" is okay. Unless the recipient is a customer, never say "Hi John Smith." That's too familiar for a first-time contact.

When to use first name only

If you have a strong business relationship with your customer or prospect, then consider using the first name only in the salutation. For example: "Hello Janice,".

Headlines in email marketing are effective, but not as powerful as in print communications.

Message area: The Opening

Careful using traditional headlines

Headlines in sales letters – aka overlines – can work well in conventional direct mail packages. But their influence is diminished in email marketing. This doesn't mean you shouldn't use headlines. In some email campaigns, you should. You just need to realize that headlines are not as powerful in this medium. The SUBJECT and the OPENING are the most testable indicators of response.

Don't write headlines in ALL CAPS

When writing a plain text email marketing message, the temptation is to write the headline in all caps, for emphasis. But this is a mistake. If you are creating your email message in HTML, then adding bold and color to your headline is effective — just keep it upper and lower caps.

Work hard on the opening sentence

You need to give your opening sentence a lot of thought. When I write for email marketing, I focus on the opening sentence as much as I do the headline and SUBJECT field. It is here that the reader is either drawn into the body copy of your message, or skips it entirely and moves on to the next email in her inbox.

The opening sentence should stand alone

I have found that opening an email marketing message with a standalone sentence — rather than a multi-sentence paragraph — works well. I suggest to ask a proactive question, quote an interesting statistic, or highlight the offer.

Focus on the first few lines

Many Internet users set their email programs to display the first few lines of their email message. As a marketing writer, you must understand this and focus your attention on the first few lines of copy. Think of a window envelope. What do you want your prospect to see that will persuade him or her to read further?

Apply the 5-30 rule

What's the 5-30 rule? It's this: First you tell the 5 second version of your marketing message. Then you tell the 30 second version. The 5 second, mini-version of your story should be at the top of your email. Obviously, it needs to be short and concise, containing a couple of the key benefits along with the offer and response instructions.

Forget the warm up

Sometimes, in conventional direct mail, you have room to draw your audience into the copy. You can introduce yourself, warm them up, and provide some interesting background before getting to the offer. Not so with email marketing. You must get to the point, but quick. No warm ups, set ups, or lead ins.

Within the first few sentences...the offer

In conventional direct mail, it's not uncommon to get to the offer only after the first few paragraphs or even at the end of the letter. This is a no-no in email marketing. You need to state the offer right on top, preferably within the first few sentences.

Within the first few sentences... the main benefit

In conjunction with the offer, you should highlight the main benefits at the top of your email message. If there is more than one key benefit, use a bullet list, but keep that list to three points maximum. Don't be afraid to be quick and brief with the benefits at the top of your email message. You can always go into more detail further down.

Within the first few sentences... the response instructions

Never state the offer without associating it with the response instructions. In email marketing, the most popular method of response is clicking a hyperlink (embedded in the email message) to a web page. Toll-free numbers are also an option, but do not pull as well. Internet users prefer to click, not pick up the phone.

Never force your prospect to scroll up and down the email, looking for the response instructions.

Message area: The Middle

Highlight the offer and the response instructions

You must sell the offer and provide clear response instructions in the body of your email message – even if you already did this in the opening (as suggested). Since your message body contains expanded information, this will appeal to those who make a decision only after learning more details.

Don't be afraid to go long

In the early days of email marketing, short copy was the rule. But this is changing. For some offers at least, longer copy that tells a more complete story is doing better. This is especially true when a transaction is involved, such as a subscription or sign up.

Tell the complete story

Email is about the open, free flow of information. People use it to save time. If you tease or hold back information, readers will get annoyed. Tell them all they need to know. If there is too much background information to include within the email message, consider embedding a hyperlink to a web page containing more details.

Divide the key messages into sections

Your message should be comprised of short paragraphs, subheads, modules, and bullets. This improves readability and makes the text, especially longer text, appear less intimidating.

Write for the scanner

People tend to scan email before reading it word-for-word, even more so than in print communication. So, make sure a reader can gain a clear understanding of your message from the fields, opening sentence, subheads, and bullets.

Check the links

Your link should point to correct web pages. Check, check, and re-check.

Don't be dull

There's no excuse for boring copy, regardless of the product or service involved. Freshen it up. Liven it up. Avoid clichés and tired phrases. Think of new ways to describe features and benefits with impact. Use examples, statistics, and testimonials.

Don't overuse the word FREE

Earlier, I suggested you don't use the word "free" in the subject area. You can, however, use this word in the message area. But I never use "free" more than twice.

Message area: The Signature

Always include a signature

Never forget that email is personal, one-to-one communication. This means that the email is not only directed to someone, but from someone as well. Always include a signature.

When you can't personalize a signature

Sometimes it is inappropriate or impractical to include a personalized signature complete with a proper name. In this case, consider using the word "team" For example: "Regards, Your Edgeware product support team."

Advertise below the signature

Although your email as a whole should not look like advertising, you can get away with a promotional blurb incorporated into the signature. Below the name in the signature you can include your web site address, a recent special offer (for example: "Click here for a 10% discount..."), links to new product information, a current promotion, and, of course, your company slogan or tagline.

Presenting the OFFER

Hyperlink the call to action

Most prospects will click on a hyperlink in your email message to respond to your offer. If you don't have a hyperlink, response will suffer dramatically

Add a toll-free number

While most prospects will respond to your offer online by clicking a link, some will prefer to call and speak with someone live. A toll free number will often boost response.

One the top. In the middle. At the bottom.

Most click-thru responses will come from the hyperlink at the top, bottom, and middle of your email message — in that order. A lot of marketers forget the middle hyperlink. Don't. Your response rates will suffer.

Keep it simple

Don't make the response instructions within your email marketing message cumbersome or difficult to understand. State it simply in clear, everyday language.

Always say "Click Here"

Surprising, not all email software programs display hyperlinks in a special color. Therefore, never assume that your customer or prospect will know where to click to respond to your offer. I always hyperlink "Click Here" and never have a problem.

Link to more information

Some people need more information before they will respond to your offer. In this case, create a link to more in-depth information existing on a web page. You can also create popup windows within your email to present shorter chunks of background information — which has the advantage of keeping the reader interacting with your email message.

Never leave the Landing Page as an afterthought. Give it as much attention as you would the email message itself.

About the landing page

Don't use email forms

Avoid designing a form within your email for users to respond too. In plain text email, this looks cheap and suspicious. Even with a graphics-enhanced email message, few will fill it out. Instead of email, use landing page for forms and then add a hyperlink to that page within your email message.

Use a landing page for response

A landing page is the most popular way of responding to your offer. It works like this: you prospects clicks the link in your email message and is taken to a special web page. This page will often include a form fill out and submit to complete the transaction.

Use a secure web page for transactions

Having a secure web page for your customer to complete a transaction will boost response to your email tremendously. Even if the transaction does not involve credit card payments and their personal information is protected!

Restate the offer

On the landing page, restate your offer. This is a similar approach to designing reply cards in direct mail, and is equally important in email. You need to maintain momentum when your customer or prospect clicks through to the web form because, once they do, they rarely return to the originating email message. Keep on selling right to the finish line.

Ask for what you need, and no more

Some like to use the landing page to gather more data on the customer — such as family income, occupation, types of computer equipment they own, and so forth. But the landing page is no place for market research.

Adding to your in-house list

If you are using a rented list, the web form is a good place to ask your new customer if he would like to be added to your inhouse list. If he agrees, then you are free to email market to that customer for as long as he stays opted-in. Software companies use this approach very successfully when users register their software.

Tell them what happens next

If your customer is placing an order, give her an estimate of delivery times, a tracking number, a number to call in case there is a problem. If it's a subscription, let her know when she can expect the first issue.

The final screen

When submitting a form, or sequence of forms, the final screen the user sees should contain these two messages: a confirmation that the order or request has been successfully received; and a "thank you" for

their business. If there is other information, such as tracking numbers and customer service, this is the place to include it.

Privacy and Permissions

Don't be big brother

People are concerned about their privacy when using the Internet. Even experienced users don't have a full appreciation of how much personal information they give away each time they send an email or surf a web site. Although you may have plenty of information — legitimately gathered — on your target audience, it's a mistake to let them know how much.

Always include an opt-out message

Email marketing is a permission-based medium. A surprising number of prospects will look for the opt-out instructions at the bottom of your email marketing message, even when they have no intention of opting out. I suspect this is because clear, nohassle opt-out instructions establishes credibility. When these are conspicuously missing, you're on shaky ground.

Make it easy to opt-out

Don't make opting out a cumbersome process.

Privacy is a concern among Internet users. Be sure your copy reflects a respect for your prospect's personal information.

Confirm opt-out status

Configure your opting-out procedures so that, when users make this request, they receive a confirmation. This can take the form of a return email, or a web page telling the user that he is now off the list.

Sample wording

I find these opt-out instructions work well in most email marketing: "We respect your privacy, and promise not to abuse this method of contacting you. However, if you prefer not to receive further emails from us of this type, please click here and we will remove your contact information from our list."

Link to your privacy policy

Privacy is a big issue among Internet users. So, alleviate their concern with a link to your company privacy policy. The best place for this within your email marketing message is below your opt-out instructions. But you can also add this link to your landing page as well.

Make time to write.

Tips for writing productively

Schedule your writing

It's amazing how many business people will schedule meetings and other appointments, but leave writing as something to do on the fly. The best, and less stressful, approach to writing is to set time aside and do it. Schedule at least a one-hour block each time you write.

Picture the person you're writing to

Email is the most personal form of communication next to the greeting card (and perhaps even more so.) To make your writing sound more conversational and appealing, create a picture in your mind of someone representative of your target market. And then write to that person. Make her skeptical and curious. Imagine she is asking you as you write, "What's this all about?" "Why should I be interested?" "What's in it for me?"

Persuade a friend

Have you ever been so excited about a new product that you persuaded your friends to try it, too. That's the perfect approach to writing email marketing, or any marketing communication. By persuading a friend, you're acting like a friend. And not like someone who is aggressively flogging a product. You'll be encouraging, understanding, thoughtful, and personable. Just the tone needed for successful email marketing.