

Avoiding the Spam Filters and Other Email Marketing Tips

Email marketing as many of us know, can be a powerful and inexpensive method of reaching our most active potential and/or existing customers. It can boost not only our direct sales, but also our credibility and referrals.

One of the major benefits of email marketing is that email is free, but obviously this is the same reason that spam has become so popular and so frustrating. With spam comes spam filters and with spam filters comes the blocking of legitimate email.

In this article I'll describe the basic steps you can take to help reduce the number of emails you send out that get blocked by spam filters -- hopefully resulting in a more rewarding marketing effort.

The right selection of words

Many spam filters work by analyzing the email based on its content and the words used. Many words -- such as free, sex and so forth -- are very heavy spam trigger keywords. Your priority should be to avoid such words while keeping your newsletter as professional as possible.

Later in this article I will show you a technique that I use to help me detect words that could trigger spam filters that I may have missed.

Pay attention to your formatting

When formatting your email, keep it simple and professional. Excessive use of different colors, fonts, sizes, images and so forth will result in a higher spam filtering rate. Keep your email as clean as possible, and try to stick to a maximum of 2 or 3 different font types and sizes. Overly large sized fonts will surely add to an email being flagged as spam, as will too many images (or not enough text).

Try and use a short and simple stylesheet rather than using font tags excessively. Most spam filters don't appreciate a multitude of font tags and inline formatting, and the more primitive filters can't detect stylesheets so they will not penalize as easily.

Consistency is king

Use a template if you plan on sending newsletters consistently. This will make sure that all your newsletters look and feel the same. It will also add a touch of professionalism and branding to your newsletters.

Whilst not directly affecting spam filters, this will enable your readers to distinguish your newsletter instantly, thus not reporting it as spam accidentally. Some spam filters work by querying a spam server, whereas others report individual emails as spam. If your email gets reported as spam, then more than likely multiple spam filters will flag your email.

Being consistent with your timing of the newsletter also helps. For example, if you send a newsletter once per month (I personally don't recommend you send out any more than this, unless you've got something really interesting to say), then aim to send it out at the same time, on the same day each month.

Once again, your potential readers will learn to expect your email, adding professionalism and often improving open rates, also reducing accidental spam flagging as well.

Always use Double Opt-in

Always make your mailing lists double opt-in. This means that when a user subscribes to your mailing list, they will be sent an email with a link that they must click on to confirm their subscription.

This is very important because many people can accidentally enter an incorrect email address, or even the email address of someone else on purpose. When that person receives a newsletter they did not subscribe to, they will assume they have been spammed, and your newsletter (and possibly your web server) will be reported as spam.

Unsubscribe and Contact Information

Every newsletter you send out should contain a way for the reader to unsubscribe. Not doing so is illegal in some countries and is an instant sign of spamming. You should also display your contact information (Phone, Fax and Address) clearly, as this greatly increases confidence in your email and your company, as well as conforms to spam laws in the United States. Contact information also allows a potential customer to contact you if need be.

Test, Test, Test

The key to avoiding spam filters is testing. The first method of testing I use is to send the newsletter to multiple email accounts with existing spam filters. For example, I have a Gmail (<http://www.gmail.com>) account and a Hotmail (<http://www.hotmail.com>) account that I make sure I send my newsletter to. If the newsletter ends up in the junk folder, then I've got some work to do.

I also have a couple of email accounts with different web hosts that have spam filters in place. In particular, they mostly use spam assassin -- a popular piece of spam filtering software. Spam assassin is useful because every email that it flags as spam is given a report and a list of why that email was considered spam.

I also have a local spam filtering application called No Spam Today! for Workstations, that runs a local copy of spam assassin on my PC. It acts as a very close replica to the same software used on thousands of servers world-wide. By sending myself copies of the newsletter No Spam Today! -- using the spam assassin checking techniques -- gives me feedback as to why my email may have been flagged. If I've used words or formatting that I shouldn't have, or if I've included too many images, etc.

Conclusion

Avoiding spam filters when sending out legitimate newsletters can be a time consuming effort. However, as your mailing list grows, it can also be a very beneficial exercise. I've watched open rates of just 2 to 3% soar to a massive 50% and over, simply by applying the techniques described in this article.