

Winning Hearts and Minds through the Inbox

With a **smart strategy**, email can be a vital communication channel for engaging your supporters and raising money.

Strategize

Establish objectives for your organization's email strategy first. Your email communications are an extension of your program strategy and must be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound. The **Spitfire Smart Chart®** can help you think through these questions and incorporate better email practices into your overarching communication strategy.



Research

Research your members and segment them into different lists according to all the information you can gather: interest areas based on response rate, activism level, demographics, location and age. As you learn more about the interests of individual subscribers, you can craft increasingly relevant content. You should treat people who respond to 80 percent of your action alerts differently from those who respond to 10 percent. This personal touch deepens your relationship and engagement with your subscribers, making them more valuable advocates and supporters.

Craft

Subject Lines

Subject: (The subject line is the most important part of your message. It determines if a subscriber opens or ignores your email. Clearly state what the email contains and make it brief, informative and personal. Make your **headlines** less than 50 characters and entice your reader to open the message. Asking questions can also be a great way to get attention. Including a recipient's first or last name in the subject line was a **common trend among nonprofits in 2015**, but whether or not it increases open rates depends on your list. This is where testing subject lines with your lists over time comes in handy. Make sure not to use ALL CAPS or too many punctuation marks as they can set off spamfilters. Include a call to action when necessary, but keep in mind that you'll lose subscribers' interest if urgency is overdone.



From Lines

Experiment with the "From" line to assess whether sending an email from a specific staff member encourages more people to open your emails. Send emails from staff members who your supporters recognize and trust, like your executive director, or a program director.



Body

Lead your email with the most compelling information and keep it succinct. Recipients will likely stop reading if they're not engaged from the start. Vary the types of emails by incorporating a call to action, relevant news and authentic stories. Include deadlines on your calls to action and end with next steps that stand out in the text and provide clear opportunities to volunteer, advocate, donate or attend pertinent events. Only include one call to action per email and repeat it once or twice in the email. Develop a content calendar to plan for key themes, events and calls to action that support your program or campaign strategies.



Design

To make your email easy to read, use bold headers, bulleted lists, and buttons, rather than hyperlinked text. Limit the number of fonts, text sizes and colors. Underline all text links. Use a template that is consistent with your brand and include compelling images or graphics that support your message.



Timing

Schedule emails when you know your readers are most likely to read them. Most email users prefer to open email before the work day and during lunch. Studies vary widely on the average open rate and click-through rate for nonprofits. The 2016 [M+R Benchmarks study](#) reported an average open rate of 16 percent and an average click-thru rate of 3 percent for advocacy emails, .43 percent for fundraising emails and 1.6 percent for email newsletters. [MailChimp](#) found an open rate of 24.88 percent and a click-thru rate of 2.81 percent. Use your email analytics to learn your audiences' behavior and the best time of day to reach them. The highest open rate tends to be within the first hour of delivery but your list may perform differently. It's best to send no more than one email per week and no less than one per month, but your metrics will tell your list's story.



Listen, Test and Improve

Test the timing, frequency, tone and content of your emails to learn what content and messaging resonates with your audiences. Most email providers offer A/B testing, which involves sending one version of an email to a small segment of an email list and a second version to an equal number of subscribers to determine which version performs better. The winning email is then sent to the remaining portion of the list. You can do this with lists that are as small as a few thousand subscribers. Experiment with the subject length, sender and time or day of the week that you deliver your emails. You should check analytics reports after each email campaign to track open, click-through and unsubscribe rates. Additionally, you can get direct feedback from your subscribers by conducting surveys.



Build Your List

Start growing your email list by inviting supporters to sign up through your website, social media channels, paid search and donor and volunteer forms. To make sharing easy and capture users on your social channels, include a "forward to a friend" link and your social media icons at the top of the page. After a supporter takes an action on your website (i.e. signs a petition or sends a letter to congress), redirect that supporter to a "tell a friend" page where they can share the same action with their friends through social media or email. You can pay for list acquisition services through companies like Change.org and Care2, which typically charge \$1.75 per supporter that opts into your list. As you start to grow your list, be sure to follow [CAN-SPAM guidelines](#) to protect your reputation and email deliverability.