

[Andrew Palmer](#) - Mon, 9/19/2016 - 00:00

Whenever you prepare a carefully crafted email for your donors, do you have a split second of doubt as you click send that anyone will open it?

I still do after almost 20 years of email marketing.

We can't help it. There are too many times we have racked our brains for the very best content, the best starting sentence, the best subject line, only to find the email stats show opens aren't as good as hoped. It happens to all of us, but there are ways to improve the odds of a successful open rate.

But first, for those of you that are new to email, let's define the term "open rate."

An email open rate is the ratio of the total number of unique people who opened an email to the total number of delivered emails. If 2,000 emails were sent and 1,800 emails were delivered, and of the 1,800 delivered emails, 540 emails were opened, the email open rate would be 30%. Only those emails that were actually delivered are a part of the calculation. (FYI: The non-profit industry average open rate, according to Mail Chimp, is 22.3%.)

Unfortunately, the tracking of the open rate is not perfect. To track an open email, the industry uses a small transparent 1x1 pixel image that is inserted into the email being sent. Only when that image renders are the emails marked as opened. But this is not always accurate. Any mailing can register both false negatives and false positives. On the one hand, some internet service providers don't load the pixel in the email when opened (false negative), and sometime a donor's email preview mode renders the pixel as they delete it (false positive).

To be fair to marketers, there are many more false negatives to be found. As such, it is likely that an actual email open rate is higher than reported and what's important is the comparison of your mailing to industry averages and the relative improvements of your open rates as you refine your craft.

So, how do you go about improving your open rates? The answer is simple... write better subject lines.

A subject line is the first (and maybe last) impression your email makes on donors. In many ways, the subject line is more important than email content. After all, a

great email or e-newsletter is worthless if it never sees the light of day.

I know you have heard that before. But since most inboxes today are congested and everyone's email messages are getting lost, it's time to start writing multiple subject lines for each mailing and testing the best of them each time out. This is the key that opens a donor's door to your messaging. Let me show you how simple it is to make subject lines stand out in the inbox. Please consider these 15 writing tips:

1. **1. Create urgency.** Imminence and exigency will convince donors to take action. It triggers them to want to learn more. But you can't fake it. Never try to use urgency if it is not present. Otherwise you may lose the trust of your donors.
2. **2. Create uniqueness.** Your donors want to learn new things. A subject line that energizes them with something new or different triggers interest. Don't be afraid to be creative. Your donors will want to find out more.
3. **3. Write benefit-oriented copy.** If your donors think your email has useful information they are more likely to open it. Make the subject line express a benefit to your donors.
4. **4. Be ultra-specific.** An email that promises a vague benefit remains unopened. But if you are specific with exact numbers it will pull in more donors. Specificity heightens credibility, credibility builds engagement, and engagement equals opens.
5. **5. Keep it clear and concise.** Often a shorter and more descriptive subject line can perform better than a clunky creative one. That doesn't mean don't be creative. It means don't be confusing. Don't be clever by half.
6. **6. Use humor.** Funny subject lines can really stick out and catch the eye of donors. But be careful. Make sure your sense of humor is shared with your donors. If you know your audience well and your emails are targeted, a good laugh can get an email opened and earn major reputation points. A bad joke is, well, bad.
7. **7. Use numbers.** Digits attract attention. Start your subject line with a number. This tells donors they will get tips or a list that is easy to scan and digest. We can't help that our brains are naturally drawn to digits, and using numbers creates a promise of a quick and easy read. This is why Top 10 lists are so successful in marketing.
8. **8. Ask Questions.** The use of question marks can make your subject line stand out. It is more engaging than the norm and it begins an instant dialogue with your donors.

9. **9. Create a list of three.** There is something memorable and readable about lists of three. It can also work well if the third item is overly specific or doesn't fit or is just there to be a third idea.
10. **10. Use pop culture.** If you know your donors, you can interject some pop-culture references. Anything from "Pokémon Go" to "Star Wars" can work. Musical lyrics can work as well. The question is... will donors get it? Is it too clever? Not appropriate? Or worse, will it turn them off?
11. **11. A single word.** Go extreme with a minimalist one-word subject line. With an inbox full of junk, the one-word subject line may be the one that stands out. A single word can make an emotional impact. It may be more enticing for your donors.
12. **12. Alliteration.** A subject line repeating the same sound or letter at the beginning of each word can grab your donor's attention more effectively than a simple phrase. It's musical magnetism.
13. **13. Keep it conversational.** Don't lecture, and don't try to impress with vocabulary or legal terms. The best email subject lines have a casual, conversational tone.
14. **14. Be a thief.** Study the emails from non-profits and for-profits that you get in your own inbox everyday. Subscribe to multiple like-minded entities and learn from their ideas. Take the essence of these subject lines and adapt them for your use. It's not really stealing, (the above heading would make a good subject line, right?), but taking an example and making it better.
15. **15. Keep it under 50 characters.** I don't believe in finite rules when it comes to subject lines, but it's always best to have fewer than 50 characters. Otherwise, there is a danger of your subject line being cut off. And that helps no one.

Two final thoughts...

Don't believe everything you read. There are many Internet gurus who claim there is a perfect subject line length, time of day to send email, or magic "open" words, etc. Not true. Every donor list is different. What works for one entity may not work for all. That is why it is important to test multiple ideas. Also, over time you will know the behavior of your donor list. By building a relationship with them via email, you'll soon be able to anticipate what they will open.

Secondly, if you are testing and you still see no improvement in the open rate, ask yourself this last question:

Am I being a pest?

Over-mailing your list is the number one reason donors don't open. They get annoyed if you send too much or if the email is not of interest to them. A donor may think you send too much "junk" and just ignore it. Others will complain and unsubscribe. Take any comments you get about over-emailing seriously. Each donor on your list has invited you into their home, office, or phone. Don't abuse the privilege.

Your donor's inbox is no doubt overflowing, but a message that is a benefit to them is always welcome. Make your emails say "Read Me" with new and different subject lines that stand out.

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