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B2B Email Marketing Best Practice Guide

What you need to know to optimise
your B2B email campaigns

About Celsius:

Celsius is a pan-European B2B Data Marketing Agency providing solutions for some of the world's leading companies, including Microsoft, Dell, Novell, and SAP, as well as some of the rising stars. Our team is made up of nationals from 10 European countries, so we really understand your target audience and their cultural differences to offer you central control for your marketing budget and content with local engagement in your target countries.

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Email marketing has become more complicated as respondents' inboxes overflow and corporate spam filters become more and more stringent. Our summary below describes how to increase the odds of your emails getting both delivered and read.

1. DATABASE QUALITY

- ✓ **Perform regular deduplication and cleansing** - to ensure that email personalisation fields (Title, First Name, Last Name) are clean and well populated (saving yourself from "Dear Smith" or "Dear Mrs Blank" embarrassment) and to avoid sending the same campaign to the same person several times, a sure way to get sent to the junk folder immediately.
- ✓ **Run email HELO (ping) testing** - to remove/correct invalid and badly spelt emails, thus ensuring optimum deliverability.
- ✓ **Adhere strictly to countries' emailing legislation** – obtain prior consent where necessary (see our B2B Email Marketing Legislation White Paper for more information) to avoid being labelled as a spammer.
- ✓ **Implement unsubscribe requests immediately** - to maintain a good reputation with your prospects and customers.

2. MESSAGE DESIGN / FORMAT FOR BEST DELIVERABILITY AND RENDERING

- ✓ **Create a "text only" version of your template** - always plan to create two separate versions of your email - one in HTML and another in plain text. Because if you only provide an HTML email, any subscriber whose email client is set up only to handle text messages will display a jumble of text, odd characters and HTML code.
- ✓ **Design for the Top 5 email clients** - According to *MarketingSherpa 2010 Email Marketing Benchmark Report*, nearly 80% of email users use one of the following five email clients: Microsoft Outlook (4 in 10), Gmail, AOL, Yahoo! and Hotmail. So ensure that your email design will render correctly in all these clients.
- ✓ **Provide a link to an online version** - you may have subscribers using a non-standard program or accessing their email from smartphones or other mobile devices. That's why it's important to include a link in your email to a Web-based version of your email message, preferably at the top of your message - this will ensure that all subscribers can access the information as you intended, even if the email they received didn't render properly.
- ✓ **Maximum message size 60Ko** - because some recipients may have file size limits within their email client, a good rule of thumb is to keep your message sizes to between 40 - 60 KB to avoid potential issues.
- ✓ **Maximum message width 600 pixels** – not all email clients have the same width viewing panes, so to avoid forcing readers to scroll horizontally, ensure that your email designs are no more than 600 pixels in width.
- ✓ **HTML coding for optimum accessibility and character rendering** – it is recommended to use ISO05588-1 (Latin 1), W3C HTML 4.0, UTF-8 coding to ensure best compatibility and rendering.
- ✓ **Do not use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)** - many graphic designers make use of CSS to help speed the development of web pages, but it is not recommended in email design, as email clients don't have a standard way of rendering CSS and, as a result, messages using CSS may end up looking radically different than you intended.
- ✓ **Never include scripts in your email** - email systems don't like scripts and will either remove them from messages or reject messages altogether if scripts are detected. Commonly used scripts to avoid using in email marketing include JavaScript and VBScript.
- ✓ **Don't use Flash elements** – Flash may work well on your website but Flash elements are not supported in the most common email clients. If you need to show subscribers content using Flash, link to the appropriate page on your website.

3. MESSAGE CONTENT FOR OPTIMUM OPEN AND CLICK-THROUGH RATES

- ✓ **Test sample messages to see what performs best** – always perform at least a basic A/B split test on subject line, to see which results in the best open rates. If your database is large enough, you can also test different templates, headers or calls to action, and sending at different times or days.
- ✓ **Put company or CEO name in the “from” address** – for fast recognition from your prospects and subscribers. Always use the same name and email address when sending mail to ensure the recipient recognizes the email sender. Also ensure the links within your message use the same domain as the “from” address, to remove the risk of the email being marked as potential phishing.
- ✓ **Keep your subject line to 50 characters or less** – and ensure that key words are at the start. Email clients often won't display the full subject line, so it is important that the main elements are visible immediately, to grab your reader's attention.
- ✓ **Avoid “spam trigger” words in your subject line** - spam filters “read” subject lines and will send your message to the junk file (or not deliver it at all) if you use certain words. Avoid trigger words like: free, discount, now only, one time, winner, hello, amazing, opportunity, promise, guaranteed, as well as the use of question and exclamation marks.
- ✓ **Beware of image disabling** – 65% of respondents in MarketingSherpa's 2009 report have their email images turned off by default. Never have important content appear only in an image. If you can, use teaser text and HTML colours and layout rather than an image so readers can get an immediate “preview” of your email even if images are disabled.
- ✓ **Ensure that all images have relevant ALT tags** – emails that arrive with blocked images often look like a puzzle full of blank boxes with red Xs in the corners. An ALT tag is a written out “ALTERNative” to what the images represent. Making use of ALT tags to describe the offers depicted in the images will help your email content better communicate with those whose images are blocked.
- ✓ **Segment your target list** - the days of blasting the same message to your entire database and praying for results are over. To optimise open and click-through rates (and reduce unsubscribe requests), aim for relevance – send carefully targeted messages to smaller segments of your list.
- ✓ **Personalize email messages with dynamic content** – personalisation is not just about using salutation fields. Develop buyer and customer profiles and align them with the content in any email message. Create multiple messages or use dynamic content to ensure the email is sent with information important and relevant to that prospect.
- ✓ **Frequency is as important as content** – however relevant your message is, sending daily marketing e-mails can cause more harm than good to your campaign. It also damages your brand's reputation. If messages are flooding inboxes, recipients are more likely to unsubscribe or mark your messages as junk.
- ✓ **Put important content at the top of the message** - 69% of B2B email recipients use preview panes. Put important content – the offer, call to action, etc. at the top of the email (over the fold) for immediate viewing.
- ✓ **Avoid long messages full of text** – you will rapidly lose your readers' attention. If you have a lot to say, give the main points in your email and link to a landing page to expand on your offer.
- ✓ **Have a clear call to action** - easily identifiable in the message, which will make respondents want to click and follow-through. Try to repeat this call to action in three different parts of your email (for example, as a link towards the top, as a prominent button towards the bottom, and on the right hand side banner as a reminder).
- ✓ **Always include a clear and easy to use unsubscribe facility** – if you send several types of communications, you can also offer the facility to unsubscribe, for example, from promotional emails only but stay opted-in for the newsletter.

4. ROUTING

- ✓ **Avoid sending using internal systems** – unless your volumes are very low. Research shows high quality ESPs have 30% better deliverability than internal servers, which tend to not handle large volumes well and will more easily get blacklisted by ISPs.
- ✓ **Look at the platform your ESP is offering** – chose one with a user-friendly platform, able to handle split testing, database segmentation, sending html and text only templates and campaign scheduling. Other must-have features include the ability to use dynamic content and trigger emails (for transactional or thank you for registering emails for example).
- ✓ **Ensure your platform offers you at least basic email performance metrics** – hard and soft bounces, single and total opens, single and total clicks, and unsubscribe requests, with an easy immediate-view facility and good report building function. More advanced functions which are desirable are web analytics and a possibility to calculate ROI.
- ✓ **Email marketing should be integrated** - ideally, the platform should allow results to be integrated with your marketing automation system, if you have one, to allow marketers to track campaigns globally across platforms and media.