Email Deliverability:

What Is It and Why Should You Care?

"Send messages to people who want to read them"

Postmaster at Google

"Only send emails to those who know they are coming and have asked for them"

Oath (Verizon) Postmaster

Our deliverability series is meant as a guideline for "best practices" and information on deliverability. Best practices is in quotes because we can separate things into two categories:

1. Minimum practices to get emails delivered anywhere

2. Actual best practices that help optimize inboxing and maximize ROI

Guided by the consultation of ISPs and the results of many Act-On senders, this series is based upon the following philosophy about emailing: quality beats quantity. It sounds simple, but many senders get trapped in a battle where they are asked to send to more contacts and provide more leads. That is what leads people into deliverability troubles, impacting their ability to generate ROI from these efforts.

Additionally, this series is a light version of everything that can be done in this field, and many factors of business needs are either at odds with or influence how to best pattern deliverability for any specific company. At the same time, deliverability is changing constantly, and what is considered a best practice today may not be good (or even legal) in the future.

We will do our best to keep this series current, but if you have specific questions, please reach out to an Act-On account manager or support member about getting in contact with our Deliverability Services team. Our team can guide you through your specific questions or develop a long-term engagement plan where we focus on helping you improve email performance by targeting specific issues while also addressing holistic problems. If you're not yet an Act-On customer, you can learn more about our platform and deliverability expertise by visiting us online.

Intro to Deliverability

This first chapter is the baseline knowledge that the rest of our deliverability series is based upon. If you have a good grasp of deliverability concepts, take a quick peek to see if this is all old-hat. If you are newer to these concepts, however, this information is pivotal in understanding the context for some of the advice and suggestions in our deliverability series.

In simplest terms, deliverability is the overall health of a sender's email. This entails many aspects:

○ Delivery Rate

○ Inbox Rate

○ Click Rate

○ Perceived Email Channel Health

○ Most importantly, ROI from email

A note on unique vs total clicks (or opens and effective opens):

Throughout our deliverability series, opens and clicks are always used as unique metrics; only one open or click-per-message per recipient. Act-On (and most platforms) also include effective opens in open numbers. Due to various reasons, not all email opens are tracked. When no open is tracked, but a link is clicked, the system adds an open into the system. (It must have been opened for the user to click on it!)

Terms Defined

Deliverability: Overall health of a sender's email

Delivery Rate: Number of emails delivered (not bounced) divided by number of emails sent

Inbox Rate: Percent of emails that make it to a Non-SPAM folder

Open Rate: Number of opens divided by emails delivered

Click Rate: Number of clicks divided by emails delivered

Click-Through Rate (Click to Open Rate): Number of clicks divided by opens

Hard Bounce: Email addresses that do not or no longer exist; no recipient

Soft Bounce: Emails that bounce for some reason other than a hard bounce — often temporary, and the email is still addressable

Bot: Program that is not a human and interacts with email and websites

Scrape: Grabbing an email from a website and putting it in an email stream for marketing or selling use

Pristine Spam Trap: Email that has never been used for a real person — only to find those that scrape email data or purchase lists from data vendors

Recycled Spam Trap: Email that was once good but stopped being used by someone for more than 3-6 months

Opt-Out: The link that unsubscribes a user from future marketing email communication

Transactional Email: Emails that result from a direct user action (e.g. receipts, notifications on service, bill due statements, balance statements, system updates, etc.)

B2C: Referencing someone using a public email address, such as 123user@gmail.com (Note: this person could also be using this email for business)

B2B: Referencing someone using a company email such as 123user@123company.com

ISP: Inbox Service Providers (e.g. Gmail, Google Apps, Microsoft, etc.)

Filtering Company: Security company that pre-filters email before the email reaches a company

Prerequisites to Talking About Actual Emails

Once someone has a platform and wants to send emails, there are a few steps they need to take before they load and send. To have good deliverability, these are a necessity.

○ **Authentication (SPF, DKIM, and maybe DMARC):** Authentication is telling the ISPs you are who you say you are in an email and also that a marketing automation platform, such as Act-On, is allowed to send on your behalf. Emails might be able to go out without authentication, but they will likely be placed into a Spam folder, bounced, or come with a message stating they shouldn't be trusted due to the lack of authentication. Part of the Act-On implementation process is setting these up (DMARC is optional). Act-On customers can visit Act-On University for help getting everything in place.

○ **Email Data Hygiene:** Good data is a critical component of deliverability. Not all data is created equal, and having good lists with the right information is the foundation for building an effective email strategy. Good data doesn't mean a sender will succeed, but bad data will almost certainly result in failure.

○ **One Domain for Each Stream:** Each "stream" of email should be on a separate domain because crossing them will likely lead to failure. The reputation can cross-pollinate, and if one stream is damaged, the others will struggle as well. So make sure your emails have a different domain or subdomain from sales and other departments.

Some members of the deliverability community recommend combining streams to "bolster" poor sending, but we've seen this cause serious issues over and over. For example, we've seen cases where very important messaging has been tanked by another department's failure. Unless control for all data and email sending flows through one authority in a company (stressful and only possible at smaller volumes/company sizes), combining streams is too risky to recommend.

The Goal: Inbox

Inbox delivery is the goal, but as spammers become increasingly common, it's getting harder and harder to get there consistently, which raises the bar for email marketing entry and forces smart marketers to do more than the minimum.

At the same time, ISPs are creating evolutionary changes to the inbox. For instance, Gmail's new tab system has changed the email landscape. The majority of B2C emails (and an ever-increasing percentage of B2B traffic) is executed through Gmail and the G Suite, so ignoring the tab system is impossible. Not to be left behind, Microsoft has also added the clutter folder as a default, and marketing messages are being routed there as well.

It is important to note that marketing emails can get into the primary tab but only for emails that are sent from a trusted sender to a targeted group of recipients. The exact strategies on those steps are outlined in a later chapter of our deliverability series.

What Senders See. What the ISP Sees.

One of the most common questions the Act-On deliverability team gets asked by marketers trying to understand deliverability is, "What is my inbox rate?" And those marketers are always a little disappointed when the team says, "We can't know, but we can guess. We can usually narrow it down to a relatively tight window, but it will always be a mystery."

There are a few reasons for this:

The sender's vision is only accepted or not. There are all the folders discussed above (inbox, spam, promotions, forums, social, updates, clutter) and all the custom ones individuals create to filter their emails how they want them. But on the sender's end, ISPs only provide whether an email is accepted or not.
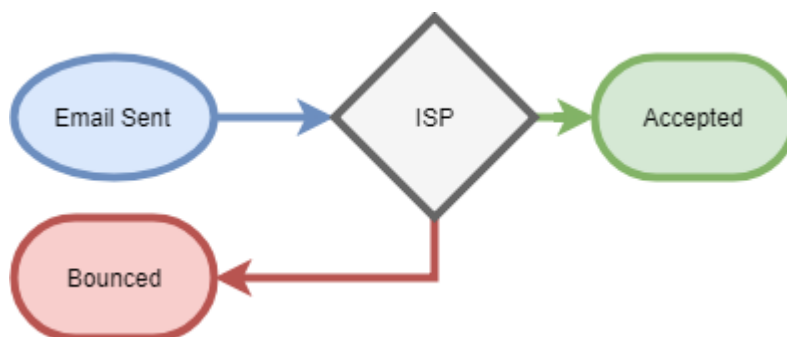
Not every recipient is the same. If a sender sends messages to Gmail, a variety of cases may occur. Most major ISPs have some type of "bucketing" system for recipients based on their behavior. For example, buckets 1-7 will get the message in their inbox, buckets 8-12 get the message in their promotions tab, and buckets 13-15 get the message in their spam folder. A different message to the same group from the same sender, based upon content and reputation at the time of sending, might have a totally different placement.
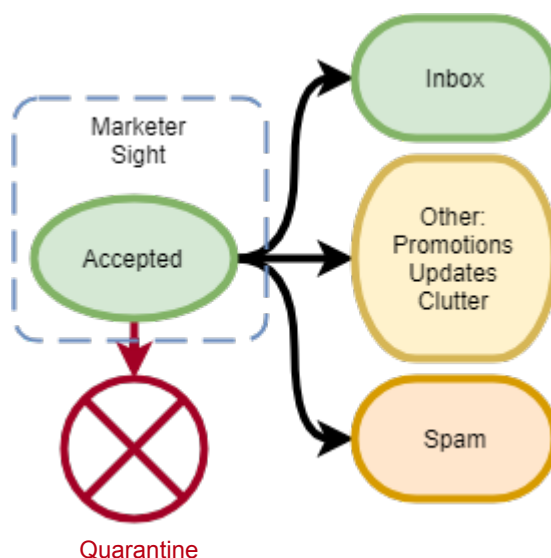
There are tools available to give some additional insight into the inbox — such as 250ok, Glock Apps, and Return Path, just to name a few. All these companies offer a glimpse at the inbox, but their information is not guaranteed to be accurate and can even be misleading based on whom you're emailing.

Act-On's Deliverability Team uses 250ok, an email and deliverability platform, for our testing, which does provide fairly accurate representations of inboxing. If a customer is enrolled in Act-On's Enhanced Deliverability Services, we tailor a 250ok list to a customer and have them send to the seedlist throughout the month to get an idea of the inbox landscape and to provide guidance on improvements.

Mobile Viewing

As most senders use their computers for creating and editing emails, it is easy to forget that most people view those emails on their phones. Making sure a send is renderable on both computer and mobile is a necessity.

Adding to this, many inboxes are being tailored differently on mobile and computer. In Gmail, if a send is not renderable on a mobile device, it might not end up in an inbox. Other platforms might place an email in a spam folder because it cannot be viewed properly on a mobile device for all inboxes — despite the email being fine otherwise.

It's important to conduct a thorough review of all critical elements of an email before sending, which is why Act-On's email designer has a mobile preview function. Several other companies — such as Litmus, Email on Acid, 250ok, and Glock Apps, among others — also provide additional renders for a variety of devices and email readers to help marketers ensure their audience will view the email properly upon receipt.

Email Sending Checklist

There are several things a sender should always check before hitting the send button. Below is a checklist of what should be reviewed prior to every send, and the rest of our deliverability series covers the specifics as to why and how.

- ○ The recipients of this email are targeted for this message

- ○ This email is part of a strategy

- ○ The subject line is clear and concise and conveys the what, where, when, why, and how (whenever applicable)

- ○ The email has a clear call to action that results in a click

- ○ All links work and lead to secured sites

- ○ All pictures have alt-text

- ○ The email renders on mobile and the majority of email applications

We've only begun to scratch the surface of the basics of deliverability, but the information above should help your business get your message in front of the right people at the right time. This is an important step in engaging your audience and converting leads into customers.

Improve Your Email Reputation to Avoid the Spam Folder

Email reputation is as varied as the audience you are sending to. The number one question someone with deliverability issues asks Act-On's deliverability team is "What is my reputation?" The person asking always wants a single score or word (good, medium, low) to describe their reputation and is disappointed when the answer is "it's complicated." So before diving into improving and maintaining a good reputation, we need to establish a shared understanding of exactly what email reputation is.

What Is Reputation and Where Does it Live?

Reputation for an emailer is varied and can depend on many factors. A good reputation will allow better inboxing, and a bad reputation will make emails bounce or be placed into a spam folder at a higher rate. Reputation can also be visible as a number or rating or hidden and assumed by spam placement and open rates.

Reputation is also controlled by different aspects of a sender's sending structure. Unpacking that, reputation can be tied to the following:

- IP address
- "From" domain
- "Envelope-from" domain

- Domain/link contained within an email
- Specific sender
- Specific content pieces in an email

Each ISP and filtering company puts different weight on each of these metrics to determine a sender's reputation. Through testing and watching visible reputations, along with talking to the ISPs, Act-On's deliverability team has determined some of the top-level emphasis the ISPs and filtering companies put on these locations.

For those reputations that are visible in some way, they can usually be found on the postmaster page of a major ISP or at a few other sites that aggregate reputation. Historically, reputation was based on the return path's sender score, a 1-99 scale. Today, due to a variety of reasons, that number is less representative of the whole picture than it once was. Instead, sites like Google's postmaster site are more accurate resources for analyzing your email performance and sender reputation. Gmail, for instance, will rate a domain and IP on a 4-tier scale: bad, low, medium, high. Others have different scales and different reasons for affecting reputation.

Establishing a Good Reputation

A good reputation is paramount to a sender, as it can compensate for any problems they may come across and will also lead to the highest ROI for email. Good reputation is based on hard work, adherence to best practices, and versatility in a changing landscape. Data quality will have the largest impact on your reputation, followed by maintaining an engaged audience.

On the following page is a chart of things, either visible to the sender or not, that affect reputation.

Sender Measurable Positive Impact

Open

Click

Forward

Reply

Proper authentication

Double opt-in confirmation

Sender Measurable Negative Impact

Spam complaint

Hard bounce

Soft bounce (due to reputation)

Repeated emails to non-engaged recipient

Sending unauthenticated mail

Sending unformatted/unrenderable content

Hiding or obfuscating links

Sending emails with bad or blacklisted links

Sending email with links that are not secured

Hidden from Sender Positive Impact

Email viewed for more than a second

Folder created for email

Email promoted to better folder (moved from promotions to inbox)

Moving a message out of spam

Adding sender to address book

Starring/marking as important

Hidden from Sender Negative Impact

Hitting a spam trap

Deleting the message

Ignoring the message

Email viewed for less than a second

Email reported as abusive

Email reported as phishing

Using spammy content

Unknown/Neutral Impact

Opt-Out

Viewing a message for more than 5 minutes (left open on that email)

Soft-bounce (due to non-reputation issue)

Repairing a Damaged Reputation

This first chapter in our Deliverability 101 series is intentionally high level so that it might apply to the majority of senders, but when a reputation is damaged, more nuance will be needed. Act-On's team of expert deliverability consultants regularly work with clients to help them improve their reputation and become the best sender they can be. If additional or more tailored assistance is needed, our customers can contact their account manager to discuss our enhanced deliverability services.

Repairing reputation is achieved in the same way as establishing a good reputation, but with tighter control and more granular oversight.

1. During a reputation repair, only the very best data should be used. This might mean that leads from a newly attended trade show sit on the shelf until the repair is complete, which can be frustrating, but waiting until the reputation is improved will translate to better results.

2. A sender should shorten the time of their engagement segmentation (discussed in the next chapter) by at least ⅓ (if not half) to only email those who are actively engaged with the sender. Engagement segmentation must be implemented, and many emails will likely need to be sunset.

3. The sender should perform list hygiene as covered in the next chapter. Both the third-party list hygiene and sunsetting should be done to ensure data integrity.

Once open rates rise and level off at a better rate for a defined time period, the sender needs to be extra careful about slowly adding longer unengaged sections. In fact, depending on what caused the reputation slide, they might want to avoid this altogether.

When the reputation repair is complete, you need to continue to follow best practices to avoid slipping back to poor performance. Each time a reputation is repaired, it becomes a little more difficult to achieve. ISPs have long memories, and short-term success will not count in your favor against repeated bad actions.

Hard Reset

Convincing stakeholders to perform a hard reset can be extremely difficult, but this practice can achieve more effective and timely results than any other method.

Initially, the reset is roughly the same for all senders: Stop sending any emails on the affected domain/IP for at least 30 days. This might seem extreme, but desperate times call for desperate measures. In this instance, it pays to have separate traffic streams for different types of emails on different domains so that not all company traffic must stop.

Once the sending has been paused for the requisite 30 days, sending can resume with the following strict setup:

○ Only send to the most engaged email recipients

○ Ramp-up volumes must be observed

○ Close monitoring on the ramp and immediate pausing if volumes are not accepted

The specifics of this hard reset depend on who the pause is for, who the audience is (which ISPs and filtering companies are being paused and reset), and the volume requirements at full sending. If your organization has decided it's time to perform a hard reset, please contact Act-On's deliverability services team to guide you through the process.

Conclusion

Maintaining a good reputation is absolutely critical to ensuring inbox placement and avoiding the spam folder. While a bad reputation can be repaired, you should always follow best practices, maintain quality data, and keep your audience engaged to prevent damaging your reputation in the first place.