



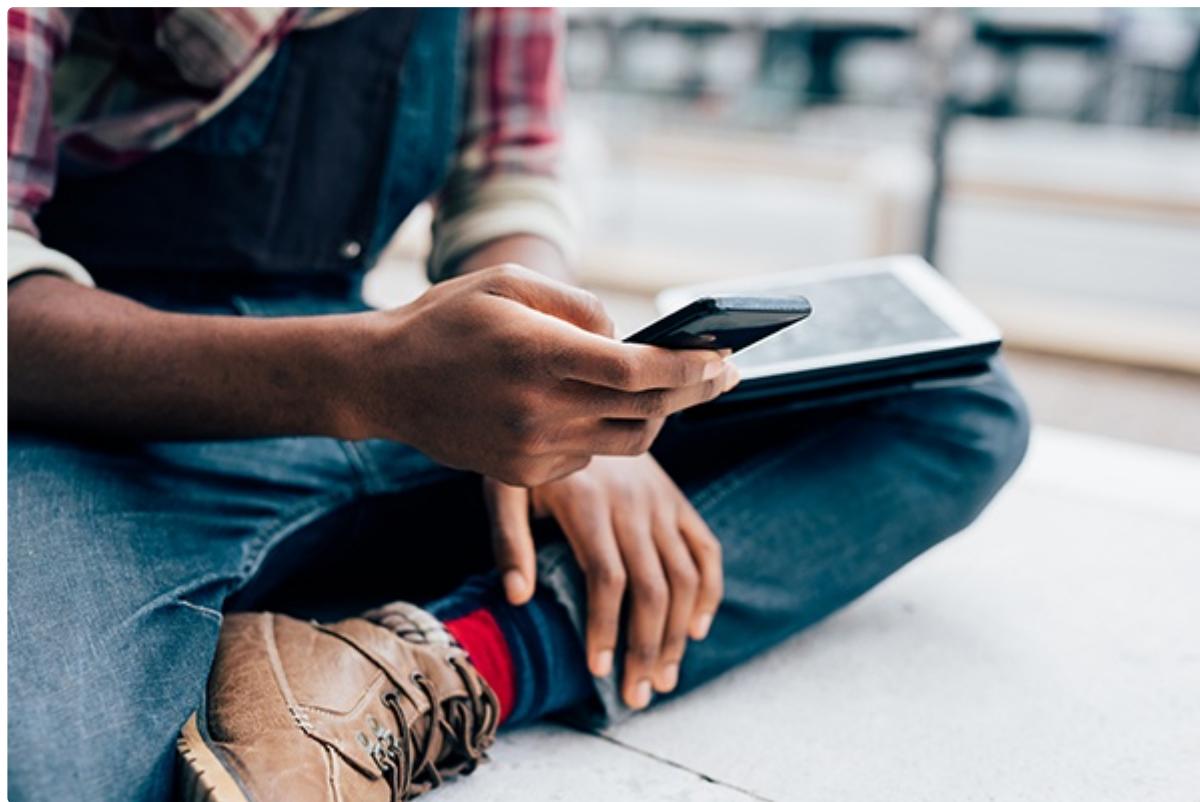
MARKETING | 11 MIN READ

How To Write Email Newsletters That People Actually Want To Read



Written by Margo Aaron

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A few weeks ago, the CEO of [GMB Fitness](#), Andy Fossett, looked out at a crowd of marketers and said, “Don’t. ever. blast. your. list.”



know better."

And we should. "Blasting" your list is one of those foundational **email marketing** violations that can get you banished for life from advanced marketing circles. Other violations include: using the greeting "Hi Friend," not segmenting your list, and "pushing" content to "get the word out."

Each of these violations makes up a core element of the infamous "Email Newsletter." You might know them better as the things in your inbox you "Mark as read."

[Click here to download our free beginner's guide to email marketing.](#)

Self-respecting email-marketers scoff at email newsletters.

And yet...we're seeing a resurgence of (dare I say it) GREAT email newsletters cropping up everywhere.

If you don't believe me, check your own inbox. How many of you look forward to [Tim Ferriss' 5-Bullet Friday](#) (and copied it yourself with a not-so-clever, "Friday's Top Hits" or some other knock off)? Or Austin Kleon's famous "[10 Things Worth Sharing](#)" Newsletter. Or Ann Friedman's "[The Ann Friedman Weekly](#)," also sent on Fridays.

Yeah, that's what I thought. The newsletter is having its moment, which begs the question: Why on Earth are these working?!

Every company with internet access has attempted the newsletter and failed miserably, boasting open rates that are lucky to hit 17%.

The vast majority of newsletters get



death: “Mark As Read.”

What are these newsletters doing that's making them work??

I decided to investigate. Spoiler alert: the answers will (not) surprise you. In fact, they're so #facepalm obvious you're going to kick yourself for not seeing it. I certainly did.

Here is why the email newsletters don't suck and how you can make sure yours don't either:

✉️ They're super niche.

If you work in a traditional company, odds are the email newsletter is your way of satisfying the CMO's frantic need to "get the word out" whenever he randomly decides he needs to because he didn't do the hard work of planning a proper launch or promotion strategy.

That is the wrong way to do this.

The right way is to focus exclusively on the kind of people who make up your specific audience and deliver content that only they will appreciate.

Again for emphasis:

Deliver content that only a specific audience will appreciate



email to everyone. Their lists are niche and specific.

My favorite example of this is [Gary's Guide](#) -- a New York specific "digest" of what's happening in the NYC tech scene. It has the most comprehensive list of events, classes, series A/B/Whatever funding updates, and job listings of anything on the internet. The best part? It looks like it hasn't been updated since 1992.



AT&T LTE

11:10 AM

97%  ⚡

Tempo of Donald / Matt Wassum (Help Bring Clean Water to communities in Cambodia & Ethiopia).

BOOK DEAL ==> The Startup Way (*By The Lean Startup author Eric Ries*), how modern companies use entrepreneurial management to transform culture & drive long-term growth; **5 FREE Copies!**

DON'T MISS! ==> Oct 26 Stem+HD w/ Lakshmi Puri (*Asst Secy-General & Dir. @ UN Women*), Jen Crozier (*President, IBM Foundation*), Seema Kumar (*VP Innovation, J&J*), Sarah Kauss (*Founder, Swell*), Antonia Hylton (*Producer, VICE*), Malika Saar (*Human Rights Counsel, Google*).; **10 FREE Passes (\$325)!**

DON'T MISS! ==> Nov 01 Decoded Fashion Summit w/ Lisa Green (*Head of Fashion & Luxury, Google*), Tracy Sun (*Founder, Poshmark*), Bill McInnis (*Head of Future, Reebok*), Riccardo Ulivi (*GM, Airbnb Trips*), Carla Dunham (*VP, Equinox*), Guido Campello (*CEO, Cosabella*); **2 FREE Passes (\$1000)!**

DON'T MISS! ==> Oct 30 Future Labs AI Summit w/ Corinna Cortes (*Head of Research, Google*), Dennis Mortensen (*Founder, X.ai*), Anand Sanwal (*Founder, CB Insights*), Evan Nisselson (*LDV Capital*), Josh Sutton (*Head of AI, Publicis Sapient*), Jean-Francois Gagn (*CEO, Element AI*); **3 FREE Passes (\$197)!**

DON'T MISS! ==> Nov 04 Excel Summit w/ founders Bryan Goldberg (*Bleacher Report*), Edward Shenderovich (*Knotel*), Rich Fulop (*Brooklinen*), Moran David (*GM, Mobileye*), Stanley Fischer (*Vice Chairman, Board of Governors Federal Reserve*), Bruce Taragin (*Blumberg Capital*); **2 FREE Passes (\$95)!**

DON'T MISS! ==> Oct 27 She Leads 2017 w/ founders Gloria Feldt (*Take The Lead*), Courtney Spritzer & Stephanie Cartin (*Socialfly*), Warren Friss (*GameHedge*), Lay Green (*SheTek*), Jodi Norgaard (*Go!Go! Sports Girls*), Ashley Crouch (*Appleseed*), Denise Lee (*Dir. Mktg, Ingram*); **3 FREE Passes (\$259)!**

DON'T MISS! ==> Oct 27 Synergy Global Forum w/ Malcolm Gladwell (*Author, Tipping Point & Outliers*), Steve Forbes (*Chairman, Forbes Media*), Nassim Taleb (*Author, The Black Swan*), Mike Tyson (*Boxer*), Arianna Huffington (*Founder, Huffington Post*), Ray





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And, yet, it's considered one of the best go-to sources for what's happening in the NYC startup scene. That's because it's not trying to be everything to everyone.

Gary's Guide is just for startups and people wanting to break into the tech scene in Manhattan. In other words: It's niche AF.

Tim Ferriss is also very niche, despite his famously massive subscriber numbers. His audience is made up of bio-hackers and aspiring digital nomads and Tim delivers exactly what they want: latest "hacks," supplements, gadgets, and, of course, *stoicism!!!* It's got wonderfully nerdy book and documentary recommendations too.

If you're not interested in those topics, you won't appreciate his bullets:



AT&T Wi-Fi

5:43 PM

100%

Purchase I'm enjoying —

[In-Drawer Bamboo Knife Block](#) -- I've tried every type of knife storage imaginable. Knife blocks tend to be bacteria hotels, so I avoid them. Magnetic strips can work well, but I've almost lost a few toes. Then I found this in-drawer knife block, which can easily store my chef's knives (or any knives) in a drawer or on a countertop. It's an elegant design, it can even hold clevers, and it's cheap as hell. So far, I'm loving it, and I'm amazed I hadn't seen one earlier.

What's more is these bullets feel personal (we'll get to that in #3). Like he's your friend telling you what he's reading, watching, and listening to. His readers don't even care that these are mostly affiliate links because it's so relevant and valuable to them.

Look:





What I'm watching –

[My philosophy for a happy life | Sam Berns | TEDxMidAtlantic](#)

-- This video hit me really, really hard. I don't know how I found it, and despite some tears, it was exactly the reset I needed. This kid is a total stud. Just watch and do *not* rush. Read the description afterward.

Again, this feels like he's your friend, casually sending you an email. And it's niche because he *knows* his readers are aspiring top performers and watching TED Talks at double speed, so he includes the detail, "Watch and do *not* rush." It's like he's looking out for you.

These newsletters work because they cater to a small, specific group of people. Tim and Gary are not trying to please everyone -- in fact, they're actively trying to turn people off.

For example, if you get excited from reading this article and subscribe to the newsletters I'm profiling here, you'll likely be disappointed because they're not interested in pleasing you. They're interested in pleasing *their people*.

✉️ The content is actually good.

I told you this would be obvious. You can't skimp on this one and yet everyone tries to. That's how "roundup" became such a dirty word. Paper.li, Refind, and other tools started automating curation and sending you pure crap (or simply too much). Newsletters started white labeling those automation services and claiming they were "curating," but that is not curating.

~~Curating is hand picking. If you're the curator of an art gallery, you're not~~



To curate is to be discerning. Careful. Methodical. Thoughtful.



For example, this is a poorly curated photo. It makes no sense right here.

Austin Kleon is the master of this. His links are thoughtful and relevant. You can tell he's actually read what he recommends and isn't siphoning the hard work of curation to his latest content manager hire (I'm assuming he has one, but you'd never know by reading the newsletter).

Here's an example of how he delivers quality curated content:



6. I'm currently reading David Rakoff's [Half Empty](#), which is quite funny. If you don't know his work, maybe check out the *This American Life* episode, "[Our Friend David](#)," which contains his [funny rant about the Broadway musical, Rent](#), which contains the great line, "Hanging out does not make you an artist."
7. Time waster: I lost a full day to playing [Frank Lantz's](#) new game, [Universal Paperclips](#). I feel, oddly, like it should exist in the same universe as [17776](#) and [World of Tomorrow](#). (Speaking of, I'm dying to see [part two](#).)

This takes clickbait to a whole new level. Instead of using a baited headline, he hyperlinks the hook: "Which contains his funny rant about the Broadway musical, *Rent*." Who doesn't want to read that?!?! (ok unless you're his niche, you probably don't, but the point still stands)

Kleon knows what his audience cares about because it's what he cares about. He's built a career and a brand around creativity and the arts. And funny drawings. And he delivers.

To nail this requirement you need a deep understanding of your audience and what they care about.

If you're asking, "How am I supposed to know what people care about?" Do yourself a favor and get a degree in accounting and call it a day. I'm not sure you can be saved.

TL;DR: Don't be lazy. Your audience is trusting that you're doing the hard



If you fail to deliver, (say it with me): "Mark as read."

✉️ Context. Context. Context. And personality. But mostly context.

Again, duh. But let me explain before you shut the screen cursing my name for telling you what you already know.

The reason these "roundups" and "blasts" work is because they're housed within useful context. They're not actually a long list of boring headlines you skim.

Let's break down a bit more how Kleon does it:



AT&T LTE

11:19 AM

98%  

Hey y'all,

Here are 10 things I thought were worth sharing this week:

1. [“Quit picking fights and go make something.”](#)
2. Marilynne Robinson, author of [Gilead](#), my favorite of [the books I read last year](#), on [writing as a process of discovery](#), from a forthcoming essay collection, [Light the Dark: Writers on Creativity, Inspiration, and the Artistic Process](#). (Previously mentioned: Alan Jacobs on [writing to think](#).)
3. I started reading Lawrence Weschler's [Waves Passing in the Night](#) and got a little obsessed with film editor [Walter Murch](#), so much so that I immediately ordered his book about film editing, [In the Blink of an Eye](#), and his book with Michael Ondaatje, [The Conversations](#). (Speaking of Michael Ondaatje, check out [his beautiful notebooks](#).)
4. Yet more for the [notebooks](#) file: feast your eyes on these [high-resolution scans of a whole Degas sketchbook](#).
5. [Swearing as a meditation](#), or how Sonia Harris started making her [profanity-laced patterns](#).
6. David Hockney says [going deaf has sharpened his art](#).





...

- 1. It feels like he's writing this directly to you ("Hey y'all"). He's conversational. Not overly chipper or super buttoned-up (here's looking at you B2B).**
- 2. He doesn't simply hyperlink the headline of an article and move on. He tells you why you should check it out or why he did. By hyperlinking the context he sort of gameifies the content. You don't know what you'll get until you click!**
- 3. He writes in the same pragmatic-and-hilarious tone he uses in his best-selling books (which is how most people discover him) which keeps his core audience happy and feeling connected to him (which is key!).**

Ann Friedman is also a master of this. Look how she weaves in a "roundup" of links into a paragraph of **context** (also a violation of copy-law: never publish a giant unbroken block of text!!!). Yet, she is famous for these giant blocks of relevant articles.

Relevant *to her readers*. If you're not a left-leaning progressive hungry for information on current events, women's issues, race issues you probably won't enjoy these pieces (see #1).



AT&T LTE

11:15 AM

98%  

3 Messages

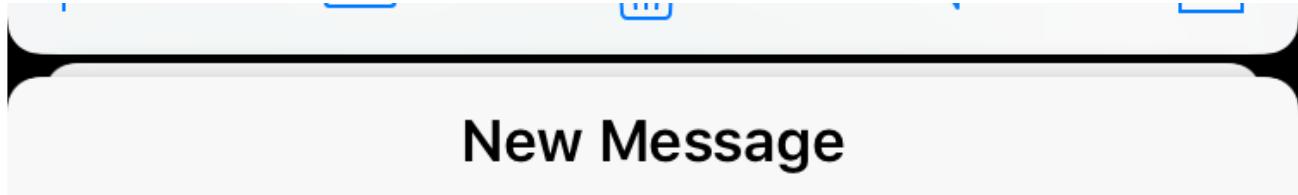
The mushy middle



I'm reading

The long, lonely road of [Chelsea Manning](#). Wow, [political divisions](#) are real. What [the horrific fire](#) in London tells us about inequality. [Stop pretending](#) you're not rich. "[Gwyneth glows](#) like a radioactive swan." The resistance will be merchandised. [Assless pants](#): Who wore them best? Profiles of incredible artists: writer [Roxane Gay](#) (whose new memoir is tremendous) and British-Ghanaian painter [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#). The [modern trans memoir](#) comes of age. The science of [gaydar](#). [Influencers' ghostwriters](#), and how Joshua Tree [became an Instagram backdrop](#). How businesses get their logos on those [blue highway exit signs](#). How L.A.'s [Grand Central Market was gentrified](#). In South Texas, deportation fears have made people [scared to go outside](#). The tragedy of [Brazilian soccer underdogs Chapecoense](#). How [Indian IT work](#) is changing. This week's inspiration: A Maine woman who [killed a](#)





She follows the same format as Kleon.

She's personable, relevant, and gamifying the hyperlinks inside of context. It feels like you're getting a rant from your best friend.

Since that content can get pretty heavy, she does what your actual besties would do: add a hilarious inside-joke GIF.



GIFspiration



Me after I kill my hangover with an everything bagel.

(omg I finally watched John Wick 2, and I've filed away lots of good Keanu-in-a-henley GIFs, but I couldn't find a single good one of him in a turtleneck. If you have one, please share.)

If you're her market it's funny.

Another master of the email-newsletter-blast-that-sounds-like-it-was-written-by-your-bestie is Luvvie Ajayi, famed blogger and **NYT bestseller** who writes the LuvvLetter. Read this and tell me it doesn't sound like it's coming from your bffaeae updating you on her life:



Last week Glennon Doyle, Abby Warmbach and I kicked off the 10 city Together Live Tour, co-founded by Jennifer Rudolph Walsh! The whole purpose of this tour is to make space for women and girls to be empowered to create change, to laugh, to be encouraged, and to have the audacity to dream big. We're also joined by the dope Latham Thomas.

I've been so excited about this Tour and was even more psyched when I found out they don gave your girl a dressing room! LAWDDD.



You can HEAR her saying this to you.

These "blasts" don't feel like blasts because they're executed extremely well. They emphasize personality, casualness, and respect the rule of email that says it's not just a one-way communication. These emails feel like 2-way conversations you're having with friends updating you on their lives.

✉️ They don't visually assault you.

I'm the last person qualified to talk about design seeing as I'm a copy-centric bafoon who frequently ignores the value of good design (I have been proven wrong. many. many times), but here we are.

Newsletters that look like you repurposed a template from MailChimp are part of why people don't read them. (I know, I am sorry MailChimp. There was a time for those.)



Design exists to serve content. Design showcases content, it is not the star.

You should never say, "Wow, this was well formatted." You should say, "Damn, I love reading this."

Even Ann's "giant block of text" is housed in a sea of whitespace so it's not competing with colors and fonts and buttons and other noise.

This week	Text
<p>White Space</p>  <p>SO MUCH WHITE SPACE</p> 	<p>I recently spent some time with Kate and Laura Mulleavy, the sisters behind the fashion label Rodarte, who have just written and directed their first feature film. Frankly I wasn't very interested in interviewing them until I saw the trailer for <i>Woodshock</i>, which is both very trippy and very feminine. I also realized that I could name a few writer-director brother-duos, but almost no sisters in the same position. In person, they were a real inspiration. I really admire how the Mulleavys don't ask for permission, don't care about their "credentials," and just get to work making things that interest them, in their own weird way. I recommend their film, too.</p> <p>On the podcast, we've got a special pelvic-health episode featuring a few nurse-midwife experts on the topic. And here's a brief interview with me.</p> <p>I'm reading</p> <p>"You can hear the sound of snap, but it is hard to notice pressure unless you are under it." The first white president. An Alabama school district resegregates. Political policing in the Trump era. It's not only Latinx immigrants who rely on DACA. Colin Kaepernick's awakening. How to properly light black faces. Morgan Parker on the Cosby trial. Life as a 48-year-old intern. "Both men and women start to lose friends around age 25, and continue to lose friends steadily for the rest of our lives." Jared and Ivanka "do not grasp their essential irrelevance." Is anyone out there still waiting for Ivanka Trump to come through? The best era for working women was 20 years ago. A tale of two janitors. The women working to fix</p>

White Space



Lots and lots of white space!



Same with Austin Kleon's:



Hey y'all,

Here are 10 things I thought were worth sharing this week:

1. Leonardo da Vinci woke up in the morning and [made a list of what he wanted to learn](#). (Can you tell I've just started [Walter Isaacson's new biography?](#))
2. Alan Jacob's great new book, [How To Think](#), is out this week. (You may remember me raving about [his book about reading](#).) It's fine that [The Atlantic](#) interviewed him and all, but the *real* news is that *I'm* interviewing him at Bookpeople here in Austin this Monday, 10/23 at 7PM. Very excited about it. Come on out! [Details here.](#)
3. "Read more than you write, [live more than you read](#)."
4. [People who built the internet are unplugging from it](#). Tech people drive me crazy when they're quoted saying, "We never saw this coming!" when people like [Neil Postman](#) and [Ellen Ullman](#) and [Ursula Franklin](#) (among many, many others—but I recommend their books in particular) were sounding the alarms the whole time. (Related reading: [One person's history of Twitter, from beginning to end](#).)
5. [On copying paintings at the Louvre](#). (Copying is [how we learn](#).)
6. I love [this description](#) of musician Arthur Russell's apartment in the liner notes of [Love Is Overtaking Me](#). It made me re-listen to [Olivia Laing's radio essay](#) about his life. (Her book, [The Lonely](#)

White
space

White space

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The banners are visually appealing too, without feeling like you're getting a Well+Good digest (aka: digital newspaper...that's a whole 'nother post).



[View this email in your browser.](#)

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DESK OF
AUSTIN KLEON

I WILL NOT ARGUE WITH STRANGERS
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Luvvie is also clean, despite having a lot more content than the other examples. Her newsletter doesn't read like a digital newspaper bombarding you with stories. Her formatting is simple and (dare I say it) dated, but her audience doesn't seem to care.

These newsletters are consistent in that they showcase one content block at a time, making it easier on the reader to skim and get downloaded on the content they're looking forward too (instead of being visually assaulted). Look how clean this is:

JudgeyPop Pin

Folks are always asking me where they can buy JudgeyPops and I always gotta break it to people that they aren't for sale! But we do have [JudgeyPop pins](#) available only through our friends at [Pin Vibes LA](#). Get one today and take the side-eye with you wherever you go!



This isn't rocket science.

...And yet the majority of marketing departments get it wrong. Newsletters



your customers. They are a vehicle for communicating with your audience—just like all email is.

Listen, I'm as shocked as anyone that one-way communication "blasts" are working, but they are. And after closely examining why, it turns out these newsletters aren't *totally* violating email marketing laws since they're upholding the important ones:

Don't "throw" offers at people (don't throw anything at people).

Act like a person. Don't be weird (like overly chipper or too buttoned up).

Write to your readers, not your colleagues, your boss, or your phantom Gary Vaynerchuck.

Be divisive. Not the in Trump-V-Hilz way, but in the "this is for people like me" or "this is *not* for people like me" way. It should be clear immediately who your newsletter is for and who it's not for.

Keep doing what works, stop doing what doesn't.

If we have any chance at clearing the internet (and certainly my inbox) of clutter, than we need to get this right. It's not rocket science, but it does require some hard work and legitimate caring about your audience (I mean it. None of that pretending crap. Your readers always know).

FREE EBOOK

Introduction to Email Marketing

Learn how to execute and measure successful email marketing campaigns.

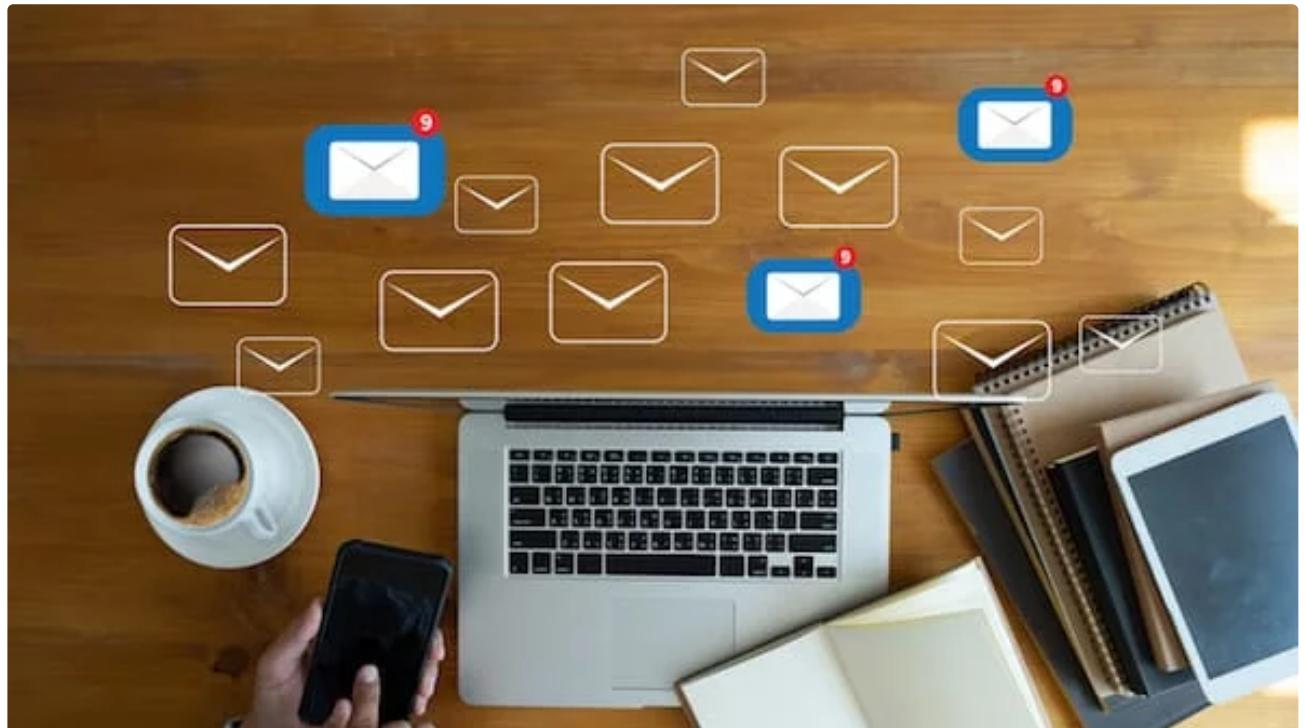
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