

How to Get Started with Email Marketing

What is email marketing?

It's a form of direct communication with contacts and an essential component of any online marketing strategy.

What is email marketing not? It's not the hottest, trendiest thing out there today. And although some analysts are quick to diminish its importance, we disagree. Email marketing is the most reliable way to reach your clients and prospects. And as we'll discuss, it's an inexpensive way to discover what really engages your audience.

Step 1. Choose your email marketing software

If you are starting from scratch, your first step is to select an email marketing software platform. There are many to choose from, each with its own strengths, limitations, and price points. You can start with a basic email service provider (ESP), such as MailChimp, Constant Contact, or Emma, or you can dive into a full-featured marketing automation platform, such as HubSpot, Marketo, or Eloqua.

If you are part of a firm, work with your staff to determine what you need from your email software. Since some platforms are prided according to the number of recipients, does your budget have flexibility if your list grows? Are you confident with your in-house technical expertise, or do you need some extra support? Do you need extensive analytics functionality? Or the ability to deliver automated drip campaigns? How about A/B testing? There's quite a bit to think about!

This piece from PC Magazine does a good job comparing the functionality and cost of some popular basic ESP platforms: [The Best Email Marketing Software of 2015 Reviewed](#). And here is a blog post that overviews some of the most popular marketing automation platforms: [10 Top Digital Marketing Automation Tools](#). And you can always enlist Hinge to help you select and install the best platform for you, if you need some help.

If you're already working with software, you may still want to evaluate whether it suits your needs. Keep in mind that the best known brands will not necessarily be the best fit for you.

Step 2. Build and grow your list

Take a look at your email list. If it's small (a few hundred names or fewer), you probably have some work to do. You may be able to rent a list from a broker, but that approach is rarely worth the investment (in fact, in many countries it's illegal). People on a purchased list won't know you from Adam — or Eve. As a result, rented lists usually get little engagement and people unsubscribe in droves.

A far better approach is to grow your list organically. One great way to do this is by offering educational materials on your website — usually for free — in exchange for a small amount of personal information.

Here's how it works. Many visitors are more than willing to exchange contact information for valuable content. They understand that even free has a price — being put on your email list. They expect you to deliver great content to their email inbox.

These offers can appear on your home page, relevant subpages, or even popup windows. Just don't be obnoxious. And as you set up your forms keep this rule of thumb in mind: the more information you require, the fewer people you capture as leads. You may even find that you need only a single field, Email (however, see the passage below about segmentation).

You are required by law to allow people on your list to opt out of your emails (through an unsubscribe link at the bottom of each promotional email you send), so your challenge is to send them information they actually want to receive.

As your list grows, consider breaking it into groups for even better targeting. This is known as "segmenting." One logical place to start is segmenting by industry. But segmentation strategy varies from company to company — you may want to break down your list by size, geography, job function, or other factors. Segmenting supercharges your email marketing by letting you tailor your content to very specific audiences.

You'll want to think about segmentation right away, even if you aren't ready to tailor your email marketing to different audiences. If you don't start asking for the relevant information on your web forms today you'll end up with an undifferentiated list of prospects. Researching this information later can be a difficult and time-consuming activity.

Step 3. Cover a few more basics

Think about the visual experience of your email messages. People process visual information more quickly than the written word, so when your messages are competing for attention with everything else in a recipient's mailbox, visuals can provide a real advantage.

Every email service provides a range of templates. If you can't afford a designer to develop a custom template, choose a template that best reflects your brand. At the very least, you'll want to include your logo, and to the extent you can, use your brand's colors. If practical, try to include fresh, appealing imagery in your emails, as these will help your piece stand out visually.

You'll also want to determine a schedule for your emails. Be specific and plan exact drop dates on your calendar. Remember to leave yourself plenty of prep time in advance of your targeted dates. Never put yourself in a position to hastily send an email blast without *careful* review. (Everyone has their own horror story of an email that went out when it shouldn't have—don't make this mistake with thousands of impressionable recipients watching.)

Provide ample lead time, especially if you are relying on other people to provide content— you'll need time to pull everything together, edit, and wait on late submitters.

How often should you email your list? Studies have shown that an organically grown list is more tolerant of frequent emails than you might think. But we recommend that you start conservatively, sending 1-2 per month. Once you have some experience, you can increase your pace as you feel out your audience and get preliminary feedback. While some companies send email to recipients daily with no negative repercussions, your mileage will vary. Most professional services send emails no more than twice a week, but your audience may have a different threshold.

Step 4. Choose your offers

As you get started, keep your emails educational in focus. These "soft offers" will nurture your audience, build your authority, and promote your services in a subtle way. Some examples of this kind of content:

- Case studies
- Practical educational guides, white papers, or ebooks.
- Educational e-newsletters
- Webinars
- Best of your blog emails (featuring a few of your best recent blog posts)

Notice that none of these offers are self-promotional. They don't overtly promote your services. Nor do they contain news about your company. People want information they can use in their work. Provide that in an easy-to-consume format and you will build a loyal following.

As your email marketing takes off, you can transition to harder offers. Hard offers appeal to people on your list who either 1) have an immediate need that you can solve, or 2) are ready to learn more about your service offerings. Examples of hard offers include a free trial, a demo, or a free consultation. You can mix hard offer emails in with your regularly scheduled educational emails.

Step 5. Anchors away!

You're ready to get sending.

When's the best time to send your emails? You know your audience and industry and can make this decision best. In general, email marketing finds its best reception on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. Good time windows are often first thing in the morning (the earlier the better) or the lull of the early afternoon. Of course, if your list covers different time zones, you probably won't be able to hit these targets for everyone. Once you set a schedule, stick to it — try to send your emails around the same time on the same day of the week.

Step 6. Test

Once you're in the groove and are sending out emails with consistency, we recommend testing various elements of your messages to improve your audience's engagement. Here are just a few things you can test:

- Subject line
- Headline
- Imagery
- Call to action wording
- Colors (for instance the color of your CTA button)
- Intro copy
- Day or time email is sent

Any of these factors can affect conversion rates, sometimes dramatically. To conduct a test, you can simply split your list into two equal parts, send the control email to one group and the test to the other group — then see which performs better. This is what we call A/B testing. Alternatively, some email services (such as MailChimp and Campaign Monitor) have A/B testing functionality built in.

To check the statistical significance of your test, you can use one of the many online calculators, like Zettasphere. Look for confidence rates of 90% or higher. If you can't achieve a confidence level that high, consider the results anecdotal — still interesting and potentially useful as you design future emails.

When you are starting out, the key metrics to monitor are your open rate, the percentage of recipients who opened your message, and the click-through rate, the percentage of readers who followed at least one link to your online content.

These two metrics will tell you what's resonating with your audience. Your email software should give you these statistics. But don't be afraid to check out the other analytics available through your email service provider — as you become more proficient, these will provide deeper insights into your prospects.

Email marketing is a continual process of reevaluation. Keep testing, keep thinking creatively, and keep trying to make your messages more relevant and engaging. With time your efforts will pay you back with a deeper awareness of your audience.

See *How to A/B Test Your Email* — coming soon — for more information.

We encourage your feedback! If you have suggestions to improve this document email us at feedback@hingeuniversity.com. Thank you!