

How to Write a Great Email Subject Line

Have you ever spent a lot of time crafting a promotional email — only to have just a small handful of people open it? Your otherwise excellent email may not get opened for one simple reason: it lacks a compelling subject line.

Today, you're going to learn how to write a subject line that piques a reader's interest and makes them far more likely to open and read your email.

Step 1. Capture Your Email's Key Message

The purpose of a subject line is very straightforward: to communicate what's in the body of your email. So begin by reading your email from start to finish. Then see if you can boil it down to a single key point.

Usually, this process is pretty straightforward, but sometimes it can get complicated if there are multiple components to your message. In that case, the trick is to figure out which points need to be referenced in your subject line and which can be left out.

What do we mean by multiple components? Suppose you want to promote an upcoming webinar. You will have to consider at least three important pieces of information:

1. That you are having a webinar
2. The topic (or title) of the webinar
3. The date of the webinar.

At the very least, you'll have to include 1 and 2 in your subject line. But you may be able to omit 3. On the other hand, if you want to convey urgency — or you are sending out a reminder about tomorrow's webinar — you may want to include all three. Here are three strong subject lines to promote a webinar.

Examples:

Webinar: 6 Ways to Control Construction Costs

Aug. Webinar - How to Control Construction Costs

Reminder: Construction Costs Webinar is Tomorrow

Step 2. Keep it Short

According to research conducted by email service provider MailChimp, subject lines of 50 characters or fewer tend to perform better than longer subject lines. While there can be exceptions to this rule, it makes sense because many email browsers truncate long subject lines — usually somewhere after 50 characters.

Working within this limit may feel frustrating at first, but it comes with a hidden benefit: it forces you to distill your message to its essence. And that usually makes your message more powerful.

Consider the following subject line:

Download our 2014-2015 research study on federal IT security threats, issues, and priorities

At 92 characters, it's a bit bushy and overgrown. Let's see what happens if we do some clipping...

Example:

Download our latest federal IT security study

Wow, that's a lot shorter! And at 45 characters it easily falls under our 50-character threshold. But have we sacrificed anything important? Let's see. We replaced "2014-2015" with the word "latest" — that seems to work. We pruned "threats, issues, and priorities", but they were dead wood anyway. The word "security" sums those up nicely. And "research study"... well, those two words seem downright redundant.

Now, while we're in slasher mode, could we possibly trim this any further? Let's find out.

Example:

New study on federal IT security

What do you think? This subject line is a skeleton of its former self, but it seems to convey everything you need. The only question is whether the verb "download", which we've removed in this version, would improve open rates.

Fortunately, a simple experiment will answer this question. Send an email using the slightly longer subject line to half your list, and send it again with the shorter subject line to the other half. You'll soon have your answer!

Step 3. Remove Salesy Language

Buyers of professional services are deeply suspicious of hype. But they will respond to a subject line that provides a clear offer — so long as it's relevant and useful.

Let's look at a couple of examples. Here's a subject line that's not likely to get many opens:

"Hurry! This Accounting Services Special Offer Ends Soon!"

What's wrong here? Well, it's salesy, a little vague, and punctuated with exclamation points. The problem is that it uses consumer sales language to sell a complex and expensive service. Even the most impulsive professional services buyer is going to think twice about this one.

In fact, the problem with this email only begins with the subject line. The entire strategy is flawed. While a better subject line might produce more opens, few, if any, readers are going to take the next step.

What would be a better approach? Get rid of the hyperbolic language and make sure the topic is relevant to the intended audience. Here's an example of a stronger subject line that promotes similar services:

"Try the Accounting Firm that's Built for Small Businesses"

Assuming it was sent to a list of small businesses, this subject line has a much better chance of success. For one thing, it's crystal clear who it's for (small businesses) — so it answers the question, "Is this relevant to me?". And while it's written as a call to action (in essence, "try us"), the message is delivered without a lot of hoopla. And because this accounting firm is "built for small businesses" it has a powerful focus that makes it appealing to its target audience.

Step 4. Be Clear, Not Clever

Research by Marketing Experiments and others has shown that clever subject lines almost always underperform clear, straightforward language. One study, for instance, showed that clear subject lines resulted in a 540% increase in open rates over their clever alternatives.

So when you want people want to take a specific action, such as read your email, you are far better off stating your point without irony, humor, or creativity. There's a place for clever language in your marketing. But this isn't it.

Step 5. Avoid Stop Words

Here is a list of stop words that have been associated with lower open rates or triggering spam filters. Unless you have a good reason to use any of these, we suggest you leave them out of your subject line:

Percent off	Claim
Reminder	Collect
Help	Income
Buy	Get out of
Clearance	Increase your
Earn \$	Prescriptions
Make \$	Free
Earn	Millions
From home	Urgent
Biz	Dear
Cash	

There is one possible exception, however.

The word “free” has a well documented power to persuade. You may want to experiment with a split list test and see how it performs. Many of our clients have had good results with “free” and the benefits outweighed the potential negatives.

So there you have it — five rules that should improve your open rates, maybe dramatically.

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