

# **Top 10 High-Tech E-Mail Marketing Mistakes**

A Connect Direct White Paper

## Introduction

Everyone knows e-mail is faster and cheaper than direct mail. But now that response rates have fallen dramatically from their highs of just a couple of years ago, the cost/performance benefits of e-mail are also less dramatic. At the same time, the onslaught of junk e-mail means that legitimate marketers have a tougher and tougher time making their message stand out from the crowd.

No matter how simple or inexpensive e-mail is in theory, the days are long gone when a company can throw together some HTML, rent a list, hit "send", and expect instant success. More than ever, planning, strategy, and technique make a significant difference. In practice, e-mail campaigns are fraught with pitfalls that, if not heeded, can result in spectacular failures.

If your most recent e-mail campaign died an ugly death, here's a list of the main suspects to consider:

### 1. **You forgot the offer.**

No matter how enticing your product or service sounds, you won't generate leads unless people want what you're offering to send them. Don't rattle on about how wonderful your product is, followed by "For more information, click here ...". What exactly is it that you're offering? Be specific. Sell the benefits of your product in the context of the offer: "In a free Web seminar, you'll learn how to ..."

Another tip: If your offer is free information, include a photo. Photos make even a simple white paper or CD-ROM seem more tangible and "real" and thus, more likely to generate a response.

### 2. **You asked too much of the reader.**

If you're like most high-tech marketers and the objective of your e-mail campaign is to generate leads, it's important to structure your offer in such a way that you avoid asking too much of the prospect.

An offer like a free product trial or an "onsite ROI analysis" may sound like a great way to generate highly qualified leads, but in the process, you may be setting the proverbial bar too high. Offers like these tend to eliminate those genuine prospects who, despite suffering from the issue or challenge that your product or service can solve, don't respond simply because they don't feel they can commit the time or resources necessary.

Make your campaign easy to respond to by creating an offer – say, a free information kit – that generates not only hot leads but also attracts those prospects who recognize the problem you highlight and want to solve it.

**3. Your call to action (or other key information) appears too far down the page.**

There's an important dividing line in every e-mail campaign – it's the point in your creative at which the average reader will have to scroll down the screen in order to read further. Whether or not your copy continues beyond that point (see #4 below), it's critical that you include key components of your message "above the fold."

Those components are:

- key selling benefits - why the reader should care
- the offer - why the reader should respond
- the call to action - how to respond

If you delay any one of these components until later in the copy, thereby forcing the reader to scroll, you will lose a large percentage of those who might otherwise respond.

**4. Your copy was too short.**

Though it's critical that you include key components of your message "above the fold," it's not a crime to continue your message beyond that point. Fact is, most high-tech products and services are complex enough that it's difficult to craft a sufficiently compelling message in the few dozen words that you can safely fit on the average screen.

In a carry-over from the world of direct mail, where many companies refuse (misguidedly) to extend their sales letters beyond one page, many online marketers are religious about e-mail copy being limited to one screen.

Again, it's critical to ensure in that first glance that the reader understands why you're writing, what's in it for him or her, and how to respond. But if you have additional, compelling benefits to offer, do so. As long as you're not forcing anyone to read it, that additional language may help convert a few more prospects who otherwise would be on the fence.

**5. You used a cheap list.**

One thing hasn't changed with the Internet age. The list is still the #1 ingredient in a successful campaign – and the #1 reason campaigns fail.

With direct mail, there's a certain consistency in the way most response lists are sourced and managed, but e-mail lists vary widely in how names are captured. As a result, the quality and responsiveness of those lists can vary dramatically. Prices also run the gamut from mere pennies per name to 50 or 60 cents per name and up.

Generally speaking, response-based, opt-in lists like subscriber or customer files perform at levels much higher than less expensive, compiled lists, and therefore are more economical on a cost-per-lead basis. In addition, the more stringent a publisher's opt-in policy, the more responsive the people on that list. Much of why subscriber lists perform well, especially those from large, reputable publishers, may have to do with how those companies handle the opt-in (and unsubscribe) process.

One important rule: Always broadcast to at least two lists, and code the responses separately (use distinct URLs or some other method). If you only use one list and your campaign doesn't perform up to expectations, you'll never know whether your problem was a bad list or some other issue.

Note: reputable, opt-in e-mail lists are typically only available on a one-time, "blind" rental basis. If a company is willing to sell you an e-mail list, be wary. You can reasonably question whether those opting in knew they were offering up permanent, unlimited access to their e-mail addresses.

## 6. You targeted the wrong audience.

Many high-tech marketers make the mistake of blindly assuming that the best audience for their message is the person destined to be the ultimate decision-maker for their solution. Sometimes this is the case, but more often, it's the person in the trenches, the individual who's experiencing the pain or problem on a daily basis, who's more likely to respond to your offer.

This issue is particularly acute for marketers whose products impact the IT department. Who is the person most likely to respond to a campaign for a new CRM solution? The IT manager who's ultimately responsible for buying, deploying, and managing that solution? The VP of Sales who needs to maximize cross-sell and up-sell opportunities within the installed base? Or the VP of Finance who needs to increase productivity and turn the call center from a cost center into a profit center? And so on.

Sometimes the answers to these questions are intuitive, but often they're not. If you assume that your target audience is a single job function or other demographic and you broadcast to that group exclusively, you're taking a big risk. Moreover, if the campaign doesn't meet expectations, you'll never know whether you targeted the wrong audience.

The solution: test. Ask your list broker or agency to split each e-mail list by job title (or company size or gender or whatever) and assign a unique response URL to each group. (This is known in the trade as an "A/B Split".) That way, you'll be able to gauge how the different groups respond and optimize your response rates and ROI going forward.

**7. Your subject line was too long.**

There's a good reason most e-mail list owners specify a 40-character limit for subject lines. It's a good approximation of how many characters will appear in the subject field of the average inbox. Extending even a few characters beyond the 40-character guideline means that the last word in your subject line may be rendered incomprehensible.

Even today's larger computer monitors don't seem to make a difference. According to research conducted by usability expert John S. Rhodes, "E-mail subject lines should be short. Our research indicates that the shorter the subject line the better it is."<sup>1</sup>

**8. Your subject line was a Yes/No question.**

If the secret to success of an effective subject line is to grab the attention of someone with a potential interest in your product or service, you can be forgiven for thinking that the simplest way to determine that interest is to ask a Yes/No question. For example:

Missing Too Many Project Deadlines?  
Spending Too Much \$\$ on Software Maintenance?  
Frustrated with Poor Application Performance?

The risk with Yes/No questions is that they put the onus and responsibility on the reader to decide whether or not he or she has a problem in the first place. If that answer is no (and remember, the reader may have the problem you're describing but simply be unaware of it), you've lost him or her immediately.

A more effective alternative is to translate questions into benefit statements. For example:

Eliminate Missed Project Deadlines  
Slash the High Cost of Software Maintenance  
Increase Application Performance up to 1,000 Percent

That way, if your readers perceive the problem you describe, they'll open your e-mail and read further. More importantly, even if they don't perceive the problem, they're likely to open the e-mail anyway if your benefit copy addresses an issue (ex: save time, money, frustration) that impacts their day-to-day responsibilities.

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<sup>1</sup>Rhodes, John S. "The Usability of Email Subject Lines." Webword.com. February 10, 2001. <<http://www.webword.com/moving/subjectlines.html>>.

## 9. You only offered online fulfillment.

When you're marketing online to a technical audience, it's easy to assume that prospects will think nothing of downloading the free information, software, collateral or other offer that caused them to respond in the first place. After all:

- the prospects are already online anyway
- they're used to downloading information, software, etc.
- they probably have a high-speed connection

Our experience, however, shows that even when targeting highly technical, Web-savvy audiences – IT Managers, Webmasters, Developers and the like – as many as 50 percent prefer that the offer be mailed to them as hard copy.

No matter how technical or Web-friendly, prospects will always choose the simplest, easiest, most hassle-free path from A to B. While downloading a white paper or free trial software may not seem like a huge imposition, the success of your campaign depends on how easy you make it to respond. If your reader hesitates – even for a second – to wonder whether it's worth the effort, you'll lose him.

Despite the potential increase in fulfillment cost, always provide a hard copy option on your landing page or microsite. If you limit the options to download only, you may end up losing a good portion of your potential response.

## 10. Your landing page was weak.

By now, most Web marketers have woken up to the fact that directing a prospect to a home page – whether from an e-mail campaign, banner ad, keyword buy, etc. – is a great way to waste marketing dollars.

It's not enough, however, to create a landing page using the very same design template as every other page on the site, and simply add a response form. An effective landing page does three things:

- it reinforces the reader's decision to respond
- it provides visual and verbal continuity from the initial campaign
- it motivates the reader to fill out the response form immediately

With these objectives in mind, here's how to avoid the most typical mistakes technology marketers make when designing landing pages:

- Don't over-sell the offer by littering the response page with selling copy. Ideally, the first thing the person sees on the page should be a reply form and little else. If you believe that prospects are likely to need more information before deciding to complete the form, then use links, but only as needed. (For example, a registration page for a Web seminar might include tabs that link to an agenda and bios of featured speakers). Just be sure those additional pages link back to the reply form and nowhere else.
- Eliminate all other, non-campaign-specific links. This includes the usual "Company", "News/Events", "Contact Us," etc. Inevitably, links like these will cause a prospect not to fill in the reply form immediately, but instead will prompt him or her to wander elsewhere on the site, never to be heard from again.
- Don't forget a photo. An image of the actual offer (ex: a CD-ROM, white paper, sweepstakes prize) on the page serves to make the offer more tangible and reinforces the person's decision to respond.
- Don't ask too much. Keep the response form short, with 3-4 qualifying questions maximum (in addition to name, e-mail address, etc.) Anything more and you risk trying the reader's patience. Use a multiple choice format, and ask questions in a friendly, non-intrusive tone (ex: "How often do you buy business gifts online?")

## Conclusion

Technology marketers can minimize the risk of e-mail marketing failure by adhering to a few simple guidelines:

- The list is everything. Don't scrimp on list buying and expect success.
- Get to the point. Make sure that key benefits and other important information all appears "above the fold".
- Sell the offer, not the product.
- Ensure that the landing page supports your response objective and doesn't confuse, distract, or drive the prospect elsewhere.
- Make it easy. Don't ask too much of the reader, and always give him or her options for both download and hard copy fulfillment.
- Test, test, test.

## About Connect Direct

Connect Direct is a full-service agency located in Redwood City, California, that specializes in direct marketing for high-technology companies. Founded in 1990, the company has produced hundreds of successful print and online campaigns for clients ranging from start-ups to some of the biggest names in high-tech. In 2001, Connect Direct was named one of the "Top 10 Fastest-Growing Private Companies in Silicon Valley" by the *San Jose Business Journal*.

## About the Author

Howard J. Sewell is president and founder of Connect Direct. Prior to starting the company, he worked as a marketing manager for software giant Oracle Corporation. Howard is a frequent speaker on direct marketing and contributor to both marketing and technology publications on topics that include lead generation, customer retention, channel development and event marketing. Since 1996, he has authored the Connect Direct "Tip o' the Month", a free monthly e-mail newsletter for technology marketers. Howard lives in Menlo Park, California with his wife Elizabeth and son William.



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