

TO THE INBOX AND BEYOND

**THE ULTIMATE
GUIDE TO**

EMAIL DELIVERY



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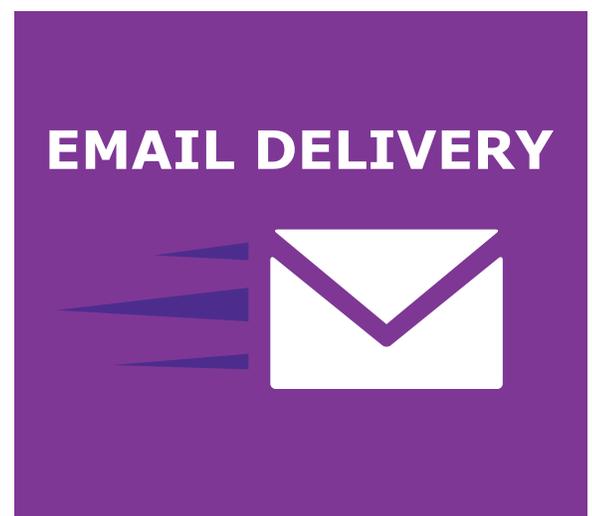
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There are a lot of things to think about when creating an email campaign, such as your mailing list, content for the email, when to send it and more. One thing you may not have considered is how your email gets to your readers' inbox.

Your ESP (Email Service Provider, like VerticalResponse) has a lot of control over how the ISPs (Internet Service Provider) handle your email and so do you. There's more to email delivery than [DomainKeys Identified Mail \(DKIM\)](#), or possible spam words used in your subject line. The content you share in your email, the way your readers interact with the emails you send, and even how you grow your email list can have an affect on where your email is delivered. So before you send out your next email, check out the tips in this guide to help get your email delivered to the inbox.



Delivery:

Mailbox providers & best practices

One of the most important parts of getting your email delivered to the inbox is how [mailbox providers](#) – like Yahoo! or Gmail – handle the emails being sent through their system. Most use similar rules and best practices for filtering spam emails, though they all put their own twist on delivery. Let's take a look first at the rules email providers suggest we use to help ensure inbox delivery. Then, we'll look at some specifics of the big four providers.

Opt-in processes

The better quality your lists are, the easier it is for us to help get your email to the inbox. This is why we recommend only using opted in email addresses for your marketing – Those who have agreed in some way to receive emails from you. We provide a free opt-in form in your account to help you grow your list. When you mail to folks that want and expect to hear from you, your email open and click through rates should be higher, and your bounce and unsubscribe rates should be lower, which will be looked upon favorably by Gmail, Yahoo! and others.

Subscribe to the VR Buzz Newsletter

Stay current with email, social media and small business marketing tips delivered once a week.

| | |
|---|----------------------|
| First Name * | Last Name * |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| Email Address * (VR username if applicable) | Company * |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |

[Subscribe](#)

We use an opt-in form to grow our VR Buzz email list.

Delivery Tip: Use a double opt-in subscription



Use a double opt-in subscription for your mailing list, in which readers verify their interest in receiving your email, generally by responding to an email sent to their address. This helps to keep your list free of fraudulent sign ups and typos that will bounce.

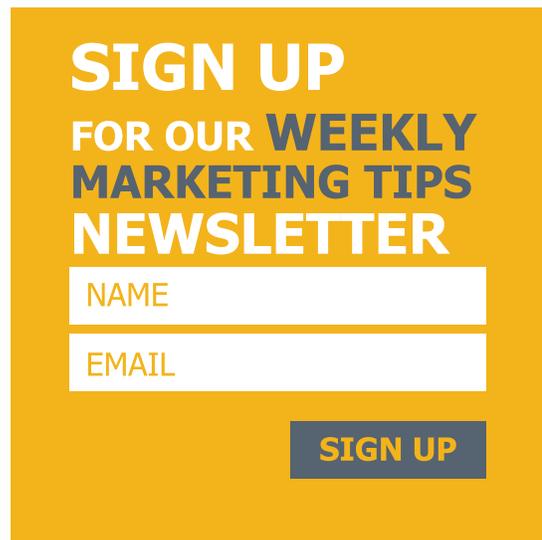
Delivery Tip: Don't use purchased lists

Don't be tempted to purchase mailing lists. Don't automatically subscribe customers or site visitors to your emails. Forcing people to opt-out from your emails can cause a lot of spam reports and ultimately, a low inbox placement.



Manage reader expectations

State up front how often you plan to email, and honor this frequency. When readers subscribe to your mailing list, tell them what email they're signing up for, how often you'll send it, and what info it will contain.



SIGN UP
FOR OUR WEEKLY
MARKETING TIPS
NEWSLETTER

NAME

EMAIL

SIGN UP

Make unsubscribing easy and quick

Your email must have an option to let your readers unsubscribe, even if you don't want to see them go. Your unsubscribe link should be easy to find in your email, and easy-to-use, like using a one-click unsubscribe link.

[Click here](#) to unsubscribe from our emails.

Your readers shouldn't have to log into a website in order to unsubscribe, nor should they go through more than one web page to complete it. And lastly, if you're not using an email service, be sure to process unsubscribes as soon as possible.

Follow CAN-SPAM

No matter where in the world you're sending your email, make sure to follow the requirements laid out by the [CAN-SPAM Act](#).

Be consistent in your ‘From’ address

Your “From” email address will help your email get into the inbox if readers save it in their address book or set up filters to send messages to a specific folder. Plus, your readers will know who’s sending the email and will be more likely to read and interact with it.

Keep complaints low

Keep your email branding consistent with your other marketing efforts to ensure you’re recognizable and welcome in the inbox. Also, think about how you’re marketing your business through other channels such as, print, web, social networks – even your brick and mortar identity.

Mailbox Providers Best Practices

Mailbox providers look at the points we just covered, but also filter based on their own criteria. Here are some specific things each of the big four providers look for to get your emails delivered to the inbox.

1) Yahoo!



Yahoo! filters email based on content and the URLs in an email that are being pointed to. They also filter email addresses by domain, not only IP address. If there’s a domain that has been sending a lot of spam email to their system, Yahoo! will filter them out.

2) Hotmail/Outlook.com



Hotmail (now Outlook.com), uses their own program called [SmartScreen](#) to “learn” what junk mail is, and uses old accounts as spam traps. This is why using a double opt-in process is good idea - Spam traps, a.k.a. honeypots, are email addresses that aren’t actually used, so if emails are sent to these addresses, they can only be spam. Mailing to one of these addresses, even accidentally, can cause serious repercussions, including being banned by an ESP.

3) Gmail



Much like Outlook.com, [Gmail collects users’ reports of what is or isn’t spam to filter future emails](#). Gmail users have the option of clicking a ‘Not spam’ button for any message that’s been accidentally flagged as spam, or, marking anything that goes to the inbox as spam. As long as your Gmail readers don’t consider your email spam, you shouldn’t have inbox delivery problems. Gmail also has two sophisticated inbox filtering options for their users, Folders and Inbox Tabs.

4) AOL



In addition to the best practices we’ve already mentioned, a high number of bounces will harm your email reputation at AOL. You can reduce the number of invalid recipients, or bounces, on your list by using a double/confirmed opt-in. You will always have some bounces due to people changing email addresses, but the lower the number, the better your reputation.

Delivery:

Email design & engagement

In the not so distant past, email delivery involved top-secret filtering tools specific to each ISP and email provider. As ISPs have grown more sophisticated and confident in fighting spam, they've also begun to address the issue of helping their users manage their inbox experience. All are incorporating more engagement metrics in their filtering such as:

- Are readers interacting with the email - opening/clicking?
- Moving it to a special folder?
- Do they delete it right after receiving it or do they spend some time with the content, re-reading it more than once?
- Do they forward it to their friends?
- Do they reply to the email sender?

Check your email content

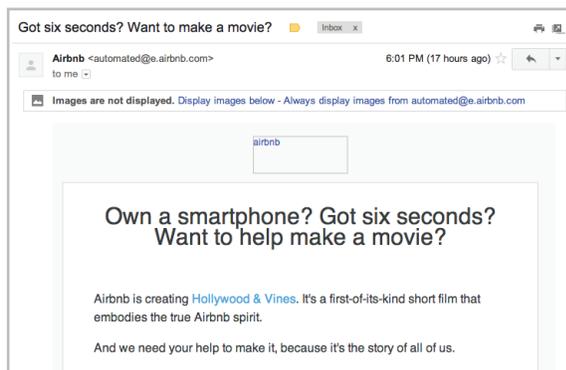
Getting your readers to interact with your email requires some dedication. You need to make sure you're sending info readers want and when they want to read it. Some of this will require testing to see what your readers like best, and some you'll be able to discover from reporting stats.

Content features

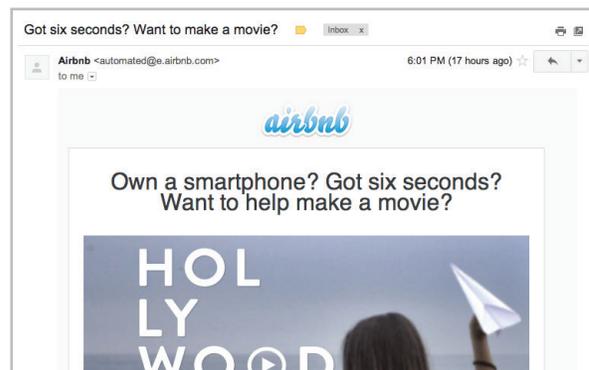
Some ISPs are able to narrow the cause of complaints down to a repeated piece of text in an email sent from different sources. Sometimes a single link or domain in the email will trigger spam filtering because that element has been too often associated with emails with complaints.

To avoid having your email sent to spam for content, keep these pointers in mind:

Test your emails’ visual look. Many readers won’t see images in your email by default (they have to opt to “display images”); make sure your email looks good even without images. Use alt text on images so your readers have information about them before they’re turned on.



Email looks good without images displayed



The same email with images displayed

Link to domains, not IP addresses. And links direct to reputable sites.

Set expectations and meet them. Send a welcome email to new subscribers with a preview of what they should expect, as well as the frequency you’ll be sending that content. Stick to this contract with your subscriber - A change in email frequency is generally a trigger for complaints due to an unexpected increase.

Be relevant. Don’t send the same content over and over or your engagement will drop off. Keep subscribers engaged and looking forward to your email.

Review reporting for spikes or changes in unsubscribe activity; this could indicate a problem with your mail plan.

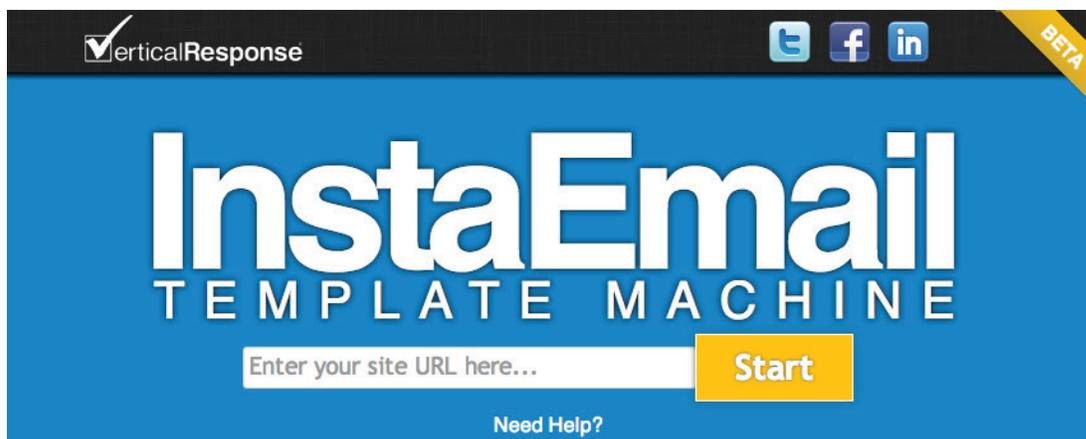
HTML

Most ESPs provide email templates. Plug in your images, add copy and links and you're good to go. But if you're more adventurous or have someone to code the email, you can create your own template. In this case, it's very important your code is clean, that you stick to the email guidelines from W3.org and you follow these tips:

- **Use HTML only** – Don't include HTML forms, JavaScript, flash or ActiveX. These won't work in most email programs and could get your email marked as spam by your readers.
- **Use nested tables** – Be sure all tags are closed and nested correctly.
- **CSS** – Use inline CSS only, most email programs will ignore any other type.

Tip: Create a custom email template easily

You can use our handy [Insta-Email Templatizer](#), to create a template in seconds.



Delivery: Graymail

There's a shift in the email delivery world from IP reputation metrics to engagement metrics. The message from the ISPs is clear: User engagement is truly the key to inbox placement.

These filtering technologies are primarily based on readers' actions, as we discussed earlier. They're designed to identify relevant emails based off of learned behavior.

You'll need an email strategy that's interaction based to ensure continued inbox placement. This is due to Graymail - the industry term for unread email sent to legitimately solicited contacts - and the attempts of the ISPs to control this type of email.

Graymail is email that has been subscribed to and is therefore not unsolicited, or spam. But the recipient often doesn't read it for a long period of time, if at all. These messages aren't spam, or even unwanted - it just hasn't caught the interest of the reader and as a result, isn't interacted with. Because of that, ISPs are now "learning" from these actions and assuming the reader no longer wants the messages.

UNDERSTANDING GRAYMAIL



Email that has been subscribed to and is therefore not unsolicited, or spam.

Legitimate sources; subscribers can opt-out at any time.

Recipient often doesn't read it, content hasn't caught the interest of the reader and as a result, isn't interacted with.

ISPs are now "learning" from these actions and assuming the reader no longer wants the messages.

So how can you get around graymail and back to the inbox? The answer is simple:

Send relevant, engaging content to your most active recipients. Here are some tips on how you can do this:

Segment engaged and unengaged recipients from each other and treat them differently.

More often, marketing effectiveness is being affected by unengaged contacts, which impacts the results with your engaged contacts. Use your engaged recipients to your advantage by sending special offers that promote engagement with your emails - the more often subscribers click through links and the faster they do so, the more likely your emails will continue to reach the inbox.



Mail your engaged subscribers first.

Continuous mailing to non-responders can negatively affect inbox placement, so mail your most engaged contacts first to increase the likelihood that the message will be considered relevant when you attempt to engage your previously unengaged subscribers.

Try a re-engagement campaign.

Get your subscribers to open your email and interact with it, and encourage replies. If you can't re-engage, it may be time to stop marketing to them.

- **Encourage an incentive to reply:**
 - “Reply to this with a joke for 25% off”
 - “Reply to this message for free shipping”
- **Add your customer service email address as the reply-to** for the campaign and encourage subscribers to “Contact our customer service anytime by replying to this email.”
- **Offer to field feedback** - even a simple, all encompassing “We'd love to hear from you!”

Every case is unique, but the bottom line is to get your subscribers engaged with your email campaigns.

If there's anything that remains consistent with ISPs and their filtering, it's that they don't remain consistent. ISPs are continuously trying to keep spam out of their user's inbox and making their user's experience as positive as possible.

Remember, to get your email delivered to the inbox the important things to remember are, to start with a good, opted in list, keep your readers coming back for more with fantastic, interesting and relevant content, and make sure you've tested and vetted all your images and links. If you've done that, you can hit send with confidence that your readers will see your email – in the inbox!