

What works and what doesn't in our COVID-19 times

EDITOR'S NOTE: This post has been updated to reflect AP Stylebook guidance on how to write COVID-19.

Marketing and communications go on, but as discussed in the last blog post, not everything is the same in the world where COVID-19 has sickened many, scared more, and generally, upended what we consider normality. That said, some marketing works better than others.

Let's start with what doesn't work.

Here's an email that I received from a real estate agent (someone I met at a networking event and added me to her list without my express consent, but that is another story).

Hello.

Your health and safety are important to me. That's why I'm reaching out to let you know that we're doing what we can to provide the best service possible during this time, and that means being here for you.

Please reach out with any questions that you may have, or if I can be helpful in any way.

We will get through this together.

If you want to keep up to date on COVID-19, visit the CDC's website.

Stay well,

[Name]

Why is this so bad? First, the sender claims that my health

and safety are important, but provides no specifics about what she is doing. Second, she is placing the onus on me to contact her. And third, she says I can visit the CDC website, and she doesn't even provide a link in her email. To me, this email shows that this real estate agent does not have any type of communication strategy or understanding, and to make matter worse, she doesn't know how to use communication tools effectively.

What does work?

1. Specificity and relevance

What is your company or organization doing *specifically* because of or in response to COVID-19.

This full page ad from LIDL is exactly right: it tells you what specific actions its stores are taking to deal with the virus and the associated issues.



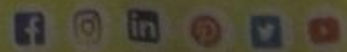
we're looking after the shelves

SO YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF YOURSELVES

Lidl is here to support you and the needs of the community. See the updates we're making to our stores and policies:

- additional cleaning in high-touch areas
- installing protective barriers in all checkout lanes
- open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily
- social distancing signs hung in stores
- increasing product deliveries
- temporarily limiting purchases of select items

visit your local store or connect with us at [lidl.com](https://www.lidl.com)



2. Segmentation

If you have an email marketing strategy, it should include the ability to segment your list into different audience types. The idea is to not send the same email to everybody on your list, but to be more targeted. For example, Boston University (where I went to grad school) keeps sending me updates, including updates about campus being closed. Well, as an alum, this is not exactly relevant to me. I am not a parent of a student or a student, so why do I need multiple emails about campus operations?

3. News/real updates

I got an email from a local bookstore that tells me that it has established a partnership with a national service in order to be able to deliver nationwide. That's news. On the other hand, Delta has sent me the same version of an email regarding how its handling COVID-19. Nothing new, no reason to keep sending me the same email. If Delta were to add or delete flights or routes, then yes, tell me. But telling me its hard on Delta's bottom line, over and over, is really self-serving, which brings me to the next point.

4. Audience-centered

What does your audience need or want right now? My undergrad university, Brandeis, did something really smart. Brandeis figured out that its audience is probably getting a bit bored being inside, so it sent out an email with suggestions for movies and television shows to watch, all featuring an alumni connection. There was no other reason for the email but to provide some relief to its audience. That is how you put your audience first.

What have you seen that works and that doesn't work? Please share in the comments.

How not to do email marketing

My inbox is under attack. In just the last couple of days, I have received no less than 15 emails from either the same sender or with the same subject line.



A barrage of junk

The first one came in on Sunday at 3 a.m. from “Emma Thompson” with the subject line “New customers looking for your services.” When I opened it, it said someone was seeking PR services. I deleted the email because I thought no serious agency would be sending out emails on Sunday at 3 a.m.

Later that morning, I got an email from “Kate Potter” with the subject line “Web designer quote.”

And then an email from “Mia West” with the subject line “New customers looking for your services.”

And then at least ten more emails throughout President’s Day from “Kate Potter” with alternating subject lines:

“Mobile Software Developer Quote”

“Photographer Quote”

“Packaging Designer Quote”

“Web Designer Quote”

Interspersed were two more emails from “Mia West,” subject: “New customer looking for your services.”

Notice a pattern? Same sender and/or same subject line.

This is lead generation?

I opened some of these email and found they all came from a supposed lead generation outfit called Bark(dot)com. This “company” found my website and copied my contact information into their database, and then began “contacting” me.

Perhaps Bark(dot)com is a legitimate business, but it doesn’t act like it. In fact, it is acting in a downright shady manner. Its marketing “method” is more like a spammer’s than that of a legitimate business’ email marketing technique.

If it acts like spam...

What makes these emails look and act like spam, and therefore be wholly ineffective:

- Sending during non-business hours and days
- Sending the same email time after time
- Sending way too many emails in too short a time span
- Sending emails that are not relevant and not personalized

Update

Since writing this post, I received six more emails, making it over 20 emails in a 48-hour time period.

When customer service and marketing conflict

Yesterday, I wrote about how important email marketing has become to retailers. Yesterday afternoon, I found out first-hand that email marketing has become far more important to retailers than customer service, and that is a problem.



Silos by Doc Searls on Flickr

Many large organizations have no bridge among their many departments. I remember when I was working with a large financial company back in the 1990s, and the public relations department (where I was) and the sponsorship department didn't really connect, even though both were ostensibly working on promoting the brand. It seems this way with customer service and marketing.

My experience was this: Yesterday, I went to White House Black Market to return a couple of items I had bought last week. I had the receipt, and the items were unused and had their tags on (nothing wrong with them, just didn't like them once I got home). At first, this clerk was friendly, but pretty soon she was having issues. It turns out that because I did not provide my email address to the clerk who had originally sold me the items, the clerk had put in a made up email, which apparently was connected with another customer's account.

The clerk called over another associate (let's call her Ms. Crotchety since she was a very unfriendly woman), who asked me my name, and of course, this did not match up with the customer name in the system. I explained that since I had no desire to be in their system, the original associate had put in that email address because she feared that she would be "dinged" by the company for not providing an email address with purchase. Ms. Crotchety proceeded to tell me that I needed to provide my address, and that if I were in the system, the system would just populate the fields with the right information (read: I am at fault for not being in their system and making Ms. Crotchety's life so hard).

In the end, I was forced to give them my address in order to get credited (in spite of having a receipt and the original credit card). To make matters worse, at no point were these associates helpful, apologetic or accommodating. I had originally thought I would browse the sales racks, instead, I walked out angry and with no desire to shop at this store.

As many people do when they have a grievance, I took to Twitter to air my dissatisfaction with the store. Let's just say that @WHBM were far more apologetic and understanding than the clerks at the store. I bet that the folks behind @WHBM are customer service folks and not marketing folks. The marketing folks probably have nothing to do with customer service. And there, in a nutshell, lies the problem. **Marketing is operating independently of customer service, with**

goals that do not take customer service needs into account.

This is an example of a marketing imperative trumping good customer service. The imperative at White House Black Market seems to be that clerks must obtain email addresses no matter what. This means that the email address itself is more valuable than the customer. That's a flawed concept. Although email can be a very powerful marketing tool, it only is effective if the customer wants to receive those emails. There is a difference between asking for an email address and making it impossible to buy something unless you provide an email address.

What do you think? Should marketing goals (grow email list in this case) be more important than customer service goals? Can the two co-exist?

Email addresses have become more valuable

Email addresses have become so valuable to marketers that they are now offering discounts and other incentives to get them. Case in point: Ann Taylor is offering a 40% discount off your entire purchase simply for furnishing them with (any) email address. Another retailer, White House/Black Market makes it practically impossible to buy anything without getting an email address (which, the salesperson says, will be used to send you special offers only available via email).

Why are email addresses so important? Simple. It's because there are so many channels out there that it has become increasingly harder (and thus, more valuable) to target people. For retailers, fewer people are reading printed anything, a traditional place for special offers and sale notices. In general, media has become increasingly segmented. With DVRs, most people are fast-forwarding the commercials.

Email reaches people somewhere where they are likely to be—on their computer or other Internet-connected device. And because people can easily opt-out of receiving emails, marketers have to work harder to make it worth their while. And then there is the added benefit of not having to pay postage or printing costs, making email marketing a lot cheaper to produce.

What does this mean for marketing communications? It means that messaging has to be more targeted, more concise and centered around providing a very tangible benefit to the consumer. Email marketing maybe cheaper to snail mail marketing, but it also easier to stop.

The bottom line is that marketers want email addresses and consumers want real value for the intrusion.

Have you noticed more retailers asking for email addresses? What incentives have you seen?

Why you need to be extra careful with your email marketing

Regardless of all the stories about email being dead, it is still around and it is still used for marketing purposes. Think about the amount of email you get every day. How much of it is personal (and by that I mean addressed to you from a real live person, whether it be to discuss weekend plans or the latest changes to the document you are working on)? I bet only a small fraction falls in the latter category.

What makes email marketing so effective is that it targets people directly and sends the messages into a place they are likely to be every day—their email inbox. **Successful email marketing is personalized and customized.** Email marketing gives you the ability to address email to individuals by name and send them the news, offers or other information that is relevant to them.

And yet, today I got an email with the following subject line: David, connect with [name of marketer]. Yes, you are personalizing, but you screwed up my name. I could have deleted it had I not recognized the sender.

And yet, on Friday, I got this email from Thrifty:

You've earned a free day! [Trouble Viewing? View Web page.](#)

RESERVATIONS DEALS MY BLUE CHIP **Thrifty.com**



You've earned a FREE day!
Look for it in the mail.

Congratulations! You've earned a FREE rental day through Blue Chip Rewards!

You'll receive your Blue Chip Rewards certificate in three to four weeks at the address listed in your [profile](#).

To redeem your free day, book online at [Thrifty.com](#) or call 1-800-THRIFTY and present your certificate at the counter.

Keep earning free days! You'll earn another free day certificate after 16 more rental days.

Help & Info

Member Number: *****

[Blue Chip help](#)

888-400-8877, option 3

Then, on Saturday I got this one:

Please accept our sincerest apology. [Trouble Viewing? View Web page.](#)

RESERVATIONS DEALS **Thrifty.com**



Please accept our apology.

Dear Valued Customer,

This morning you received an email from us offering you a coupon for a free rental day through Blue Chip Rewards. **Unfortunately, this offer is not valid.** You will not be able to book this offer online and you will not be receiving a coupon in the mail. Please disregard the email you received. We're very sorry for any confusion our eagerness may have caused.

If you have any questions regarding this email, please contact Customer Service at bluechip@thrifty.com. We sincerely appreciate your understanding in this matter. We value you as a customer and we look forward to saving you money down the road.

Thank you for choosing Thrifty.

I am not sure how many people got this email, but since I

happen to rent a few times a year, I thought the first email was for real and an offer for me personally, even though I don't have a Blue Chip account. The second email—addressed to “Dear Valued Customer”—did not make me feel valued at all. Thrifty is now telling me that it screwed up and that the offer it sent is not valid, without doing anything to compensate for the mistake.

Are you screwing up the goodwill?

How many times can you screw up and keep goodwill? The difference between screwing up in a mass advertising campaign is that it is impersonal. When you screw up on email you have addressed a client/customer/prospect directly and personally, you have to be more contrite. Since you have the ability to be personal, then be personal! And be more careful.

It is about opting-in. Don't give them a reason to opt-out.

The reason that we use email marketing is because, generally, it is opt-in. That is, people have signed up to receive our messages and want to get them. There is goodwill. But if you fail to personalize, send out erroneous offers, or the wrong offers, you are jeopardizing that goodwill and giving your list a reason to opt out.

Thoughts?

Are your emails getting read?

Email marketing is alive and well, in spite of all the doomsayers who say email is dead. Most people use email to communicate, and generally check their email multiple times a day.

We all get tons of emails—notifications, calendar events, special discounts, sales pitches and perhaps a few personal notes too. What makes you open (let alone read) an email. There are a few scenarios:

Known sender: We'll open something if we know who is sending it (your aunt Karen or Groupon, for example) Of course, spammers have exploited this to their advantage by fabricating the sent address.

Subject line: We'll open something if it sounds relevant or interesting, like "Special Event to Benefit (name of charity you care about) Next Week).

Ideally, your emails should have both to ENSURE the are opened. If you don't have one, you have to work on the other. Your mother can send you an email with the subject line "Hi," but if you are someone the recipient does not know your subject line MUST be descriptive.

I received an email this morning from someone I do not know, which had the subject line "meeting request." Why should I open that? I don't know the person sending it and the subject tells me nothing. If this person had been more descriptive and said "(Company name) requesting meeting to discuss (product/service/whatever)" wouldn't that have made it clear what the email was about?

Think about your readers...do they know you well enough to care about your emails? If not, give them a good reason!

UPDATE: Check out this infographic about email, which provides some good facts/figures including the fact that email continues to GROW.

Improve your email marketing!

Our inboxes are cluttered with hundreds of email messages—some from friends asking us to join for dinner and most from companies looking to sell us something. We may have signed up for a few enewsletters. We may have met some people at networking events. Regardless, our inboxes are overwhelmed with email.

In the past week, my company sent out its enewsletter. It got two unsubscribes, one report for spam (the person who did it may have had some sort of personal vendetta, not sure) and a fairly good open rate. I am going to call it a moderate success. The newsletter did not have a call to action, so it is hard to measure its effectiveness.

In the past couple of day, I got two emails from two sources. Both caught my eye for different reasons. The first was from someone I met a while back who just started a new business venture. The subject line said “Hi Deborah.” The body was the following (with identifying info cut out):

Dear Mr. Sample:

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is XXXX, Director of Media Services for XXXX and XXXX— two truly groundbreaking companies that have recently joined together to become one of Washington’s newest and most innovative full-service production resources. If you’re in the neighborhood, I hope you’ll stop by for a tour of our facility, just off XX here in downtown D.C.

Our owner-operators are award-winning media professionals with more than 25 years of experience, and our list of long-term clients include companies like X, Y and Z, together with

advertising and public relations agencies, corporations, associations and government agencies, both local and nationwide.

We'd like to show you exactly what we can do. By addressing your creatitve and technical needs with our deep expertise in all forms of broadcast and corporate production, creative editorial, 2-D and 3-D graphics, sound design and audio mixing. With our detailed approach to client service, we can easily guide your next project from concept through completion.

Feel free to look through our demo reels and check out the bios of our skilled artists, editors and producers. Just go to (website) and (website) to find out more. Or give me a call personally, at 999-999-9999 I'll be happy to answer your questions or set up a convenient time when you can pay us a visit. I look forward to the opportunity to meet you in person.

Warm Regards,

What is wrong with this email? First, the personalization is not working. Second, the formatting was off. Third, there are several grammatical mistakes (and at least one typo). The first paragraph is a waste. The sender could have mentioned a reason that I would be interested in this email and new venture. Instead it is an "introduction" to someone I met already. The email was sent out in plain format—and this is a multimedia production company? Why not make it look pretty and professional? There is no signature from the sender. No way of opting out of the email. No permission. I could go on and on.

The other email I got was announcing a group trip. But guess what? No dates were listed for the trip on the email, forcing me to go to the website. Maybe this was on purpose, to get a click-through to the website. In my opinion, when you don't

give people some basic information, you lose them at hello.

Lessons about email marketing:

- Have a call to action.
- Mind your ps and qs—details like grammar are important.
- Include relevant information: dates, locations, contact information, pricing (don't make me work so hard to figure it out).
- If possible, personalize.
- Make it look nice (there are many newsletter/email marketing companies out there at various price points).
- Be careful with SPAM laws. Give people a way to opt-out. Explain why they are receiving your email.

What drives you crazy when you get an email?