Beyond the Single Message: Running Effective Email Campaigns

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With 71 percent of people in the United States using the Internet, more organizations are moving communications with their constituents online for a variety of purposes: regularly scheduled newsletters, ad hoc or time-sensitive updates and campaigns to drive fundraising, membership or advocacy. But today's Internet environment is not the same as it was a year ago, or even six months ago.

As constituents become overloaded with email messages, organizations must plan and execute email campaigns with new approaches that address the challenges of today's wired world to inspire the greatest response rates. From deciding how many emails to send to whom, to determining which messages will get the best response, strategice email campaign planning and execution are key.

Here are a few techniques for ensuring a more effective email campaign:

1. Design an Effective Campaign

An email campaign is a unified series of messages targeting a specific audience to support a specific goal, such as:

- Recruiting new donors from a pool of email subscribers or activists

- Renewing or upgrading current members or donors

- Motivating advocates to respond to an advocacy alert

- Encouraging donors to sign up as volunteer fundraisers

As with direct mail, organizations typically need to send more than one message to drive a response. After an initial email communication, however, it is important to suppress people from the mailing list who have already responded before sending follow-up email messages.

For example, if an organization's first email targets 1,000 people and generates 50 responses (i.e., a five percent response rate), then the next email should be sent to the 950 people who did not respond. Continuing to ask the 50 respondents to take action when they've already done so runs the risk of annoying and alienating people who have already provided support. The best email marketing software today allows an organization to configure email campaigns (versus individual emails) that automatically cull respondents from the list so they do not receive additional email appeals or calls-to-action for the same campaign.

2. Test the Message for Greater Response

Just as with postal mail, the messaging and presentation of emails can affect response rates. Despite emerging best practices in crafting email campaign messages (e.g., making a single ask in each email), every organization still needs to test the effectiveness of its messaging, use of images and subject line copy to optimize response rate. One strategy to optimize response rates is to conduct an A/B test.

A common (but sometimes cost- and time-prohibitive) practice in direct mail, A/B testing is the technique of creating two test emails with a different single element — such as the message or subject line — in each one. Each message is sent to different "test cells," or groups of constituents, made up of a random sample from an organization's target list. The message that gets the best response is the one that should be used for distribution to a wider audience. The latest email marketing tools make it easy to run online A/B tests to enhance the performance of a nonprofit's email campaigns.

3. Measure Results

Measuring campaign results is critical to determining campaign effectiveness. An organization should look not only at the response rate and other key metrics (e.g., email open rates, click-through rates) for each email in the campaign series, but also at the cumulative performance of the campaign while it is underway and at its conclusion.

Continuing the example above, if the second email sent to the revised target list of 950 generates 30 responses (a 3.2 percent response rate), the cumulative response rate from the campaign would be 80/1000 or eight percent. Rather than averaging the response rates on

each individual email (showing a 4.1 percent response rate), the organization realizes that the campaign has drawn eight percent response from the campaign after just two related emails.

Measuring results on the campaign as a unified series of communications, in addition to viewing each email separately, gives the organization a much more accurate assessment of how the campaign is working and what results it can expect on future campaigns. Be sure to use email marketing software that automatically tracks responses at a campaign level, making this type of analysis simpler.

With people and communications moving online, email campaigns today require new approaches supported by advanced email marketing software. As nonprofits grow their email files and continue to step up their use of email marketing, expect to see more best practices and analysis techniques from the world of direct mail applied to online direct response marketing.

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