act-on

Deliverability 101

Your Guide to Developing a Content Strategy to Maximize Email Deliverability

Developing and distributing relevant, compelling content helps fuel demand generation, successfully guide leads through the sales funnel, and drive conversions.

act-on

Unfortunately, deliverability is frequently at odds with our content marketing strategy. With the right priorities and best practices in mind, however, content and deliverability can work together to generate amazing results.

For example, if a company wants to institute a rewards program for their company and distribute related content using the alias "rewards@company.com," they're likely going to run into some issues. As it relates to deliverability, this alias could be associated with numerous scams attached to similar addresses.

Instead, they should consider using an alias like "customerrewards@company.com" and a display name of "[Company Name] Rewards Program." These two components are distinct enough from standard scam emails and should improve your chances of having your messages delivered. Not only will the updated alias and display name help you bypass filters, but taking the extra step to identify your company and provide extra context improves the likelihood of your customers engaging with your email.

As a rule, any portion of content can be something that gets an email blocked or put into spam (or placed in the "Promotions" or "Clutter" folders). Due to all the different little elements that compose the building blocks of an email, this chapter is broken into three separate sections focusing on how to shape your email content to influence open rates, clicks, and how to avoid spam placement.

Content That Determines Open Rates

There are five pivotal elements that affect open rates:

1. Inbox timing
2. Email folder placement
3. From address/display names
4. Subject lines
5. Preview text

Inbox timing and email folder placement aren't directly influenced by how you structure your content and are discussed in previous chapters. However, from addresses/display names, subject lines, and preview text (first line text) do directly impact open rates, so we're going to discuss best practices for each of these elements over the next few pages.

"From" Addresses and Display Names Matter

The top three items of an email are the only items visible to recipients before they click through, so marketers should prioritize these when developing email content. The "From" address alone can have a huge impact on deliverability and engagement. In fact, upwards of 40% of recipients decide whether or not to report something as Spam based on the "From" address alone.

Much of this response is due to the growing focus on security training and awareness fueled by the increase in hacking and phishing attempts. Companies and their employees are becoming more savvy about which signs to look for, making it more necessary than ever for senders to establish trust with their target audience as soon as their email lands in an inbox. This means that their "From" address/display name needs to be recognizable and not draw any red flags that might motivate recipients to label it as spam.

These fundamental rules and best practices can help set you up for deliverability success:

o **Avoid Using Noreply@ Display Name:** You should always send from an email that someone can reply to, even if the response is forwarded to another company email. ISPs check for this when scanning email, and if the reply-to link is broken, it may affect placement. Furthermore, even if your message lands in the inbox, using a "noreply@" can discourage engagement, so it's best to send from an email that motivates your target audience to open and read your message.

o **Don't Use Generic Addresses Such as Postmaster@, Admin@, Hostmaster@, and Other Specifically Nomenclatured Addresses:** These addresses have specific meanings in the world of email and the internet, which means they should never be used for marketing and sales purposes. These are also addresses a sender should avoid sending to unless otherwise specifically requested. Act-On blocks sending to these addresses unless additional steps are taken.

o **Make Sure the Chosen Email and Display Name Are Related:** If your "From" address is "marketing@ company.com," and the display name is "CEO of Company" (or if you don't use a display name at all), ISPs may filter your messages. Furthermore, emails such as "marketing@" are generally not as appealing to recipients, which could negatively impact engagement. Below are guidelines on how to use display names and "From" addresses for improved deliverability and results:

- **Only Use a Personal Email Name Once You've Formed a Relationship:** Although emails that have a personal email as the display name typically have slightly higher open rates, misleading an email recipient can have serious negative consequences, especially regarding their ability to engage with them in the future. The best practice is to use broad names and display names, form a relationship or introduce a specific person who will be emailing, and then transition to emailing them from a personal email address:

  New customer: First emails come from "Product New Customer Guidance Team" / NewCustomerTeam@mywebsite.com

  Once Relationship is Formed: Transition to a "named" individual after initial series of emails for updates and guidance "John Doe - Product" / John.Doe@mywebsite.com

- **Clarify the Sender When Using Broad Email Addresses:** "Marketing" is an ineffective display name because nobody knows exactly who that is. Instead of using an email address that is hard to identify, use your display name as an opportunity to differentiate yourself and properly brand. Take caution, however, to not use a display name that is misleading.

- **Use Proper Capitalization**: Always follow the same capitalization format when writing your display name. Improper capitalization sticks out like a sore thumb and draws bad attention.

- **Do Not Use Emojis in a Display Name:** Not only is the use of emojis in your display name unprofessional, but it also reflects poorly on brand identity and many systems might not display them directly, defeating the intended purpose.

Subject Lines

According to a 2017 marketing study, 84% of recipients decide whether to open an email simply by reading the "From" address and subject line. Just as the "From" address can help you establish trust with the recipient, the subject line can help you motivate them to open the email.

Knowing the perfect recipe for subject lines is challenging. Although there are plenty of data and "guidelines" for subject lines online, much of this advice is dated or incorrect and can negatively impact your deliverability. In addition to determining and following best practices, marketers face the challenge of having to capture their audience's attention in just a few words while avoiding certain red flag terms that ESPs scan for to discern spam and malware.

As we've mentioned before, the best practice for email content is to set the right expectations from the outset with your recipient, and in the case of subject lines, doing so by using a catchy punchline that describes the purpose of your email. In general, you want to use your subject line as an opportunity to outline some of the who, what, where, why, or when that is further outlined in the body of the email.

This chart describes some of the do's and don't of subject lines:

DO	DON'T
Clearly State Why to Open an Email: *Magazine Accepting Article Drafts- Editing Help and Resume Formatting Available*	**Mislead Readers to Try and Trick an Open:** *Your Article Needed for Immediate Publishing!*
Use Urgency with Specifics: *Final Days- Our End of Quarter Sale Ends Friday*	**Use Urgency Without Explanation:** *Urgent! – Get our Deals Before They Are Gone!*
Use Correct Capitalization: *Information on R.I.C.E. (Random Incoherent Capitalization Everywhere) Usage in Millennials*	**Use All-Caps or No-Caps:** *HOW TO GRAB ATTENTION FROM AN AUDIENCE and how to monopolize time.*
Limit Your Use of Emojis and Made Up Words: *Firesale on Product X 🔥 While Supplies Last*	**Use Emojis and Made Up Words Throughout:** 🙌😍处分特売🔥*Shitje Zjarri* 🦄*Fire Sale*🎉🍾
Personalize the Subject Line to Make it Personal: *John, Get the Most Out of Your Product.*	**Personalize on Anything Confidential or Sensitive:** *We're Sorry you Have Warts, Here's a Guide on Proper Application of Our Cream*

Preview or First Line Text

The final thing recipients see before deciding whether to open an email is the preview or first line text. This copy is more complicated than subject lines because it also shares some of the same issues as "From" emails/display names - namely, the ESP decides which information to display. For instance, some ESPs always show the first line of the body copy of your email, even if you've provided specific preview text.

Senders also face a challenge when it comes to determining the appropriate length of preview text. Depending on which platform and device recipients use to read their email, the number of characters allowed and the way the information is displayed will be different. Some platforms allow customizable preview text while others only show the first lines of text. Certain apps show as many characters as a reader's screen and settings will allow but some limit preview text lines to as few as 40 characters. In addition, using "hacks" like white-space from multiple spaces to create blank space may or may not work depending on the app.

Because we know that what our recipients see in an email preview depends on which platform and device they use, we can deduce that both the preview text and first line of an email are equally important. These lines can be viewed as a supplementary subject line, much like a subtitle. However, there are a few mistakes related to the first line of email that senders commonly make.

When crafting your first line, make sure to avoid using the following text in the first line:

- **Information About Website View Mode:** Trouble Viewing? View online
- **Improperly formatted HTML Code:** <div {style="display: none; max-height
- **Alt-Text for Image or Banners:** [Banner][Banner][Banner][Banner]
- **Addresses or Other Location Info:** 1600 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington D.C.

Content That Directly Impacts Clicks

Once you have optimized your email content to improve open rates, you should focus on converting those opens into clicks, which indicate engagement and position within the sales cycle. They also improve deliverability in the long run because nearly every ISP interpret clicks as a positive action. As a result, this quality engagemen

We recommend reviewing the following key components to optimize your emails for maximum engagement:

Make Sure You Have a Good Call to Action!

The most important link in an email is the call to action (CTA), which can make a huge difference in recipient engagement levels, even in the case of similarly designed emails.

The words and design of your CTA should motivate recipients to click and continue moving through the buyer journey. These best practices will help you craft visible CTAs that get clicked and drives conversions:

o **Place Your CTA Above the Fold:** You should aim to place the visual for your CTA within the preview panel so your recipients can easily see it when they open their emails. Pushing a CTA above other elements of an email may seem odd, especially when you want to provide context for your audience, but having a CTA that is easy to access allows readers to quickly grasp what is being asked of them — encouraging them to follow through.

o **Make Your CTA Separate and Distinct:** The most common way to make CTAs stand out is to include a button that is centered and separate from other text within the body of the email. Part of the reason this method is so common is that it is the easiest way to enhance your CTA and motivate readers to click. If a button does not seem like the most appropriate choice for your email, you can embed your CTA within the text of your email, but make sure it stands out and clearly denotes what you want your target audience to do.

o **Avoid Images for CTAs:** Some senders favor image-based CTAs, but this leads to two distinct issues that can be worked around but require additional planning and effort on the part of the sender. The first major issue is that an image is rarely a clear call to action and is treated as an image by the recipient. This will drastically lower the click-rate on the CTA, essentially rendering it useless. The second major issue is that some (or many) recipients will accidentally click on the image without realizing it's a CTA. While this can be interpreted as a positive action at first glance, it often results in a spike in spam complaints (as well as misleading data pertaining to click-through rates).

o **Identify One CTA to Rule Them All:** Though an email may have multiple CTAs, it should always have one primary CTA that stands out from the rest. Having too many CTAs can make your email seem cluttered and actually reduce clicks. Having clear callouts for additional CTAs is important throughout an email (see our next point), but the main CTA should draw in the reader and keep them engaged with the email enough to either clicks that link or another link in the email.

o **Provide Multiple CTAs or Options for a Click in Every Email:** This best practice is contrary to past advice from deliverability experts and even to what some leaders in the deverability field are still recommending today. However, the last Postmaster at Gmail advised that "There should be 5 links in every email, giving recipients a chance to click even if they don't like the main CTA." This advice stems from the fact that it is becoming more and more important to receive email clicks and engagement to maintain a good email reputation and improve inbox placement.

Cut the Clutter!

Our deliverability team commonly sees cluttered copy and design in emails with low click and open rates. Copy should always be clean and concise, and email design should properly and clearly display your brand to improve engagement.

Keeping an email clean also means using white space effectively — an email that has a header, one or two lines of text, and a CTA crammed into a small space isn't pleasing.
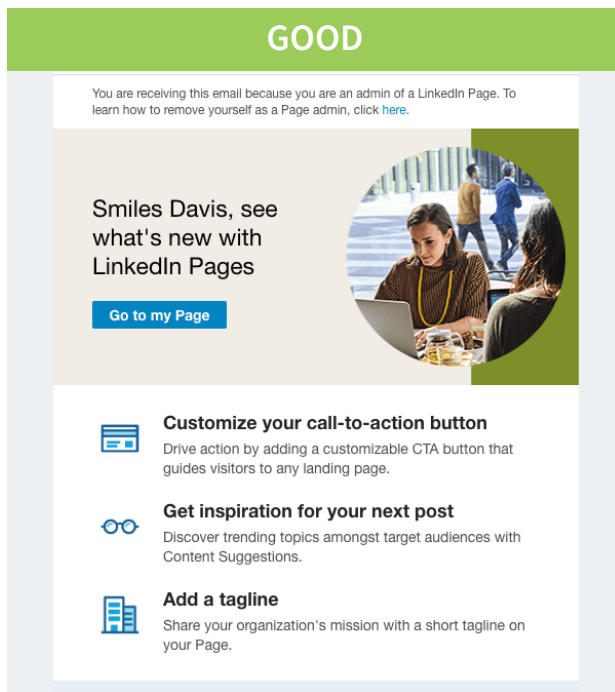
Here are a few sample combinations of good and bad copy and design:

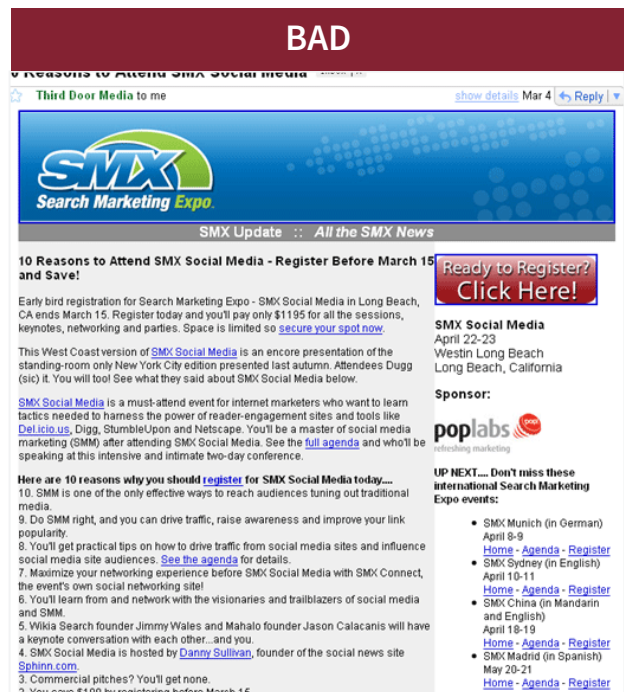| GOOD	BAD
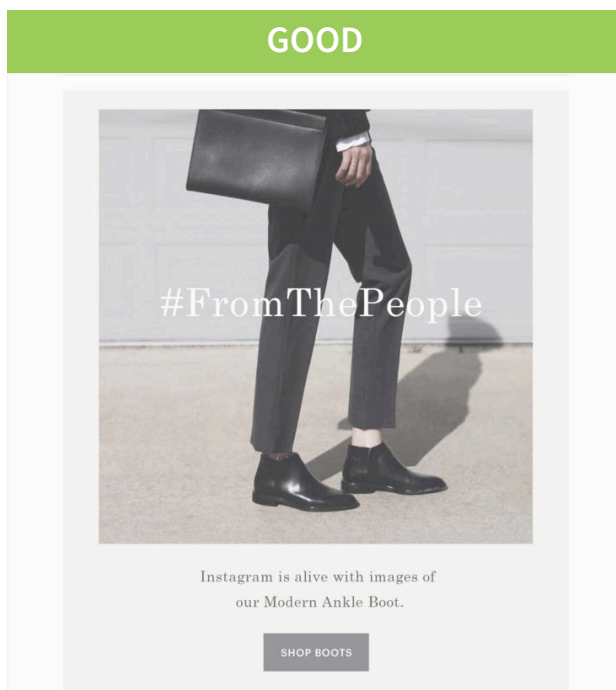
This retail brand's email features a high-quality image and a clear CTA — making it super simple and effective.
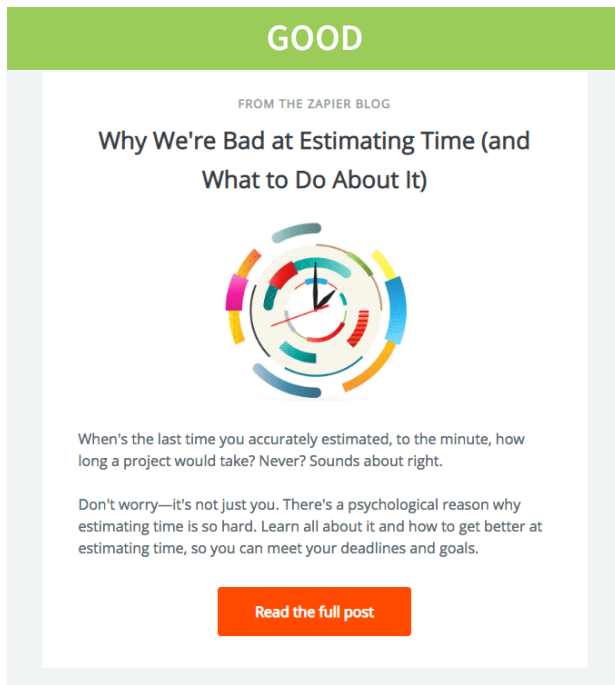
Macy's has an unfortunate track record of email designs that are way too cluttered, including an abundance of CTAs and text.

The LinkedIn email example above has a clean and organized look with clear CTAs.

This event email is text-heavy, poorly organized and features multiple text line CTAs.

Zapier's blog update email features a compelling image, a small paragraph of text, and a CTA to continue reading the full post.

The blog email example above includes the entire blog copy with no visible CTA.
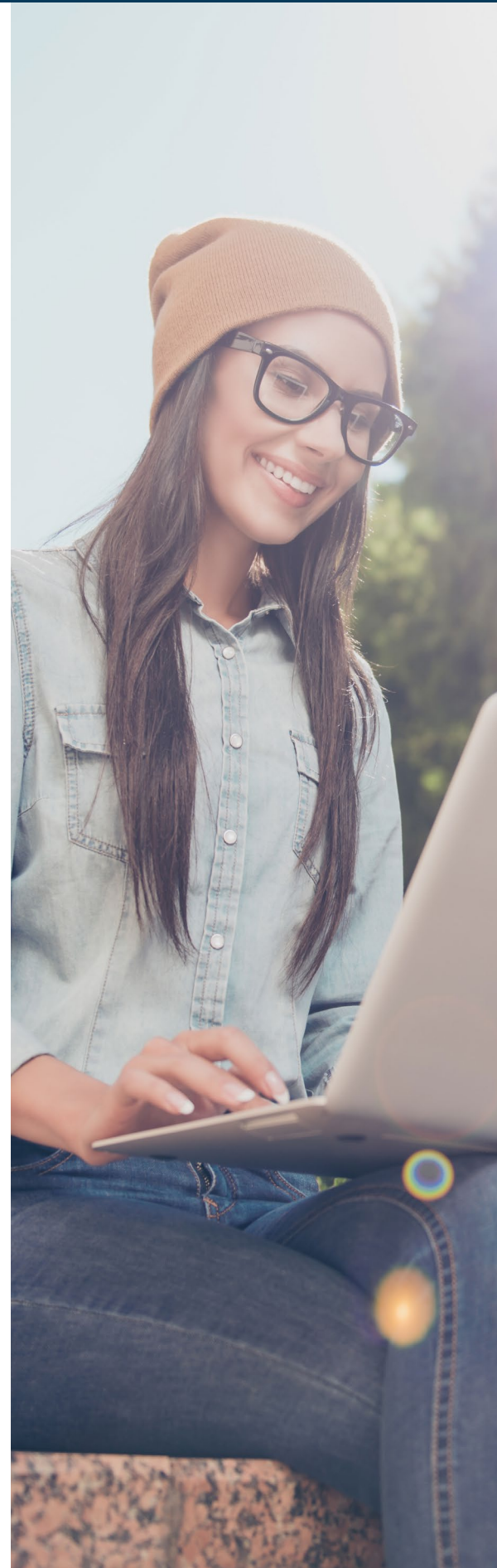
Formatting

There are different ways to format an email and general guidelines on how to do it, but here are the two main things to keep in mind:

1. Email must be renderable on mobile and desktop devices

2. Every recipient should have a similar email experience

Here are three formatting choices to avoid:

○ **Not Making Your Design Mobile-Friendly:** Act-On's native email creator designs emails to be responsive to mobile viewing, but many users still inject HTML to keep a specific look and design. This practice is fine to use, but since the most business emails are viewed on mobile devices, you should also ensure your emails display well on mobile readers.

○ **Designing Your Emails to Only Consist of Images or A Single Image:** This is a shockingly common practice, but is a bad idea for two reasons:

　　• If the entire images is a link, recipients who accidentally click will feel misled, increasing your number of opt-outs and spam complaints.

　　• It can negatively impact the recipient's viewing experience, especially if some or all of the images fail to download properly.

○ **Not Making Sure That Your Alt-Text Matches Your Images:** Something to keep in mind when designing an email is that up to 50% of B2B audiences might have images blocked. So if you have images without good alt-text, those who don't see the images are less likely to engage. Keeping a good image-to-text ratio and writing descriptive alt-text for images will make a text version of an email still look relatively good, and it may even entice the reader to go ahead and download the images.

There are a few tips and tricks that will help combat the formatting issues listed above. In addition, Act-On has many tools and resources that you can use to preview emails to ensure they meet best practices before clicking "Send."

o **Act-On's Email Review Tab:** This tool does a good job allowing a standard view for the majority of email readers. To ensure the formatting of your email works for all ISPs and devices, make sure to review how your email displays on desktop, text, and mobile before scheduling an email. We also advise you to pay special attention to the text version, as images with side-by-side placement or odd placements may display in a strange order when viewed in a text-only email.

o **Litmus Connector:** Litmus is one of the two major email preview and render companies (the other being Email-on-Acid). It works by sending a test email to many different devices and email viewers and giving you a copy of the results. To ensure all of your emails are good to go before you click "Send," Act-On has a direct integration with Litmus so you can use the tool from directly within the platform.

o **Send Yourself a Test:** Sometimes the simplest way to test something is to send a test email. Bear in mind that you might want to send your test to non-business emails to avoid getting white listed for sending test messages to yourself at your own domain. You should also get in the habit of sending yourself test emails to make sure that everything is being received as you want it, and that you have a copy of all the emails you send (inside and out of Act-On) for compliance and auditing reasons.

Content Elements That Can Affect Spam Placement

Most of the elements discussed in this section don't directly impact email open or click-through rates, but they do impact whether the email is placed in the "Spam," "Promotion," or "Inbox" folder (or simply bounced). Many senders fail to pay attention to these important facets, which can trip up an otherwise quality sender.

1. **Alt-Text:** Every image in your email should have alt-text to reduce the probability of landing in the spam folder. Alt-text is also allows visually-impaired individuals to know the content of your image. Additionally, Google and other ISPs check alt-text to make sure it matches the content of an image and use this information to determine the placement of an email.

   The best practice with alt-text is to use language that is concise, rich, and accurately describes the content of an image. Alt-text should not be used to stuff keywords, and it must be descriptive. This example from Google demonstrates best practices for creating alt-text.

   - **Bad (missing alt text):** `<img src="puppy.jpg" alt=""/>`

   - **Bad (keyword stuffing):** `<img src="puppy.jpg" alt="puppy dog baby dog pup pups puppies doggies pups litter puppies dog retriever  labrador wolfhound setter pointer puppy jack russell terrier puppies dog food cheap dogfood puppy food"/>`

   - **Better:** `<img src="puppy.jpg" alt="puppy"/>`

   - **Best:** `<img src="puppy.jpg" alt="Dalmatian puppy playing fetch"/>`

2. **Links, Link Checking, and Link Shorteners:** Links and URLs in emails are one of the most scrutinized elements of an email by spam filters because links to external websites are one of the likeliest places for a malicious attack to originate. Additionally, the reputation of the domains you link to in your emails is a major indicator of whether the email is spam or legitimate.

   For these reasons, we recommend following these best practices when dealing with links in emails:

   - **Always use HTTPS for all your linked URLs.** Linking to secured websites with SSL certificates improves trustworthiness and, subsequently, the likelihood of inbox delivery. It's becoming standard for ISPs to place emails that contain unsecured links in the spam folder due to the number of data breaches on the web.

   - **If you link to third-party websites, make sure they're not on any blacklist.** If one of the domains you are linking to in your emails is listed on a blacklist, your email will likely bounce or be placed in a spam folder, regardless of your email reputation. For Act-On customers, the easiest way to do this is to run your emails through the Act-On link validation tool.

- **Do not use URL shorteners.** Using a URL shortener such as Tiny URL is a sure-fire way for your email to end up in the "Spam" folder. Gmail has announced that it cannot even trust emails that contain links from Google's own URL shortener, so it's best to avoid this practice altogether. ISPs distrust shortened URL links because they're an easy way for phishers and spammers to hide their true destination. Instead, you should emphasize the text that is linked by making it a different color and underlining it. Also, make sure recipients can see the original URL link when they hover their mouse over it.

- **Links should be easily and clearly identifiable.** Ensure all your links are distinguishable by underlining them and making them a different visible color from the main text. Links that aren't easily distinguishable from the main text will increase your chances of spam placement because hiding links is a practice commonly used by malicious senders to trick users into accidently clicking on potentially dangerous or undesired links.

- **Don't use URLs for your visible link text.** Anti-spam filters will scan the text of your hyperlinked url to the actual href url in the HTML code. If the two don't match, your email will be flagged. Again this is a method typically used by phishing emails who, for example, will have visible URL text that reads "*www.facebook.com*" but actually directs users to "*www.badwebsite.com*."

  This feature is meant to protect recipients from potential phishing, but it can accidentally trap legitimate senders who are sending emails from ESPs and marketing automation platforms. Act-On, for example, appends your URL before sending to help users track click activity. So if you're visible text reads "*www.mywebsite.com*," the actual hyperlinked URL will be adjusted for Act-On's tracking purposes.

  So your original HTML might be:

  http://www.mywebsite.com

  but once we append the email to add link tracking, it will change to:

  http://www.mywebsite.com

  As you can see, this creates a mismatch that can lead to your emails being flagged. Luckily, you can get around this by avoiding using your URL as the visible text for your links. Instead use the name of the company or words describing the CTA you would like the user to click, such as "Take Our Survey" so that this is what ISPs see:

  Take Our Survey

3. **HTML cleanliness:** Many spam emails have sloppy HTML or include additional formatting that is used to hide content, such as links that recipients can mistakenly click. Therefore, ISPs and spam filters view messy or unnecessarily complex HTML as a red flag, which can land your email in the "Spam" folder. Messy code can also increase the size of your email, causing long loading times, which could lead ISPs to reject your email

   Here are several practices to avoid:

   - Font color similar to background color
   - Embedded Javascript
   - Extra large font sizes
   - An invalid font face
   - Non-standard ASCII characters
   - Bad tags or too many closing tags
   - iFrame in HTML
   - Providing attachments within the HTML

4. **No-No words/phrases and "catchphrases":** ISPs and major spam filters process and scan the content of hundreds of billions of emails each year. They know which word combinations are typical of spam emails, and if your email includes these phrases, it will likely end up in the "Spam" folder.

   Avoid phrases and words that are typical of spam, such as:
   - Free
   - 100%
   - Try now, buy later
   - Save
   - Last chance offer

5. **Copyrighted images:** Improper copyright usage complaints can be sent to anyone in an email transfer chain — including ISPs, data centers, filtering companies, and blacklists. Any of these agencies can take action to shut down emails with claimed copyright infringement violations.

   The simplest way to avoid this is to make sure you either own or have permission to use the images in your emails and landing pages. If you're using public open sourced images, make sure they're also hosted on the open source site where they originated from.

6. **Privacy Policy on Domain website:** Make sure all domains referenced in your email have a privacy policy on the domain website. Much like with SSL and link shorteners, a privacy policy is a requirement in the evolving world of deliverability. Many jurisdictions now require a privacy policy for websites that offer or sell any service, even if there is no ecommerce platform on the site itself. ISPs have followed suit and check links for privacy policies as part of the inboxing equation.

Conclusion

The right email marketing strategy can yield incredible results, but you have to make sure your emails land where they're supposed to and encourage your audience to engage. The content of your emails plays a huge role in how your emails are received by both your target audience and ISPs, and the best practices highlighted here will ensure you get your messages in front of the right audience for maximum results.

If you would like more tips on how to improve inbox placement, check out our full Deliverability 101 series. And stay tuned for our next installment in the series, where we'll be discussing compliance as it pertains to email deliverability.