

A man with a beard, wearing a white shirt, is sitting at a desk in an office. He is smiling and looking at a computer monitor. A desk lamp is positioned behind the monitor. The background shows a window with a view of a building.

Deliverability 101:

# Don't End Up in the Spam Folder!

Your Guide to Good Email Reputation

Email reputation is as varied as the audience you are sending to. The number one question someone with deliverability issues asks Act-On's deliverability team is "What is my reputation?"

The person asking is nearly always wanting a single score or word (good, medium, low) to describe their reputation and is disappointed when the answer is "it's complicated." So before diving into improving and maintaining a good reputation, we need to put forth a shared understanding of exactly what email reputation is.

# What Is Reputation and Where Does it Live?

Reputation for an emailer is varied and can depend on many factors. A good reputation will allow better inboxing, and a bad reputation will make emails bounce or be placed into a spam folder at a higher rate. Reputation can also be visible as a number or rating or hidden and assumed by spam placement and open rates.

Reputation is also controlled by different aspects of a sender's sending structure. Unpacking that, reputation can be tied to the following:

- IP address
- "From" domain
- "Envelope-from" domain
- Domain/link contained within an email
- Specific sender
- Specific content pieces in an email

Each ISP and filtering company puts different weight on each of these metrics to determine a sender's reputation. Through testing and watching visible reputations, along with talking to the ISPs, Act-On's deliverability team has determined some of the top-level emphasis the ISPs and filtering companies put on these locations.

For those reputations that are visible in some way, they can usually be found on the postmaster page of a major ISP or at a few other sites that aggregate reputation. Historically, reputation was based on the return path's sender score, a 1-99 scale. Today, due to a variety of reasons, that number is less representative of the whole picture than it once was. Instead, sites like Google's postmaster site are more accurate resources for analyzing your email performance and sender reputation. Gmail, for instance, will rate a domain and IP on a 4-tier scale: bad, low, medium, high. Others have different scales and different reasons for affecting reputation.

## Establishing a Good Reputation

A good reputation is paramount to a sender, as it can compensate for any problems they may come across and will also lead to the highest ROI for email. Good reputation is based on hard work, adherence to best practices, and versatility in a changing landscape. Data quality will have the largest impact on your reputation, followed by maintaining an engaged audience.

On the following page is a chart of things, either visible to the sender or not, that affect reputation.

### Sender Measurable Positive Impact

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Open  
Click  
Forward  
Reply  
Proper authentication  
Double opt-in confirmation

### Sender Measurable Negative Impact

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Spam complaint  
Hard bounce  
Soft bounce (due to reputation)  
Repeated emails to non-engaged recipient  
Sending unauthenticated mail  
Sending unformatted/unrenderable content  
Hiding or obfuscating links  
Sending emails with bad or blacklisted links  
Sending email with links that are not secured

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### Hidden from Sender Positive Impact

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Email viewed for more than a second  
Folder created for email  
Email promoted to better folder (moved from promotions to inbox)  
Moving a message out of spam  
Adding sender to address book  
Starring/marketing as important

### Hidden from Sender Negative Impact

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Hitting a spam trap  
Deleting the message  
Ignoring the message  
Email viewed for less than a second  
Email reported as abusive  
Email reported as phishing  
Using spammy content

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### Unknown/Neutral Impact

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Opt-Out Viewing a message for more than 5 minutes (left open on that email)  
Soft-bounce (due to non-reputation issue)



## Repairing a Damaged Reputation

This guide is intentionally high level so that it might apply to the majority of senders, but when a reputation is damaged, more nuance will be needed. Act-On's team of expert deliverability consultants regularly work with clients to help them improve their reputation and become the best sender they can be. If additional or more tailored assistance is needed, our customers can contact their account manager to discuss our enhanced deliverability services.

Repairing reputation is achieved in the same way as establishing a good reputation, but with tighter control and more granular oversight.

1. During a reputation repair, only the very best data should be used. This might mean that leads from a newly attended trade show sit on the shelf until the repair is complete, which can be frustrating, but waiting until the reputation is improved will translate to better results.
2. A sender should shorten the time of their engagement segmentation (discussed later in this eBook) by at least  $\frac{1}{3}$  (if not half) to only email those who are actively engaged with the sender. Engagement segmentation must be implemented, and many emails will likely need to be sunset.
3. The sender should perform list hygiene as covered in the data section. Both the third-party list hygiene and sunsetting should be done to ensure data integrity.

Once open rates rise and level off at a better rate for a defined time period, the sender needs to be extra careful about slowly adding longer unengaged sections. In fact, depending on what caused the reputation slide, they might want to avoid this all together.

When the reputation repair is complete, you need to continue to follow best practices to avoid slipping back to poor performance. Each time a reputation is repaired, it becomes a little more difficult to achieve. ISPs have long memories, and short-term success will not count in your favor against repeated bad actions.



# Hard Reset

Convincing stakeholders to perform a hard reset can be extremely difficult, but this practice can achieve more effective and timely results than any other method.

Initially, the reset is roughly the same for all senders: Stop sending any emails on the affected domain/IP for at least 30 days. This might seem extreme, but desperate times call for desperate measures. In this instance, it pays to have separate traffic streams for different types of emails on different domains so that not all company traffic must stop.

Once the sending has been paused for the requisite 30 days, sending can resume with the following strict setup:

- Only send to the most engaged email recipients
- Ramp-up volumes must be observed
- Close monitoring on the ramp and immediate pausing if volumes are not accepted

The specifics of this hard reset depend on who the pause is for, who the audience is (which ISPs and filtering companies are being paused and reset), and the volume requirements at full sending. If your organization has decided it's time to perform a hard reset, please contact Act-On's deliverability services team to guide you through the process.

## Conclusion

Maintaining a good reputation is absolutely critical to ensuring inbox placement and reaching your customers. While a bad reputation can be repaired, you should always follow best practices, maintain quality data, and keep your audience engaged to prevent damaging your reputation in the first place.

In our next section, we will discuss segmentation practices that can help you improve engagement.