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Keeping the Subscriber Experience Positive After “Unsubscribe Me”

Good relationships start with good conversations. For permission emailers, the conversation often starts at the subscriber sign-up box or email registration link. Once you start a dialogue, it's important to provide your email subscribers with a consistently positive experience throughout the subscription lifecycle.

It's clear enough how to do this at the start of a relationship, when someone has registered. There are informative welcome messages, and special offers and content carefully targeted to the individual's interests or market segment. However, companies seem to be less clear on how to handle the discomfort of the conversation once a subscriber asks to opt-out of the program.

Contrary to popular belief among marketers, an unsubscribe request is not necessarily the end of a customer relationship. By executing a well-thought out, positive unsubscribe experience, a company can extend their brand equity and keep the customer for years to come, even if that customer is no longer an email subscriber. And a well-designed unsubscribe process can provide highly valuable, actionable information that will make you a better marketer.

Return Path's researchers recently studied how companies handled the opt-out process. We unsubscribed from the email lists of 45 companies we had subscribed to for a previous study.

We found that overall, the unsubscribe process was straightforward and user friendly. Sixty-five percent of those surveyed removed subscribers from their lists immediately. However, 20% of companies sent more than one additional email after the opt-out request was received. Most of these sent four or more additional messages, a practice that could undermine the customer's relationship with the brand.

While the basics were well-executed in most cases, most companies did not realize maximum benefit from the opt-out process. Many treated the unsubscribe process as a technical transaction, rather than a continuation of the conversation with the customer. They failed to take advantage of the chance to extend their marketing reach and to give departing customers the best possible brand experience.

¹ Return Path, “Creating Great Subscriber Experiences,” Spring 2008

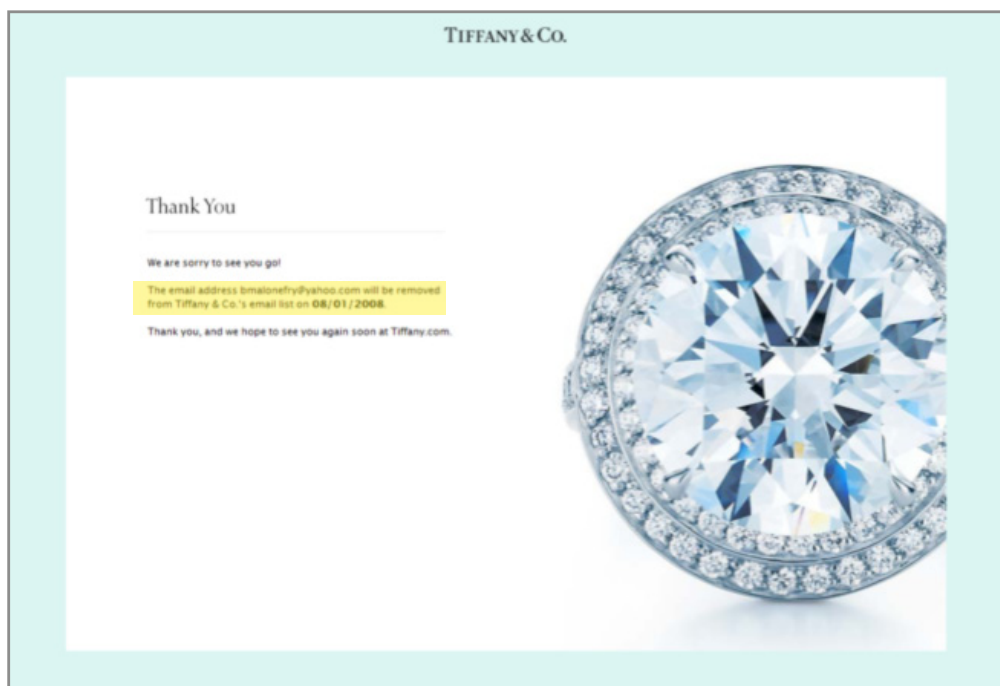
Handling the Fundamentals

Most companies handled the transactional aspect of the unsubscribe process reasonably well.

Direct Links and Immediate Confirmations

The majority of companies studied provided a link from the email to an unsubscribe landing page on their website (about 60%) or a preference page (about 40%). Two required subscribers to send an email to submit an email request to unsubscribe, a process that is often perceived as inconvenient by the subscriber.

Most companies provided customers with immediate confirmation that their unsubscribe request was processed, through a landing page on their website. Some went a step further in this confirmation process. For example, Tiffany & Co gave users the exact date of removal in the unsubscribe confirmation landing page. A few companies sent an email confirmation of the subscriber's opt-out request.



Travelocity did a nice job by executing a single-click unsubscribe function directly from the email. With this option a subscriber was presented with a conveniently pre-populated landing page, offering a menu of campaign-type unsubscribe options. Travelocity also chose to send a follow-up email to confirm the subscriber's removal request.

Return Path Recommendations: The process of opting out should be as easy and painless as possible for the customer. While it is acceptable to have an email-based unsubscribe process where a recipient would reply to the message with the words “unsubscribe” or similar, this is no longer common practice and therefore may cause confusion for some recipients. However, marketers must honor unsubscribes that come in via email, even if that mechanism is not explicitly stated as an option. Continuing to send email to people who wish to opt out is a recipe for more spam complaints.

Sending unsubscribe confirmations via email is a controversial practice. Some customers find it annoying to receive any email after unsubscribing. Others may like the “instant gratification” of a confirming email. Certainly email confirmations should only be sent when it can be done instantly. It is critical to monitor the associated complaint rate to be sure your practices are not damaging your brand image.

Email confirmations do provide an opportunity to make sure that a subscriber hasn’t been accidentally unsubscribed. This can be valuable if your email campaign includes a forward-to-a-friend option, where the friend might unintentionally opt-out the original recipient.

Email Address Confirmation

Just over a quarter of companies asked individuals who were unsubscribing to confirm their email address, a step that helps assure that the correct individual is unsubscribed. A handful of companies are still requiring that the subscriber log-in to unsubscribe, which is not compliant with the recently updated CAN-SPAM Act.

Return Path Recommendations: Every email should have a link to the unsubscribe landing page or preference page. Ideally, the email address should be passed from the unsubscribe link in order to pre-populate the unsubscribe email address box. Make sure the person clicking on the link can change the pre-populated address, however, in case the person responding to the email received it by forwarding.

Email Change of Address

Offering email change of address (EOCA) options seems to be low on the radar for many marketers, even though it offers a great opportunity to improve subscriber experience and engagement and lower your unsubscribe rate. Very few companies provide an email change of address link on the emails they send. Some provide the capability in their preference center but may neglect to communicate it to their subscribers.

Only 11% of companies provided an opportunity for subscribers to change their email address on the unsubscribe landing page, despite the potential to increase retention by doing so. If there is no preference page and no ECOA section on the unsubscribe page, someone who wants to change their email address has to unsubscribe and re-subscribe under the new address. The process may not be completed if the subscriber is annoyed by the inconvenience, is short on time or gets interrupted.

By offering an ECOA opportunity, you can also prompt individuals who are trying to reduce email volume at their main email address to consider receiving the email at an alternate email address.

Return Path Recommendation: Provide subscribers with the opportunity to change their email address on the unsubscribe page—even if you also offer this option on a preference page. Giving subscribers flexibility in managing email options is always a good practice.

Business Process Weaknesses

Our study showed that in some companies there was a disconnect between the unsubscribe request and the actual removal of the email address from the active list.

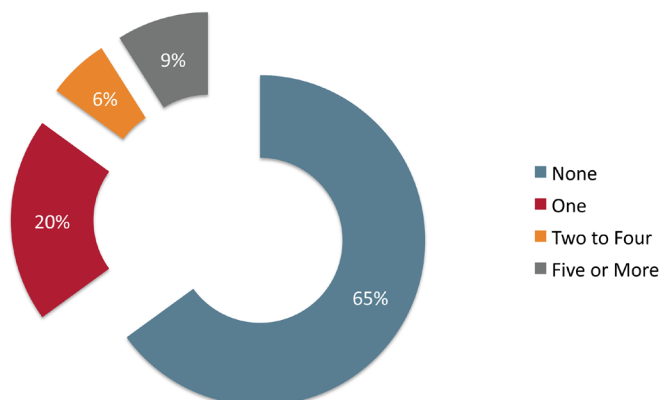
Twenty percent of companies sent more than one additional email message after confirming that the individual was no longer subscribed, with most of these sending four or more additional messages. In five cases—11% of the companies studied—messages were still arriving more than 10 days after the date of unsubscription, a violation of the CAN-SPAM Act. This is shocking given that this law has been in effect for more than five years and that the companies included in this study are top-tier marketers with programs that are generally best-in-class.



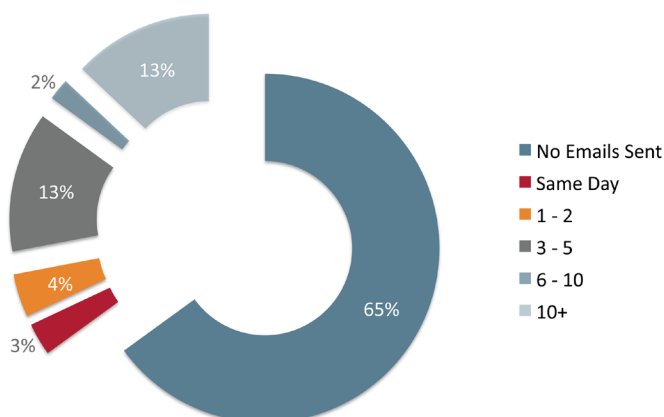
Return Path Recommendation: Companies must coordinate their email list maintenance functions with their actual mailings to ensure subscribers stop receiving email as soon as possible after a request is made. If you know that those who have opted-out are likely to receive emails which are already queued up, set expectations for consumers by letting them know that it may take a few days for the unsubscribe to take effect.

Many consumers will hit the “this is spam” button if they receive more email after an unsubscribe request, assuming that the functionality is broken or purposely non-functional. The longer the customer continues to receive email, the more likely they are to become disillusioned with their entire experience with your brand. It is essential that all mailings cease within 10 days, as required by CAN-SPAM.

Number of Emails Sent After Unsubscribe Request



Number of Days for Which Emails Were Sent After Unsubscribe Request



Using the Unsubscribe Landing Page to Maximum Benefit

The unsubscribe process must be streamlined and quick to continue providing customers with a positive brand experience. That said, it is still possible to use the opt-out process to learn why people are unsubscribing, in order to inform and improve the marketing strategy of your program. You can also offer consumers alternatives to unsubscribing that may keep them on your mailing list by better meeting their needs.

Offering Alternatives

Only two companies offered an option on the landing page allowing subscribers to change the frequency with which email is received, or to opt out of some

but not all mailings. Providing this kind of option offers an opportunity to retain subscribers who still have interest in your company and your products or services, but who simply feel they are getting too much email.

Return Path Recommendation: While the CAN-SPAM legislation requires that subscribers be able to opt-out by providing only their email address and opt-out preference, it is certainly acceptable to give consumers additional choices as long as the unsubscribe option is clear and conspicuous.

The unsubscribe landing page can offer subscribers a choice of mailing frequencies and the opportunity to opt out of selected mailings rather than all. For products that tend to be seasonal or where the nature of the products is likely to make the list less relevant after a specific period (e.g. jewelry, baby products), it may be appropriate to ask consumers if they would like to receive emails with gift ideas during the holiday season only, or for a time period that is appropriate for your business.

Ideally, consumers will have seen these choices throughout the subscription lifecycle and listed as options in the preference center. Waiting until the end of that cycle to present alternate options may leave some feeling irritated.

Clinique's landing page offered subscribers the choice of unsubscribing from all or only selected campaigns. The page also included other best practices, including a pre-populated email address box and the opportunity to change one's email address on the list.

A Benefits Refresher

Just two companies used the landing page to remind subscribers of the benefits the email program was providing them. Sears' unsubscribe landing page provided a full recap of program benefits. While the wording could have been a little more positive, this landing page does remind people why they subscribed in the first place and could lead some people to reconsider opting out.

Continuous Learning

Just two of the companies studied took advantage of the opt-out process to learn how they could improve their email program. They included a few simple survey questions on the landing page to help them understand why customers were unsubscribing and how they could do better.

Return Path Recommendations: While you don't want to make unsubscribing cumbersome, it is a best practice to survey former subscribers when they opt out to know whether they have less interest at this point in their lives or in this season, whether they never really found the emails they received to be relevant or helpful, or whether they simply want less email. A simple three-question survey will help you continue the conversation with your customers and give you the information to strengthen your future email relationships.

About Return Path Strategic Services

Return Path Strategic Services will help you move your email program from ordinary to extraordinary. Our expert strategists will give you inventive, practical, affordable ideas for optimizing your B2B or B2C program, thus improving your bottom line. Recommended ideas are tailored to your business goals and will help you move the needle faster to maximize ROI. We're dedicated to email performance – it's all we do. Please call 303-642-4199 to learn more.

Methodology

On August 1, 2008, the Return Path Strategic Services team unsubscribed from 46 of the email lists to which it had subscribed in connection with the study described in "Creating Great Subscriber Experiences." The companies involved were top marketers representing a variety of vertical markets, including retailers, consumer brands, travel companies, media sites and sports organizations. We recorded the process required to unsubscribe from each list (e.g. was there a landing page for unsubscribing or was the user sent to the preference center, were address confirmations required), and the degree of and kinds of choice offered at the point of unsubscribing. We also tracked how quickly companies stopped sending email.

Companies included in the study:

Retailers:

Piperlime
Wal Mart
Staples
Sears
Hallmark
Barnes & Noble
Tiffany
Crate & Barrel
Target
Sephora
Sports Authority

Brands:

Sharpie
Clinique
Betty Crocker
Fisher Price
SonyStyle
Kraft
MAC Cosmetics
Nike
BMW
Levis
Burt's Bees
Adidas

Media/Entertainment:

Disney.com
Food Network
New York Times
Martha Stewart Living
Cosmopolitan
Detroit Red Wings
LA Lakers
Southern Living
Bravo TV

Travel:

Travelocity
Hertz
Marriott
Hilton
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American Airlines
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- The Super Six: Best Practices That Will Make You More Successful with Email Marketing
- Your Reputation Holds the Key to Deliverability
- Tactics to Combat and Manage ISP Image Blocking
- Personal Whitelisting: How Subscribers Can Contribute to Deliverability

Research Studies

- 2010 Email Delivery Imperatives
- Top Email Trends in 2009
- The Global Email Deliverability Benchmark Report, 2H 2009
- Emailing in the Dark: What European Email Marketers Don't Understand about Deliverability
- Telling Stories, Building Relationships: How Non-Profits Can Create More Engaging Email Marketing Programs
- The Email Deliverability Benchmark Report, 1H 2009
- Increasing Revenues by Optimizing Emailing Practices with Online Buyers
- Keeping the Subscriber Experience Positive After "Unsubscribe Me"
- Q2 2008 Reputation Benchmark Report
- Fourth Annual Holiday Email Consumer Survey
- Creating Great Subscriber Experiences: Are Marketers Relationship Worthy?

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