
The anatomy of an effective e-mail subject line: How to stand out in a crowded inbox

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Abstract E-mail marketing is one of the most pervasive communication tools around and its importance continues to grow with the use of technology. It is also one of the best and most cost-efficient ways to get a message out to a specific audience. However, professional and personal e-mail inboxes are crowded with messages, and brands/companies need to compete to be noticed. For their messages to break through the noise of the crowded inbox, marketers must start with the subject line. Drafting the perfect subject line is an art form with a little bit of science thrown in. It requires an intimate knowledge of one's target audience and the ability to translate a larger message into a few words to strike the right chord and compel the recipient to take action. This paper explores how to provide the most relevant, personalised e-mail subject line 'experience' by discussing the fundamentals of how to draft compelling, effective subject lines.

KEYWORDS: digital marketing, e-mail marketing, e-mail subject line, best practices, subject line fundamentals

INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing is by far the most agile form of marketing today. The digital landscape is changing rapidly, propelling several emerging marketing trends and technologies, and encompassing many moving parts, from social media, to search engine optimisation, pay-per-click and more. Leveraging digital marketing is crucial to the ongoing success of any brand.

The one form of marketing that still ranks high in use and does not seem to

slow down or lose momentum is e-mail marketing. Although the rise of mobile and other emerging technology platforms has revolutionised the ways brands interact with consumers, e-mail continues to enjoy a strong track record — with an 11 per cent increase in usage from 2018 to 2020 and high utilisation rates (82 per cent) by brands.¹

E-mail is one of the most pervasive communication tools available, and one of the most cost-efficient ways to get a message to a specific audience. Its importance only

continues to grow as technology evolves. The average office worker receives over 100 e-mails a day² and the number of worldwide e-mail users is expected to grow to over 4.3 billion by the end of 2023.³

These numbers are significant and only strengthen e-mail marketing's positioning as a strategic and optimal tool for any business. Consumers all over the world receive various forms of e-mail marketing in their inboxes daily, from coupons and offers, to newsletters, to password resets and privacy notices — it is a lot to sift through, never mind to actually open and create engagement. In fact, the average consumer opts in to receive e-mail notifications from approximately nine different brands, and when these messages appear in inboxes, each and every one competes for the recipient's attention.

HOW TO BREAK THROUGH THE 'NOISE' OF THE CROWDED INBOX

Any marketer who wants their e-mail content opened, viewed, read and clicked through must start with a well-crafted subject line. An e-mail subject line is the most significant part of the e-mail. In fact, 33 per cent of e-mails are opened based on the perceived attractiveness of the subject line alone.⁴

E-mail subject lines can range drastically — from acting as a tantalising teaser that invites a meaningful interaction, to actually inducing disinterest and compromising the impact of all future e-mails from a brand. Knowing how to compose an effective e-mail subject line can mean the difference between creating loyal subscribers and ending up in the trash.

Marketers on a mission to grab consumers' attention must touch their hearts to turn them into brand loyalists. In what follows, this paper will discuss subject line fundamentals, tried-and-true tips and best practices to optimise e-mail subject lines and enhance consumer engagement.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF THE SUBJECT LINE

Use short subject lines to stand out in mobile

Less is always more — this is especially true in the digital world, as consumer attention spans are dwindling and readers typically perform quick scans to consume their information. Lengthy subject lines do not have the same punchy impact as shorter, more concise ones. A typical desktop reveals about 60 characters of an e-mail's subject line, while mobile devices show just 30 characters. A general rule of thumb is to craft a subject line of between 30 and 50 characters long. Getting right to the point in about five to seven words is key.

Overly wordy e-mail subject lines will get cut off and risk jeopardising the message's delivery, especially on mobile devices. As a whopping 62 per cent of e-mails are read on mobile devices these days,⁵ use subject lines with fewer than 40 characters to make sure the entire subject line remains visible. Front-load the most important information to ensure the most compelling aspects are not cut off. Steer away from complex language and keep magniloquence at bay, unless going for an elusive subject tone to entice recipients. E-mail subject lines that are direct and simple work best.

Start with action-oriented verbs

Subject lines are similar to calls-to-action, in that the language should motivate, encourage or incentivise recipients to open the mail. Actionable verbs are more enticing and inspire people by instilling urgency and/or excitement. Consider the difference between the subject lines:

'Celebrity Stylist XYZ Shopping Event'

'New Fall Arrivals'

'Your Exclusive Offer'

and:

‘Shop and Get Styled by Celebrity Stylist XYZ’

‘Check Out Our Fall Arrivals’

‘Look Inside for Your Rewards Balance’

Although the subject lines contain more or less the same information, the second group motivates a click and a view by starting with action verbs.

Some notable e-mail subject lines include the following:

- Suze Orman: ‘Join Suze LIVE on HSN!’;
- Duolingo: ‘Got 5 minutes? Take a quick French break!’.

Highlight promotional offers

Great incentives have a proven track record of inspiring engagement, so why not include the offer in the subject line? Consumers expect and look forward to receiving discounts and ‘free’ offers from their favourite brands, and are more inclined to open e-mails when an offer is directly mentioned in the subject line.

The following subject lines provide great examples:

- Glowbiotics: ‘Your Exclusive Gift: \$59 Value — with Any Purchase’;
- Glowbiotics: ‘Free Body Lotion + Double Points All Weekend!’;
- Merz Aesthetics: ‘Later, Frown Lines. Hello, Up to \$200 in Savings’;
- FOX’s Online: ‘10% Off Casual Style! Shop Now! 🛍️’,⁶

Create a sense of importance, scarcity or urgency that screams ‘act now!’

When phrased creatively and strategically, communicating urgency and scarcity in an e-mail subject line will compel readers to open. Research shows that people are motivated and react much more strongly when they feel they are about to lose

something, versus when they expect to gain something. To capture attention, capitalise on the fear of missing out on something by using subject lines to highlight what they stand to lose — whether it is a fun event, a valuable resource, a great deal, a limited-time offer or a VIP experience. E-mail subject lines with an element of scarcity (limited availability) or urgency (limited time) also tend to perform well, and this language is also a common practice with squeeze pages.

The following subject line examples are cases in point:

- Guess: ‘Today Only: Order Your Favorites with Free Shipping’;
- eBay: ‘Don’t Let this \$10 Shopping Credit Slip Away!’;
- Coursera: ‘Don’t Let Your Free Class Pass Expire’;
- JetBlue: ‘You’re Missing Out on Points’.

These types of subject lines work best when used sparingly, so limit their use to when the occasion genuinely calls for immediate action.

Make people feel special — Use power words

The psychology of exclusivity is a magical thing. Everyone wants to be a trendsetter or an early adopter, so why not feed that desire? When a valuable opportunity is genuinely available, including exclusives and sneak peeks in the subject line is a sure-fire way to increase e-mail open rates. When people feel like VIPs/insiders, it gives them a sense of belonging that propels loyalty and compels conversion. The right phrasing utilised in an e-mail subject line can make recipients feel special and important — an effect any marketer would like to have on their audience. Good words to use in subject line copy include ‘bonus’, ‘exclusive’, ‘limited’ and ‘gift’.

Consider the following subject lines from real-life marketing e-mails:

- Saks Fifth Avenue: ‘For Our VIP Customers Only’;
- Victoria’s Secret: ‘An Exclusive Offer for You’;
- Apple: ‘Exclusive Look: iPhone X’.

Add a touch of personalisation

No two e-mail recipients are identical — so the e-mails and subject lines they receive should not be, either. To build stronger customer relationships, brands must communicate in ways that speak to each individual customer. E-mail marketers can easily differentiate and personalise subject lines by including the subscriber’s name and segmenting the list to ensure that each recipient gets the most relevant content.

A personalised e-mail provides a feeling of importance, so use a merge tag in the subject line to generate the customer’s name. ‘Victoria, you have rewards waiting for you’ is more likely to get an open than ‘You have rewards waiting for you’. Other personalisation tokens, such as location, can and should also be used in the subject line to add a feeling of rapport, especially when backed by relevant content. Open rates for personalised e-mails average 18.8 per cent compared with 12.1 per cent without personalisation.⁷

Create further intrigue by front-loading e-mail subject lines with a compelling allusion to the content within the e-mail. For example, an e-mail subject line inviting a dog owner named Vincent to purchase food for his dog, Yoshie, could read: ‘Vincent, Treats for Yoshie at 25% Off’.

The following is a notable example of a subject line:

- Credit Karma: ‘Ewelina: New Score Alert 

Ask a compelling question

A subject line with a sense of mystery can pique the recipient’s interest enough to ensure they open the e-mail and get more information. Do not give away all the

information upfront, but do not make it too obscure either, as it may be perceived as spam. An intriguing question in the subject line is a great way to draw subscribers in: ‘Are you making these skincare mistakes?’ or ‘Do you know what your accountant is doing wrong?’

The following subject lines provide excellent examples:

- Groupon — ‘Can You Deal with These?’;
- SkinCeuticals: ‘What Are Your Summer Skincare Must-Haves?’;
- GreenMedInfo: ‘Why Do You Need Vitamin B12 in Your Life?’.

Share relevant topic insights

E-mail subject lines that incorporate trending, timely or seasonal topics can help establish a company/brand as an authority within a given industry, develop deeper connections with the target audience, and prompt recipients to click and read. As long as the message complements the brand ethos, stand out from the competition by sharing unique, innovative perspectives and insights about your industry.

Notable subject line examples:

- CrowdTwist: ‘[New Research Report] Gen Z, Millennials and Beyond’;
- Robyn Openshaw: ‘Most Important Health Tip of this Century’;
- Suze Orman: ‘The Difference Between a Will and Trust (and Why You Need Both)’.

Provide value via educational content

Any e-mail to existing, new or potential customers should give them something of value. Indeed, e-mail marketers should always ask themselves how opening the mail will benefit the customer. Valuable content could be a tip, a strategy, a knowledge nugget, or a tool or solution from which they could benefit.

This tactic is an opportunity for a brand to share expertise and shine as a thought leader. If the customer finds value in what

they receive, they will keep opening e-mails. Promoting products and/or services through educational content will help recipients rationalise their buying decisions. To execute this approach use words like ‘learn’, ‘discover’ and ‘maximise’ in e-mail subject lines.

Notable examples include the following:

- SkinCeuticals: ‘Discover Your Ideal Skin Care Regimen’;
- Dr. Jockers: ‘12 Ways to Balance Hormones and Inflammation’;
- Coursera: ‘23 New Courses to Broaden Your Skillset’.

Leverage emojis

Emojis have quickly become powerful communication tools, making it easier for companies and brands to convey emotion in situations where they are strapped for space (such as character length limitations on mobile devices) or proper vocabulary to express a sentiment.

Emojis are a fun and easy way to add some visual pizzazz to subject lines, and are an especially powerful tool when marketing to millennial audiences. The use of a simple emoji can humanise the message as well as create visual contrast in a recipient’s inbox, differentiating the e-mail and drawing the eye to the content.

Research has found that emoji usage can actually make a message more memorable — which is a great win for marketers. In fact, 56 per cent of brands using an emoji in their

e-mail subject line had a higher open rate than those that did not.⁸ It is important to note, however, that emojis should never be forced. Only use them if they are relevant to the brand and e-mail campaign.

Notable subject line examples include the following:

- Travelzoo: ‘This Week’s Top 20: Flights ✈️ to India 30% OFF’
- Gap: ‘Free 📄 on Orders \$35+’
- Glowbiotics: ‘Your Summer Skin Damage Reversed + FREE 🎁’
- Wayfair: ‘CHRISTMASTREES 🌲 🎁 UP TO 50% OFF’

An excellent source of emoji icons can be found at <https://emojipedia.org/>. For inspiration on which types of emojis to use, see Mailchimp’s most used emoji chart (Figure 1).⁹

As with emojis, it is worth exploring hashtags and testing them in e-mail subject lines to support specific campaigns associated with current social media initiatives.

For example, SkinCeuticals’ skincare line introduced a new product to its audiences by including a unique hashtag in the e-mail subject line,¹⁰ driving engagement and user-generated content on its social media channels:

- SkinCeuticals: ‘#GLOWTOBED with the NEW Glycolic 10 Renew Overnight by SkinCeuticals’.

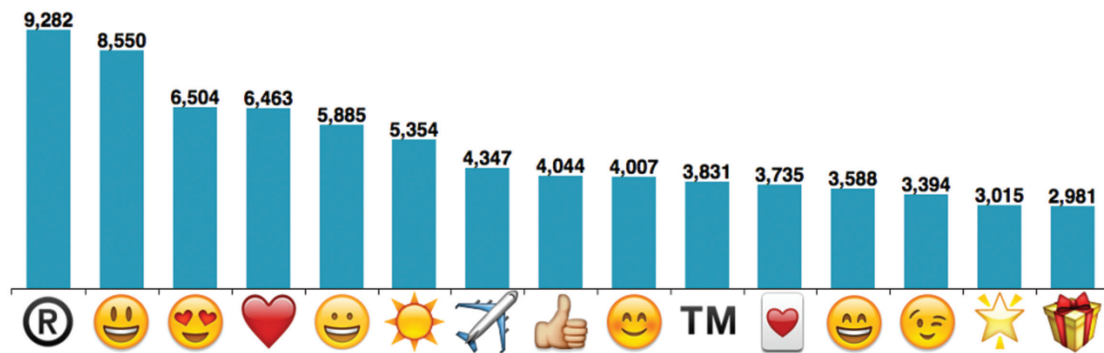


Figure 1: Top 15 emojis by subject line appearances

Utilise numbers and data (when available)

Wordiness and fluff have no place in e-mail marketing, so make sure subject lines clearly communicate how the e-mail will benefit subscribers. If this can be done using numbers and data, even better. 'Grow revenue by 20% today' is more appealing and specific, for example, than simply 'How to grow revenue'. Incorporating numbers into the subject line creates focus, as the human brain is naturally drawn to digits. Using data in the subject line gets e-mails noticed by demonstrating a straightforward insight and providing proven, objective information.

For example:

- B.I.G. Marketing Consulting: '5 Ways to Grow Sales by 30%'.

Avoid spam triggers

Two-thirds of e-mails that are flagged as spam are identified as such because of the subject line and e-mail content. Using spam-trigger words, symbols, phrases and punctuation in subject lines can result in an e-mail:

- being perceived as spammy and discourage a recipient from opening it (ignored);
- being automatically blocked (and never seen by the recipient); or
- being sent directly to a recipient's spam folder (and never seen by the recipient).

Research the most common spam trigger words relevant to your industry that are likely to be flagged by spam detectors. A good starting point is the extended list of spam triggers on HubSpot.¹¹

Aggressively salesy subject lines are often marked as spam, so be sure to avoid the following:

- overtly promotional language like 'Buy now' or 'Free';
- all caps (which can be perceived as the digital equivalent of yelling and can rub people the wrong way), ellipses, and multiple exclamation points;

- special characters and symbols, like '\$\$\$' and '*****'; and
- words like 'cheap' and 'winner'.

A subject line like 'Want To Get 30% Off? Click Here!' is guaranteed to end up in the spam folder. Avoid using audience-alienating spam triggers to stand out in subscribers' inboxes, and try personalising e-mails and using relevant, catchy language and emojis instead.

Use a cliff-hanger technique

Hook e-mail subscribers with a cliff-hanger in the subject line. Instead of providing the entire message upfront, tease just enough detail in the subject line to stoke interest. Recipients will automatically want to know more, and will be more likely to open the e-mail to see what it is about.

Notable subject line examples include:

- Travelzoo: 'The Secret to a Great Vacation...';
- Suze Orman: 'The answer to my top question';
- Dr. Mercola: 'Eye Opening Video...'

Note that as with emojis, it is important not to overuse the cliff-hanger technique, as it can annoy subscribers.

USE THE TOOLS AT YOUR DISPOSAL

Perfect each and every subject line with a rating tool, such as the one from subjectline.com. Once the subject lines have been crafted, be sure to run them through this free tool to evaluate their components against the industry standard and rate them with a score ranging from 0 to 100. The tool also suggests how to improve the subject lines in order to achieve a score of 100.

It is also important to test how the subject line and sender name look on mobile devices. Free marketing tools like Zurb's TestSubject (<https://zurb.com/playground/testsubject>) show how the subject line will appear on a variety of popular mobile devices. It is also possible to view how the

sender name and pre-header text display — no one wants a line-break in the middle of their brand name or for the subject line to be cut off.

It is critical to test before sending, as research shows that e-mails that display incorrectly on mobile devices may be deleted within three seconds.¹²

MIX AND MATCH YOUR WAY TO E-MAIL SUBJECT LINE MASTERY

Media headlines grab people's attention and get them to listen longer or read further. A meaningful subject line in an e-mail offers the same punch. Subject lines should be relevant, interesting and genuine.

These tips and best practices are a great starting point when embarking on the road of subject line optimisation; however, success ultimately comes down to figuring out what works best for the specific brand and audience. In reality, there is no true 'perfect e-mail subject line' and industry standards will vary from brand to brand. What works for one company today may not work for them tomorrow, and might even produce opposite results for another.

For this reason, it is critically important to know the target audience and their unique consumer personas, to understand what grabs their attention and what they find relevant. It is paramount to always draft e-mail subject lines with the recipient in mind.

While it can be tempting to rely on intuition to predict which subject line language and style will compel people to open an e-mail, one should always A/B test and tweak the wording according to the results. Determine what works best for your subscribers: longer or shorter subject lines? A subject line that is promotional in nature, or a tantalising cliff-hanger? The key to maximising results is to know one's purpose and target audience, and to learn from the results. Try different things. See what works. Ditch what doesn't. Repeat for success. If using professional e-mail marketing services like Mailchimp or Emma, it is easy to check

on subject line performance. These services show detailed reports on each e-mail sent, and provide statistics making it possible to gauge performance.

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