Google Gmail Marketing Best Practices:
Top Gmail Issues and Solutions

A Whitepaper Authored By:
Chip House, Vice President Privacy & Deliverability

47 South Meridian, Suite 300   Indianapolis, Indiana 46204   www.exacttarget.com
1.866.EMAIL.ET

Introduction to Gmail

In May 2004, Google introduced Gmail, their take on the popular free Internet email service, in a limited Beta release. Beta users were established by primary invite by Google, or by viral invite from another Beta user. As of September 1, 2004, Gmail is still in Beta, though a launch is expected yet this fall. This means there is no time like the present to get yourself, and your company's email program, ready for the changes that Gmail brings.

A recent survey by Pew Internet shows that Google holds 47% of the market for Internet searches. Free email services now account for a significant portion of the email landscape, and with Yahoo and Hotmail boasting approximately 125 million users between them, it is likely that Google's Gmail will make a huge impact in a relatively short amount of time. Google's demonstrated marketing savvy and market share could bring as many as 10 or 20 million users in only a year or two.

Google seeks to attract users away from other free email services by highlighting its unique features such as email searching, an unprecedented 1-gigabyte of mailbox storage space, and "conversation" groupings. Here is how Google describes their new features on the Gmail home page:

"A Google approach to email.
Gmail is an experiment in a new kind of webmail, built on the idea that you should never have to delete mail and you should always be able to find the message you want. The key features are:

Search, don't sort.
Use Google search to find the exact message you want, no matter when it was sent or received.

Don't throw anything away.
1000 megabytes of free storage so you'll never need to delete another message.

Keep it all in context.
Each message is grouped with all its replies and displayed as a conversation.

No pop-up ads. No untargeted banners.
You see only relevant text ads and links to related web pages of interest."

The screenshot of Gmail's interface, below, shows some of the new features such as search, conversations, and email starring.

**Example: Gmail's Home Page Interface**

Though many of Gmail's unique features will undoubtedly attract lots of users, they do pose some concerns for marketers. Changes such as image suppression, email contextual ads, and address book limitations are decidedly less friendly than the features found at other free email providers. From this paper, you will learn about Gmail's features, the challenges they bring to marketers, and steps that can be taken to address these issues and maximize email success when sending to Gmail users.

Gmail Challenges

1. Image Suppression Degrades Email Display

Like Hotmail, Outlook 2003 and AOL 9.0, Gmail defaults to suppressing the display of images on HTML email, which reduces the ability for marketers to achieve immediate impact by using images in their HTML email campaigns. However, subscribers can easily view images by clicking the link inserted by Gmail at the top of each email that reads, "Display External Images."

Example: Gmail Email w/ Image Suppression
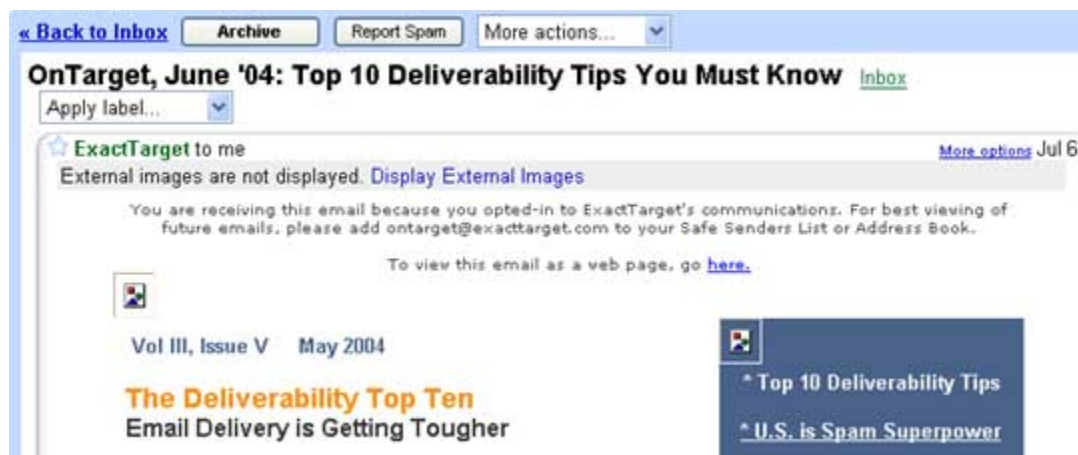
The default rejection of images creates a number of challenges for the email marketer. The first obvious one is the degradation in the way the email appears to users. Rather than showing the image intended, Gmail will show the broken image default. However, in our testing, Gmail held the position of the image in the HTML email body, rather than distorting the email, which can happen in Outlook 2003.

Also, Gmail's "Display External Images" link may not be initially obvious to new users. The prominence of the image display function is different than that of other email tools, such as AOL, which warns the user with a pop-up, or Outlook 2003 which replaces each image with text reading, *"Click here to download pictures. To help protect your privacy, Outlook prevented automatic download of some pictures in this message."*

Another effect of the default removal of images is that software using images to detect email open rates will be affected. An email "open" is often tracked by detecting the email client's request for an invisible 1x1 pixel placed in the email. With Gmail, the image request is dependant on the user to "approve" the image download. Similar image suppression at Hotmail and AOL 9.0 tend to underestimate actual open rates. In general, however, it remains to be seen if open rates of Gmail subscribers will follow other free email providers and come in lower than the open rates

of paid email subscribers. For example, whereas Hotmail subscribers tend to create a numerous "throw away" accounts, which drive open and click-through rates down. Gmail is expected to encourage higher loyalty due to the email archiving and search features, and it may produce higher overall response rates from users.

Despite the image blocking, Gmail proved to render emails as anticipated in every HTML email we tested. However, due to problems seen at other providers with complex HTML, DHTML, style sheets, complex tables, or Java scripts, I would recommend keeping your HTML designs relatively simple, or use an approved template from a provider like ExactTarget. Simple HTML also will reduce scoring with score-based filters which will penalize you for a high quantity of HTML tags.

2. "Contact List" Benefits and Shortcomings

Whereas AOL, Yahoo, Hotmail and Microsoft Outlook 2003 provide multiple advantages for being in the subscriber's address book (or Safe Sender list in Outlook), there are fewer benefits to your address being in a Gmail users "Contact List." For example, there is a distinct advantage for a marketer to get their email "from" address in the subscriber's address book at AOL. This is because when a sender is in an AOL subscriber's address book, the sender's message will be routed directly to the inbox with links and images working. If the sender's address is not in the address book, then the email will go through the breadth of AOL's spam filtering logic, and should it land in the inbox, it will arrive with images suppressed and links disabled.

Gmail's equivalent of the address book is their "Contact List." In our testing with Gmail's Beta, the presence of a sender's address in the Gmail contact list did not change the display of the email, but did prevent the email from going to the "spam" folder. It remains to be seen if this advantage will remain in the Gmail general release, but there is indication that a marketer should take action to get in the contact list for Gmail users.

3. Contextual Ads Open Door to Distraction and Competition

Google has grown to their gargantuan size partly by building a business model that drives revenues. One of their main money-makers has been their sale of keywords for sponsored links inside their search engine. A spin-off to their search technology is their AdSense product, which serves contextual advertising on 3rd party sites, and is being leveraged to serve text ads inside of Gmail. These text ads appear at the right edge of the email window once a user has opened an email message. Since Yahoo, Hotmail and others serve ads to their email users also, it isn't the ad serving that is unique to Gmail—it is their use of ads that are served based on the content in each email that is of concern.

Google leverages their search technology to scan each incoming messaging for relevant keywords that have been bid upon by advertisers and sold on a cost per click (CPC) basis. Each time an email recipient clicks on a link, the advertiser shells over between a few pennies and several dollars to Google. Good for Google, yes, but maybe not so good for the marketer hoping to get a click from their Gmail subscribers. This is especially true if you sell, for example, an anti-virus product and a competitor's AdSense ad, triggered by the word "virus" in your email, shows up!

Google has been criticized for this practice by many privacy advocates who are concerned that Google is reading private email messages. Google argues that their technology does not infringe on users' privacy since it does not actually "read" the email, but rather performs a systematic search for keywords that correspond to an ad.

In our testing, we determined that the text ads were not displayed for every message, as it depended upon whether or not the message contained a valid keyword, as well as other AdSense logic. However, when ads display, they may or may not be relevant to the actual context of the email. For example, a personal email that included the phrase "*plan* on getting together" yielded an AdSense ad that promoted "flexible cafeteria health *plans*" – not at all related to the content of the email.

There are some steps you can take to protect your response rates from being harmed by AdSense ads, which are discussed below.

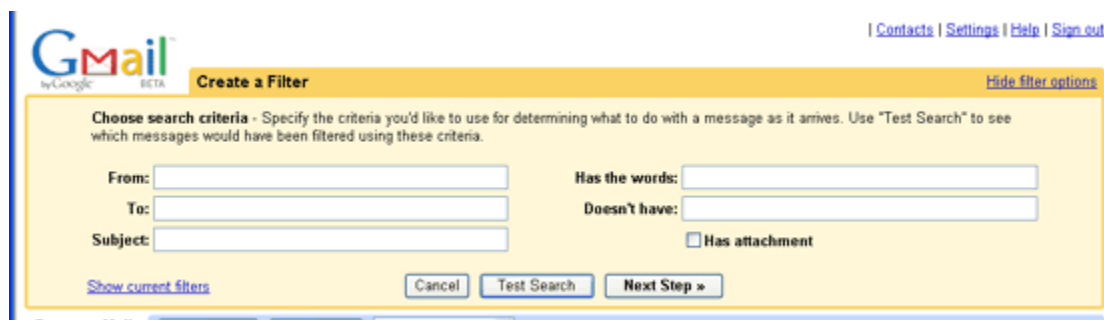## 4. Spam Reporting & User Filtering

Gmail, like AOL, Hotmail and Yahoo, allows a subscriber to click a "report spam" button without opening an email. Gmail users only need to click the checkbox next to the message, then click the button. Alternately, they can click the "report spam" button (found at the top of each email) to report an email as spam.

Ultimately, this ease of reporting will result in Gmail users accidentally reporting emails that they have actually opted-in to receiving as spam. This same issue is evident at Hotmail, Yahoo and AOL, and a limited volume of spam complaints is tolerated at most ISPs. AOL, for example, publishes their acceptable threshold for complaints of less than 1 per thousand or 0.1%. Gmail has not published this information, nor indicated if a threshold exists or how complaints play into spam filtering.

Google apparently uses a form of content or Bayesian filtering, which, over time, learns the content and characteristics of good email versus spam. Also, Google users have some control over their filtering, as they can filter email by "from address," "subject line," or "to name." The user can also choose to filter on message keywords by using the "Has the words," or "Doesn't have" options. Also, a user can check a box to filter all emails with an attachment.

Once the user defines filter criteria he can choose where to direct messages that meet them. Users have the choice to "Skip the inbox (archive it)," "Star it (keep in the inbox)," "Apply a label to it (customer defined)," or "Move it to the Trash."

Example: User Filter Settings

5. Unique "From" Line and Subject Line Treatment

Gmail treats the "from" line of the email message similar to both Yahoo and Hotmail by displaying the friendly "from name" rather than the "from email address" as AOL does. For example, for my emails from Apple's iPod site, the from field shows "iTunes" rather than "itunes@music-

store.apple.com." One thing to note for companies with long names is that Gmail only allows the first 19 characters of your from name, then abbreviates it with a period. On the other hand, Yahoo, for example, breaks the name after 19 characters to a second line.

The subject line is also unusual at Gmail, in that it includes "snippets." Snippets are bits of text pulled from the top of the email body (much like Outlook 2003), and are added on the end of the subject line. The subject line is entitled up to 60 characters, and the snippet uses whatever space is left (up to 86 characters). In most cases, the snippet allowed is between 5 and 10 words – enough to add "oompf" to a subject line if managed correctly (see ideas below).

Gmail Marketing Best Practices

Marketers can take action with their email campaigns that will improve their deliverability and response rates to Gmail users. By leveraging the concepts below, marketers will see stronger response rates, reduced complaints and filtering, strong subscriber retention rates, and improved email display at Gmail.

Worried About Competition Using Gmail's AdSense Ads? Fight Back. There are two main ways you can reduce the chance that users will click on a Gmail AdSense ad at the right side of your email message. First, you can test templates that include a column at the right with a strong border that reduce the chances that the user's eyes will drift further to the right to the text ads. Second, you should always make sure you are one of the top bidders on Google for the main keywords representing your line of business. Granted, Google has us cornered on this one, but doing search engine optimization at Google should be part of any business' marketing strategy in this day and age. With hundreds of millions of searches daily, your company can't afford not to be present for Google searches. And, if you manage your bids closely, your own text ads should show up next to your very own emails!

Leverage Snippets for Promotional Text. As mentioned above, the "snippet" in Gmail scans your email message for the first text that it can find, then displays it verbatim after your subject line (in a lighter shade of grey). Since this is the default setting for Gmail users, most will leave it on. Plan on repeating your main message/call to action in text at the top of your email, which is always a good practice. However, now you'll need to come up with a different twist on your main message, rather than just repeating your subject line. Remember, between subject line and snippet you'll have up to 86 characters to help give Gmail users a reason to open your email.

Include Promotional Text at the Top of HTML Emails. Emails that are comprised of only images will appear broken in the inbox. However, HTML emails with strong text at the top will still make an impact given that images will be suppressed. Another benefit of promotional text near the top is to leverage Gmail's "snippets," at the end of each subject line.

You'll also want to give your subscribers an option to subscribe to receive a text version of your email since Gmail users may prefer this over time. To learn the preferences of your subscribers, consider testing an email with few or no images against a graphically rich HTML version of your email.

You should also experiment with larger text (even in colors) that will soften the initial blow from having your images suppressed, and will give a better first impression. This also allows you to maintain a marketing message and call-to-action even in the absence of images.

At Top of Email, Use Images Sparingly. Due to the visual interruption of multiple "image missing" icons, it is best to reduce the use of images at the top of the message. Reducing images

makes the copy at the top of the email asking for the user to add your company to the Contact List more noticeable.

Ask to be added to Each Subscriber's Contact List. Although Gmail doesn't remove image suppression for senders in your contact list (like Outlook or AOL), having your name in the subscriber's contact list will prevent your email from being routed to the bulk folder. If you haven't already, begin developing a strategy to get your subscribers to add your email address to their contact list at multiple touch points, such as: on your online name capture form, in direct mailers, at the top of each email, or during customer service calls. Being in the contact list provides deliverability advantages not just at Gmail, but also at Yahoo, Hotmail, Outlook or any of the challenge response filters available – such as Earthlink's, or the new Mailblocks filter being incorporated at AOL.

Maintain Consistent "From Name" and Address. Since Gmail provides advantages for being in the contact list, changing your email address will hurt you. You'll need to get added back to the list all over again. Also, a from name consistent with what the subscriber sees at the time of opt-in will increase the chance that the sender opens your email, and reduces the chance they'll report your email as spam. This "recognition" piece of email is very important when sending to all of the Internet email providers.

Remind User of Opt-in. It is important to remind the user why they are receiving the email and when they opted in to receive it. This increases opens, and reduces the chance a user will send future emails to the junk mail folder. An ideal message would be something like: *"You are receiving this email because you opted in to receive our newsletter at xyzco.com. To ensure you receive future emails, please add abc@xyzco.com to your contact list."*

Watch your Content. As mentioned above, the spam folder is driven by complex Bayesian content filtering that will learn over time by studying not only the content of the message, but how users respond to your message. Avoid overly promotional words and phrases, multiple exclamation points, all capital letters and other copy often used by spammers. Also, avoid overusing words like "click here" or "unsubscribe," which, though a necessity in many cases, can add to your content score.

Summary

Overall, Gmail's innovations provide some new challenges to both users and legitimate email marketers. Though some functionality may change as Gmail moves from Beta to a full public release, legitimate email marketers who are aware of these imminent changes and make the necessary adjustments will continue to promote successfully, achieve positive ROI, and maintain solid relationships with their subscribers.