

## In Search Of Email Optimization

By: Ian Oxman, Vice President, Innovyx, RappDigital  
J. G. Sandom, Vice Chairman, RappDigital  
<http://www.rappdigital.com>

Novice email marketers stop reading right now! This column will not discuss permission marketing, spam, html, or any other such Email 101ish topics. Rather, this column speaks to the experienced email marketer who has already implemented various email programs, realizes the value of e-Messaging, and understands email's role in the overall marketing mix.

This column boldly goes where maybe only Leonard Nemoy has gone before – In Search Of . . . Email Marketing Optimization.

To truly optimize email marketing one need not have pointy ears but rather the stamina to analyze the entire chain of events and behaviors related to the email itself. In new buzz word parlance, we call this E-Messaging Use Case Optimization. The notion of the Use Case is something borrowed from software (including Web) development. A Use Case is a defined series of interactions between the user and the system designed to fulfill a specific task such as “Learn about a Product” or “Get a Coupon.”

In other words, Use Case Optimization begins with defining particular Objectives or end-user goals, and then examining all of the variables that may impact that Objective. For example, a common Use Case is Website purchase or e-Commerce. Hence, the dependant variable becomes online purchase, and the Use Case involves measuring, testing, and evaluating every possible independent variable which potentially leads to online purchase.

So, what are those independent variables? Email marketing optimization can be segmented into three sets of variables: database variables; creative variables; and site path variables.

Let's start with the Creative variables since these are the elements that most email marketers currently track. Creative involves the subject line, from line, offer, copy, and design. Creative can also include animation, flash, audio or streaming video. Every one of these items should be measured and tested in order to determine effectiveness in generating open rates and click-throughs.

A couple quick comments on the relative importance of these creative elements. Subject line and offer remain the two key drivers of email open rate and clickthrough. Certainly eye-catching design and great copywriting help, but subject line and offer remain the largest drivers. Always test new subject lines and offers. I am not discounting the tremendous impact which creative elements such as Flash or animation can produce. However, in terms of immediate, ROI-based drivers, subject line and offer should be your

starting points; we have seen more than one client generate better email performance with a simple text version vs. an html format. Yes, no design or eye-catching graphics, but straight text performing better! How could this be? Well, it leads to our second area of independent variables – the database.

The mantra of the direct mail world – list, list, list – also applies to e-Messaging (email marketing). Most marketers track the performance of different acquisition rental lists. However, few email marketers track the various independent variables present within their house database. All house records are not created equally! Every house record must be source-coded on three levels. First, coded by origin of the subscriber. For example, the email was sourced via a sweepstakes, a list rental, a search engine, an unsolicited Website visit, etc.

Each of these different sources will produce different email marketing results. Second, within each source, the type of permission gained should be logged; i.e. opt-in registration or opt-out. Third, recency should be coded. While a search-engine-based, opt-in permission name may be the best performing in general, it may perform worse than a more recent but opt-out name. Hence, a full analysis of your database will reveal potentially dozens of variable combinations.

This now leads us to the third leg of our Use Case – the Website path analysis. Path analysis is often the key but missing link for most email marketers. Here's why it's so important. Let's say you fully analyzed the email creative and database variables to know exactly the best list and best email design to generate the highest open rate and clickthrough. Getting the prospect to click from the email to the Website is certainly a job well done, but it's not the ultimate goal. Remember, we and Mr. Spock are In Search Of optimizing online purchases. Hence, we now need to analyze the conversion of those clickthroughs and, specifically, the different navigational paths those email respondents took through the Website.

The reason that the site path analysis remains key is that two emails, each performing at the same clickthrough rate, may produce significantly different conversion and purchase rates. In fact, the most successful email might very well be one with a lower clickthrough rate but a higher conversion rate. By not examining the Website paths a marketer might miss these sometimes surprising but extremely important patterns.

Here are the key steps in Website path analysis:

1. Institute a Tracking and Measurement program. Leverage an ASP such as Live Technology of Purchase, NY, to “tag” all of the relevant steps along each Use Case. These would include the email, the Landing page(s), plus all of the relevant clickstream elements that make up the Use Case.
2. Next, “flavor” or “characterize” each relevant page across the Use Case. Some clients have multiple objectives, such as Branding, Sales, Registration and

category Education. Each element of each Use Case must be characterized along these dimensions.

3. Benchmark your Use Case. Test the efficacy of the campaign against the defined Use Case. In other words, run the campaign and leverage your Tracking and Measurement solution to see where your targets are “falling off” from the Use Case.
4. Optimize the entire Use Case. When you see someone attriting from the Use Case, this is your signal that something is wrong. Examine each element of the Use Case and then optimize. For example, if your dominant Objective is Sales, if cybernauts are bailing out of the shopping cart, it probably means you have some work to do to make the shopping cart easier to navigate.
5. Test the Use Case again. Once you have optimized the entire Use Case clickstream, run the test again and see how much you have improved against the defined Objectives. For example, if your Objective is Branding, and you find that your optimization effort has increased traffic flow through Branding-flavored pages by 20%, you’ve generated an optimization score of 20% against your Branding Objective.

In Search of email optimization certainly would not make for an exciting weekly TV series. But, the search for and finding the answers certainly does make for profitable email marketing – even if you don’t have pointy ears.

# # #

Contact: VISIBILITY  
914 712 2610  
Lens@visibilitypr.com