

MDR's 5 Best Practices for Prospecting Email to the Education Market

- Create a Strong Value Proposition
- Design With Image Suppression in Mind
- Remember Educators Do Use Mobile Devices
- Get the Right Message to the Right Person
- Stay in the Inbox

Prospect email marketing to the education market is arguably one of the most effective marketing channels available today. Almost all educators check their school, district, or college emails multiple times a day—and most use email to communicate with students, parents, colleagues, as well as education associations, publishers of educational textbooks and courseware, and vendors of other education-related products and services.

While marketers have access to educators via email, there are steps you can take to decrease the likelihood your email will either be ignored or, worse yet, filtered into a junk folder. With 88% of education marketers already using email, educators are getting more email than ever before and are increasingly using mobile devices to pre-screen and sort emails for later reading. As a result, best practices that increase the likelihood of an email making contact have become requirements for marketers. And the specific characteristics of the educator audience demand email campaign design that suits their priorities and preferences.

These best practices are based on MDR's analysis after deploying over 8,500 educator email campaigns in 2010, and have shown to be effective across a broad range of education marketers. To maximize results in your email marketing programs, include these 5 Best Practices when prospecting to educators.



GET RIGHT TO IT – CREATING A STRONG VALUE PROPOSITION

One of the most important things to accomplish with your prospect email campaign is getting enough of your message across in the quickest manner so that your readers will decide it is worth their time and effort to continue reading and/or take action, such as clicking through to your website. This is accomplished through the smart use of each of the elements of an email:

Subject Line Testing: Your subject line can be used for several purposes. Teachers reported that the number one factor in their likelihood to open an email is knowing the sender, so test subject lines that focus on identity and brand. The number two reason stated was that the message was relevant to them. Test subject lines that focus on a solution to a problem or need that you know your reader has or on relevant content that will help or interest them.

Mixing in your value proposition is also possible. Utilize the “display from” field to reinforce relevance as well. Instead of sending an email with a display from of “ABC Textbook,” you can trigger a response from your audience with a display from of “Reading Solutions From ABC Textbook.” Now you have begun your value proposition and relevance messaging and still have your subject line to refine it further.

Fast-Forward to Value: From the subject line on down, if the educators do not instantly get the relevance, they will abandon your message. Lead with your brand if it is emblematic of your value proposition and serves to set the table for you. Or lead with tailored and personalized value propositions and let the brand follow. Test both and see which pulls better.

Never assume inherent value. A value proposition lies entirely in the eyes of the beholder, and marketers must continually test and challenge assumptions about what their target audience wants to hear. Email offers you opportunities in targeting, feedback, and reporting not available in any other medium. Use these tools to periodically confirm the resonance of your value proposition to an audience.

Headlines and Teasers: The purpose of the initial headline or teaser text is to make an instant connection with the reader. Single-sentence teaser lines that are a succinct summary of the message and/or are a CTA link are the most successful. Between the headline and the teaser, 90% of your message should be conveyed so the reader can quickly scan the message for relevancy. When combined with a clickable CTA link high up in the message, your email is equally powerful with images on or off or on a mobile device.

A Strong Call to Action: It is all about the click. In most cases, the goal of the email is NOT to sell a product or service; it is to sell the click through. The information in the email should be enough to affect this outcome and no more. Emails do not close the sale—that is what your website or sales force is for. Think of email as an inbound customer call and the click as routing the call to the sales specialist for that product. Do not offer too many unnecessary choices in the email and offer no choices on the landing page. It should be 100% focused on driving the action to the next step in your sales process.

Landing Pages: Taking the time to design and deploy specific landing pages for your email campaigns can give you one of the highest ROI lifts in your email marketing efforts. Here are some best practices for creating highly effective landing pages:

1. Integrate and dovetail the marketing message to what they just read in the email, create a smooth transition, and do not start over or leap forward.
2. Create single-focused pages and remove all non-relevant navigation and links from the page, except for a path back, should the reader decide not to respond.
3. Always keep the call to action prominent and in view.
4. Utilize a two-column (or more) design and test swapping left and right panes—keep the page length as short as possible.
5. Make strategic use of graphical elements—use trust builders whenever applicable (for example, TRUSTe or other privacy marks, trade association logos, etc.).
6. Test it, measure it, and tweak it until you arrive at a control. Then periodically test new designs against your control. Never settle for good enough, as small gains in conversion at this stage of the process can yield strong revenue gains.



DESIGN WITH IMAGE SUPPRESSION IN MIND

According to Marketing Sherpa's *2010 Email Marketing Benchmark Report*, just one-third of today's email users have images turned on when they read email messages. The scenario is even more serious for education marketers, with only 19% of teachers reporting they have images always present when they read their emails (MDR's *Email Trends in the Education Market 2011* report). As you design your email messages and content, be sure that they can stand on their own without any supporting graphics. Never put any core messaging or call-to-action links within an image that is not repeated in HTML text. You cannot count on teachers who have images turned off to go through the effort to manually download the images for your prospecting email—they simply are more apt to delete the message and move on.

Suppression-Proof Design: While there are many things from an email design standpoint that can help with this issue, such as making sure to include descriptive image alt tags and links at the top to view the message as a webpage, the hands down most effective way to combat image suppression is to design messages to withstand image suppression in the first place. This means the following:

- Design the email creative to use images as additive, not essential to the message.
- Use teaser text at the very top of the message to convey core value proposition and relevancy.
- Do not place critical information within the image unless it is also repeated in the message in the form of HTML text.
- Create HTML text-based links instead of image-based ones—these links can be creatively formatted so that they look very much like image-based links but will remain if images are turned off.
- Be sure to include very descriptive and value-oriented image alt tag text.
- Make use of tables to create formatted messages that remain intact without images.
- Use background table cell shading to create image-like formatting that remains when images are suppressed.

Images vs. HTML: If you are still sending your email messages as a single image (or multiple images) without any HTML text, you need to rethink your creative strategy. Because of a rise in spammers utilizing all images to get past spam filters, there has been a responding increase in the percentage of spam filters blocking emails for improper image-to-HTML ratios. While there is no set-in-stone percentage that is guaranteed to get you delivered, best practices dictate a balanced mix of HTML text to images not only to alleviate the spam filter concern but also to address the image rendering issue.

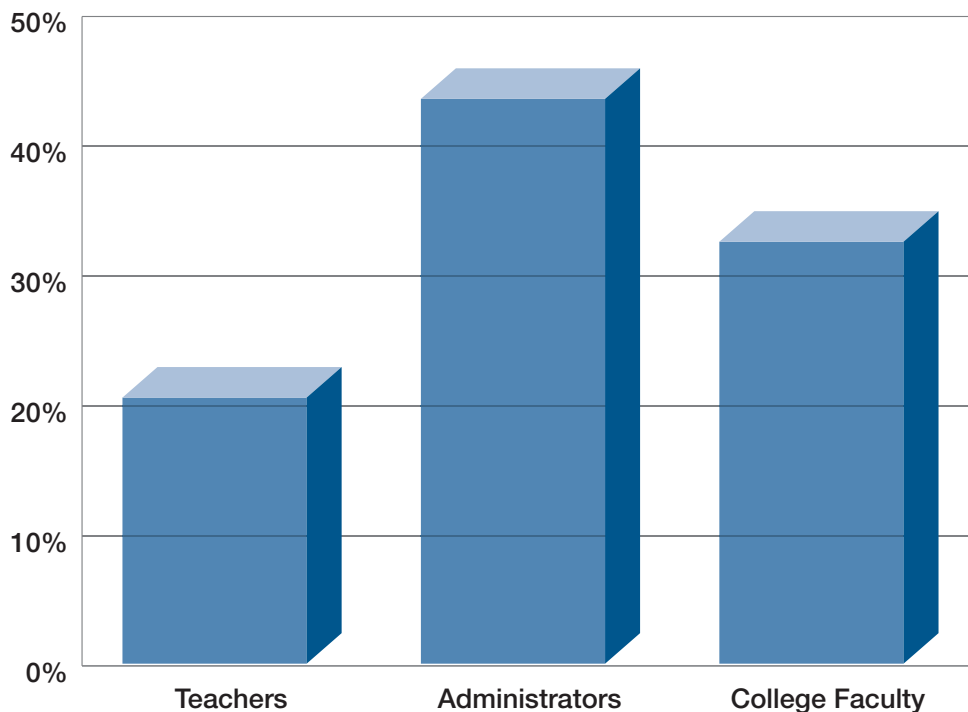
Image Rendering: Image rendering will continue to be a problem for education marketers due to the fact that image blocking has been widely implemented by most schools and educational institutions. The good news is that many smart education marketers have successfully adapted to this phenomenon and are showing no signs of it having a negative impact on the success of their campaigns. A majority of email recipients will choose to download the images (anywhere from 54% to 79%, depending if you have a relationship with them or not) if they have some reason driving them to download the images.

Utilize a mix of images and HTML text to get your value proposition across loud and clear, with or without images. Take the time to ensure that your email looks good when images are turned off in Outlook. Utilize hosted webpages of your email message and give readers a compelling reason to view the hosted webpage in your description of the link, rather than the canned “Click here to view this email as a webpage.” And, lastly, account for the fact that the open rate metric from your campaign results is going to be reduced by those messages that had images turned off. The email recipient still opened, read, and may have clicked through and purchased, but the open is not captured in your metrics because the call for the image is turned off.



EDUCATORS AND THE MOBILE REVOLUTION

Educator use of mobile devices (such as BlackBerry/iPhone) for email access jumped dramatically in 2010. More and more educators are accessing their email via the Internet on their own personal smartphones and gaining remote access to school-based email addresses. The number of educators that report being able to view their school-based email on a mobile device breaks down by job role as follows:



Email on the Small Screen: Educators were asked how they typically viewed email on their mobile devices. A majority previewed the message but waited until they were back in their classroom or at a desktop computer to try to fully read, respond, or click through the message. Only a small percentage report that they download images in the email to their handheld devices or follow links in messages and view senders’ websites.

The addition of this pre-screening step has major repercussions for prospecting email marketers. The opportunity to make your case has been reduced to even briefer text rendered on a smaller screen. The imperative for concise, high-value messaging is even higher.

Designing for the Mobile Platform: Design standards for mobile display continue to emerge as this market rapidly expands. According to the International Data Corporation, the worldwide smartphone market is expected to grow 49.2% in 2011. The dizzying variety of devices, screen sizes, platforms, and mouse versus touch-screen interfaces can make this seem like an impossible landscape to navigate. The good news is that the majority of Internet-enabled phones include browsers and email clients that offer HTML and CSS support. For the prospecting marketer, the goal of the mobile email becomes the click to a landing page, which offers a better venue to establish credibility and value. Some design tips to consider:

- Observe all the same best practices for email relevancy and targeting.
- Confine your most persuasive messaging to the subject line, headline, and/or teaser. Can the reader make a contact decision with this much information?
- Put call-to-action links at the top of the message to avoid the need to scroll.
- Design your target landing page for the mobile viewer at 320 pixels wide.
- Make the email body brief and scannable.



THE RIGHT MESSAGE TO THE RIGHT PERSON

Email's strength lies in its ability to create highly targeted and relevant messages based on available data about the personnel and the school/district that you are reaching out to. By using this information, you can create subject lines that resonate and email messages that deliver value to your prospects. The specificity of your messaging should be driven by a real understanding of what unique drivers connect to each segment of your audience.

The depth and breadth of data available about educators allows you to carve out nearly any group you wish—by demographics, job title, education level, interest, etc. While there is some overhead involved in this type of campaign segmentation, the resulting information offers benefits to marketers beyond the email channel. Testing and robust back-end reporting gives you diagnostic insight that can instantly improve the ROI of future campaigns in all channels. Identifying which segments do not require unique messaging is just as valuable an outcome as identifying the ones that do, and watching where the clicks come from can help you understand a person's role in the purchasing process—as influencer, decision maker, or holder of the purse strings.

Data for Targeting: Not every offering will be able to be mapped to an available data field for targeting. But a creative application of data can identify effective criteria for a more likely fit than an open call. For instance, in the absence of a tag for ELL teachers, a campaign that targets the broader category of language specialists may have some success. The point is not to abandon segmentation when an exact match is not possible but to see what existing data elements can get you closer to your ideal audience.

Refining Relevancy: Just as no two fingerprints are alike, you should not make assumptions about the relevancy and effectiveness of a message on a broad basis. For example, a generic offering for teachers interested in pursuing a master's in education may get a big response from audiences in California but fall flat among reading teachers. All teachers are not equal in their interests.

By segmenting your prospecting email campaigns into smaller groups with specific needs, you can custom tailor your relevance and value messaging. If a company has many solutions to a diverse group, segmenting down to a single-like group allows you to only talk about the products and services that specifically address this group. This dramatically increases the relevance to this audience, making them much more receptive to your message.

Personalization: Relevancy can be communicated not only by the fit of the offering to the educator but also by the use of dynamic data fields to tailor the message to the reader. Twenty-one to twenty-three percent of MDR survey respondents are using dynamic insertion and/or personalization in emails. While many marketers use these fields for operational purposes—that is, inserting the name of the appropriate sales rep—there is much to be gained by making educators feel that you appreciate their unique circumstances and concerns. Inserting the name of their district, citing applicable state standards, or changing an image to be appropriate to their geography are all easily accomplished and make an impact in perceived relevancy.



STAY IN THE INBOX

As we have discussed throughout, email is an invaluable tool to the marketer. But it is also a channel with a history of misuse and abuse. It is in our best interest as reputable marketers to observe strict codes of conduct to maintain audience goodwill and keep this channel a viable and welcome marketing option. As our research revealed, the number one factor educators use to determine if they will open an email is knowing the source company. Once you gain that trust, it is imperative to keep it. Luckily, all the best practices we have outlined on relevance and value of content are as effective in ensuring value to the audience as they are in generating results for marketers.

Be Polite: You will optimize your deliverability and minimize reputation hits by being mindful and courteous to your audience. That is expressed through the tone of your copy, the frequency and timing of your emails, enabling and honoring unsubscribe requests, and offering user controls over communications once prospects become customers.

Mind Your Reputation: The B2B and education markets are experiencing big growth in e-marketing with the commensurate push back from the audience when the principles of relevancy and courtesy are violated. The advent of Real-Time Black Lists (RTBLs) and scores that help spam filters identify email abusers raise the stakes and make protecting your reputation as an e-marketer even more critical. Use free services (like senderscore.org) to find your own score based on the metrics that distinguish legitimate email from spam, such as volume, complaint rates, unknown user rates, infrastructure, spam trap hits, and content.

Spam Filter Testing: Overall, email marketers are going to see a shift away from content analyzing-based filtering to more reputation-based filtering or a healthy mix of the two. So it will be important to ensure your content is compliant with most spam filtering applications as well as the reputation of your sending domain being clean. However, due to the protracted adoption rate of software solutions in the education space in general combined with the lower cost of some of the open source content filtering solutions, it is likely that schools will be relying heavier on content-based filters, such as Spam Assassin, longer than most. Education email marketers should consider incorporating spam filter scoring of their messages as part of the message creation process.

Monitor Your Feedback Loop: Now more than ever, it is important to utilize all the feedback from your email campaigns. This means looking at the return codes from the deployment (if you have access to this information) and to system-generated or user-initiated reply emails. Analyzing the emails you receive in your reply-to email box will provide you with insight about your deliverability. Additionally, you will identify some schools that utilize “Challenge/Response” systems or other applications that might make you want to segment them to the side to treat differently. The more you learn and adapt to your campaigns, the stronger your deliverability will be.

Reply-To Flaming: Your reply-to email address is the canary in the coal mine of your email campaigns and needs to be carefully monitored. It is the first place you will see indications that you may need to make course corrections in your deployment process. While not always pleasant, these emails can be valuable diagnostic tools to help you identify too-broad segmenting, inaccurate prospect contact data, poor messaging, or any other issues you can address.

CONCLUSION

Education marketers, like all email marketers, should be looking to maximize the ROI in their email marketing efforts as educators’ email boxes become more crowded in the years to come. By adopting these best practices in your e-marketing programs now, you will see an immediate boost in your email marketing efforts. You also will develop a foundation to build upon—to turn pure prospecting into relationships and increase overall sales and customer loyalty.



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