

Your Guide to Inbox Placement

"Send messages to people who want to read them"

Postmaster at Google

"Only send emails to those who know they are coming and have asked for them"

Oath (Verizon) Postmaster

Our deliverability series is meant as a guideline for "best practices" and information on deliverability. Best practices is in quotes because we can separate things into two categories: minimum practices to get emails delivered anywhere and actual best practices that help optimize inboxing and maximize ROI.

Guided by the consultation of ISPs and the evidence of many senders, this series is based upon the following philosophy about emailing: quality beats quantity. It sounds simple, but many senders get trapped in a battle where they are asked to send to more contacts and provide more leads. That is what leads people into deliverability troubles, impacting their ability to generate ROI from these efforts.

Additionally, this series is a light version of everything that can be done in this field, and many factors of business needs are either at odds with or influence how to best pattern deliverability for any specific company. At the same time, deliverability is changing constantly, and what is considered a best practice today may not be good (or even legal) in the future. We will do our best to keep this guide current, but if you have specific questions, please reach out to an Act-On account manager or support member about getting in contact with our Deliverability Services team. Our team can guide you through your specific questions or develop a long-term engagement plan where we focus on helping you improve email performance by targeting specific issues while also addressing holistic problems.



Intro to Deliverability

This section is the baseline knowledge that the rest of our deliverability series is based upon, and it is assumed that the reader has knowledge of the concepts and definitions in this section. If you have a good grasp of deliverability concepts, take a quick peek to see if this is all old-hat. If you are newer to these concepts, however, this information is pivotal in understanding the context for some of the advice and suggestions in our deliverability series.

In simplest terms, deliverability is the overall health of a sender's email. This entails many aspects: delivery rate, inbox rate, click rate, perceived email channel health, and, most importantly, ROI from email.

A note on unique vs total clicks (or opens and effective opens): Throughout our deliverability series, opens and clicks are always used as unique metrics; only one open or click-per-message per recipient. Act-On (and most platforms) also include effective opens in open numbers. Due to various reasons, not all email opens are tracked. When no open is tracked, but a link is clicked, the system adds an open into the system. (It must have been opened for the user to click on it!)

Terms Defined

Deliverability: Overall health of a sender's email

Delivery Rate: Number of emails delivered (not bounced) divided by number of emails sent

Inbox Rate: Percent of emails that make it to a Non-SPAM folder

Open Rate: Number of opens divided by emails delivered

Click Rate: Number of clicks divided by emails delivered

Click-Through Rate (Click to Open Rate): Number of clicks divided by opens

Hard Bounce: Email addresses that do not or no longer exist; no recipient

Soft Bounce: Emails that bounce for some reason other than a hard bounce — often temporary, and the email is still addressable

Bot: Program that is not a human and interacts with email and websites

Scrape: Grabbing an email from a website and putting it in an email stream for marketing or selling use

Pristine Spam Trap: Email that has never been used for a real person — only to find those that scrape email data or purchase lists from data vendors

Recycled Spam Trap: Email that was once good but stopped being used by someone for more than 3-6 months

Opt-Out: The link that unsubscribes a user from future marketing email communication

Transactional Email: Emails that result from a direct user action (e.g. receipts, notifications on service, bill due statements, balance statements, system updates, etc.)

B2C: Referencing someone using a public email address, such as 123user@gmail.com (Note: this person could also be using this email for business)

B2B: Referencing someone using a company email such as 123user@123company.com

ISP: Inbox Service Providers (e.g. Gmail, Google Apps, Microsoft, etc.)

Filtering Company: Security company that pre-filters email before the email reaches a company

Prerequisites to Talking About Actual Emails

Once someone has a platform and wants to send emails, there are a few steps they need to take before they load and send. To have good deliverability, these are a necessity.

Authentication (SPF, DKIM, and maybe DMARC): Authentication is telling the ISPs you are who you say you are in an email and also that a marketing automation platform, such as Act-On, is allowed to send on your behalf. Emails might be able to go out without authentication, but they will likely be placed into a Spam folder, bounced, or come with a message stating they shouldn't be trusted due to the lack of authentication. Part of the Act-On implementation process is setting these up (DMARC is optional). Act-On customers can visit Act-On University for help getting everything in place.

Email Data Hygiene: Good data is a critical component of deliverability. Not all data is created equal, and having good lists with the right information is the foundation for building an effective email strategy. Good data doesn't mean a sender will succeed, but bad data will almost certainly result in failure.

One Domain for Each Stream: Each "stream" of email should be on a separate domain because crossing them will likely lead to failure. The reputation can cross-pollinate, and if one stream is damaged, the others will struggle as well. So make sure your emails have a different domain or subdomain from sales and other departments.

Some members of the deliverability community recommend combining streams to "bolster" poor sending, but we've seen this cause serious issues over and over. For example, we've seen cases where very important messaging has been tanked by another department's failure. Unless control for all data and email sending flows through one authority in a company (stressful and only possible at smaller volumes/company sizes), combining streams is too risky to recommend.

The Goal: Inbox

Inbox delivery is the goal, but as spammers become increasingly common, it's getting harder and harder to get there consistently, which raises the bar for email marketing entry and forces smart marketers to do more than the minimum.

At the same time, ISPs are creating evolutionary changes to the inbox. For instance, Gmail's new tab system has changed the email landscape. The majority of B2C emails (and an ever-increasing percentage of B2B traffic) is executed through Gmail and the G Suite, so ignoring the tab system is impossible. Not to be left behind, Microsoft has also added the clutter folder as a default, and marketing messages are being routed there as well.

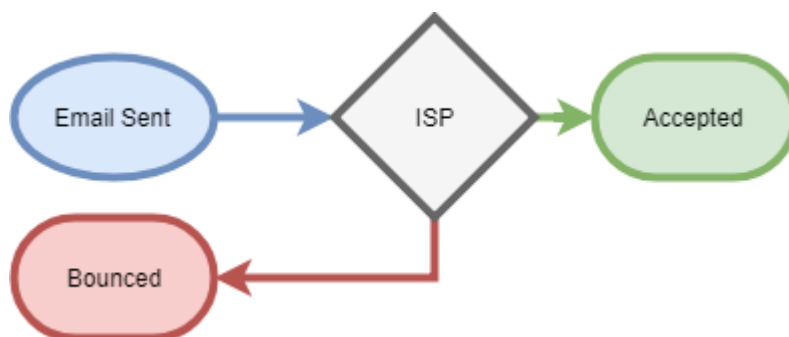
It is important to note that marketing emails can get into the primary tab but only for emails that are sent from a trusted sender to a targeted group of recipients. The exact strategies on those steps are outlined in a later chapter of our deliverability series.

What Senders See. What the ISP Sees.

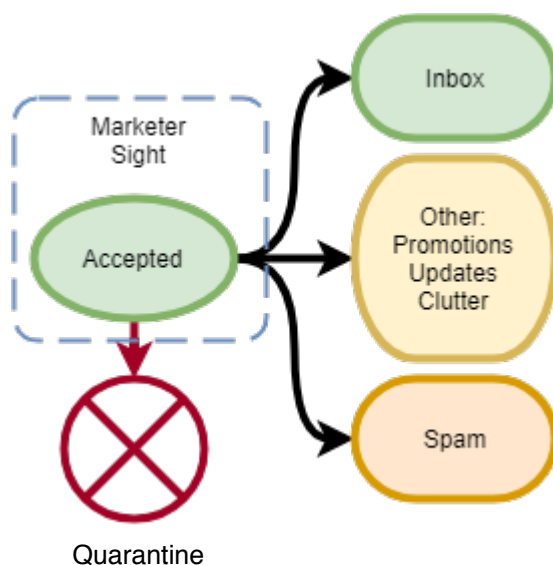
One of the most common questions the Act-On deliverability team gets asked by marketers trying to understand deliverability is, "What is my inbox rate?" And those marketers are always a little disappointed when the team says, "We can't know, but we can guess. We can usually narrow it down to a relatively tight window, but it will always be a mystery."

There are a few reasons for this:

The sender's vision is only accepted or not. There are all the folders discussed above (inbox, spam, promotions, forums, social, updates, clutter) and all the custom ones individuals create to filter their emails how they want them. But on the sender's end, ISPs only provide whether an email is accepted or not.



Not every recipient is the same. If a sender sends messages to Gmail, a variety of cases may occur. Most major ISPs have some type of "bucketing" system for recipients based on their behavior. For example, buckets 1-7 will get the message in their inbox, buckets 8-12 get the message in their promotions tab, and buckets 13-15 get the message in their spam folder. A different message to the same group from the same sender, based upon content and reputation at the time of sending, might have a totally different placement.



There are tools available to give some additional insight into the inbox — such as 2500k, Glock Apps, and Return Path, just to name a few. All these companies offer a glimpse at the inbox, but their information is not guaranteed to be accurate and can even be misleading based on whom you're emailing.

Act-On's deliverability Team uses 2500k, an email and deliverability platform, for our testing, which does provide fairly accurate representations of inboxing. If a customer is enrolled in Act-On's Enhanced Deliverability Services, we tailor a 2500k list to a customer and have them send to the seedlist throughout the month to get an idea of the inbox landscape and to provide guidance on improvements.

Mobile Viewing

As most senders use their computers for creating and editing emails, it is easy to forget that most people view those emails on their phones. Making sure a send is renderable on both computer and mobile is a necessity.

Adding to this, many inboxes are being tailored differently on mobile and computer. In Gmail, if a send is not renderable on a mobile device, it might not end up in an inbox. Other platforms might place an email in a spam folder because it cannot be viewed properly on a mobile device for all inboxes — despite the email being fine otherwise.

It's important to conduct a thorough review of all critical elements of an email before sending, which is why Act-On's email designer has a mobile preview function. Several other companies — such as Litmus, Email on Acid, 2500k, and Glock Apps, among other others — also provide additional renders for a variety of devices and email readers to help marketers ensure their audience will view the email properly upon receipt.

Email Sending Checklist

There are several things a sender should always check before hitting the send button. Below is a checklist of what should be reviewed prior to every send, and the rest of our deliverability series covers the specifics as to why and how.

- The recipients of this email are targeted for this message
- This email is part of a strategy
- The subject line is clear and concise and conveys the what, where, when, why, and how (whenever applicable)
- The email has a clear call to action that results in a click
- All links work and lead to secured sites
- All pictures have alt-text
- The email renders on mobile and the majority of email applications



Conclusion

We've only begun to scratch the surface of the basics of deliverability, but the information above should help your business get your message in front of the right people at the right time. This is an important step in engaging your audience and converting leads into customers. Look out for future chapters to learn more about email deliverability — including data quality, email hygiene, email segmentation, and more.