

Your Guide to Testing and Optimizing Your Emails

The best marketers and most effective communicators know how important it is to constantly test their efforts.

As our target audiences and the world around them evolves, it is our job to figure out the most effective way to reach them and how to speak their language. What doesn't work one week may be what resonates best with our audience at another time.

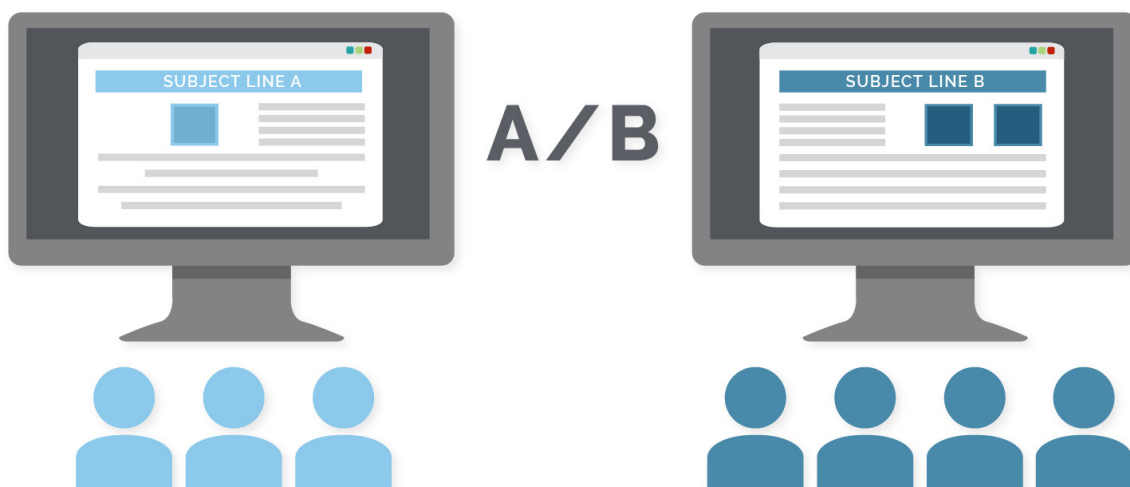
In addition to strengthening your messaging, testing your efforts is extremely important to your email deliverability and ongoing success. An email that gets delivered, seen, opened, and motivates your contacts to complete an action can contribute significantly to your ROI, and testing is your key to determining a recipe that works.

Although it may be hard to know where to start testing your efforts, this eBook is intended to provide you with strategies that help you experiment with new and improve existing email marketing efforts. The next few pages will guide you through key testing and optimization concepts to adhere to for achieving and maintaining success.

A/B Testing

A good method to use if you're just getting started examining what works in your emails is A/B testing. This simple process can provide you with useful insights that enable you to enhance your email marketing efforts. In fact, some of the best and most successful email campaigns you've seen have been developed and refined through A/B testing.

To conduct an email A/B test, you randomly divide your audience into two segments and send an email with one subject line (or another element) to one segment and another with a different subject line to the other segment. Whichever email subject line has the highest engagement is the winner of the two.



Best practice dictates that you continue to A/B test on a regular basis for consistent optimization and to produce the best possible results. To make this process much more effortless, Act-On users have access to a built-in A/B test feature that is designed to check for click-throughs.

If you are conducting testing on areas other than click-throughs — such as engagement on CTAs or graphics — we suggest you forgo this Act-On feature and instead conduct an A/B split test on a larger list and examine the results within Data Studio. Set up your email or campaign with Act-On and look at your analytics to determine how different changes affect email engagement over time. This method can be especially useful if a company is creating something like an onboarding campaign. This, too, should be an ongoing effort, so you should continue testing and enhancing your efforts even after you find a winning combination.



What Do You Test?

Think About What Relates to What.

As discussed in the first chapter of our Deliverability 101 series, there are a few metrics that can be tested with stats found in the Act-On platform. While you can test inbox placement through outside platforms like GlockApps, 2500k, and Return Path, those utilities only provide rough estimates.

To determine what works best, expert marketers use hard numbers to see how their results change when they manipulate certain elements in their emails. Although that may seem obvious, it can be difficult to determine which variables to change in order to test how different email areas perform.

Below is a guide of the elements you should change based on which email metrics you want to test.

It is also possible to test engagement based on email content. Best practices for that are covered in another section of our deliverability series.

Open Rate

Even though the email open rate is the number one thing marketers want to test and improve, this metric has some of the fewest testable areas:

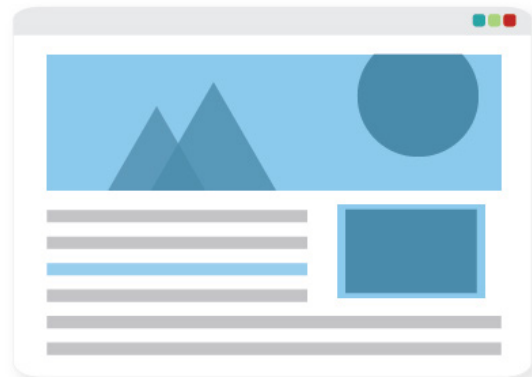
- **Subject Line:** The subject line is the easiest — and often most impactful — change that can be made in testing purposes. However, you should avoid making your subject line misleading in an effort to improve engagement.
- **"From" Addresses:** The sender's email address can have a surprising effect on open rates. Avoid "noreply@" and other generic addresses, and make sure that a recipient can actually reply!
- **Sending Time:** The sending/receiving time of an email can greatly impact whether an individual decides to open an email or not. Act-On is working on an adaptive feature around this specifically to help with sending times (anticipated release is 2019).
- **Preview Text:** The preview text should always either be part of the text from the email or a catchy phrase. Changing the wording and words can have a major effect on opens.



Click-Through Rate

Testing your click-through rate is important to the ongoing deliverability and engagement of your future emails. This variable can be tested by manipulating your CTAs (calls-to-action) and the elements around them.

- **Call-to-Action Placement and Wording:** Changing the placement, wording, and look of a call-to-action can impact your click-through rate. When testing this element, consider creative ways to make your CTA stand out in a text-only version in case your recipients decide to forgo downloading any pictures.
- **Ratios:** The number of links, pictures, and text in an email will alter how users interact with a message. We go more in-depth into this topic in the "Content" chapter of our deliverability series, but even when following best practices, there is a lot of flexibility when it comes to ratios. Therefore, finding the right balance for your specific audience is important.
- **Layout:** Similar to the ratio of images to text and links, the layout of those elements have a large impact on the readability of your email and how your recipient decides to engage with it once they've opened it. Testing different layouts can help you see if and how the different arrangements are impacting your recipients' engagement levels and activities.
- **Length:** Some senders have found an increase in click-throughs when they provide less content and make readers click for additional information, while others have experienced the opposite. How this element affects your click-through rate depends on your audience's preferences, which is why testing the length of your messaging is a must in order to determine what works best for who you're targeting.





Opt-Outs and Spam Complaints

Testing your emails to determine how to minimize spam complaints and opt-outs is crucial to your overall success and deliverability. You want to ensure the people receiving your emails actually want to see them in the first place. In addition, having too many spam complaints can lead to a bad email reputation.

Even if your audience chooses to receive an email, there are those who will decide they no longer want to hear from you at a later time. For instances like these, you should also test how to maximize opt-outs instead of spam complaints. To test these metrics, we recommend experimenting with the following elements.

- **Opt-Out Placement:** The location of your opt-out link within the body of your email can have a drastic impact on the number of spam complaints you receive. Moving it to the top or near to the call to action will allow those who do not want content to remove themselves instead of hurting a sender's reputation.
- **Cadence:** You can easily test your cadence with Act-On's automated programs. Split your customers into two groups, and measure how each of these customer segments engages with your email based on the frequency. If you notice that one group has fewer open rates and an increase in opt-outs and spam complaints, that's a concrete sign that the email cadence isn't working.

Conclusion

If your goal is to continue meeting and exceeding your goals, testing your email marketing efforts should be an ongoing activity. This practice will help you improve the personalization of your emails for improved deliverability, engagement, and results. Furthermore, it will allow you to always stay on top of what your customers want and what they respond to before your competition steps in.