

B2B Broadcast emails

It's a true account with names changed to conceal the client's identity. And it's a cautionary tale about how tricky business-to-business (B2B) email acquisition campaigns can be these days. Flooded inboxes and an increasing intolerance for unsolicited mail make it more difficult than ever to get the response you want.

Think about it. Even if you're mailing to a permission-based opt-in rental list, the message you're sending -- to be absolutely precise -- is unsolicited. It hasn't been *specifically* requested. And it's certainly unexpected; unlike an e-newsletter you've signed up for and expect to receive regularly.

Plus, the smaller size of niche B2B lists does not work in your favor. It's just a matter of statistics. When you're mailing to a rented list of 5,000 as opposed to 500,000, a typical click-through rate of around 1 percent is not going to net you many responses.

The Case Study

Our client's first email campaign was a text email effort, designed to generate sales leads for the firm's high-end software development services. After working with the director of marketing on the campaign, I received this message from her:

The short-term results on our direct email using the XYZ (a respected B2B name) list are in. We transmitted to 5,063 people, received 19 click-throughs and 12 registrants to download our free guide. That's about a 0.25 percent response rate. Much worse than I was expecting.

Our list broker (Jim, who seems to be a straightforward guy), believes the list is good and that our targeting was good. Prior response rates for these lists have been 0.8 to 1.8 percent normally. Jim feels that our email text is too long and not structured for maximum impact. I wonder about the subject line.

I still think this marketing method can be effective for us. I mean, if we closed even one \$100,000 project from every 5,000 names we sent to, it would be worth it. How should we proceed?

Ouch. That's not the kind of news you want to get from a good client. And when I say good, I mean that this woman and her team are a thoughtful and sharp bunch. Despite her best efforts -- and mine -- to craft a response-driven message, something got lost in the translation.

Here's what I think happened.

Safe Subject Lines

This is a company selling complex, pricey development services. "Hey, get your FREE guide!" just didn't feel right. But what we ended up with was not a grabber: "Why outsource software development for your hardware product?"

This illustrates a key point about [subject lines](#). To make them compelling, you have to inject a bit of intrigue. A subject line should be informative, but it should also tease. It should raise just enough of a question in your mind that you want to click to get the answer or find out "what happens next."

A teaser approach to this one might be: "Why outsource critical software..." It doesn't really matter what the rest of the sentence is, because that's all that most readers can see in their inboxes.

Copywriting by Committee

The copy for this text message was edited several times, going back and forth between the client and me. But then the CEO and the director of engineering got into the act, injecting their own language and removing some of ours.

The result is a message lacking a strong enough call to action and having too long a description of the company's services. In addition, the layout of the text was changed. Some bullet points were dropped; some white space was eliminated. Layout is just as important in a text message as it is in an HTML message. Short paragraphs, bullets, and lots of white space make it easier to read.

This does prompt a question, however: Does plain-text work for acquisition email? B2B inboxes are starting to get some pretty nifty-looking HTML offers. (This particular rental list only sends text emails, so we can't test it.)

Authentic Voice Is Key

The biggest challenge in writing for a B2B audience is finding the right tone. It has to reflect your brand; you have to be comfortable with it; it has to speak clearly to your readers. But finding a voice that is distinctive, authentic, and appropriate for your audience is difficult.

The message in question became a little stiff in tone after several rewrites. We'll be revisiting this.

What's in a Name?

Finally, the offer propelling the campaign lost a bit of sizzle. The free downloadable guide was initially titled, "Navigating the Minefield of Outsourcing Software for Hardware." OK, it's not Stephen King, but it is a little clever.

The title of the guide morphed into "A Guide to Outsourcing Software for Hardware: Partnering With the Experts." Yawn. Plus, the mention of "partnering with experts" suggests that the guide is promoting the company in question. Free guides should always be about "them," not about you.

Tune in Later

I'll report back to you on what happens to this campaign after we test some different copy and subject lines.

In the meantime, if you have your own case study to share, [please tell me](#). Whether it has a happy or sad ending, we'll all learn something. Identifying details can be removed if you wish.