Evolving Your Brand's Email Marketing Strategy

By **Daniela Forte,** Multichannel Merchant

Creating an effective email marketing strategy is instrumental when communicating with your customers. Like the "retail apocalypse" narrative, the death of email has been greatly exaggerated, and the marketing tactic remains alive and well.

It is one of many ways to capture customers when they are first introduced to your brand, following them throughout the path to purchase and into post-purchase.

According to the 2017 MCM Outlook Survey, 85% of respondents said they use email marketing. This was below ecommerce website (100%), social media (95%), catalog (90%) and retail stores (95%).

The survey also revealed that on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, email was given an 8.83 in terms of value as an ecommerce strategy for retailers.

All of the survey respondents said unsubscribe rates and click-throughs are the top metrics they track. Nearly all (83.3%) said they track sales, deliverability and open rates. All respondents also said they send promotional/marketing emails, while 83.3% said they sent transactional and trigger emails.

The Email Marketing Evolution

While other channels like social media and mobile are the shiny toys every retailer wants to play with, email marketing is a stalwart and as relevant as ever. A report by McKinsey & Company found it is 40 times more effective for customer generation.

"When it comes to creating an effective email marketing strategy, retailers need to think about design and data as a unified whole," said Brandi Smith, Vice President of Marketing for Maropost. "There's no question that emphasizing engaging design is paramount, but retailers need to inform those design decisions with real-time data."

Smith said for design functionalities like dynamic content and triggered deployment, retailers can leverage these as much as they want. But unless they're backed up with data, they won't be operating at their full potential.

"Dynamic content can be driven by profile data or preferences, but having API calls for ERP systems increases

your ability to personalize content, timing and targeting," said Smith. "Creating an engaging design can't be done by instinct alone – it's data that truly determines what is and isn't grabbing your subscriber's attention."

Smith said context is key for email content. Leveraging dynamic content and delivering personalized messages starts with knowing things like browsing history, typical email open time and message frequency preferences – all factors to consider.

"Knowing who your customers are based on their behavior is the only way to create content that engages, converts and retains," said Smith.

While today's email is unrecognizable from its roots over 20 years ago, it's still one of the most effective retail and ecommerce marketing channels because it has been able to evolve.

"The core of the evolution is data," said Smith. "Marketers today know much more about their email subscribers than they did 10, five or even two years ago. Especially when they're combining behavior web tracking with email data, they have a much clearer customer view than ever before."

Ryan Bonifacino, CMO of mattress startup Tomorrow Sleep, said the company builds a profile around each individual based on customer data. Marketers look at the various touchpoints along the purchase path, what customers viewed and what they responded to.

"Marketers tend to be cautious in combining interest level and data with behavioral data, said Bonifacino.

Smith said the increased application of data in personalized content will allow email to continue to grow as an effective marketing channel.

"We've seen segmentation and tags become standard," said Smith. "But new functionalities like product and content recommendations, conversion time opti-mization and dynamic content show how much more marketers can do for personalization."

StickerYou, a maker of custom stickers and labels, was using three different marketing platforms and spending too much time trying to integrate and reconcile all three. While the company had data on customer preferences, it didn't have the ability to use that information for personalized emails.

Working with Maropost, StickerYou focused on several metric improvements as goals. These included increasing ticket and merchandise sales; boosting fan engagement, email clicks, opens and conversions; reducing manual setup and execution of technical processes; and centralizing marketing campaigns on a single dashboard.

StickerYou was able to build a segmentation strategy tailored to its audience and goals. Unique segments were set up for each stream and campaign to create personalized communications. Maropost also helped the company develop a comprehensive tracking and reporting system, allowing marketers to see how and why numbers were increasing in order to boost performance. They were also able to segment for different streams, campaigns and unique user profiles.

Personalization was based on content preferences and interests and automated email journeys, campaigns and reporting. As a result, StickerYou saw a 500% increase in open rates and a 300% increase in click rates.

Different Types of Emails Favored by Retailers

Smith said any good retail marketing strategy include emails focused on sales, promotions and cart abandonment. But the problem is that they put the focus solely on purchases and repurchases, outside the context of customer lifecycle stages. Offering first-time customers extra incentives is good, but putting resources into retaining existing ones is even better.

"Winning new customers might be sexier, but keeping the customers, you have is invaluable," said Smith. "When you send personalized emails to long-time customers to remind them of and reward their loyalty, you can create a customer for life."

This reflects the increasing industry focus on person-

alization, Smith said. It makes customers feel continuously valued when they receive messaging reflecting their interests, experience and past purchases, while creating an emotional brand connection.
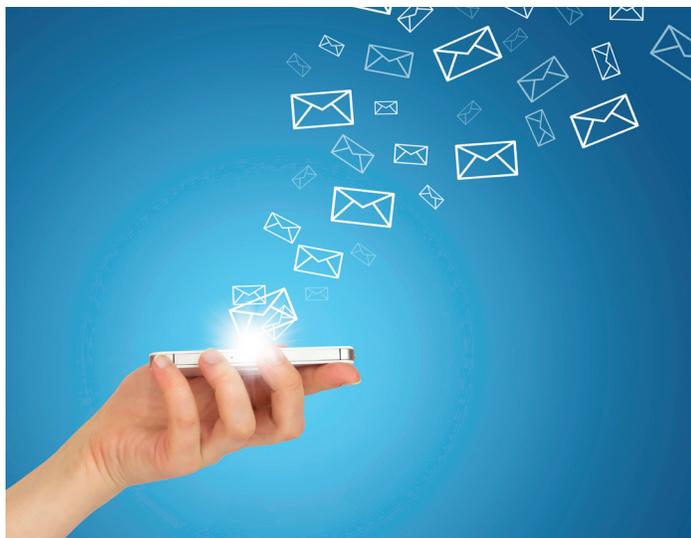
"But sending special sale emails to long-time customers is not where the effort should end," said Smith. "Asking for product reviews, inviting them to events and inviting feedback can build a deeper relationship between your company and customers."

As a new company, Tomorrow Sleep has a lot of new subscribers, Bonifacino said, so its largest email campaigns are about welcoming them. Subsequent emails follow on in a branch-like manner.

Smith said retailers are huge fans of cart abandonment emails, and with good cause. It's one of the most effective ways to re-engage and head off lost sales. That's not to say that promotional announcements aren't huge, but cart abandonment emails are crucial in pulling back reluctant shoppers.

"You're targeting a critical moment in the buyer's journey with an abandon cart email, a tipping point to purchase," said Smith. "A discount email will help guide a customer to your site, but a cart abandonment email, especially when paired with a coupon code, seals the deal. It's also an easy move into personalization, as an introduction into sending emails is based on customer behavior."

The interesting balance with a cart abandonment email is that it both acknowledges and progresses the customer journey, Smith said. "You're letting them know you understand them and then directing their behavior," she said.

Top 5 Tips for Your Email Marketing Strategy

Optimize for mobile

A lot of marketers still see email and mobile as separate channels, but with the increase in smartphone adoption, they need to start seeing them as overlapping. If you aren't treating mobile as part of your email marketing strategy, you're already behind. According to Return Path, the percentage of emails opened on a mobile device has nearly doubled in the past five years alone. That's a number marketers can't ignore.

Perform a deliverability health check

Deliverability continues to be a critical element of successful email marketing, for the simple reason that your customers can't engage with what they don't receive. To guard against getting caught in the junk folder, retailers should perform regular sender reputation checks. A comprehensive health check should ensure that:
- The subscriber list is clean, with double opt-ins and no bad addresses
- Subscription option updates and unsubscribe links are easily accessible
- Spam complaints are monitored and used to improve send frequency, send time or content relevancy

Segment and personalize everything

As customers continue to expect better experiences, brands need to continue to create more personalized customer journeys. With an average of 20.5 billion emails sent daily, it takes a lot to stand out, especially for retailers. First-name personalization alone doesn't cut it anymore. For advanced personalization, retailers need to start with the right technology that incorporates artificial intelligence and machine learning to deliver dynamic content specific to customer interests, buying behavior and demographics.

Integrate social media with email

Email marketing and social media marketing don't need to be treated as competing forces. Together they make a powerful basis for cross-channel campaigns. Even if you only start by incorporating social media icons into your emails, you're immediately providing subscribers with further opportunities to engage with your brand.

Optimize and test for improved conversion

Never trust your gut. The only way to ensure your marketing is at its most efficient is by constantly testing and continuously optimizing. Even if something worked in the past, there's no guarantee it will in the future. When it comes to your campaign and conversion results, you can't afford to operate based on assumptions.

Include visual content

Let's face it—your subscribers have short attention spans, and text-heavy emails aren't helping. By incorporating images, video or GIFs, you can engage even the shortest attention spans. Capturing and retaining attention isn't easy, but rich content and creative copy—combined with rigorous testing—give your brand a distinct advantage for conversions.

Brandi Smith, Vice President of Marketing for Maropost

The Design of Your Email Marketing

Smith said design and data are the two critical components of any email marketing strategy. Creative design and real-time data work together to optimize engagement and conversions.

"Today, email design needs to cater to two main customer drivers – a desire for personalized content and short attention spans," said Smith. "Retailers are adapting accordingly by incorporating rich content like images, videos and GIFs into emails featuring dynamic content, customer field personalization and content and product recommendations."

Smith said the key is to design with psychology in mind. Even something as simple as incorporating a countdown timer can create a sense of urgency and increase email engagement.

For Tomorrow Sleep, design is critical and fundamental, Bonifacino said, adding the business need is identified first. Marketers are not only designing interest segments, but designing a mobile-first approach. Emails are responsive and designed to scale the design based on demand.

User-Generated Content and SMS

Smith said there has been a recent uptick in interest in putting user-generated content in emails, because customers want a more human, engaging brand experience.

"It's the authenticity or imitation of authenticity that makes user-generated content so powerful for marketers," said Smith. "Shiny, overly corporate emails don't produce that personalized experience customers are craving. Incorporating customer photos, reviews and videos into emails leverages that desire and engages customers on a level even a marketing department's best work can't – because it's real."

Smith it's a similar story with SMS. Text marketing messages are stringently monitored, he said, because it's an incredibly personal medium.

"When people open a text, it's usually from family or friends," Smith said. "This is not a medium, unlike email, that has been saturated with marketing. Which means marketers looking to leverage SMS need to be discerning with their timing, their frequency and their content."

Done right, texts can provide a highly personal experience, with time-sensitive, targeted content reaching customers when it needs to. Done wrong, they will break customer trust and turn them against your brand.

"We've been able to send emails to mobile devices for a while now, so reaching the smartphone isn't what sets SMS apart as a channel," Smith said. "The distinguishing feature between the two, the one that makes them complementary, is context."

Smith said when people open their emails they expect to see a few promotions as it's assumed in the medium, but the same is not true of texts.

"When you send a marketing message over SMS, you have to be careful with the trust of your recipients," said Smith. "The biggest step to ensure you're not breaking that trust is frequency. It's critical that you reserve SMS for urgent, exciting, time-sensitive messages and save your regular sale promotions and campaigns for emails."

Smith said consumers can handle a much higher message frequency over email because they expect it. How the two can work together is simple: Send your full campaigns over email, and only include the highlights in SMS, saving it for when you really need them to see your message.