

Times Are Changing for E-Mail Delivery

By Bill McCloskey , November 5, 2009

E-mail delivery. I don't think any subject other than spam elicits so much discussion, articles, blog posts, and conference topics. If you're going to make money using e-mail as a channel, you have to get your message in front of people. The reason so much attention is paid to deliverability is that it's a "solvable" problem. There's a free solution: you can ensure you conform to best practices, do double opt-ins, be aggressive and compulsive about removing dead branches from your list, don't over mail, and get on white lists. You can pay for a solution: Return Path and Goodmail have programs and technologies to increase your placement in the inbox.

In fact, I've always felt that the topic of better e-mail creative is underrepresented at trade shows and conferences, perhaps because technology companies and their sponsorship dollars often influence (even subconsciously) the shows agendas. Actually, a show dedicated to B2B e-mail creative would probably be a huge hit.

But looking at deliverability, the times they are a changin', and the sand is beginning to shift a bit beneath the feet of those in charge of getting e-mails to the inbox, as Internet service providers (ISPs) begin to experiment and implement different methodologies and techniques to deliver the e-mail people want and block the e-mails they don't.

While ISPs use a number of devices to determine if an e-mail should be delivered or not, a big determining factor is the reputation of the IP address that is delivering the mail. This, of course, has some issues: to a certain degree it locks brands into a specific e-mail service provider (ESP) whose IP addresses they're using to deliver the mail. Even a well known brand can have difficulty delivering their e-mail from an IP address that has little or no reputation.

Which means that a brand that switches ESPs...well, that hard won IP reputation score doesn't travel with you. It's like the old days with cell phones, where you couldn't take your number with you when you changed carriers. A brand is at ground zero again and has to "warm up" the new IP addresses with small mailings, which can mean a significant hit to bottom line revenue.

And this is why domain-based reputation has generated such interest. Recently, a number of articles have been written about ISPs moving towards a domain-based reputation scoring, based on conversations that Pivotal Veracity has been having with ISPs.

The good news is that brands (who have maintained good practices) will be able to take those good reputations with them, regardless of ESP, IP address, or whether they're sending via their in-house mailing system, their ESP, or through a third party. The bad news for those that were hoping to switch IP addresses to correct some bad practices is that your reputation might proceed you.

No one expects domain-based reputation scoring to be implemented immediately. For one, most ISPs aren't geared up to recognize the reputation scores from domains. It's coming though, according to some in the know.

But it doesn't end there. The talk is that consumer-based reputation is being considered. Meaning, that the action of the actual customer might someday determine if your e-mail is delivered or not. If the customer doesn't open the e-mail, doesn't click on the links, or moves it into the spam filter -- ultimately that consumer behavior might determine whether or not I see your campaign.

Which brings us full circle, back to creative. E-mailers just might have to make their e-mails more engaging, more interesting, and more targeted to keep me on their list. And that might not be a bad thing.

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