

5 FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE B-TO-B EMAILS



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Newer, flashier marketing channels and techniques—social media, ad tech—have grabbed the lion’s share of attention during the past few years. Email, however, has commanded something more important: return on investment. Of the nearly 4,000 marketers surveyed for Salesforce’s 2016 State of Marketing report, an impressive 80% said email directly generated ROI in 2016, up from 53% the year before; what’s more, 45% of those marketers deemed the ROI “significant.”

Average business to business click-through rate in 2015 was 47% higher than that for business to consumer emails.

And no, it’s not primarily consumer companies that are reaping returns. According to marketing platform Emfluence, the average business-to-business email click-through rate in 2015 was 5.27%, 47% higher than that for business-to-consumer emails. And at 14.38%, the b-to-b click-to-open rate was 23% higher than that of b-to-c emails.

If your company has yet to succeed with its email marketing efforts, or if you’d like to achieve even greater success, it’s time to review your email’s copy. No matter how on-target your mailing list, weak copy will generate weak response. Copy, in the form of subject lines, plays a huge role in an email campaign’s open rates. Similarly, copy is a key factor in whether recipients will click through once they’ve opened the email.



All effective b-to-b email marketing copy has five things in common. Read on to learn if your email copy does too. If it doesn’t, see how you can improve it—and in turn improve response and ROI.

1 The email speaks to people, not businesses

This is the foundation of all the other elements of b-to-b copy. The purchase order and the check may come from Big Corporation Inc., but those who decide whether to make the purchase are people.

“In writing b-to-c copy you focus on a single individual and his or her family and loved ones,” says Ernest Nicastro, b-to-b copywriter and principal with Hilliard, OH-based Positive Response (positiveresponse.com). “In writing b-to-b copy you still focus on a single individual, but in this case ‘family and loved ones’ may—among others—include any one or all of the following:

the reader’s boss, customers, co-workers, stockholders and other stakeholders, or the public in general.”

And when appealing to individuals, emotion is as important as information. “The biggest misconception is that there’s not emotion involved,” says Achinta Mitra, founder/president of Tiecas (tiecas.com), a Houston-based industrial and b-to-b marketing company. Even when selling to an audience considered to be exceptionally analytical, such as engineers, “there is a great deal of emotion involved, and the biggest emotion involved is fear of failure.”

No matter what you’re marketing, Nicastro says, “good copy strikes a nerve with the reader and influences him or her to feel or act positively toward the brand or product being promoted. In either case the primary motivators for those feelings and actions are typically one or more of the following: fear, exclusivity, greed, guilt, ego gratification, salvation.”



That's why it's not enough to state that your company's product is the best in its class. **You need to show how using the best-in-class product will satisfy an emotional need.** Which brings us to...

2 The message focuses on benefits rather than features

Features are the aspects of a product or service that are worthy of being called out. The features of a shirt might be that it is machine washable, is made of organic cotton, and has double-stitched seams.

Benefits are what the product or service can do for the customer. For that same shirt, the machine washability provides the benefit of reducing dry-cleaning bills and eliminating another chore—dropping off and picking up dry-cleaning—from customers' to-do lists. Likewise, the benefit of the double-stitched seams is that the shirt will last longer than one with single-stitching, again saving them money. And for some consumers, the fact that it is made of organic cotton has a benefit too; its relative eco-friendliness might appease their guilt for buying yet another shirt. Features are usually easy to identify. In catalog copy you can often list them with bullet points rather

than weave them into sentences of flowing prose. In fact, listing the features makes it easier for potential customers to compare and contrast products.

Before your audience gets to the point of comparing product features, however, they need to understand why they should do so. "Companies should never write about their products and services from their own perspective," says Diana Wolff, president of Nyack, NY-based LRG Marketing Communications (lrgmarketing.com). "Ultimately your customer cares first about their own needs, not about your new feature. Does this solve a problem for me? If not, I'm much less likely to spend time reading about it."

Every feature of what you're promoting should have a benefit; after all, why would you bother including that feature in your product or service if it didn't? But your copy should make clear what the benefit is. What's more, a feature could have different benefits to different audiences. Say you're offering an instructional workshop. If profit margins are a primary concern for your audience, you might want to indicate that the knowledge gained by attending the workshop will enable them to work more efficiently and effectively, saving the company man-hours or

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reducing the need to hire consultants. If, however, keeping up with competitors is a major pain point for your audience, you might suggest that the workshop will include information already used by the major industry players and that the workshop will prevent attendees from lagging behind—in other words, you might want to appeal to their insecurity. Or you could appeal to their ego by letting them know that attending the workshop will reinforce their superiority by giving them knowledge their peers won't have.



3 The copy is easy, and maybe even entertaining, to read

If you favor “utilize” over “use,” “cadence” over “frequency,” and “incentivize” over “motivate,” chances are you’re guilty of using corporatese in your copy. Yes, there are instances when “utilize,” “cadence,” and “incentivize” are the precise words needed, but those instances are rare.

Many businesses mistakenly believe that using corporate jargon gives their message added credibility and heft. What it really does is make the message difficult to digest and the copy a chore to wade through. “Just because you’re b-to-b doesn’t mean you have to be boring,” says Katie Daggett, owner/copywriter at Fort Collins, CO-based KD Copy & Content Writing (kdcopyandcontent.com/).

Think of words as money. Don’t use a 25-cent word (“leverage,” for example) when a nickel word (“use”) will do. Likewise, don’t waste 50 words describing something that you can explain in just 25.

“Never write copy that you wouldn’t use in a face-to-face meeting,” Nicastro advises. “To that end, copywriters would serve themselves well to always keep this Mark Twain quote within eyesight when working: ‘I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words, and brief sentences. That is the way to write English. It is the modern way and the best way.

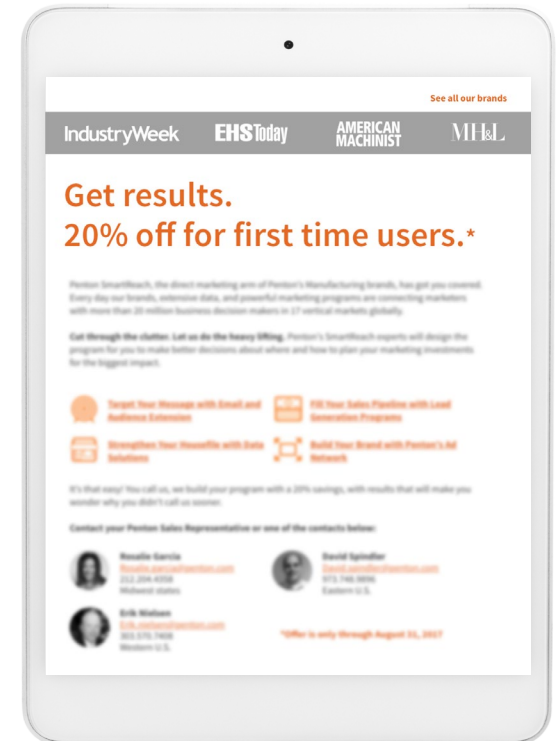
Stick to it; don’t let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.” If you think we’re suggesting that your email copy take on a more colloquial, less formal tone, you’re right—to a degree. “At one time business copy was written in a more formal style with the intent of communicating a ‘professional’ tone,” Wolff says. “Today the barriers between consumer and business have melted away as it’s understood that all communication is human-to-human and people respond well to the kind of language we typically use when speaking to one another. There may still be some differences—b-to-b copy is unlikely to include trendy phrases or words—but for some brands even those differences are disappearing.” Wolff’s caveat “for some brands” is an important one. You need to keep the education level, age, and profession of your email recipients in mind. Emails targeting marketing professionals, for instance, “would be expected to be convivial, engaging, at times even less serious,” Nicastro says. “Engineering, on the other hand, would be more serious, technical, nerdy, always projecting competence. In the case of writing for engineers big words and jargon are usually quite acceptable.”

4 The email has a clear call to action—and repeats it

Make it clear what you want the reader to do, whether it’s to request a white paper, attend a webinar, or call a salesperson. Be as specific as possible.

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“Learn more” is weak. So is “Click here.” “Send my free whitepaper” is stronger. “Send my free whitepaper now,” which adds a sense of urgency, is stronger still.

The CTA, by the way, is the one place where first person (“my,” “me”) has shown to be more effective than second person (“your,” “you”). No one has satisfactorily explained why, and you might find that it doesn’t work for your audience. At this point, though, it’s considered a best practice to have the CTA be in the first person or to avoid a pronoun (“Send the free whitepaper now”) rather than to use the second person.

The first appearance of the CTA should be visible in the first screen of the email. The reader should not have to scroll down to see it. Note that we said “first appearance.” The CTA is too important to mention just once. At the very least, you want a second CTA at the end of your email. If the email is several screens long, you could add another CTA at an appropriate break between paragraphs.

As a rule of thumb, all the CTAs in a given email should be asking readers to take the same action. If the primary goal of your email is to have recipients request a whitepaper, do not toss in a CTA asking them to check out your blog. You do not want to distract them from the primary task.

5 The subject line packs a punch in its first 40 characters

This doesn’t mean your entire subject line has to be fewer than 40 characters long. (Spaces between words, by the way, count as characters.) Some studies show that subject lines in the 60- to 70-character range are most effective. Others indicate that the length of a subject line has relatively little bearing on the response rate.

But more than half of all b-to-b emails are now opened on mobile devices, and the number of subject-line characters displayed on a mobile inbox can be as low as 30 (for some Androids). According to email services provider Campaign Monitor, for **iPhones and Windows phones in portrait view, the character count tops out at 42.** People with those phones would see the subject line “This is a revenue boost you can’t afford to miss” as “Here’s a revenue boost you can’t afford.”

So just as you don’t want to bury the lead in your email copy, you don’t want to bury the most compelling aspect of your subject line near the end—unless, of course, your entire subject line is short. You want to make clear from the get-go how recipients will benefit from opening your email. “Free whitepaper offer” doesn’t do that. “Generate more sales with these 5 tips” does.



A few other suggestions:

- Keep ALL CAPS to a minimum—or avoid them altogether. They can look spammy and unprofessional. Ditto exclamation points.
- Use numbers when appropriate. Usually “7 ways to reduce packing errors” will generate greater response than “How to reduce packing errors.”
- Consider asking a question. But try to avoid yes/no questions. “Is your warehouse safe?” will probably be less effective than “How safe is your warehouse?”

- Add a sense of urgency. If your offer expires in a few days, try mentioning that in the subject line. Even adding “now” often boosts response.
- Veer away from the pack. A humorous, irreverent, or intentionally vague subject line can pique curiosity and stand out from the numerous other subject lines in recipients’ inboxes. More than any other type of subject line, however, be sure to A/B test it first. (See “A/B Testing Made Simple,” directional.)
- Make the most of your preview pane. In most inboxes, the preview pane appears after the subject line. Many companies fail to make the most of this real estate. (In those emails, you’ll see verbiage such as “Can’t see images? Click here.”) The preview pane is a handy place to include messaging that reinforces or elaborates on your subject line. For instance, if you are unable to include a reference to urgency in your subject line, here’s where you can say “Limited time only” or “Only a few seats left.”

Copywriting is as much a science as it is an art. B-to-b emails written with the above tenets in mind have proven to generate higher response than those that aren’t. Before hitting “send” on your next email campaign, make sure your copy includes the five elements listed above—then get ready for the responses to stream in.

A/B Testing Made Simple

Assumptions can be costly when it comes to marketing. The subject line that follows best practices could be a flop; the CTA everyone in your office loved could be the same one everyone on your email list hates. That’s why A/B, or split, testing is so important. Luckily it’s also easy.

A/B testing is basically sending one version of an email to part of your audience and another version to another segment. “We do a lot of A/B testing on copy for CTAs,” says Diana Wolff, president of LRG Marketing Communications. “Keep testing and you will find what works best for your own audience. Subject lines should be A/B tested as well; we’ve been surprised at some that have performed better than their alternates.”

To ensure that you’re A/B test is productive, follow these guidelines:

- Test only one variable at a time. Both emails should be identical except for the one variable you are testing. If you do want to test two variables at the same time—say, subject line and CTA—you will actually need four email versions:
 1. Version A: control subject line, control CTA
 2. Version B: test subject line, control CTA
 3. Version C: control subject line, test CTA
 4. Version D: test subject line, test CTA
- Granted, you can proceed in this way, so long as your email list was large enough to **make sure your results are statistically significant**. Statistical

significance ensures that your results are reliable and worth basing decisions on, rather than a result of coincidence or chance. Much of it depends on your response rate compared with your sample size and the size of your overall universe. Free online calculators can help you determine how many responses you need and how long you’d need to run the test to achieve statistical confidence in the results.

- Test both versions simultaneously. Otherwise you’re introducing another variable into the test.
- Sort the audiences for the versions randomly. You don’t want results skewed because one group consisted primarily of long-term customers, for example, while the other was mostly prospects.
- Don’t necessarily limit yourself to a straight 50/50 test. If you’re testing a wildly different subject line against a tried-and-true performer, you might want to send the challenger to only 30% of your audience rather than a full half. You may therefore have to run the test longer to ensure statistical significance, but it also reduces risk if the new subject line turns out to be a flop.
- Consider expanding you’re A/B test into an A/B/C test. If your audience is large enough to ensure statistical significance, you can pit three (or more) subject lines or CTAs against each other. Again, just be sure all other aspects of the emails are identical.

Hiring a copywriter? Here's what to look for.

If you don't have a copywriter on staff, you might want to outsource this important task to a professional. Ideally you'd want your writer to know about your industry, market, and business. However, it's more important that the copywriter knows his business: writing. "Choose a great writer over a mediocre one who knows your business already," says Diana Wolff, president of LRG Marketing Communications. "It's easier to learn business and technology than it is to become a better writer."

In fact, "someone from outside your industry might bring a very valuable fresh perspective," says Ernest Nicastro, b-to-b copywriter and principal with Positive Response. "I think one of the most important considerations is the process that the copywriter uses to gain an understanding of the features, advantages, and benefits of your product or service and the key motivators that drive your target audience to take action. Is the process thorough? Is it proven? Does it make sense to the person hiring the copywriter?"

Of course, you'll want to ask candidates for samples and references. In addition, pay on a per-project rather than a per-word basis. And consider whether you



want to work with the copywriter on multiple projects, rather than a one-off assignment. "If you try to hire somebody to write just one thing, they're not going to have the time to invest in getting up to speed,"

says Katie Daggett, owner/copywriter at KD Copy & Content Writing. "Look at it as a partnership and invest in the training, just as you would an inside employee, in your company and solutions."

To learn how Informa Engage can help you move the needle and increase engagement, contact the team at:

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