The sooner a subscriber is engaged, the longer and deeper they remain engaged with an email program over time. The welcome email is a critical phase in every life cycle; maximizing it pays big dividends. I decided to dive deep into the email welcome experience, studying an array of businesses with a focus on driving conversions. Opting into a brand’s email program sets the stage for a follow-up strategy.

Using Internet Retailer’s list of the top 500 B-to-C retailers based on online sales, I selected the first 80 retailers and went through the process of subscribing to their email program using a Gmail address. Of those 80, eight didn’t have a formal email program, so the final sample set was 72.

The basics
Among the companies that sent a welcome email, 9 percent landed in the spam folder. That doesn’t bode well for those programs going forward. Additionally, 33 percent of the retailers that sent a welcome email didn’t include any recommendation to add their address to the subscriber’s address book, either in the email itself or on the confirmation page. That’s not going to help their deliverability rate over the long term.

Sixty-two percent allowed me to sign up using only an email address. This is always a trade-off for acquiring subscribers, and clearly most companies are opting for the path of least data gathering resistance.

The surprises
Seven percent of the retailers asked for a format preference of HTML or text — an unnecessary question that only makes the sign-up process longer than it needs to be. Only two of the 73 companies used a double opt-in process (3 percent). Double opt-in is always a tough sell, but this really showcases how little this approach is used today. While 25 retailers collected a first name, 60 percent of those didn’t use it in their welcome email. Remember, if you ask for a data field, be sure you’re going to use it.

Biggest missed opportunities
The lack of cross-promoting for other online engagement channels was a huge miss. The subscriber is in a “sign-up” phase with the brand … why not take advantage of that and cross-promote your Facebook and Twitter pages? What about on the thank-you landing page or the welcome email itself? Of those companies with a Facebook or Twitter presence and an email program, 48 percent didn’t promote those engagement options on either their confirmation page or welcome email.

The other big miss was the subscription confirmation page. In 55 percent of the cases, the landing page provided no clear direction on what to do next. While the primary purpose of the page is to confirm the subscription, don’t forget to nudge the subscriber with what you want them to do next.

Jobs well done
Thirty percent of the retailers have a multimeasure welcome stream that helps to orient the subscriber to the brand and its email program before entering them into the regular stream. While it’s a far lower percentage than it should be, it’s higher than anticipated and several did it quite well.

I’m not a huge fan of incentivizing subscribers to join an email list — and it appears neither are most retailers. Only six retailers offered an up-front incentive for opting in. However, 22 retailers ended up offering a gift (e.g., a discount or free shipping), recognizing the opportunity to push for conversion while an individual is indicating they’re “in market.” This bonus surprise factor can foster good will and set the stage for showcasing the email program’s value in the future.

You’ve got to be kidding me
Of the companies with an email program, 22 percent didn’t send a formal welcome email at all. In fact, allowing for at least two weeks after sign-up, 11 percent of the 73 hadn’t sent anything.
Twelve percent of the retailers that did send a welcome email didn't use their brand name in the from line. Examples of what was used instead included “no reply” (used by three different retailers), “service” and “notify.” Ouch.

Welcome programs often fall into the out-of-sight, out-of-mind category for email marketers. They're automated and generate high open rates, so why worry? The issue of course is that they're anything but out-of-sight for prospects. They engage with this email more than almost any other sent. Take a run through your welcome experience with fresh eyes. Is the data collected being used? Is the content of the welcome email up to date with added value? Optimizing this experience is time well invested in the long-term health of your email program and its ability to foster a deeper relationship with consumers.

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