The Opt-in Process: 10 Steps to Success

By SubscriberMail

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1. Understand What Constitutes an "Opt-in"

As e-mail has grown from a communication vehicle to marketing superpower, the industry has fought to keep up with best practices. While marketers would like to believe recipients are all overjoyed to receive e-mail from them, that's not always the case. To this end, the E-mail Sender & Provider Coalition (ESPC), a cooperative group of industry leaders, has composed its E-mail Best Practices Guide. Among other clarifications, the ESPC defines "opt-in" as "the point of e-mail address collection at which point a person has affirmatively requested to be included on an e-mail list to receive commercial mail". Furthermore, the ESPC establishes that commercial e-mail should not be sent without:

1) Prior affirmative consent of the individual, as defined by the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003; or

2) Prior consent of the individual as defined by the European Commission Privacy and Electronic Communications Directive.

As defined by CAN-SPAM, "affirmative consent" means that:

A) The recipient expressly consented to receive the message, either in response to a clear and conspicuous request for such consent or at the recipient's own initiative; and

B) If the message is from a party other than the party to which the recipient communicated such consent, the recipient was given clear and conspicuous notice (of this) at the time the consent was communicated.

The ESPC maintains that even with a prior business relationship, the opt-in best practice is to:

1) Notify the person of the sender's intent to communicate with him or her at the point of address collection or in the first communication to the person, and then

2) Upgrade permission to opt-in status, preferably confirmed (defined later in this whitepaper) as soon as possible.

2. Establish Your Privacy Policy

Before you start to collect opt-ins, you'll want to be sure to first establish a privacy policy if you don't already have one. If you have a policy currently, review it and update it to include your policy on collecting e-mail addresses. Specifically, be sure to let consumers know if you will share their e-mail addresses with a third party, and how exactly that shared information will be used. If you indicate in the policy that you will under no circumstances share e-mail addresses, be sure you stay true to that affirmation.

Make sure your privacy policy is easily accessible on your website, and that you provide links to it at every step of the opt-in process. Be sure to keep your policy updated and reviewed by legal counsel when necessary. The Direct Marketing Association provides a tool on their website to help you generate a privacy policy. Visit www.the-dma.org for more information.

3. Create the Opt-in Page

Your opt-in page is very important because it is the place where consumers will decide if they will or will not give you their e-mail addresses to receive e-mail from you. It also sets the tone for future e-mail communication. When done correctly, it can drive future e-mail activity; and when done poorly, it will result in lower e-mail activity. To these ends, the most important thing to do when constructing your opt-in page is to focus on building value and setting expectations.

Build the value of opting in by focusing on what's in it for them, not for you.

- "Be the first to know"
- "Free, timely market updates"
- "Special offers" or "special discounts"
- "Save money with weekly coupons"
- "Strategies to improve your…"

Set the proper expectations up front by explaining on the opt-in page:

- The types of messages recipients will receive,
- Message content,
- Frequency of messages, and
- If they'll receive third party offers.

Other considerations to take when building you opt-in page include:

- Will you use a short or a long sign up form? A short form will garner more sign-ups, but a longer form will collect more information.
- Will subscribers need to create a password to opt-in? A password could give subscribers access to an account, but you will loose subscribers who do not want to create a password just to receive e-mail from you.
- Will you provide options for subscribers to choose what type of messages they receive? Asking subscribers to select their interests allows you to send targeted messages, but required more work to create separate lists and content.

Don't make these important decisions blindly. Test your opt-in page for higher conversion and/or more qualified opt-ins. Aspects to test include:

- Incentive to sign up vs. no incentive
- Long vs. short opt-in form
- Copy (value statements)
- Sign up options vs. global opt-in
- Create password vs. no password
- Placement of opt-in box on website

4. Know What Information to Collect

When deciding what information to collect initially on the opt-in page, keep in mind your e-mail marketing strategy. If you haven't established what your strategy will be, spend some time thinking about it.

- What's your segmentation strategy? Will you send targeted mailings based on demographic information such as gender, age and location?
- What's your personalisation strategy? Will you send personalised content such as "Dear First Name"? Personalisation could also include sending targeted content based on location or other demographics as identified above.
- What's your marketing strategy? Will you send strictly monthly messages on your time frame, or will you send customised messages based on a recipient's birthday or anniversary?

Knowing the answers to these questions up front will help determine what information should be collected on the opt-in page. The best practice is to collect only the information that is necessary. For example, collecting postal information if you do not plan to send direct mail is a useless step that could lose you opt-ins.

Consider collecting additional information that is not imperative to the opt-in process after the opt-in has been collected. This could also be collected in a follow-up survey.

5. Create the Opt-in Confirmation Page

Drive future e-mail activity by setting expectations on your opt-in confirmation page. This page should include the following important aspects:

- Text that asks subscribers to add your from address to their safe list or address book. Consider providing a link to a page with specific directions on how to do this for each of the major e-mail clients. This is the point at which you should ask subscribers to do this, as they are at their most active stage of involvement with you, having just signed up for an e-mail form you. Being added to their safe list ensures your message will always be delivered to their inbox.
- An image of your welcome e-mail so recipients will recognize the message in their inbox when they receive it. Be sure to specifically point out the confirmation link if using double opt-in, with directions to click on the link to confirm their subscription.

6. Send the Welcome Message

The welcoming message is another step in the opt-in process where you have the opportunity to reinforce value and expectations to drive e-mail activity. It should be sent immediately after the opt-in and be a branded HTML message that accurately and positively represents your organisation. Your welcome message should include these key elements:

- Copy that restates the value of their opt-in, the type of message they can expect receive, and how often they should expect to receive messages.
- Copy that again asks subscribers to add your form address to their safe list or address book.
- An image in the newsletter they will receive so they will recognize it in their inbox.
- A link to your privacy policy, to again re-assure subscribers of how their information will be used.
- A confirmation link, if using double opt-in process, with a strong call to action that directs subscribers to click to confirm their subscription.

7. Drive Traffic to the Opt-in Page

Once you have your opt-in form page, confirmation page and welcome message set, you can now focus on driving visitors to the opt-in page. You should have a strong call to action on your home page in a prominent location that directs visitors to the opt-in page. A popular way to construct this e-mail sign-up box is with a form field where visitors can fill in their e-mail address directly on the home page, then be directed to a second page (your opt-in page) to collect additional information. This sign up box or call to action should include strong copy on the value to the potential subscriber of receiving your company's e-mail. Additionally, your sign-up box should also be prominently displayed on every page of your website.

4You may want to consider using an incentive to drive opt-ins such as a cash giveaway, drawing for a coveted prize or valuable coupon to be used toward their next purchase. You will certainly increase the number of opt-ins collected with an incentive vs. no incentive: however, you may also see a lower quality of opt-ins as people sign up for the prize rather than your e-mail. On the down side, these people may not turn into active recipients and may thereby lower your response rates. On the other side, you now have the opportunity to turn people into active recipients who otherwise may not have chose to receive e-mail from your organisation.

8. Collect Opt-ins from Other Points

Your opt-in page should be your main focus for collecting opt-ins, but it shouldn't be your only opportunity to collect opt-ins. There are many other contact points with consumers where you could solicit and e-mail address. Here are some good examples:

- Contact form: Add a check box asking for an e-mail sign-up on other web forms on your website. For example, a contact form for more information, a webinar registration form, a whitepaper download form etc.
- Product purchase: The checkout process on your ecommerce site is a great time to present to add a checkbox asking purchasers to sign-up for e-mail from your organisation. These are your most active web visitors who have already shown an interest in your company.
- Co-registration: Look into co-registration opportunities that would make sense for your business model. Be sure that your main focus remains to collect qualified opt-ins, rather than grow a list of e-mail addresses for people who may have already shown an interest in your company.
- Brick and mortar: If your company or organisation has a brick-and-mortar business front, use this opportunity to collect e-mail addresses from prospects either with a sign-up box on a counter or by asking directly for them. Again, be sure that the value of the opt-in is clear to prospects.

When adding a checkbox to either a contact form, the checkout process or a co-registration process, you have the option to make this checkbox either pre-selected or unselected. It is a best practice to never have this checkbox pre-selected. Furthermore, it also makes good business sense. Using a pre-selected checkbox will add uninterested people to your list, and they'll end up skewing your results by opting out or generally never responding to your message. And it could be worse: they could end up reporting your messages as spam since they will not have recalled signing up for your e-mail.

9. Evaluate using Double Opt-in

Double Opt-in — or confirmed opt-in as it's also known—is the process whereby following an opt-in request, a confirmation e-mail is sent. This e-mail requires the person to confirm the opt-in before he or she will receive any future e-mail messages. The person must respond, usually by clicking on a double confirmation link, in order to be considered confirmed.

Using a double opt-in process ensures you are sending to only your most qualified, most interested, and most active recipients. The potential downside is that you will almost never have as many confirmed double opt-ins as you have single opt-ins. However, lists that are confirmed through this double opt-in process consistently produce much higher open rates and click through rates, and offer lower complaint rates.

If you decide double opt-in makes the most sense for your business model, you can increase the number of subscribers who confirm by following up with non-confirms two to five days within the initial opt-in. These are people who may have forgotten to act on your initial welcome message, but with a reminder message will confirm. Depending on your e-mail service provider, this could potentially be set up as an automatically recurring message. This would ensure the highest rates of double confirming while removing the work of sending additional messages.

10. Deliver on Your Promises

After you've been diligent to set expectation to drive future e-mail activity (on the opt-in page, confirmation page and welcome message), be sure that you then deliver on those promises. If you've promised weekly tips, be sure the message type you are sending is a "tips" e-mail and that you are sending them weekly.

Additionally, be sure that you don't deliver something that was not promised. For example,

- A different type of e-mail than what they opted in for,
- Weekly e-mails if you stated e-mails would be monthly, or
- Third party e-mails if this was not explicit during the opt-in process

If your strategy shifts and you want to deliver something other than what was promised during the opt-in process, send an e-mail asking subscribers to opt-in to this different type of e-mail or send an e-mail letting subscribers know of the change and giving them a chance to opt-out.

A smooth opt-in process from start to finish will ensure that you are collecting subscribers who know what they are signing up for and who will be active recipients when they receive the content they are expecting. Delivering on promises made during the opt-in process and refining your strategy to send targeted mailings will keep your attrition rate low.