10 top tips on how to write <u>effective</u> subject lines

Getting your emails opened is now one of the most difficult challenges in contemporary communication.

In the UK, for example, average opening rates for emails is now under 10% for the first time – and these numbers are still going south.

Just think about that for a minute. Nine out of ten emails don't even get opened, let alone read. Staggering, isn't it?

(I can remember when <u>direct mail</u> opening rates were 90% - and professional direct marketers used to debate, how we could influence the other 10%).

But that was when people cared – and the DM industry had a heartbeat. Hardly anyone in marketing cares a jot about anything any more. And the DM industry passed away years ago.

So, why are email opening rates so bad? Firstly, the medium has been <u>massively</u> abused – and this shows no sign of improving. Secondly, most marketers haven't got a clue about how to write an email that cuts through and works.

Let's face it, you are not going to sell anything to anyone by email, if you can't influence them to open the email in the first place.

When we open our Inboxes in the morning, we don't open them with anticipation. That has long gone. We now open them with dread.

We all know we face a nightmare, because our Inboxes are full of garbage.

It happens every day.

Our mindsets when we look at the list in front of us, will be negative. We will not be in the right frame of mind to be sold *anything*. All we want to do is get rid of the garbage and leave the messages that are important to us.

Your customers and prospects are exactly the same.

We all pretty much address our Inboxes this same way, by the way. I have found this out when presenting my DM Masterclasses around the world.

We might be waiting for a very important message and we can see it in the list. But we don't open it. We get rid of the rubbish first. Then we pay attention to the messages that are important to us.

How do we select these, amongst the overall list?

We look at the sender's name and the subject line.

If the sender is someone we know, it is unlikely that we will zap the message. If the subject line is interesting and relevant, that also will give the email a stay of execution.

Some recent research I saw, suggested that 64% of people open emails that are from people or organisations that they know – and 47% of respondents open the email because of an interesting subject line.

The best email subject lines give the reader a reason to open your message and explore it further. If you use gimmicky or colourful phrases to try and stand out, you are almost guaranteed to be zapped.

It's best to keep your subject line to 50 characters or less, including spaces. Any more than this and your message will not completely appear in most email listings.

This will result in you doing only part of the selling job.

Like half a headline. Worthless.

Remember, you could have the most effectively written and most attractive email message ever. But if the subject line doesn't get it opened, your message will not even see the light of day.

Try and write your subject line first. I do. It gives me focus and an ideal starting point for the rest of the email. A lot of people write the subject line <u>after</u> they have compiled the email. I think this is a mistake.

There are a number of words to avoid in your subject lines. I won't list them all, as we'll be here all day. But here are three that definitely have the plague.

'Help', 'Percent off', and 'Reminder'.

A lot of people would add 'Free' to that list. However, I would suggest caution with that.

I have read a lot about using 'Free' in subject lines. The consensus of opinion is that it triggers spam filters. I'm sure it does.

But that doesn't necessarily rule it out.

I read a recent article from a well-respected Internet marketing expert, who recommended using the word "Free."   His article stated "Free <u>can</u> and <u>does</u> work in subject lines. In fact, most of our clients have at least one control subject line with "Free" in it".

He then gave some examples of a list broking firm who ran an A/B split test with 2 subject lines: (a) *"Boost sales, increase profits and expand market awareness"* versus (b) *"FREE Direct Mail Encyclopaedia."*

The "FREE Direct Mail Encyclopaedia" generated **25 percent more click-throughs than the other subject line.**

Those are <u>BIG</u> numbers…

Basically, it would appear that in some cases, the increased response produced with a 'Free' offer, can far outweigh the negative effect caused by triggering spam filters.

Whatever view you hold on this, it's certainly worth testing – given the above. If you try it, please let me know how you get on…

So, how do you write an effective subject line?

In my humble opinion, you use **Benefit, News, Curiosity** and **Fear of Loss**. Plus, with certain promotions, add a dash of **Urgency**.

As all DM professionals who write for a living know very well, the single most important thing that makes copy work is <u>benefit</u>.

There has to be something of benefit in it for the reader. If there isn't, then there's little or no reason for them to open the email.

Here's an example that makes the point: *'6 tips to make landing pages more successful'.*

After benefit, the next most important thing is <u>news.</u> Effective subject lines contain <u>news of benefits</u>. Here's an example of what I mean:

'Launch date for Blackberry 11 announced'.

Curiosity works well in subject lines too, if it is relevant. This particular one, I know, delivered very good results:

"Does your website pass this test?"

We know that fear of loss is <u>always</u> more powerful than the promise of gain, so using this proven technique can also be very effective. Something like this:

'Only 17 tickets left to see Tony Bennett'.

Always try to apply these proven techniques when you are considering your next email campaign. Think about the recipient, not yourself.

If you do, you will find your emails will work much better.

So, as promised at the start of this Copycat, here are my ten top tips for <u>effective</u> subject lines:

1. Always ensure that your subject line describes the subject of your email.

This is basic common sense really. And it's the same as any direct marketing message. Your subject line is your headline – just like the headline of your direct mail letter, or direct response ad, or the strapline on your outer envelope.

They are, as the peerless Bill Jayme put it all those years ago, "The hot pants on the hooker".

They are the words that 'grab' you and pull you in. So, if the copy in your email doesn't flow on seamlessly from your subject line, the reader will immediately lose interest and your chance of a sale will have gone.

What's more, you'll probably upset the reader for wasting his or her time, which may well result in an unsubscribe request.

2. Make sure your spelling, grammar and punctuation are spot on

Pretty obvious, huh? Yes, you would think so. But, I'm sure you get emails, as I do, that have a subject line with a spelling mistake in it.

If you let an email go out with an error in the subject line, you should be boiled in oil. There is no excuse. You should get out of marketing and go and do something else.

I get <u>loads</u> of emails with spelling or grammatical mistakes. And, from big brands, too. I had one from an airline recently.

But this one I just <u>have</u> to share. Somehow I don't think you're going to learn much at <u>this</u> particular marketing show, do you?

If I had told you about this, you wouldn't have believed me. Read it and weep.

3. Do not use CAPITAL letters or exclamation marks.

If you use capitals in your subject line, you will get deleted as quick as blinking. And you will deserve it, too. A subject line using capitals, even for one single word, is tantamount to shouting – and will trigger spam filters.

Surely everyone knows this now?

Exclamation marks will also give your subject line a 'spammy' look. Be very careful with them.

4. Link the message to the "From" field

This is particularly relevant for newsletters.

The "from" field is vitally important and is the reason for over 60% of emails being opened. The recipient recognises who has sent the email, so the subject line's selling message has a better chance of success.

But remember this. If your "from" field contains your company name, you don't necessarily need to repeat it in the subject line. But you can consider incorporating some branding in there - for example, the name of your newsletter. This way, it will stand out in your recipients' overcrowded Inbox.

5. Don't be too pushy or over-hype the message

Talk to any top salesman and he will tell you the first commandment of selling is 'people don't like to be sold'. They love to buy, but only if they feel it is their decision.

Successful email marketers disguise their sales pitch as valuable content.

So, keep this in mind when you are crafting your subject line.

If the subject line is too "salesy," or is full of hype, you will turn the recipient off. Subject lines like *"Make £20,000 by the end of the week"* and *"Never be ill again"* will almost certainly be ignored.

6. Consider using numbers in your subject line

I have found over the years, that people love lists of things that will benefit them. The most requested slides from my Masterclasses are always things like *"The most effective 27 words in copy"* or *"The 5 key elements of direct mail"*. I think this will always be.

So, including a number in your subject line, will normally work well. For example: *"6 ways to make your copy work better"* or *"The top 5 blogs to save you money"*.

7. Consider 'How-to' and 'Reason-why' subject lines

The 'how-to' subject line is effective because it promises to reveal a benefit. To be honest, it's virtually impossible to write a bad how-to email subject line.

All you have to do, is add a relevant benefit to "how to." And you will probably get opened.

The 'reason why' subject line can also work well with numbers.

'The reason why these 6 words work' is a good example.

8. Embrace curiosity and fascination

The human animal is curious. Not as much as cats are, but not far behind. So that's why words like "discover" and "secrets" and others like them, will always work well in direct marketing copy.

Words that convey curiosity and fascination are always compelling - and offer real attraction, as they influence the reader to find - or discover – hidden secrets that will benefit them.

Put 'discover' and 'secrets' together, for example – and the attraction is obvious.

9. Study other subject lines.

I have a word document on my desktop with subject lines I see that have promise - and subject lines that are so awful they beggar belief.

It goes without saying, that I have ten times more bad than good.

I figure that if a particular subject line attracts me – and gets me to open the email, it has 'something'. Maybe I'm not quite sure what it is at the time.

So, I add it to my list, as I can revisit it over time and might be able to use it, or use part of it, in a future test email campaign for my company or for a client.

I also share a lot of these with delegates at Seminars and Masterclasses around the world.

Remember, all art is theft. Murray Raphel said it so well many years ago. "Steal the best. Forget the rest."

10. Test, test and test again

You should be <u>continually</u> testing subject lines. It is so easy to do and you get to know the results very quickly.

You can then incorporate these results into your next wave of campaigns to make them even more effective. That makes perfect sense.

But, I can tell you now, that only a small percentage of companies test *anything*. I simply can't believe it.

Your opinion is worthless, as is mine. The only opinion that matters is the opinion of the recipient of your email. Use testing to find out what <u>they</u> want – and then give it to them.

Isn't that what good marketing is all about?

Before I go, I would like to discuss another important element in subject lines. You may be wondering why I haven't included it in my 10 best tips.

It's personalisation.

We all have our opinions about this. As an experienced direct marketer, I know and value the power of personalisation. It is *essential*. But, does it work in subject lines?

Personally, in prospecting emails, I don't think it does. But in emails to past customers and colleagues, I think it can be extremely effective.

Does sending an email with the subject line *"Tom, do you want your copy to work harder?"* generate a better response than *"Do you want your copy to work harder?"*

Well, I saw a recent study on this, which I would like to share with you.

It suggested that emails with personalised subject lines, averaged <u>26% higher open rates</u> - and <u>over 130% higher click-through rates</u> (CTR) than emails without personalised subject lines.

But, here's the rub…

The same study showed that emails with personalised subject lines averaged 26% higher complaints - and over 71% higher unsubscribe rates than emails without personalisation.

As I said earlier, I am pretty sure this is down to the relationship between the sender and the recipient.

When people see their name in a subject line, they associate it with spam.

But when they look at the sender's name and identify it's from someone they know, they are then happy to open the email and read it.

O.K. folks, that's it. I hope you have enjoyed my latest ramblings – and also hope the ten tips I've highlighted, help you generate an improved response to your future email campaigns.

It's been fun, as always.

Keep the faith

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