

Grab them by the inbox

E-mail is one of the most direct, effective and least expensive ways to market your store. Here's how to get started

BY CLAIRE SYKES

There was a time when you wouldn't think of running a business without at least having a sign out front and a Yellow Pages ad, and certainly the occasional spot in the local newspaper. There's one more place you should be advertising these days, and that's your customer's e-mail inbox.

Electronic marketing, or e-marketing for short, is a term frequently bandied about today. It includes your store's Internet site, promotional e-mails, blogs and social networking like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. It's enough to make even large companies crazy. So what do you do if your store only has a few employees? Or just you?

Concentrate on the e-marketing that gives you the most bang for your buck: e-mail.

"If you want to stay in business for the next 20 years, you've got to be doing e-marketing. Very few companies are going

to survive without it," says Ken Mahar, owner of E-mail Broadcast, a full-service national e-mail marketing agency in Seattle, Wash. (www.e-mailbroadcast.com).

Business owners involved in e-mail marketing say it's:

- **Inexpensive:** Compare it to postcards: 170,000 at 25 cents each for sorting and more for postage runs about \$85,000, minus paper and labor expenses.
- **Fast:** No time spent printing, sorting, stamping and mailing.
- **Accessible:** You can connect with customers whenever you want.
- **Targeted:** Your e-mails go to those who have already done business with you.
- **Trackable:** Technology counts how many people opened your message, as well as responded to it, so you know which e-mails work and which don't.
- **Eco-friendly:** E-mails don't deplete our forests, get tossed into our landfills or burned up, or take energy to recycle, all of which also costs money.

I know I need it, but how do I start?

Obviously, you need to gather e-mail addresses. The best way to get them is just to ask your customers for them. This type of marketing has become commonplace, so shoppers frequently give this information. Also, they're more likely to give you the information if there's something in it for them.

When you ask customers for their e-mail addresses, let them know they'll be the first to hear about new products, sales and other promotions. You may want to run specials only for those on your e-mail list.

Don't wait until you think you have enough addresses before you begin your e-mail campaign, either. Start with what you have. If you put it off, you risk some of those addresses becoming defunct, or patrons wondering why you bothered to ask for them.

Next month: E-mail marketing Part 2, including finding the right service.

Maybe you think buying or renting an e-mail list will save you time, money and hassles. Not true! "It's a worthless investment," Mahar says. Would you rather have thousands who don't care about getting your e-mails or a hundred who do? And steer clear of "harvesting" software that searches the Internet for e-mail addresses, and e-mail address directories. All of these venues violate the CAN-SPAM Act, aimed at reducing unsolicited e-mail and text messages. The best e-mail addresses come from your first-time guests, loyal customers, vendors and others in contact with your store.

Collect e-mail addresses by:

- **Involving employees:** Everyone from your managers and cashiers to departmental staff interact with patrons.
- **Making it unique:** Give your campaign a name, like a club, so people feel special.
- **Promoting:** Let people know through your website, business cards and other advertising and make it easy for them to sign up.
- **Spreading the word:** At shows, speaking engagements and even gatherings with friends, invite people to join your e-mail campaign.
- **Recognizing:** Reward staff with a small bonus when they collect 75% of customers' e-mail addresses per week.
- **Not giving up:** If someone refuses to give their e-mail address, respect it. But don't hesitate to mention the campaign to them next time, pointing out more benefits.
- **Keeping it current:** Stay in touch, so people can easily update their e-mail addresses. Make sure to avoid typos. ■

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CAN-SPAM ACT OF 2003

Despite its name, the CAN-SPAM Act doesn't apply just to bulk e-mail. It covers all commercial messages, which the law defines as "any electronic mail message the primary purpose of which is the commercial advertisement or promotion of a commercial product or service," including e-mail that promotes content on commercial websites. The law makes no exception for business-to-business e-mail. That means all e-mail — even a message to former customers announcing a new product line — must comply with the law.

You can read it at <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/business/ecommerce/bus61.shtm>.