



## How Dealer Reputation Impacts Email Deliverability

*Monitoring your company's email marketing reputation and the reputation of your Email Service Provider (ESP) is vital to your business.*

*Most marketers engaged in email marketing do not realize the important role that their reputation plays, not only on their deliverability, but also on the overall return of their marketing investment.*

### **Why Should I Care about my Reputation?**

The amount of unsolicited email that ISPs and corporate mail server administrators receive has forced them to adopt creative methods to reduce or halt spam delivery. While content filtering works to block spam, it also falsely labels many emails as spam and blocks them from being delivered to the recipient. As a way to combat this, users have been forced to abandon content blocking in favor of reputation based systems which have a much lower propensity to block conversational email. However, doing so may wreak havoc on email marketing campaigns.

Many email marketers that use an ESP mistakenly think that reputation and deliverability are the sole responsibility of the provider. Cactus Sky clients have seen deliverability rates increase up to 20% by simply paying attention to the problem and following some of the simple steps outlined in this document.

### **The Components of a Good Reputation**

Email reputation is not determined by one single thing, it is the sum of many data points gathered over time. While various methods for reputation scoring are used today, the "Report Spam" mechanism has given email receivers the greatest amount of data by which to gauge the sender's reputation.

Email receivers use four specific components to measure the reputation of the sender. These include number of complaints; number of bounces, number of messages sent, and the size of the messages (see Figure 1).

*It is important to keep in mind that each email receiver has different rules for determining reputation so the threshold for blocking messages will differ amongst them.*

Figure 1



ISPs base reputation on the volume of activity over a certain period of time

## **Message Header**

Most recipients never see the header of the message. However, it is the first thing that is seen by an email receiver; and, therefore, it has the first chance of being blocked. There are four major areas within an email header that should be checked prior to sending the message:

- Sender IP address
- Host name of sender IP address
- Envelope header From or Return Path address
- Reply-To and From addresses

The envelope header's "From" address is the Return Path email address, and it is the first address given from the sending email server to the receiving email server. Some ESPs and in-house email marketing solutions will use the envelope header "From" address for automated bounce handling, so, again, it is important that this address contains your domain name and not the domain name of your ESP.

Many email marketing or sales force automation tools offer an automated reply handling feature. This is handy for anyone sending large volumes of email as it automatically handles unsubscribe requests, filters "Out of Office" replies, and intelligently routes real replies from humans through the proper channels. Again, it is important that your domain name is included in the email address of the "Reply-To" or "From" email address.

## **Message Body**

The message body is the part of the message that is most familiar to both the sender and the receiver. And, although receivers primarily base the reputation score on the message header, there are two main components of the message body that you must look at closely in order to maintain a good reputation. To determine reputation, email receivers focus on:

1. Links (Anything found with the <A HREF> tag
2. Images (Anything found within the <IMG SRC> tag

It didn't take long for email receivers to catch on to the fact that the primary role of a spammer was to send billions of pieces of unsolicited email containing links to sell things for a profit. As an anti-spam measure, email receivers now analyze messages that trip a complaint threshold for links contained in those messages. Receivers then put those links on a blacklist and block any messages that contain them. If you are using an ESP, it is important for you to make sure that the tracking links that the ESP inserts in its messages contain your domain name and not the domain name of the ESP to ensure that your message isn't mistakenly blocked by email receivers.

The second component of the message body that may potentially lead to deliverability problems deals with image tags. Many email marketers use an image hosting service offered by their ESP or they outsource through a content distribution network like Akamai. While these services can be extremely helpful to email marketers, it is important to make sure that the host names are branded with your domain name and not the domain name of the hosting provider as you might inadvertently be labeled with someone's poor reputation.

## **Three Proactive Steps to Enhance Reputation**

Email marketers can take a few proactive steps to help their reputation and positively affect their deliverability. While not an exhaustive list, the suggestions below will help most email marketers achieve a very high deliverability rate and keep their reputation positive.

## 1. Keep Complaints Low

Email reputation is heavily based on user complaints. If email campaigns are generating a high level of complaints, you need to find out why and fix the problem immediately. Perhaps there is a permission problem or frequency issue as companies that send three or more emails per month may have a higher number of complaints. If you have complaints, you should measure them by acquisition source to help uncover some potential problem areas.

## 2. Maintain Infrastructure Isolation and Transparency

If you use an in-house email marketing system, such as CRM, or an outsourced hosting company like Cactus Sky, it is imperative that they separate their mailing footprint from other customers within the mailing infrastructure. This means that you must make sure that your mailings go out using a dedicated IP address or a pool of dedicated IP addresses. You must also make sure that any domain name in the header of the message is your domain name and that all tracking links use your domain name as well. Finally, you must make sure that images that are hosted anywhere other than your own websites use your domain name in the image links. This includes any image based tracking technology used by an ESP to track messages.

## 3. Test, Measure, Improve

To quickly spot abnormalities in email campaigns, you should measure performance metrics such as opens, clicks, and bounces by domain sorted by top percentage of list composition. There is no excuse for any email marketer not to test their email campaigns. A critical first step of testing is to know what to test so it is imperative that you understand the composition of email list by domain. Once you understand what percentage of your list is composed by which ISP, you should then get an email account with the ISPs that account for the top 50% of the list composition. Most times these accounts will be free with the exception of ISPs such as Comcast, Earthlink, and Juno/NetZero. AOL is even offering free email accounts at this time.

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