

DEEP DIVE

THE ANATOMY OF A FIVE-STAR EMAIL.



A Deep Dive
into the 12 Core
Components of an
Exceptional Email

A publication of
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Prior to HubSpot, she managed the cutting-edge website optimization research cycle at MarketingSherpa. There, she was the lead author on the 2012 Website Optimization Benchmark Report, the 2012 Website Optimization Handbook, and a co-presenter of the 2012 Email Strategies Certification Workshop.



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Introduction: Why email marketing?

A few years ago, marketers were decrying the death of email. Instead of fading away a la MySpace and mood rings, email remains one of the most productive means of generating leads and selling products online. According to a [2013 National DMA email report](#), 89% of marketers consider email important to their organizational goals. Rather than dying out, [56% of email markets plan to focus more on their email campaigns in 2013](#).

How do you make sure this focus pays off? By making sure you are maximizing conversions and clickthrough rates with every email you send. Managers of five-star restaurants spend hours combining the right ingredients for their recipes. Similarly, creating a five-star email marketing campaign involves more than laying out some content and crossing your fingers – emails with killer clickthrough rates have a special mix of the right content, a stellar layout, and the right underlying strategy.

In the rush to ship emails out the door, we know it can be difficult to design the perfect email layout every time - trust us, we send out more than 8 million emails a month! With that kind of volume, we have spent a lot of time learning how to test and improve our email marketing.

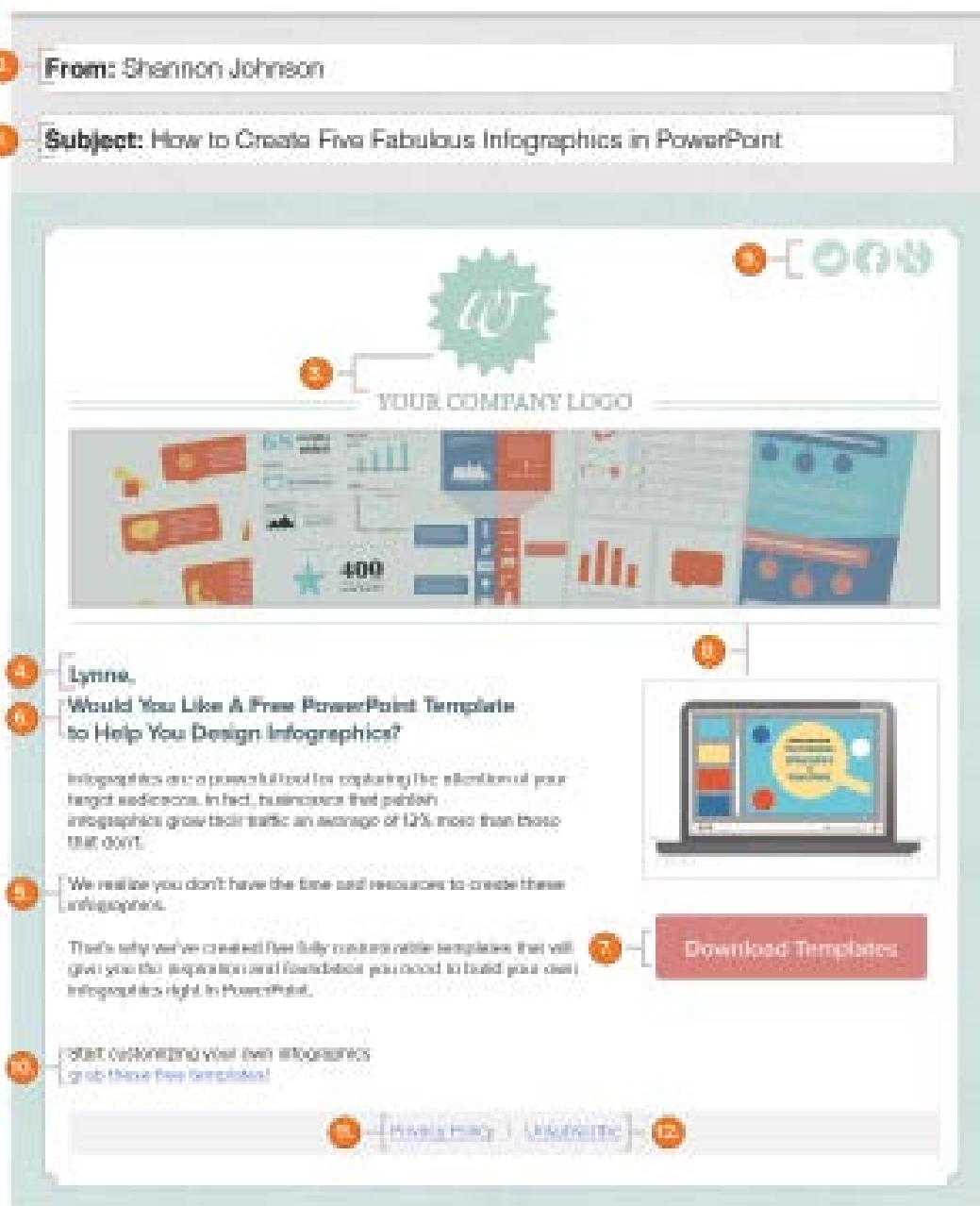
To help you learn from our experience, we put together this two part resource:

About this pocket guide.

In the next sections, you will find a printable tip sheet that displays 12 components of a five-star email. The remaining pages walk you through each of the 12 elements in detail to help you understand the strategy behind each of these email sections, and explain how to optimize your email marketing campaigns.

According to [Magill research](#), marketers earn an estimated \$39 for every \$1 they spent on email marketing in 2012. Use this two-part offer to start developing an email strategy to maximize your own results.

----- THE ANATOMY OF A FIVE-STAR EMAIL -----



- 1 A Clear, Attention-Grabbing Email Subject Line
- 2 Actual Person as the Sender
- 3 Company Branding
- 4 Personalized Content
- 5 Appropriate Segment
- 6 Value Proposition and Context
- 7 Obvious, Focused Call-to-Action
- 8 Relevant Image
- 9 Social Sharing Buttons/Links
- 10 Secondary Call-to-Action
- 11 Link to Privacy Policy
- 12 Unsubscribe Link



1. A Clear, Attention-Grabbing Email Subject Line.

The Radicati Group reported that 1.9 billion non-spam emails are sent everyday. To break through this noise, you must develop a compelling email subject line that inspires your audience to click on and read your email. Remember, if you don't capture your target's attention in the subject line, they are never going to see any of the other parts of your five-star email strategy.

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Here are a few guidelines to ensure your subject lines entice your readers to click.

- **Address your readers concerns:** Put yourself in your audience's shoes and write your subject lines to address their needs. What is interesting about your product and service from their perspective? The key to generating clickthroughs is answering questions that your prospects care about.
- **Personalize:** Consider including your readers' first name in your email subject line. According to our own [Dan Zarrella's Science of Email research](#), adding a name in the subject line significantly increases clickthrough rates.
- **Use actionable language:** Use action words to inspire your readers to click. As you are writing actionable subject lines, remember this requires a bit more than checking your thesaurus. You want your action verbs to inspire your audience to immediately click on your email by instilling urgency and excitement for people reading your subject lines.

For example, in an email inviting people to a hockey legend dinner, the email subject line should read, "Dine with Bruins legend Bobby Orr on Saturday", rather than a more generic (and less actionable) "Local Boston Sports Legend Meal". The former email spells out a dinner that will happen on Saturday, and uses "Dine" to help the reader envision themselves at a dinner table.

- **Be explicit:** Clearly spell out what the email contains. You want the reader to understand exactly

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what they will get when they open your email. For example, the subject line “[Free Collection] 101 Companies Rocking Social Media” tells my reader exactly what they will get by downloading our collection. Similarly, if you are running a special 20% off special, allude to that specific number in the first third of your subject line.

- **Scan your subject lines for clarity:** MarketingExperiment’s is often quoted as saying “clarity trumps persuasion” when writing online copy. A clear, easily-understandable subject line is vital for generating email clickthroughs. Occasionally, when marketers try too hard to be clever, they end up just making the reader think “huh”? You want your emails to grab attention, but not at the expense of clearly conveying the email’s content.
- **Deploy Brevity:** Email subject lines will get cut off if they’re too long, particularly on mobile devices. We recommend using subject lines with fewer than 50 characters to make sure readers scanning their emails will read the entire subject line.
- **Be consistent:** Your email subject line is making a promise to your reader about what you will deliver in your message. Make sure that you make good on that commitment.

Do not promise a 50% off coupon in your subject line unless that coupon is prominently displayed in your email. Similarly, don’t advertise 50% off if that discount only applies to a small segment of

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your products. A “bait and switch” email engenders too much distrust to be worthwhile. If people think they have been cheated by your subject lines, they will stop opening your emails, which leads to lower open-, clickthrough-, and conversion rates, as well as higher unsubscribes. No good.

- **Avoid SPAM triggers:** Email spammers rely heavily on certain words to boost their open rates. Because of these dark hat practices, email providers employ special spam filters to keep out any emails containing certain words. Email marketers should be careful about using words like “Cash,” “Quote,” and “Save” to make sure they don’t inadvertently get caught by a spam trap. [We recently wrote a blog article](#) that includes a full list of spam trigger words.

Spam traps look at more than just subject lines to determine if they will deliver your email. For example, “Free” is a traditionally spammy subject line word, but you will notice that we included it in our “101 Companies Rocking Social Media” subject line. We did a lot of background research to make sure this word wouldn’t work against us. Because HubSpot has a great sender reputation, and we were sending out the email from a legitimate person, including “free” in this line didn’t impact the email’s deliverability. There are several tools online you can use to test if your subject lines will raise any red flags.

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2. Actual Person as the Sender.

The name you include in the “From” field of your email can have a huge impact on your overall open rates. [HubSpot conducted a number of A/B tests](#) on our own emails, and we have found that sending our emails from an actual person increases both the open and clickthrough rates for our email marketing efforts.

People feel a more personal connection to your email when they receive it from “Shannon Johnson” than they do from Company X, or worse, some version of “donotreply.com”. You can even consider

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adding the sender's picture to the bottom of your emails, and signing off the email with their signature or nickname.

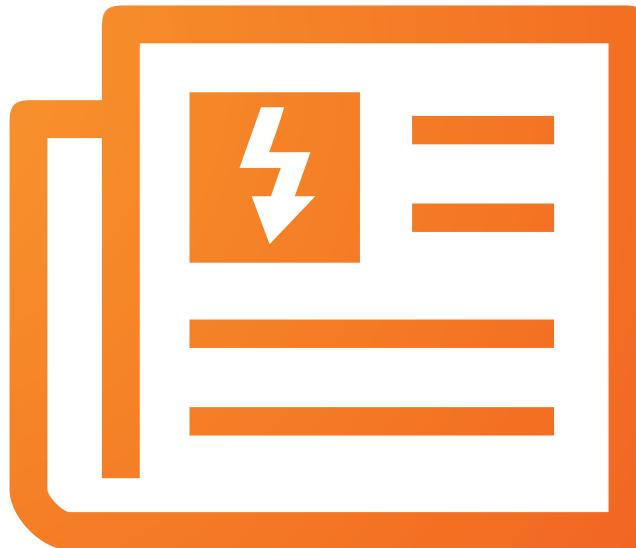
Experiment with how to position your "from" sender. Watch your open rates to determine if people prefer someone they hear from frequently, such as the relationship manager or sales rep, or if your company CEO nets more clicks. You may find that your best email open rates actually come from a combination of a person's name and company name, e.g., Shannon Johnson, HubSpot. Including both a name and a company brand can help to put context around your email marketing.

If you are creating five-star content, people will frequently look forward to your regular email communications, and open your messages because it comes from your company – so let them know it's you!

Finally, whomever you choose to include as your sender, be conscious that people will expect an answer to any emailed replies, so have someone tracking your email accounts, and be prepared to address any questions or concerns you receive from your list.

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3. Company Branding.

Make sure your email marketing templates echo your overall company brand. You want the people opening your email to recognize who you are, and remember why they clicked on your email.

While they don't need to be identical, the design elements in your emails should echo your company style. A consistent brand image, language, and tone helps your audience relate to your content and expands your overall brand experience. Consistent brand style also conveys the professionalism and

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planning that goes into your email marketing efforts – or at the very least, it's a great step toward faking it!

The easiest way to ensure a consistent email style is to create, and regularly utilize, email templates, such as the ones that accompany this offer! In your template design, include your company colors, logo and any other important corporate branding elements.

When designing your branded templates, don't overdo it, and pay attention to how long it takes to download your email messages. Emails with tons of design elements – big images or video, for example – can create problems in prospects' inboxes than more basic HTML emails.

Some of your recipients' inboxes will default to prevent images from downloading, or in other words, it will take too long to find and download all those images. You want the visual design of your emails to enhance the overall experience, not get in the way of the content, so make sure your design doesn't inadvertently decrease your open rates.

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4. Personalized Content.

According to our [Science of Email research](#), personalized emails improve clickthrough rates by 14%.

This is an easy win! Simply include a person's first name in your email greeting to net a double-digit boost in email clickthroughs.

Despite the impressive benefits of email personalization, a surprising 68% of marketers aren't utilizing personalized content in their email marketing – despite the fact that [a third of marketers believe](#)

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personalized campaigns are highly effective.

As a result, developing personalized emails is a great way to gain a competitive advantage in your email marketing. With 72% of B2B firms reporting that [a top priority for this year is to deliver highly relevant content](#), this is the time to employ personalization tactics and get ahead of your competition.

Think about how to leverage personalization for your lead nurturing or sales strategies. Beyond simply adding a first name to your email greetings, develop targeted content for each list segment. Delivering personalized email messages or specific offers based on your audience behaviors, interests, or buying stage is a terrific way to set your content apart.

Just like a five-star restaurant would remember and cater to their top customers' preferences – for example whether you like red or white wine – you can use smart lists and dynamic email templates to deliver individualized content based on your contacts' form responses or past purchase history.

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5. Appropriate Segment.

Your database most likely includes both customers and prospects – all of whom are at varying stages of their buying cycles. When designing a five-star email experience, pay attention to how you segment your list and align your email strategies to capitalize on your list's needs.

Segmentation is extremely effective in boosting email performance metrics. We found that 39% of

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email marketers who practice list segmentation see better open rates, while 28% have reduced opt-out and unsubscribe rates. On the other hand, companies that sent email to a single list had a lower average email click-through rate (7.3%) than those that segmented their overall email database into two to six lists (8.3%).

As you can imagine, in reaction to these results, [84% of B2B marketers use some kind of segment targeting in their email campaigns.](#)

If you are looking to start segmenting your list, consider the following to begin your list parsing:

- **Demographic data:** Personal data such as geography, age, gender, job function, industry, seniority, etc. can all offer insight on what kind of email content will be most interesting to your target audience.
- **Personas:** The best marketing strategies are built around detailed buyer personas that help inform their content development. If you haven't yet built out your buyer personas, [check out this article to help you create them](#). Once you have defined your personas, use these targeted personas to design email content that appeals to your personas' distinct challenges and concerns.
- **Purchase history:** Any past purchase or browsing history can also help focus email sends to specific interests. Purchase history can be used to target thank you and cross-sell emails. In your secondary

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CTAs, recommend additional services or complementary products your audience might enjoy based on past purchases.

- **Lifecycle stage:** Even if you don't have explicit personas, segment your list based on your customers' purchase cycles. Set up separate lead nurturing tracks for those at the top of your sales funnel, in the middle of your sales funnel, and at the bottom of the sales funnel. By providing information linked to questions your prospects face along their decision-making process, your content will better push your leads down the funnel, and ultimately close sales.
- **Content engagement:** Look at your email analytics. Is there a specific segment that always downloads a certain kind of content? What can you infer about these content trends to improve your email list performance?

At HubSpot, we found that some of our leads and contacts are far more interested in certain content topics than others. One of our segments frequently downloads information on [sales and marketing alignment](#), while another is far more interested in [Pinterest marketing](#). We segment our list based on the topics our contacts have showed interest in, and make sure to offer additional complimentary offers based on this interest and engagement. Look at your lists to see if similar trends emerge, and incorporate these insights into your email strategy.

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As its popularity grows, segmentation is becoming more efficient. New marketing automation, email workflows and triggered smart lists make collecting and segmenting your email database more streamlined. Use these ideas above to begin cutting up your database. You will learn along the way, and you can improve your practices as you watch what works.

When thinking about your segmentation, consider how people will open your messages. To be worthy of five-star status, your email needs to be readable on all devices. First, check to see that your email messages are mobile optimized. As iPad and SmartPhone technology evolve, more people are bypassing their laptops reading your emails on a mobile device - email opens rates on smartphones and tablets [have increased 80% over the last six months](#). Check out this blog for more [details on optimizing your email messaging for mobile devices](#). Another viewing best practices is to create a text-only version of all your email messages, for those on your mailing list with less advanced technology. This additional step ensures that your good content will be delivered to even those without HTML-enabled inboxes. Most email tools make it relatively painless to create a text-only version of your send.

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6. Value Proposition and Context.

Your email content should immediately address what your offer is, and why it's valuable to your audience. Adding a value proposition for your offer as the first sentence in your email copy is the best way to accomplish this.

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Your value proposition should clearly address the key points of your offer in brief, compelling language.

For a standout value proposition, utilize these tactics:

- Clearly highlight what email recipients will get from downloading your ebook, purchasing your product, etc. For example, the sentence “five free downloadable email templates” informs the reader in several ways. We explicitly tell people the number of templates they receive in conjunction with this offer (five), as well as how to access them (downloadable), and how much they cost (free).
- Incorporate statistics to emphasize what problem your offer is solving. For example, we know that companies who tested and optimized their value propositions saw a 15% increase in their marketing ROI, [according to MarketingSherpa](#). As a result, we included this section on value propositions as a key component of a five-star email, to help you significantly boost your overall email performance.
- There are also multiple visual elements that can improve your emails. For example, minimize page friction by keeping your emails clean of clutter and multiple messages. Prominently feature a button to download your offer. We do this after we position the value proposition so that people are excited to download. You should also add multiple links for your offer in the email content, in the event that your audience prefers clicking on hyperlinks. You can also use bullet points to break up the text and emphasize key takeaways.

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In addition to developing a compelling value proposition, you want your email copy to provide context on why your reader has received this email. People have notoriously short memories when it comes to what links they've clicked or what pages they've visited. Acknowledging why they are receiving your email reduces anxiety. For example, in a welcome email, you want to remind a new subscriber specifically how, when and where your reader signed up for your email list.

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7. Obvious, Focused Call-to-Action.

Your email should have a single conversion goal, whether it is to download an offer, sign up for a webinar or purchase a product. The call to action button is the link that triggers this action – so make sure that your call-to-action is prominently displayed in your email.

Because of their vital importance, marketers pay a lot of attention to their CTA buttons. In fact, according to MarketingSherpa's 2011 Landing Page Optimization Survey, 41% of marketers found

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optimizing their CTAs extremely valuable. Whether you are looking at a CTA in your email or landing page, it's clear that marketers need to think about how they are positioning their CTA buttons.

Your call to action button includes two elements:

- **The button itself:** Make sure your button is visually distinct from the rest of your email template, and place it in the top third of your email layout – what we call “above the fold”. At HubSpot, we position our CTAs immediately after the value proposition. We have just explained what’s exceptional about our offers, and we want the reader to immediately download our link before they get distracted.
- **The button copy:** Most people scan their emails rather than actually reading them, so minimize the copy to ensure people will read it. As a general rule of thumb, CTAs should run between 90 and 150 characters and include explanatory subjects and verbs.

When designing this minimal button content, keep these key items in mind:

- Tell the reader specifically what action they must take to receive the offer (e.g. “Download”)
- Create a sense of urgency using words such as “Now,” “Today,” etc.
- Tie the CTA to the offer itself (e.g. for a live webinar, say “Register For the Webinar Now” or “Reserve Your Seat Today”).

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- Avoid vague language such as "Submit", which doesn't inspire the reader or tell them anything new.

Call-to-action buttons are intended to get noticed. To boost your email clickthrough rates, you want your CTAs to stand out on the page, communicate a clear value, and compel your visitor to click on them. Great design, strong word choice, and concise sentences will get you there.

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8. Relevant Image.

Incorporating images is another tool to differentiate your email marketing. Visual cues are great tools to ensure every element of your email template engages your audience. [Our Science of Email Marketing research](#), revealed that 65% of people prefer emails with mostly images rather than text.

People simply like pictures - probably because 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual, and visuals are processed 60,000X faster in the brain than text. ([3M Corporation](#) and [Zabisco](#)) With so many people scanning your emails online, breaking up your text with a professional looking image is a

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good way to increase your email engagement.

At HubSpot, we have learned that matching our emails with relevant images significantly boosts our conversion numbers. We recommend matching your images with the content of your offer. Because people literally judge your books by their covers, if you're [offering an ebook](#), include a picture of the cover page. If you're offering a webinar, include a screenshot of the cover slide from your presentation.

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9. Social Sharing Buttons/Links.

Social sharing buttons and links are great tools for expanding your email marketing and reaching new potential leads, with very little effort on your part.

A few years ago, social media proponents foretold that the rise of social media would spell the death of email. Rather than seeing the two channels as competitors, however, smart digital marketers learned to use social media channels to magnify the reach of their email marketing.

The [2012 Marketing Sherpa Email Benchmark Report](#) discovered that, in fact, 78% of organizations integrate their email and social media strategies.

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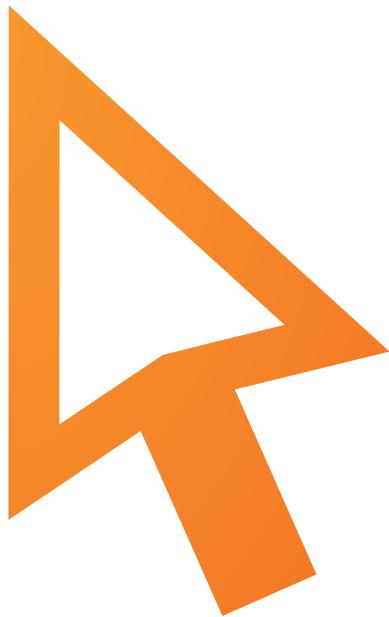


You spend so much time developing valuable content – make it easy for your list share your offers with their own networks. Add social sharing buttons to your email templates so that readers can share all of your material with their networks.

In addition to making your content shareable, use email campaigns to grow your social media reach by adding follow buttons or links to your email templates. You developed five-star content, which means people will want to further engage with your brand. Give your email list a chance to do so by encouraging your subscribers to follow you on Twitter, “like” your Facebook page, subscribe to your YouTube channel, or follow your company updates on LinkedIn.

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10. Secondary Call-to-Action.

If your email recipients have successfully read all the way through the bottom of your email, make sure you provide some way for them to dive deeper into your content. The best way to do this is by adding a secondary call-to-action button at the bottom of your page – sort of like the P.S. on a handwritten letter or a complimentary dessert at a great restaurant.

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Use this secondary CTA to provide additional information on your product, push people further down your funnel, or to promote a cross-selling opportunity. If your email subscribers are ready for a more product-focused offer, such as a free trial of your product or a personal consultation, you want to be sure to provide that information, rather than asking a potential conversion to go hunt for your pricing – they probably won't.

The key to a secondary call-to-action is to make sure it complements, but doesn't compete with, the primary objective of your email. If you clutter the page with too many CTAs, you will confuse your reader, and they will likely become frustrated and stop reading. Still, adding a smaller secondary CTA will boost engagement among your more inspired readers.

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11. Link to Privacy Policy.

According to [MECLABS Email Messaging Optimization Index](#), one of the major reasons that emails fail to convert is because they contain too many elements that cause the reader anxiety. While most digital marketers are pretty comfortable filling in personal information online, it's important to remember that many people you are sending emails to may not be quite as comfortable filling in their private information on an anonymous email page.

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Even a savvy online audience may have some concerns about privacy as many have received spam emails or other unsolicited marketing at one point or another. Give your email subscribers peace of mind and a sense of security by including a link to your company's privacy policy.

In your privacy policy, tell your subscribers exactly what you will do with their email address plus any other information you think will help alleviate their privacy concerns.

You don't want to blow your five-star email status – or waste a conversion - because you failed to dot all your "i's". Using a privacy policy will help combat any potential anxiety your email sales or lead generation sign-ups may cause. This is an easy addition to all your email templates that will help boost your clickthrough metrics.

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12. Unsubscribe Link.

The final element of a five-star email is also the only mandatory element in your email templates. You **MUST** add an unsubscribe link to the bottom of every email marketing message. Sending an email without an unsubscribe link violates [CAN-SPAM regulations](#), can significantly damage your email sender credibility, and can even potentially leave your marketing open to costly fees or litigation.

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In addition to being a legal requirement, adding an unsubscribe link is smart email practice. You only want to send emails to people who actually want to hear from you. Don't try to trick people into staying on your list – make your unsubscribe link clearly visible and offer a simple unsubscribing process.

As we mentioned before, online "readers" scan most of your content. Rather than hunting for an unsubscribe link, 47% of recipients just click the spam button in their email. (Sherpa 2010 Email Marketing Benchmark Report) Someone opting-out of your email marketing will not hurt your deliverability reputation, but a complaint for neglecting the unsubscribe link certainly will.

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Conclusion.

Consumers remain committed to their email inboxes. In fact, 77% of readers prefer being marketed to via email than any other channel.

By following these 12 steps, you learned how to design an attention-grabbing headline, identify the right segmentation for your lists, correctly position your messaging, create a personal email experience, and address all the major functional components of five-star email campaigns. Now it's time for you to develop your own stellar email strategy.

Your email list is your most engaged audience – these are the people who have opted into your sales or lead generation lists and agreed to let you market to them. Make the most of this resource to produce your own five-star email marketing.

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