



Nonprofit Email Subject Lines

# 5 Unusual Levers To Help Your Emails Get Read

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# Subject lines!

From: "Big Brothers Big Sisters" <[donotreply@bbbs.org](mailto:donotreply@bbbs.org)>

Date: July 15, 2015 at 4:53:09 PM CDT

To: "Jeff Ciddens" <[jeff@nextafter.com](mailto:jeff@nextafter.com)>

**Subject: Big Impacts: A Bond Nearly Three Decades Strong**

Reply-to: <[donotreply@bbbs.org](mailto:donotreply@bbbs.org)>







From This



To This







DAVID J. LIEBERMAN, Ph.D.

GET

*NEW YORK TIMES*  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*NEVER BE LIED TO AGAIN*

ANYONE

TO DO

PSYCHOLOGICAL  
SECRETS TO  
PREDICT, CONTROL,  
AND INFLUENCE  
EVERY SITUATION

ANYTHING

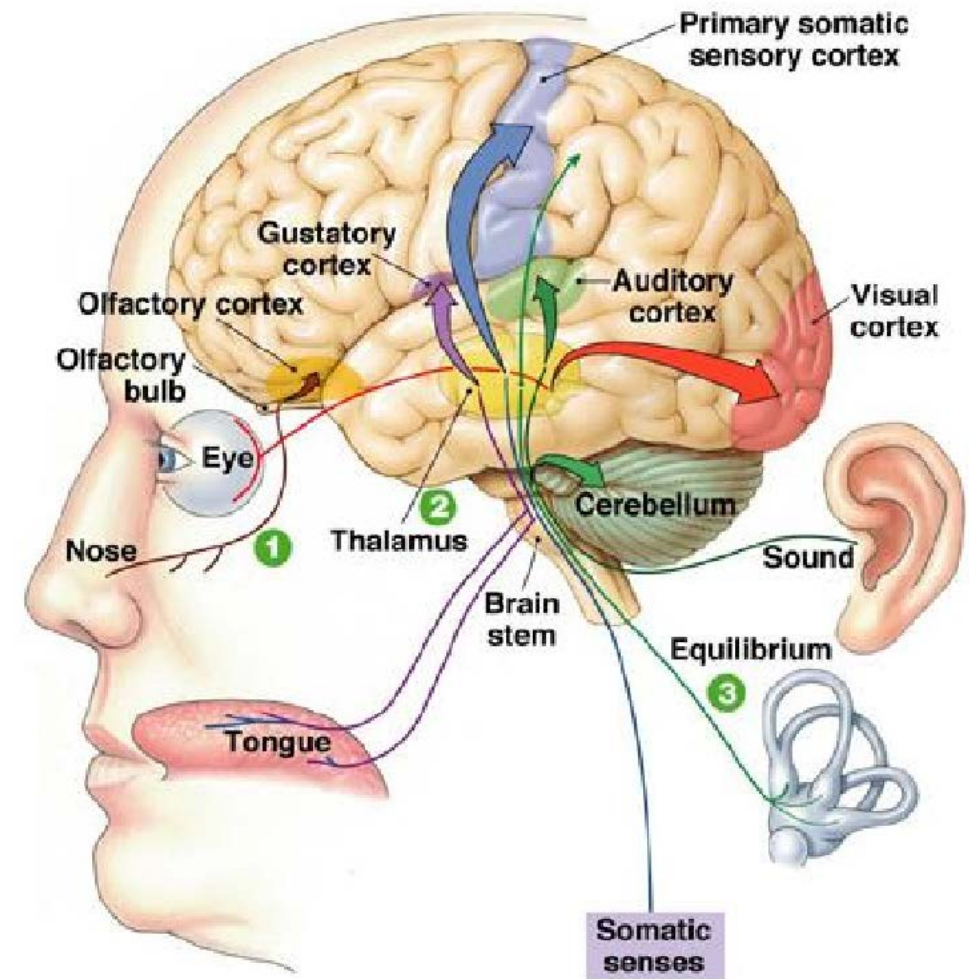
AND NEVER FEEL  
POWERLESS AGAIN

READ BY SCOTT BRYCE WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION READ BY THE AUTHOR



# We Rely on Impressions

- The human sensory system sends the brain about 11,000,000 bits of information each second.
- The actual amount of information our conscious mind can handle has been estimated to be somewhere between 16 and 60 bits per second.



© 2007 Pearson Education, Inc., publishing as Benjamin Cummings.

Fig. 10-4

Source: Mlodinow, Leonard. (2012) Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior. Pantheon Books.



Knowing this...

There are generally **two ways** to improve a subject line so that it leaves an **irresistible impression** on a person...





1

Appealing to the topic  
angle...





“Hey Jon, It’s Tim [K].... I have a question about taxes and enrollment.

Can you call me back?”







“Hey Jon, It’s Tim [K].... I have a question about your paycheck and health insurance. Can you call me back asap so I can get everything to you on time?”



*Potentially powerful, right?*



*The challenge: You have to figure out the most relevant, urgent and important angle.*







*But wait! There's  
another way!*



2



- ✓ You don't have to be an amazing writer.
- ✓ You don't have to be extremely knowledgeable
- ✓ You don't have a lot of brainstorming time.



Appealing to the  
conversation.





“Hey Jon, It’s Tim [K].... I have a question about taxes and enrollment.

Can you call me back?”





“Hey Jon, It’s Tim [K].... I have **an important question I need to ask you.**

Can you call me back?”

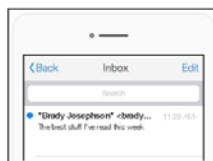


# What we Discovered

After examining our library of 1,000+ published experiments, we've analyzed 50+ email envelope experiments to help us understand this phenomenon and how to leverage it to even the playing field.

## How a more specific subject line increased clicks in a nurture email

↑ 26.0% lift



Date Added: April 16, 2018

Research Partner: NextAfter

Element tested: Email Subject Line

In this experiment, the email we were sending was a round up of fundraising content that Brady had read over the course of the previous week. The goal was to drive recipients to click and engage with other content as ongoing nurture of our house file. The original subject line was related to the content of the email and a specific reference made within the body copy.

We wondered if a subject line that was more specific to what kind of content the reader would find within the email would prime the reader and drive more clicks.

[View the experiment »](#)

## How the type of subject line affects open rate in an appeal

↑ 19.2% lift

Date Added: February 6, 2018

Research Partner: National Breast Cancer Foundation

Element tested: Email Subject Line

NBCF was sending out an email appeal to their housefile for their Valentine's Day Hope Kit campaign. Their goal for the experiment was to get more eyes on the email and more opens. The hypothesis was that the subject line "720 women" would be more compelling than asking the reader a question or to do something, for example, "Will you help me do this?". The email itself remained the same

## SEARCH THE LIBRARY

Keywords

[Show Advanced Options](#)

Search

## FILTER BY AREA OF FOCUS

- Advertising (194)
- Emails (174)
- Email Acquisition Pages (162)
- Donation Pages (206)

## GET THE LATEST RESEARCH IN YOUR INBOX TODAY

Subscribe today to receive the latest research from NextAfter. These tests offer new ideas for nonprofits to increase their names, donors, and dollars acquired.




Send me the latest research

The 5 key levers to  
making it work.





# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

## 1. Mystery



**U N S O L V E D**

---

***mysteries***

#2675

VERSION A

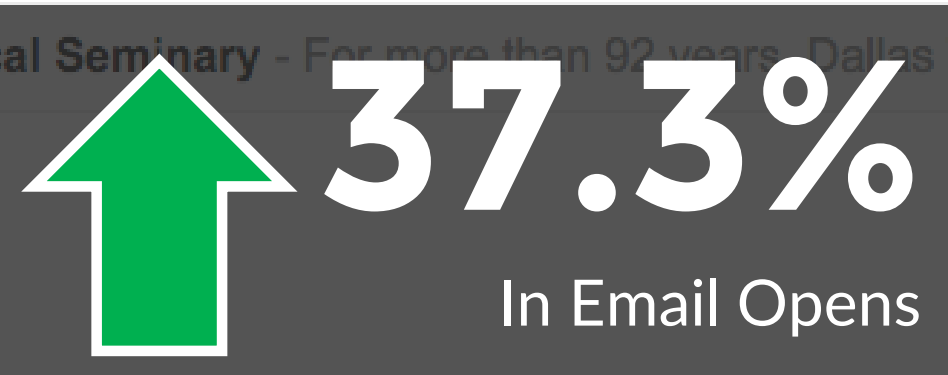
☐ ☆ Mark L. Bailey

Study the Gospel of John with DTS - For more than 92 years, Dallas Theological Seminary

VERSION B

☐ ☆ Mark L. Bailey

A Special Gift from Dallas Theological Seminary - For more than 92 years, Dallas



#1390

VERSION A



Larry P. Arnn

Your next course is ready - P. Arnn President Hillsdale College

VERSION B



Larry P. Arnn

A new course for you: American Heritage P. Arnn President Hillsdale College



-15.1%

In Email Clicks



# What does this mean?



To activate the element of **mystery**, you need to leave *just* enough information out of the subject line concerning the topic.



# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

~~1. Mystery~~

2. Utility





# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

~~1. Mystery~~

2. Utility



*Do people always come to email  
because they have to?*



*Email can be just as much an*  
**ESCAPE**  
*as it is a*  
**DUTY.**





QUESTION

*Why would someone  
want to “escape” to  
email?*



*People often*  
**ESCAPE**  
*to email looking for a*  
**QUICK WIN.**





# STIMULANT

Gmail

Outlook



Welcome to iCloud Mail

=



# STIMULANT



*It's about utility-based fulfillment.*



Welcome to iCloud Mail

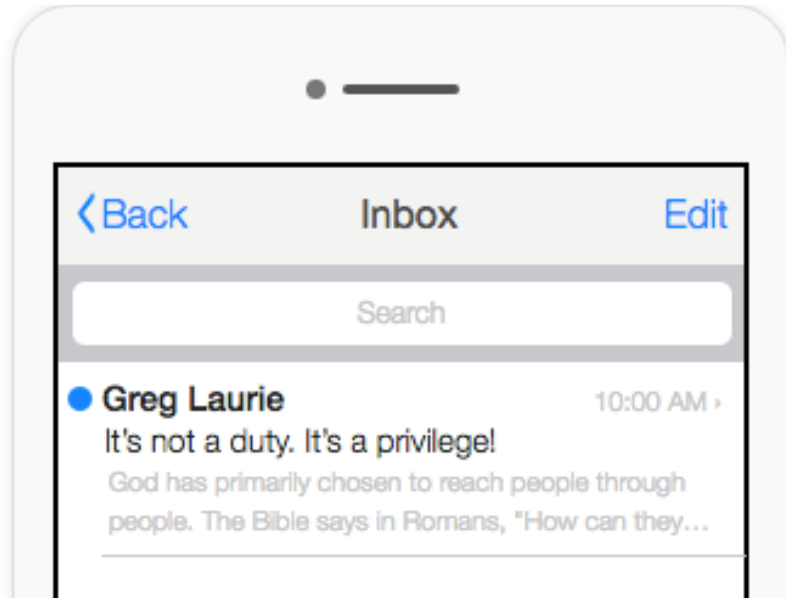


*Knowing this, how do we use  
this to write better subject lines?*

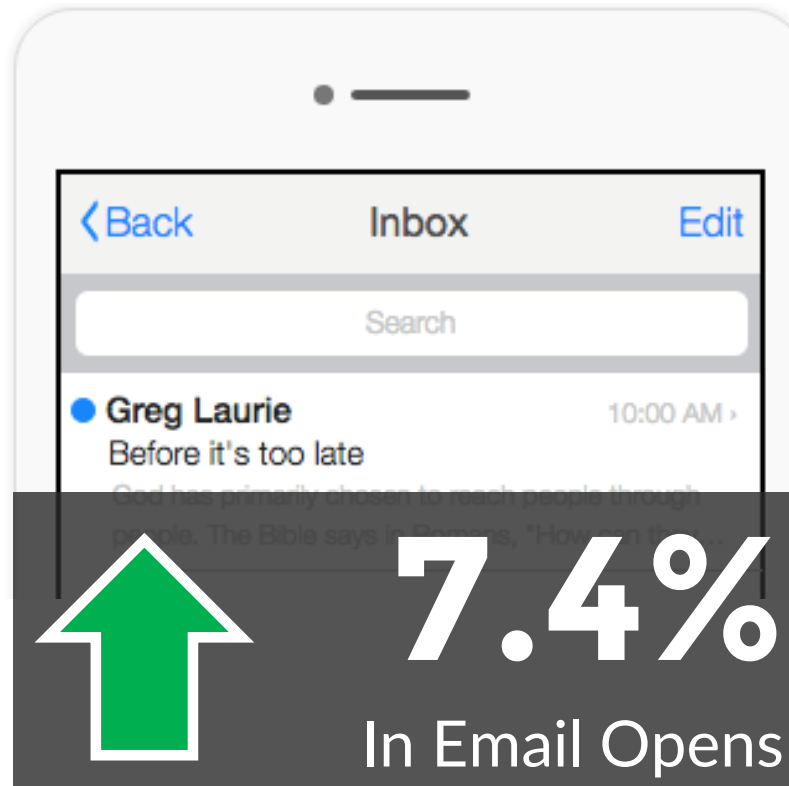


# PERCEIVED UTILITY (giving) (#4715)

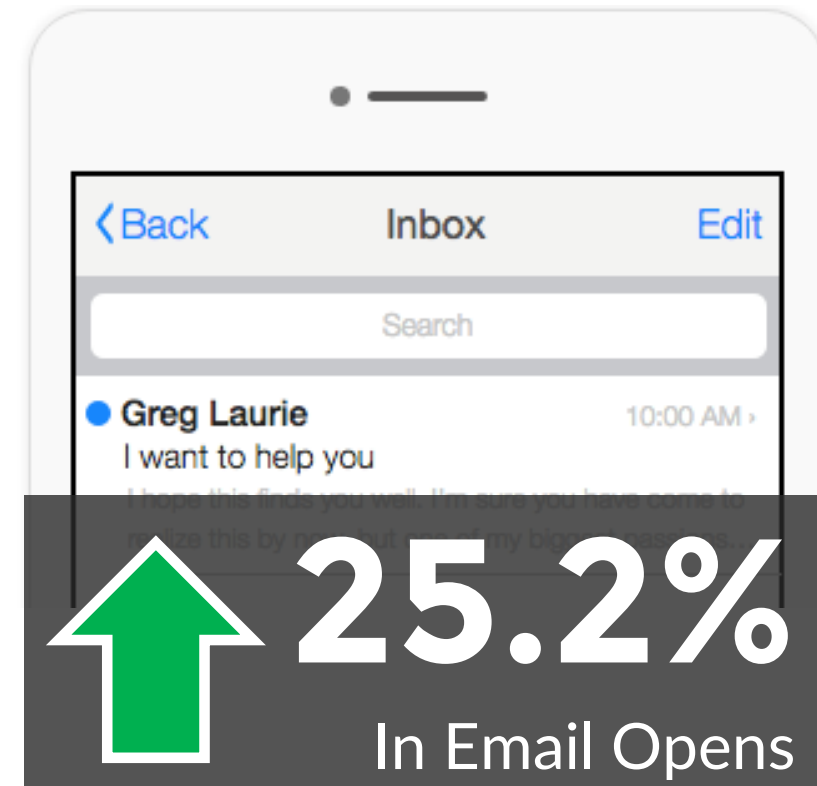
VERSION A



VERSION B

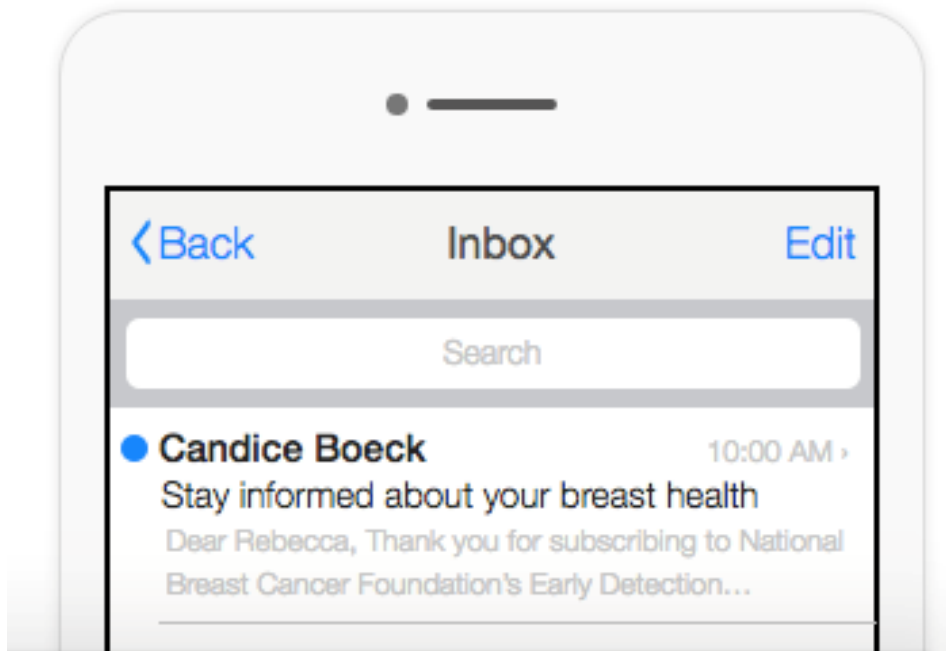


VERSION C

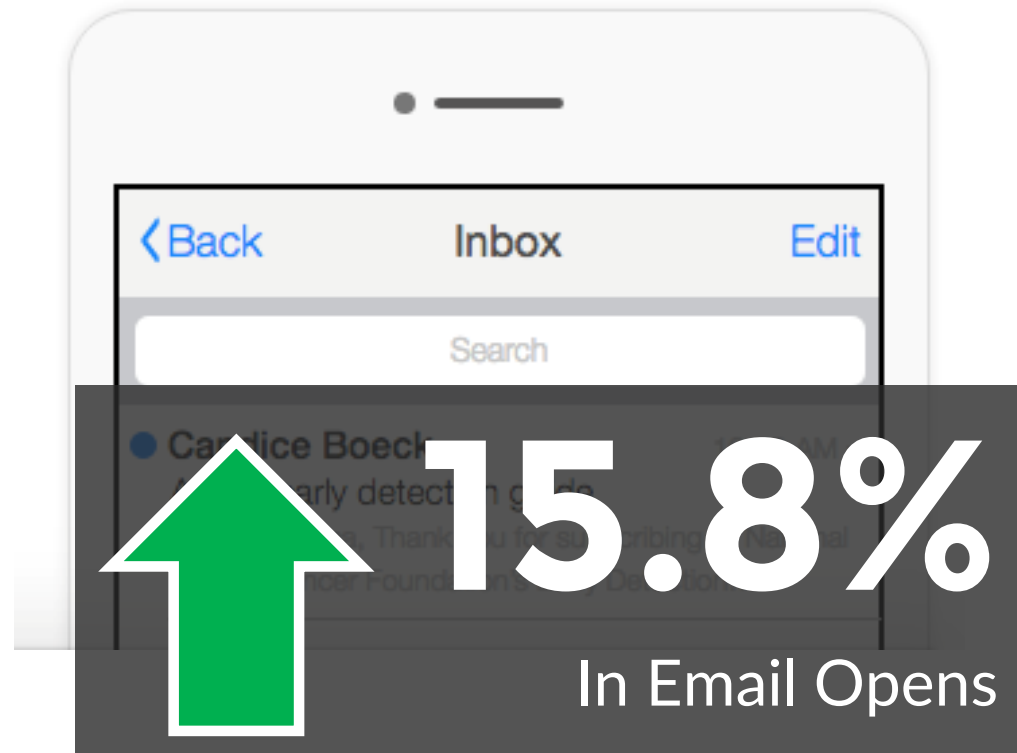


# PERCEIVED UTILITY (free offer) (#5439)

VERSION A

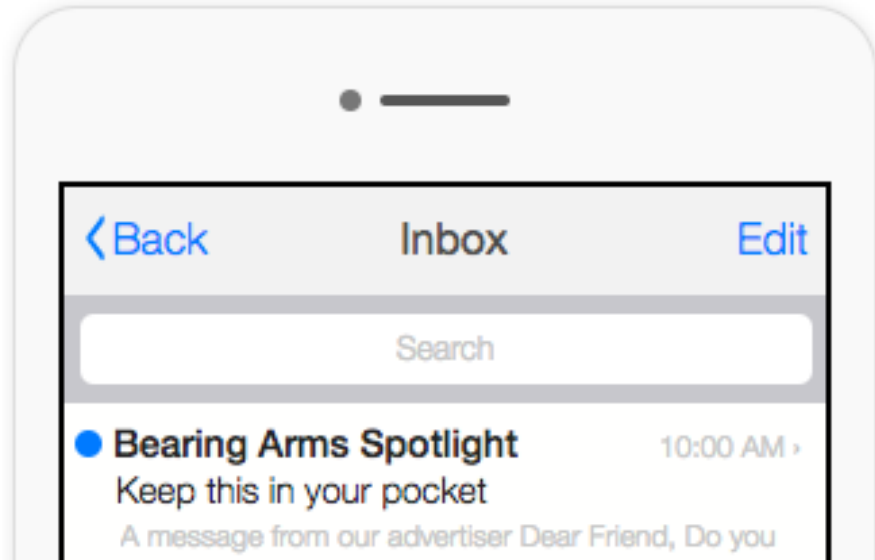


VERSION B

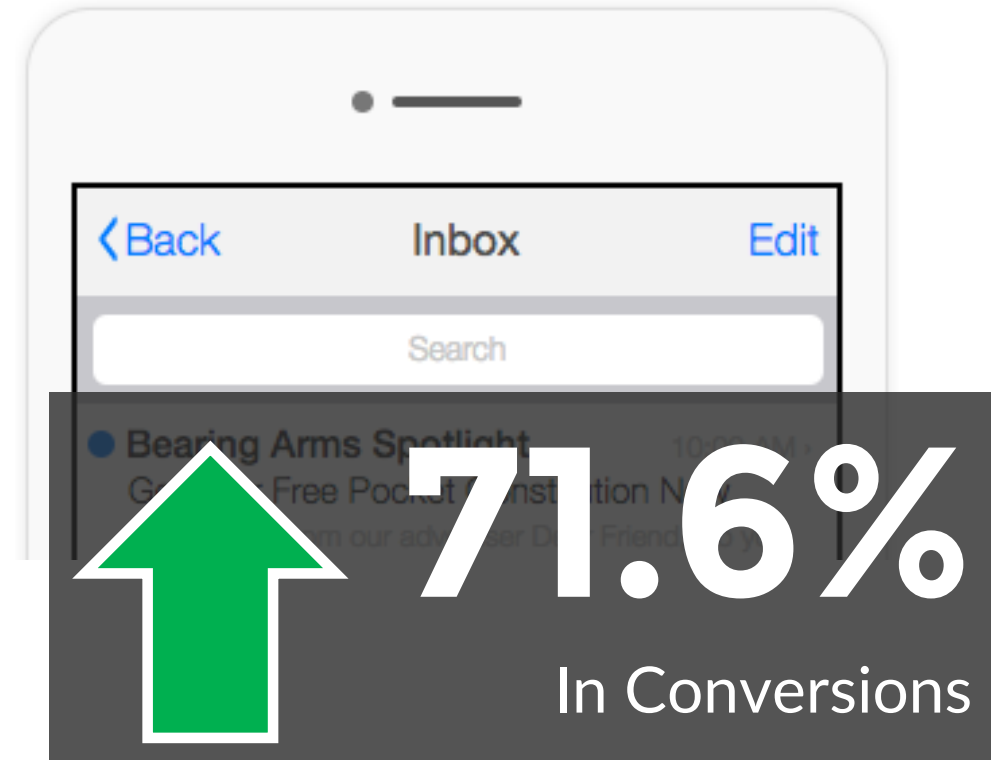


# UTILITY BEATS MYSTERY (#5470)

VERSION A



VERSION B





*But what if I am asking for money? How is that beneficial to them?*



*“The desire for a feeling of importance is one of the chief distinguishing differences between mankind and the animals.”*

-Dale Carnegie



# What does this mean?



To activate the element of **mystery**, you need to leave *just* enough information out of the subject line concerning the topic.



To activate the element of **utility**, you need to imply that there is something useful to them or their special interest – be it a **gift**, free **resource**, or **opportunity** to be part of something special.



# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

1. ~~Mystery~~

2. ~~Utility~~

3. You



# 5 key levers

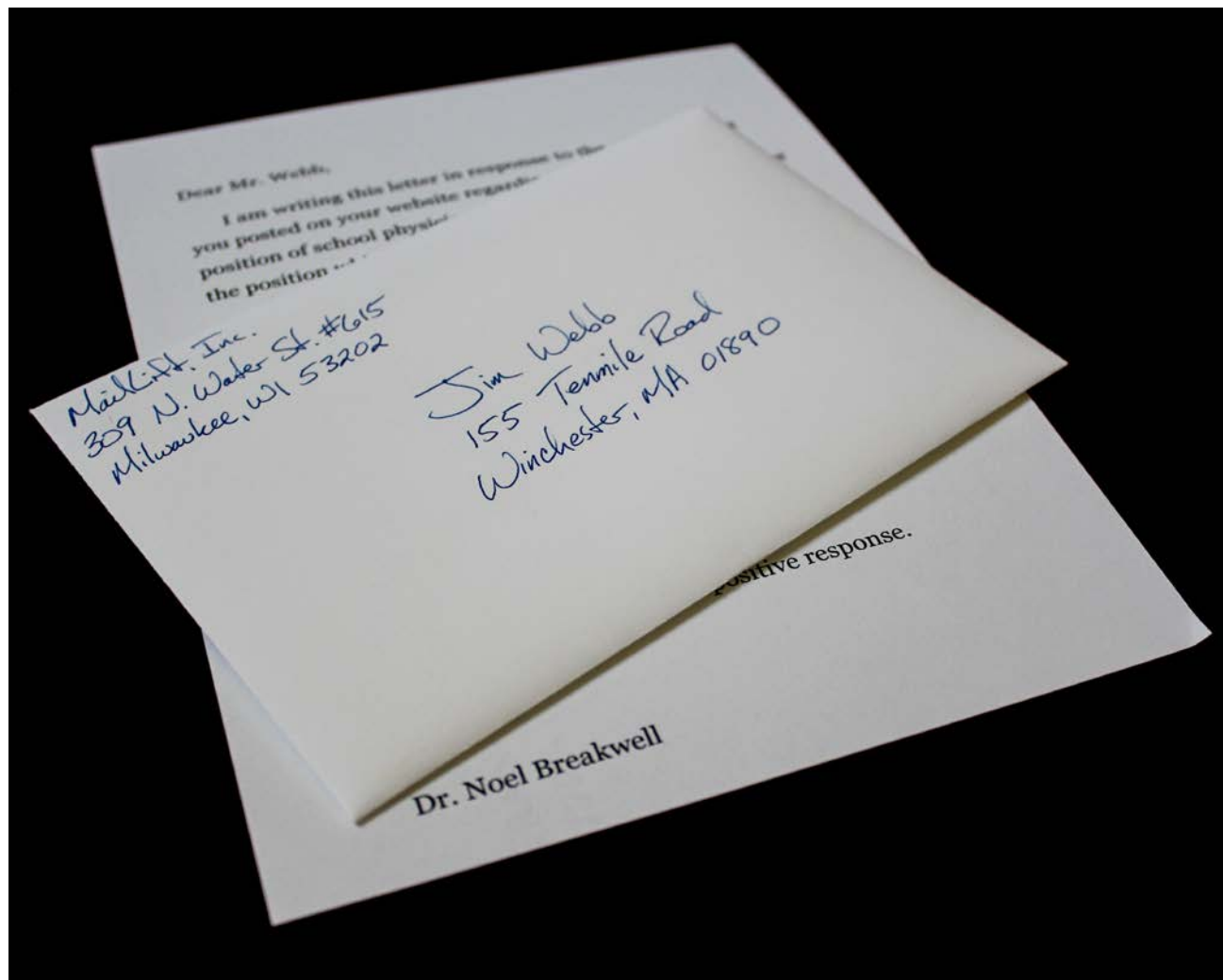
*For appealing to the conversation*

~~1. Mystery~~

~~2. Utility~~

3. You





How do we achieve this effect in a subject line?



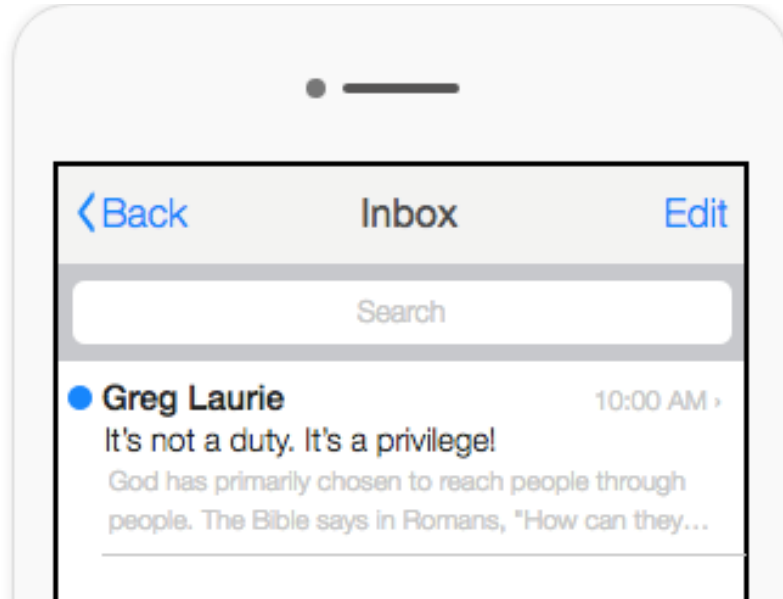
Find a way to naturally add  
the word “you.”



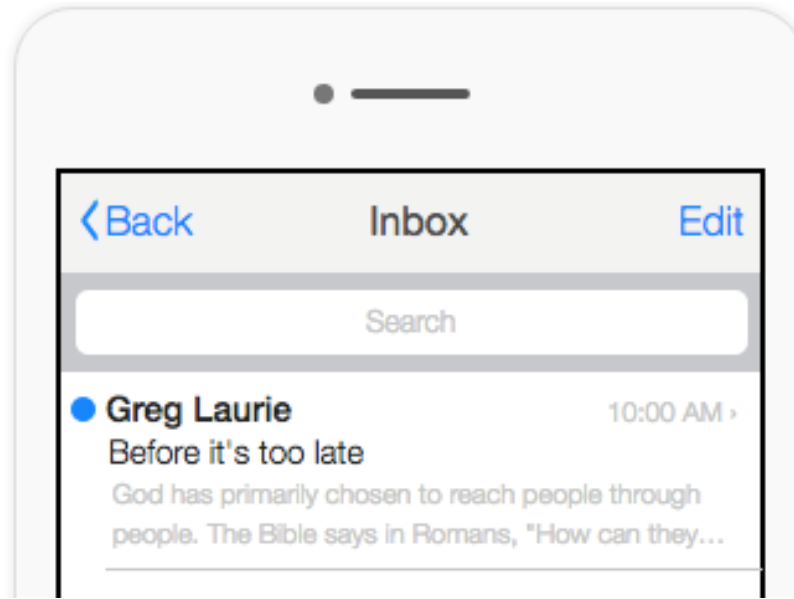


# Remember this?

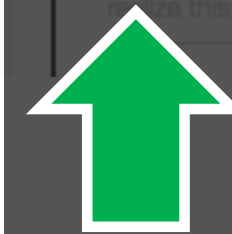
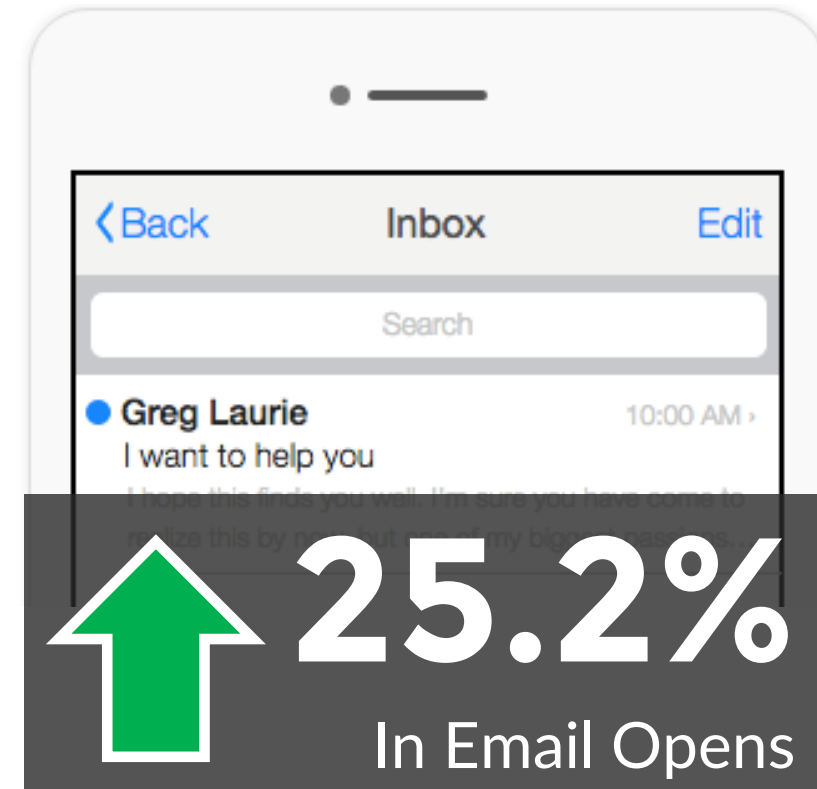
LOSER



LOSER



WINNER



25.2%

In Email Opens

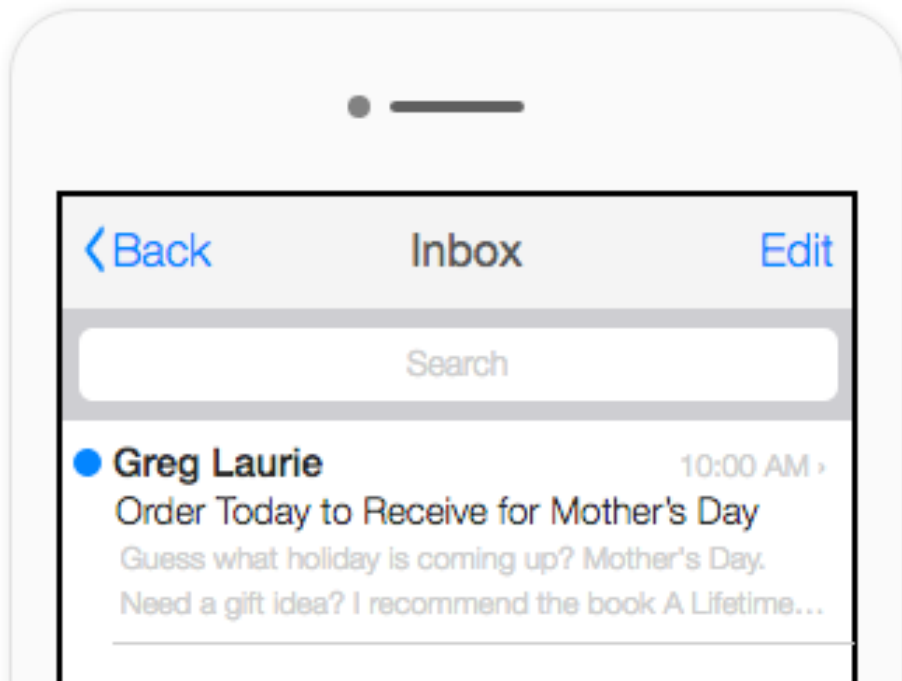


Pay attention to how this  
element can **naturally combine**  
with the previous two  
elements...

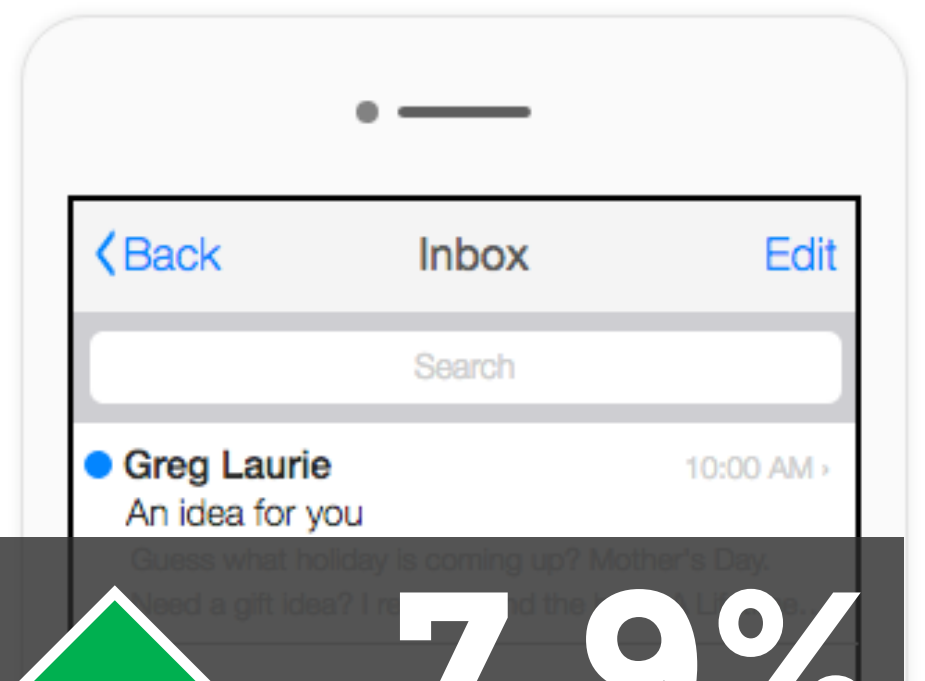


# #3798

VERSION A



VERSION B



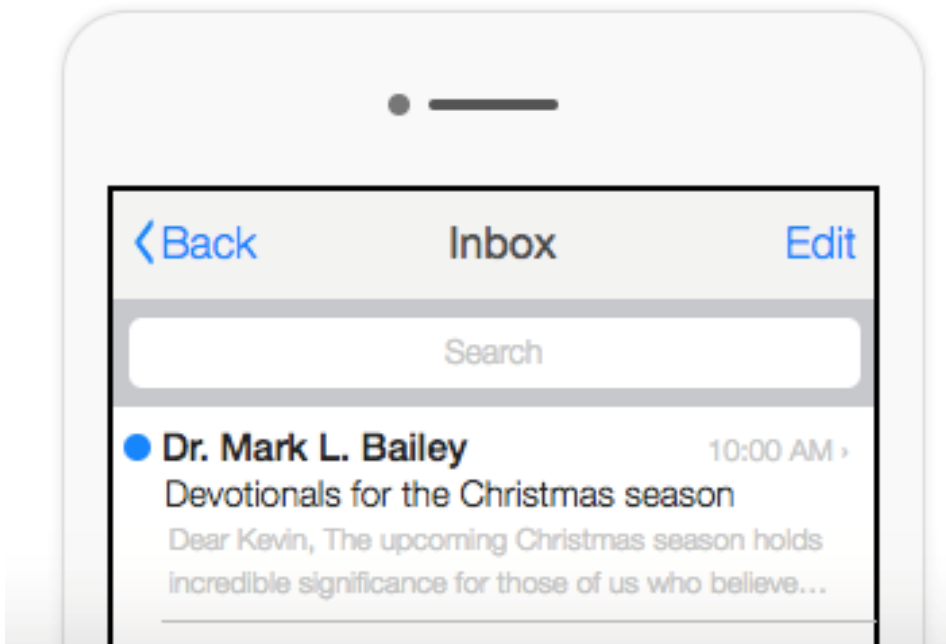
7.9%

In Email Opens

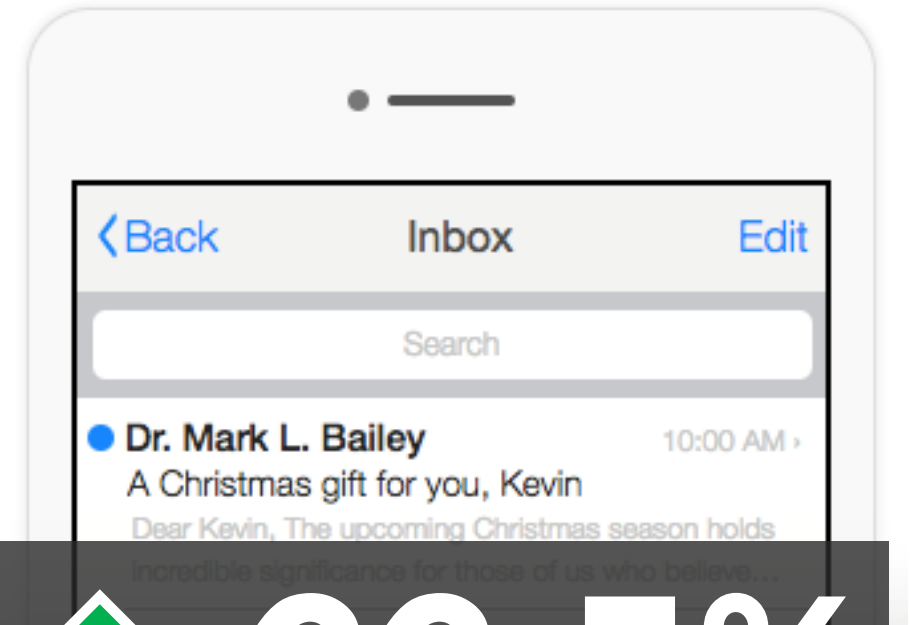



# +MYSTERY + YOU (#5694)

VERSION A



VERSION B



 **22.5%**  
In Email Opens



# +UTILITY + YOU (#3012)

## VERSION A

☐ ☆ **Moody Radio**

**Time Is Running Out To Get Your Free CD** - Thank you for your t

## VERSION B

☐ ☆ **Moody Radio**

**Our Gift to Thank You - A Free CD** - Thank you for your faithful g



**49%**

In Email Opens



Specifically using the word “you”  
isn't as important as making it feel  
like it **was written specifically to**  
**them.**



# What does this mean?



To activate the element of **mystery**, you need to leave *just* enough information out of the subject line concerning the topic.



To activate the element of **utility**, you need to imply that there is something useful: a benefit, a gift, or content that progresses them toward a goal



To activate the element of **you**, you need to imply that this email was made specifically for them, either by using the word “you,” using their name, or writing it so it feels personally addressed.



# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

~~1. Mystery~~

~~2. Utility~~

~~3. You~~

4. Recency





# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

~~1. Mystery~~

~~2. Utility~~

~~3. You~~

4. Recency



# NEWS

Number 554,02540  
internet version #  
<http://newssoft.com>

## Latest news

President has laid out details of an economic plan  
... 2 million jobs. — page 2

**Workers sit-in over money owed to them**  
Windows & Doors factory remained camped out  
... to leave the Goose ... page 6

**Investors**  
... highest weekly investment

## Economic Plan

But as the economy ...  
executive ...  
a ...  
Chrysler ...  
could ...  
Economic ...  
a part of ...  
the ...  
the ...

*Activating*  
**RECENCY**  
*involves using*  
**TIME RELEVANCE**  
*indicators/words.*

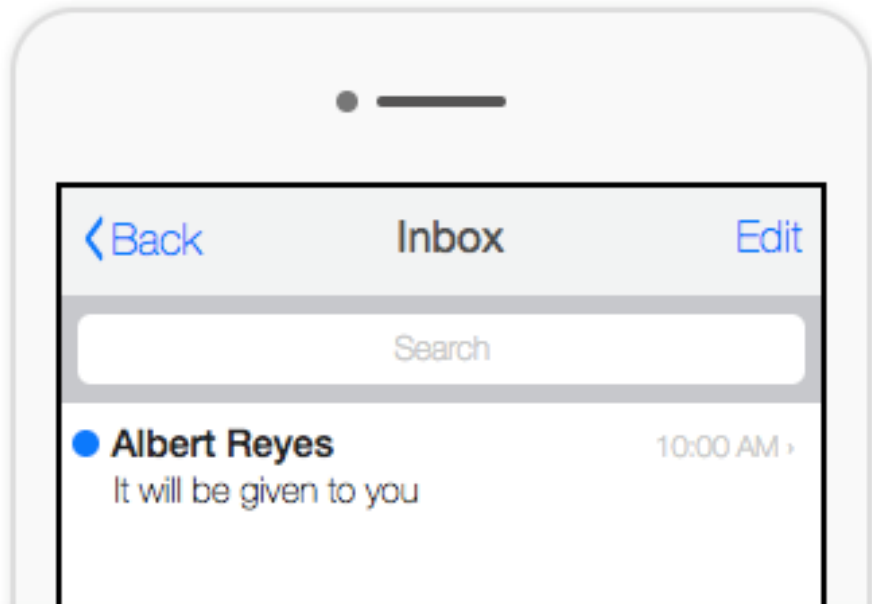


- ✓ Days of the week
- ✓ Yesterday, today, tonight, tomorrow
- ✓ Time of day salutations

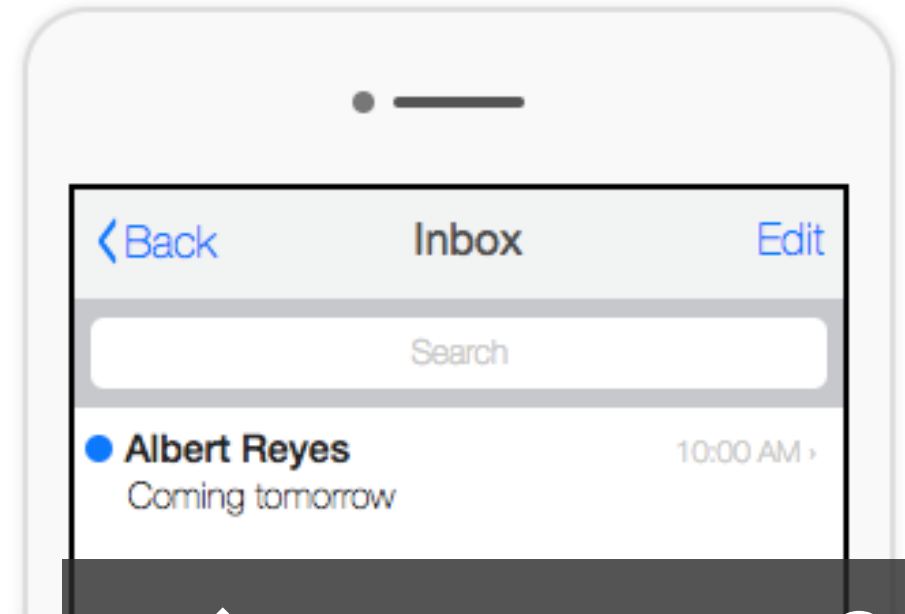


# #8040

VERSION A



VERSION B



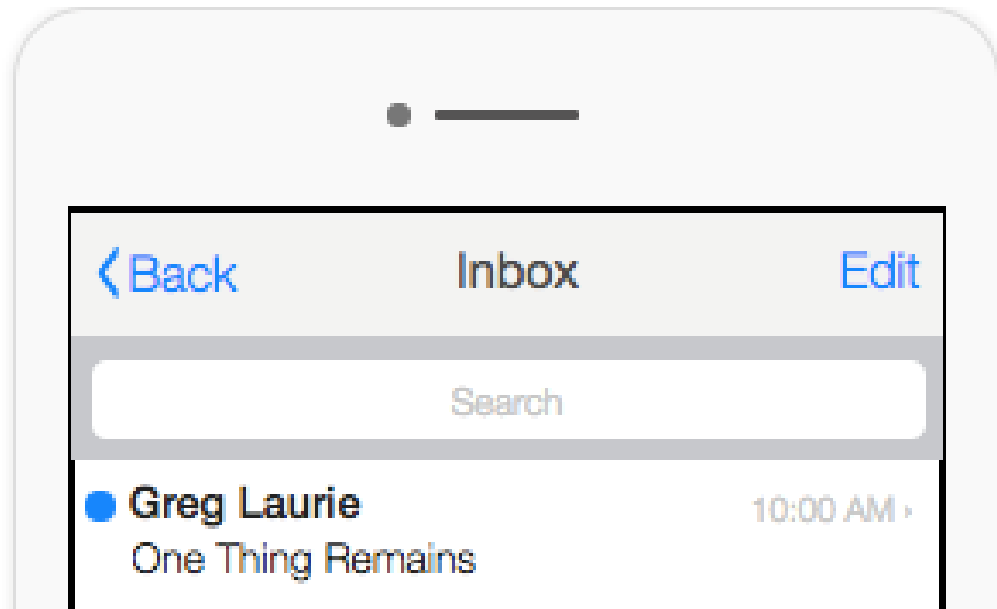
13.3%

In Email Opens

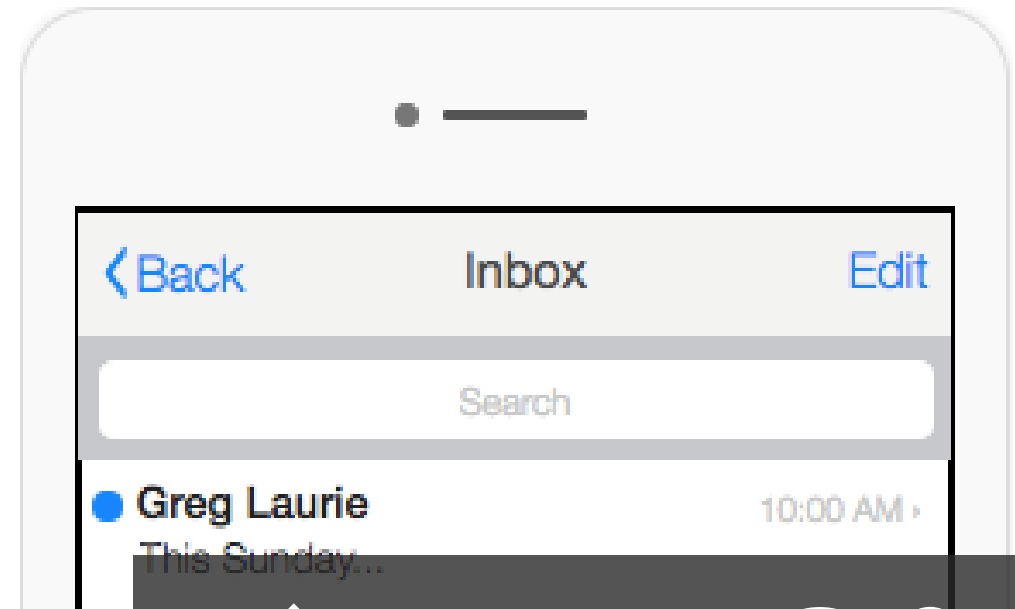


# #6824

VERSION A



VERSION B



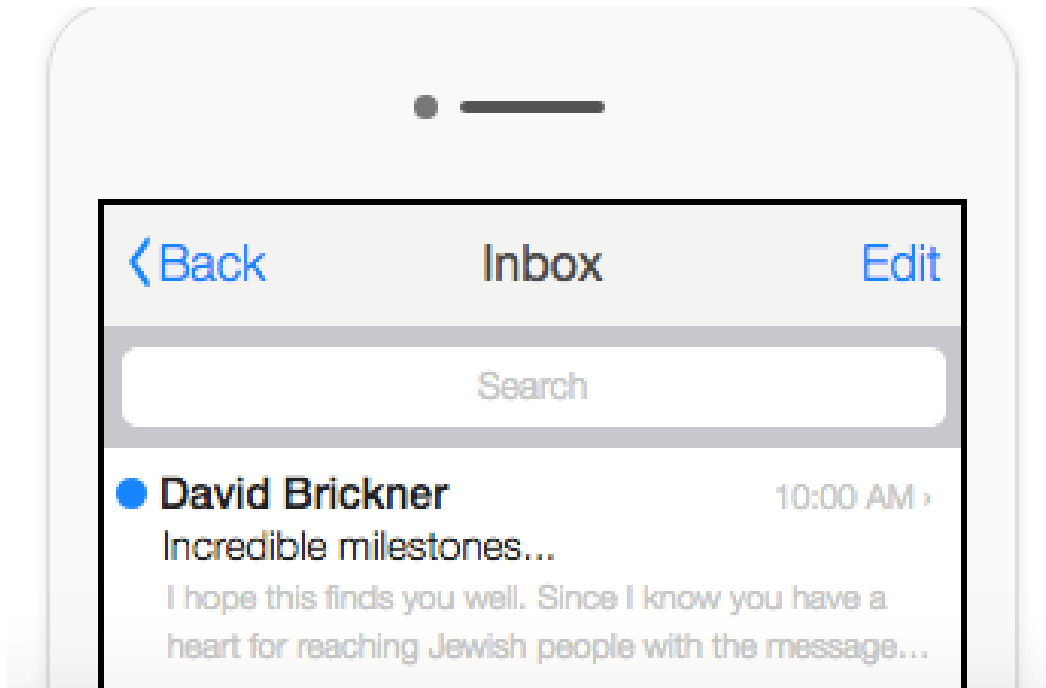
**5.8%**

In Email Opens

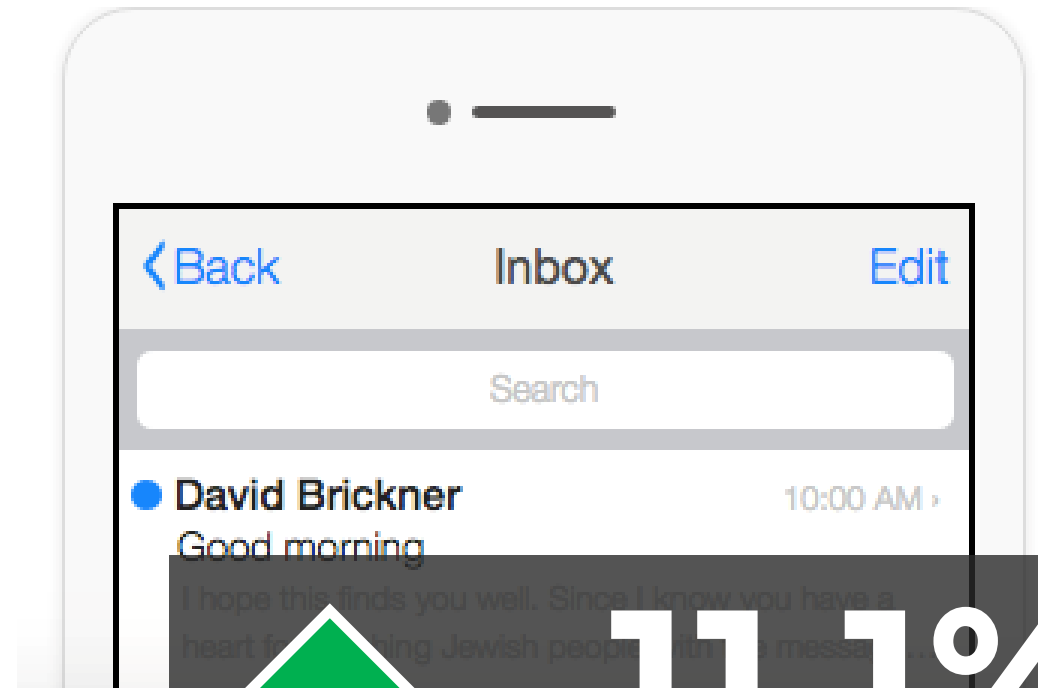


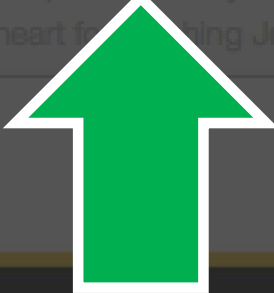
# #5455

## VERSION A



## VERSION B



 **11.1%**  
In Email Opens



#2725

From This

☐ ☆ Greg Laurie

Did you eat too much last week? - I admit it: I ate a little too much last Thursday.

To this

☐ ☆ Greg Laurie

What's special about today? - Happy Tuesday, December 1st. It might seem lik





# What does this mean?



To activate the element of **recency**, you need to use a word that implies your email covers something recent and/or newsworthy.

# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

~~1. Mystery~~

~~2. Utility~~

~~3. You~~

~~4. Recency~~

5. Authenticity



# 5 key levers

*For appealing to the conversation*

~~1. Mystery~~

~~2. Utility~~

~~3. You~~

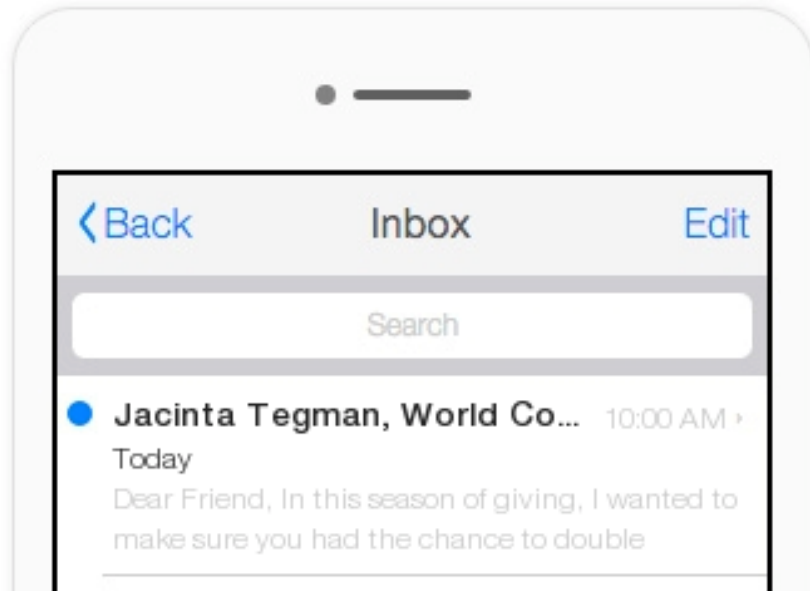
~~4. Recency~~

5. Authenticity

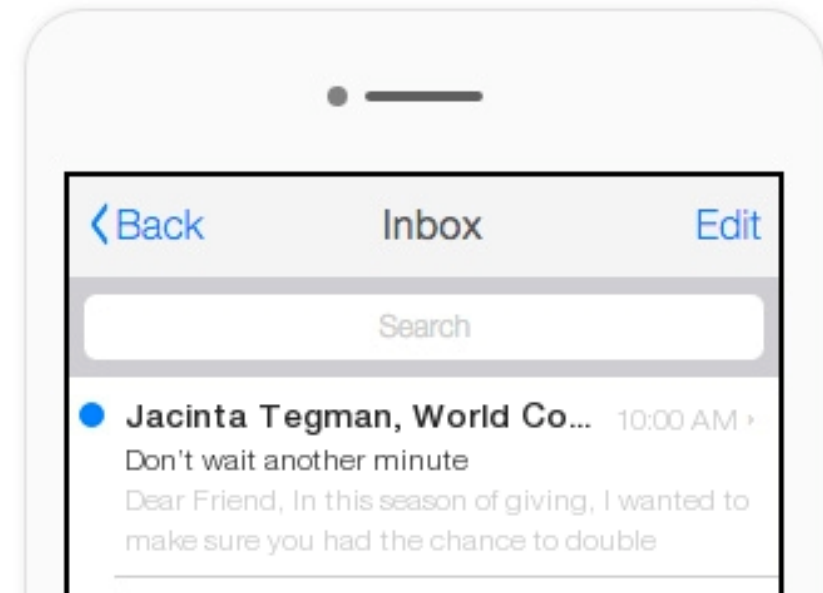


# #5831

## VERSION A



## VERSION B

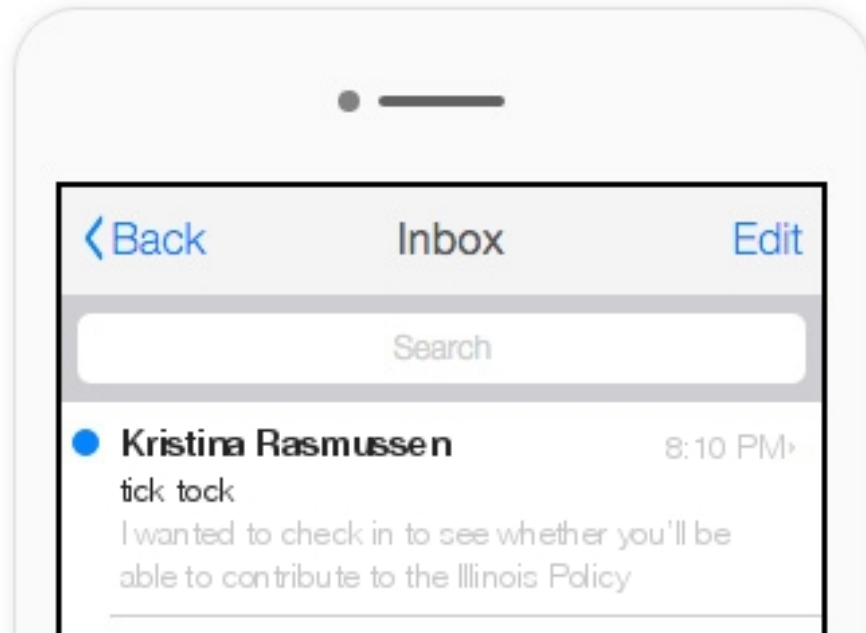


 **-28%**  
In Email Opens

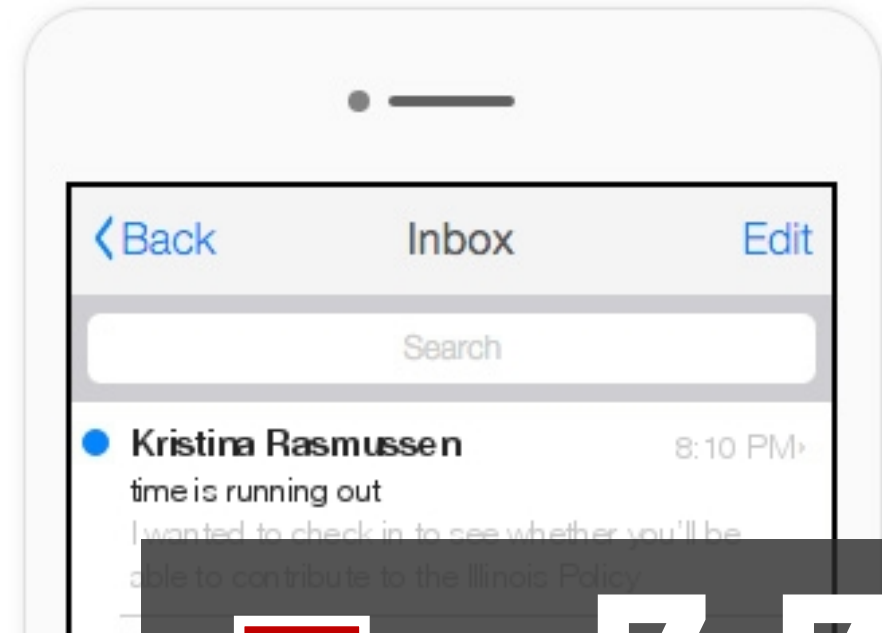


# #6102

## VERSION A



## VERSION B

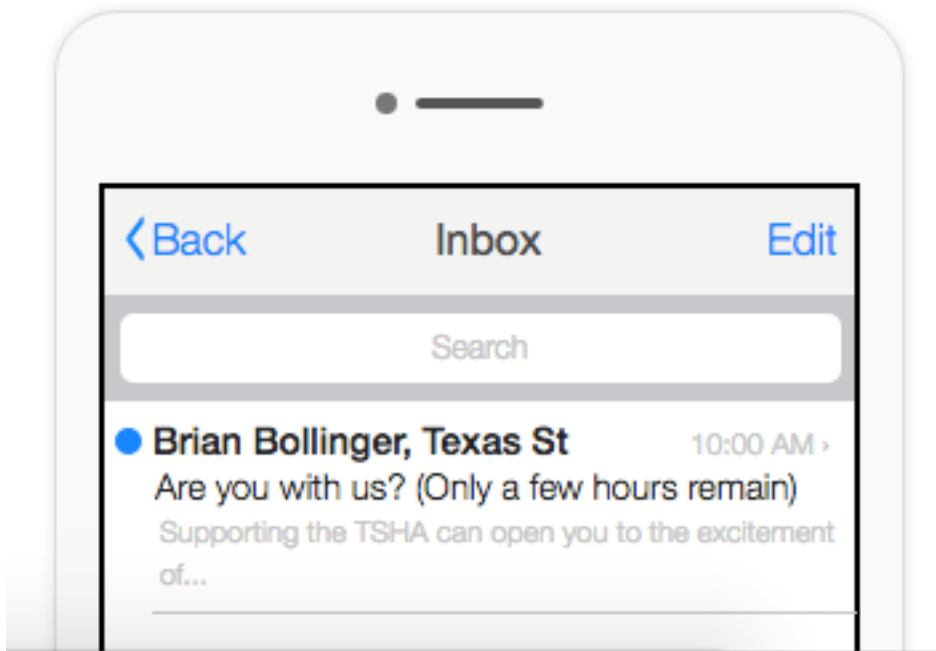


 **-7.7%**  
In Email Opens

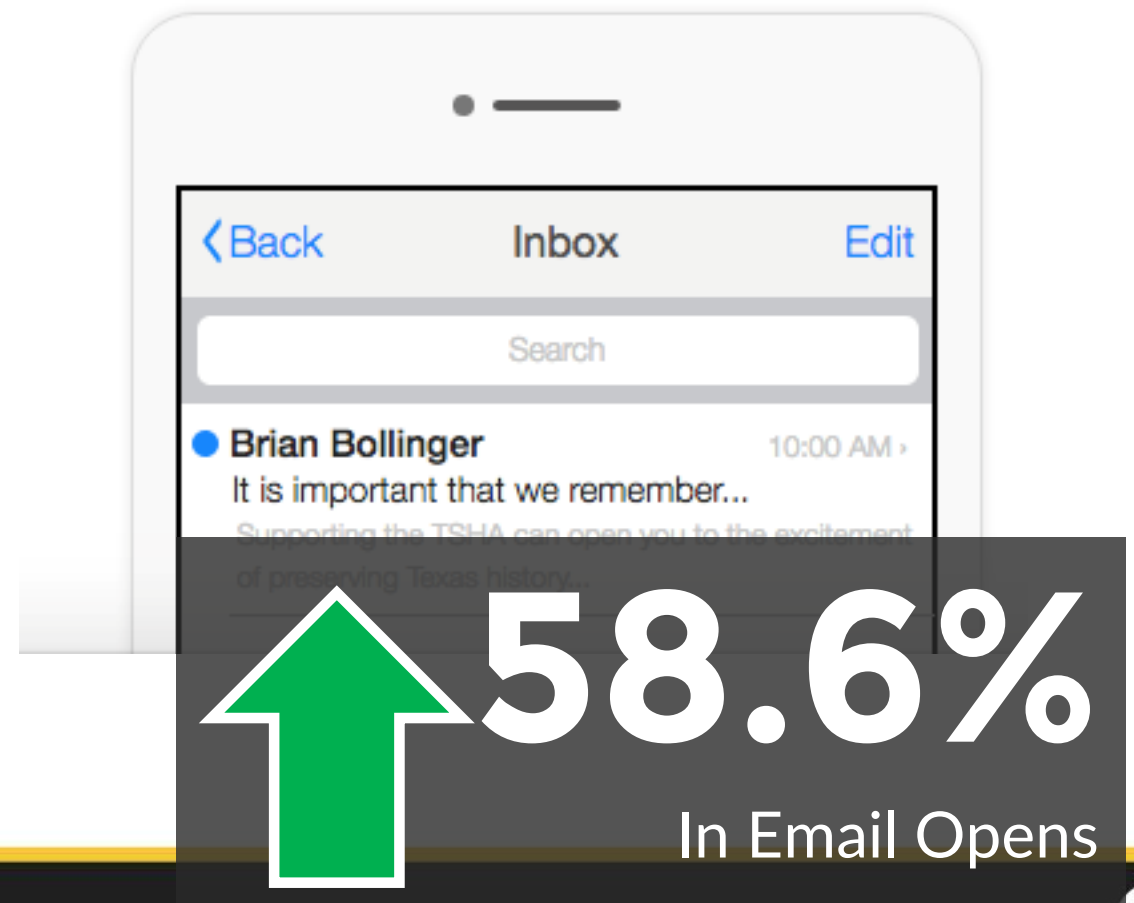


# #2932

## VERSION A



## VERSION B



# #4116

## VERSION A

Bringing the greatest  
message in a generation

## VERSION B

An invitation



# What does this mean?



To activate the element of **recency**, you need to use a word that implies your email covers something recent and/or newsworthy.



To activate the element of **authenticity**, you need to avoid phrases or word pairs that come off as opportunistic.



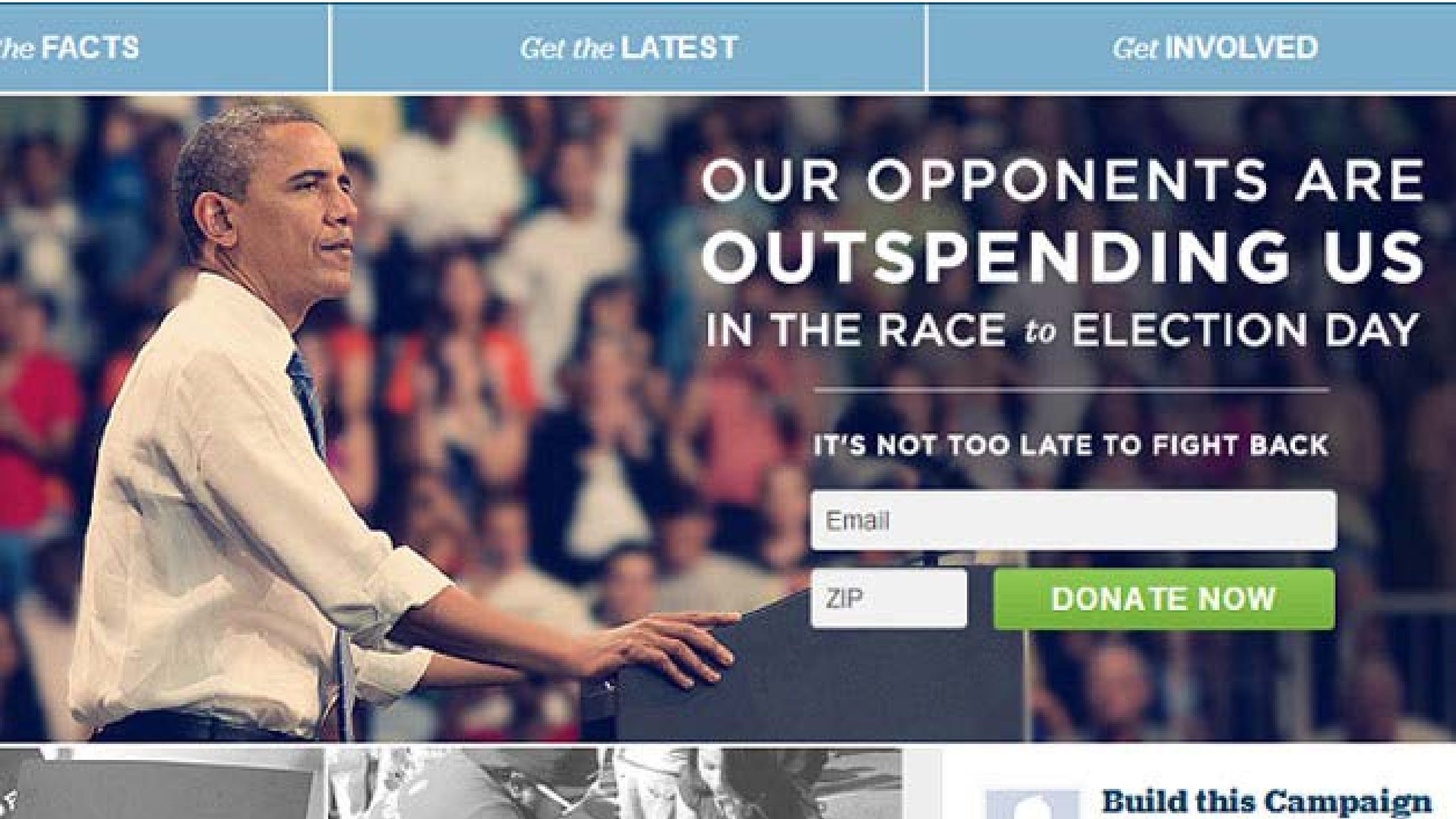
You know whose team  
were experts at this  
approach?



the **FACTS**

Get the **LATEST**

Get **INVOLVED**

A photograph of Barack Obama speaking at a podium, with a large, blurred crowd in the background. The image is the background for the entire page.

# OUR OPPONENTS ARE **OUTSPENDING US** IN THE RACE *to* ELECTION DAY

IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO FIGHT BACK


Email

ZIP

**DONATE NOW**

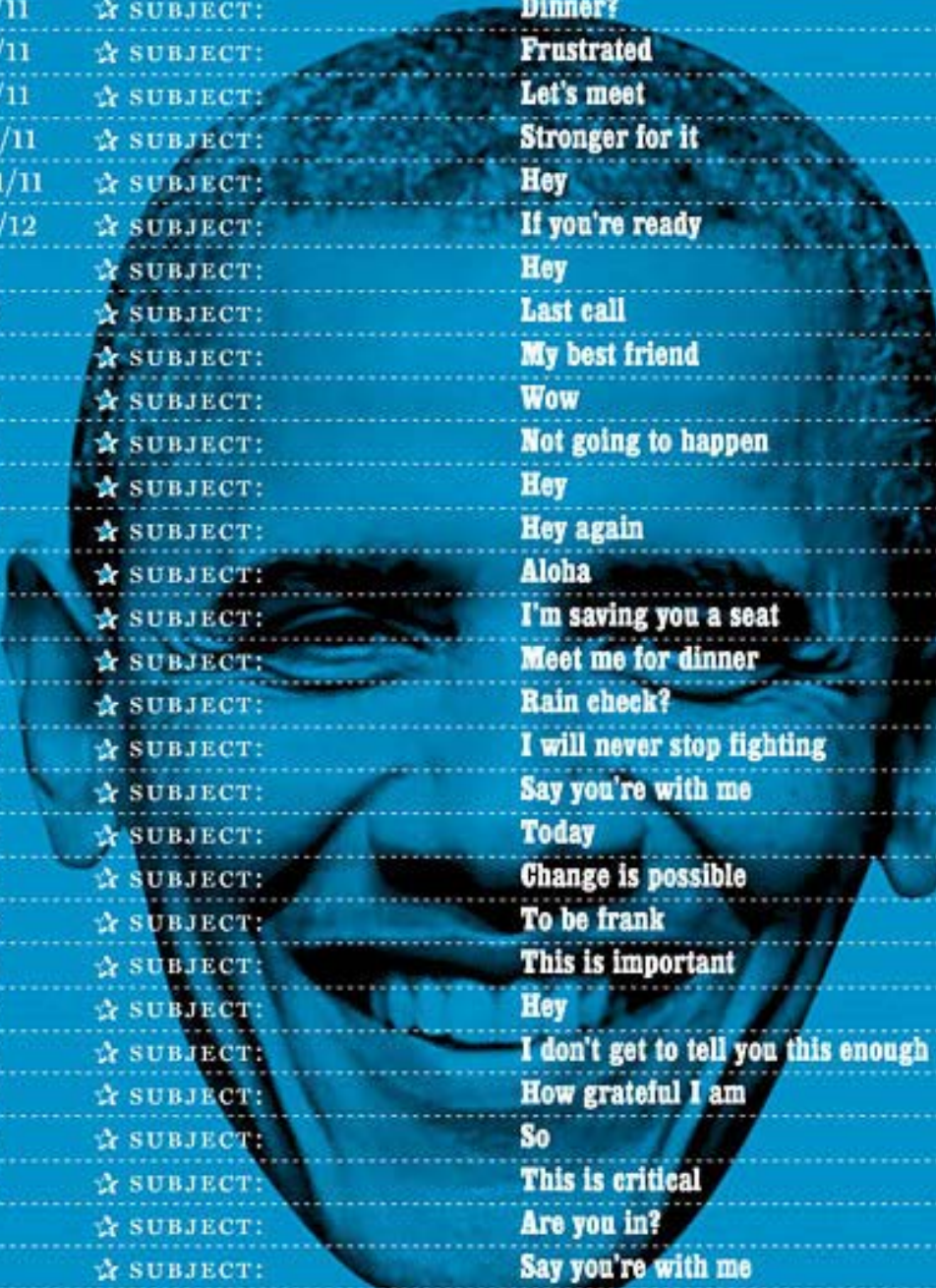


**Build this Campaign**



<input type="checkbox"/>	5/10/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Fixing what's broken
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/15/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Dinner?
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/31/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Frustrated
<input type="checkbox"/>	9/14/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Let's meet
<input type="checkbox"/>	9/30/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Stronger for it
<input type="checkbox"/>	12/31/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	3/27/12	☆ SUBJECT:	If you're ready
<input type="checkbox"/>	3/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	4/30	☆ SUBJECT:	Last call
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/11	☆ SUBJECT:	My best friend
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/22	☆ SUBJECT:	Wow
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Not going to happen
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey again
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Aloha
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/11	☆ SUBJECT:	I'm saving you a seat
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Meet me for dinner
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/15	☆ SUBJECT:	Rain check?
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/25	☆ SUBJECT:	I will never stop fighting
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Say you're with me
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Today
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Change is possible
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/30	☆ SUBJECT:	To be frank
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/30	☆ SUBJECT:	This is important
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	I don't get to tell you this enough
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	How grateful I am
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/31	☆ SUBJECT:	So
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/31	☆ SUBJECT:	This is critical
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/2	☆ SUBJECT:	Are you in?
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/2	☆ SUBJECT:	Say you're with me
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/9	☆ SUBJECT:	This isn't going to stop





<input type="checkbox"/>	5/10/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Fixing what's broken
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/15/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Dinner?
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/31/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Frustrated
<input type="checkbox"/>	9/14/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Let's meet
<input type="checkbox"/>	9/30/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Stronger for it
<input type="checkbox"/>	12/31/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	3/27/12	☆ SUBJECT:	If you're ready
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<input type="checkbox"/>	5/11	☆ SUBJECT:	My best friend
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<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Aloha
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/11	☆ SUBJECT:	I'm saving you a seat
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Meet me for dinner
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/15	☆ SUBJECT:	Rain check?
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/25	☆ SUBJECT:	I will never stop fighting
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Say you're with me
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Today
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Change is possible
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/30	☆ SUBJECT:	To be frank
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/30	☆ SUBJECT:	This is important
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	I don't get to tell you this enough
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	How grateful I am
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/31	☆ SUBJECT:	So
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/31	☆ SUBJECT:	This is critical
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/2	☆ SUBJECT:	Are you in?
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/2	☆ SUBJECT:	Say you're with me
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/9	☆ SUBJECT:	This isn't going to stop

# My personal favorites?







<input type="checkbox"/>	5/10/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Fixing what's broken
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/15/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Dinner?
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/31/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Frustrated
<input type="checkbox"/>	9/14/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Let's meet
<input type="checkbox"/>	9/30/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Stronger for it
<input type="checkbox"/>	12/31/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
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<input type="checkbox"/>	3/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
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<input type="checkbox"/>	5/11	☆ SUBJECT:	My best friend
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/22	☆ SUBJECT:	Wow
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Not going to happen
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey again
<input type="checkbox"/>	5/31	☆ SUBJECT:	Aloha
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/11	☆ SUBJECT:	I'm saving you a seat
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/11	☆ SUBJECT:	Meet me for dinner
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/15	☆ SUBJECT:	Rain check?
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/25	☆ SUBJECT:	I will never stop fighting
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Say you're with me
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Today
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/28	☆ SUBJECT:	Change is possible
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/30	☆ SUBJECT:	To be frank
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/30	☆ SUBJECT:	This is important
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	Hey
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	I don't get to tell you this enough
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/26	☆ SUBJECT:	How grateful I am
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/31	☆ SUBJECT:	So
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/31	☆ SUBJECT:	This is critical
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/2	☆ SUBJECT:	Are you in?
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/2	☆ SUBJECT:	Say you're with me
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/9	☆ SUBJECT:	This isn't going to stop

My personal favorites?

“Hey”

“Hey again”

“Aloha”



# Formula for Appealing to the Conversation

$$3(Ut + Mys) + 2Rc + You - 2uAu$$

Ut (utility)	= Implies something that will benefit/progress them
Mys (mystery)	= Leaves out info to completely determine what it is
You	= Includes “made for them” cue
Rc (recency)	= Includes recency cue
uAu (Unauthentic)	= Includes unnatural/unauthentic cues



# Building your subject line

- This heuristic tells us to create our conversation appealing subject lines like this:
  - Write out a subject line with a primary focus on the reader's benefit/importance growth (utility)
  - Re-write the subject line to not completely give the topic away (mystery)
  - Then try to add a recency cue
  - Then try to add a “made for you” cue or short phrase
  - Finally, check to make sure it doesn't come off as opportunistic or self-centered



# In Summary?





- ✓ You don't always have to be that expert writer...
- ✓ You don't always have to figure out that perfect subject line angle...



*Instead...*

Just give readers the  
**impression**

that you have a  
conversation worth having.

