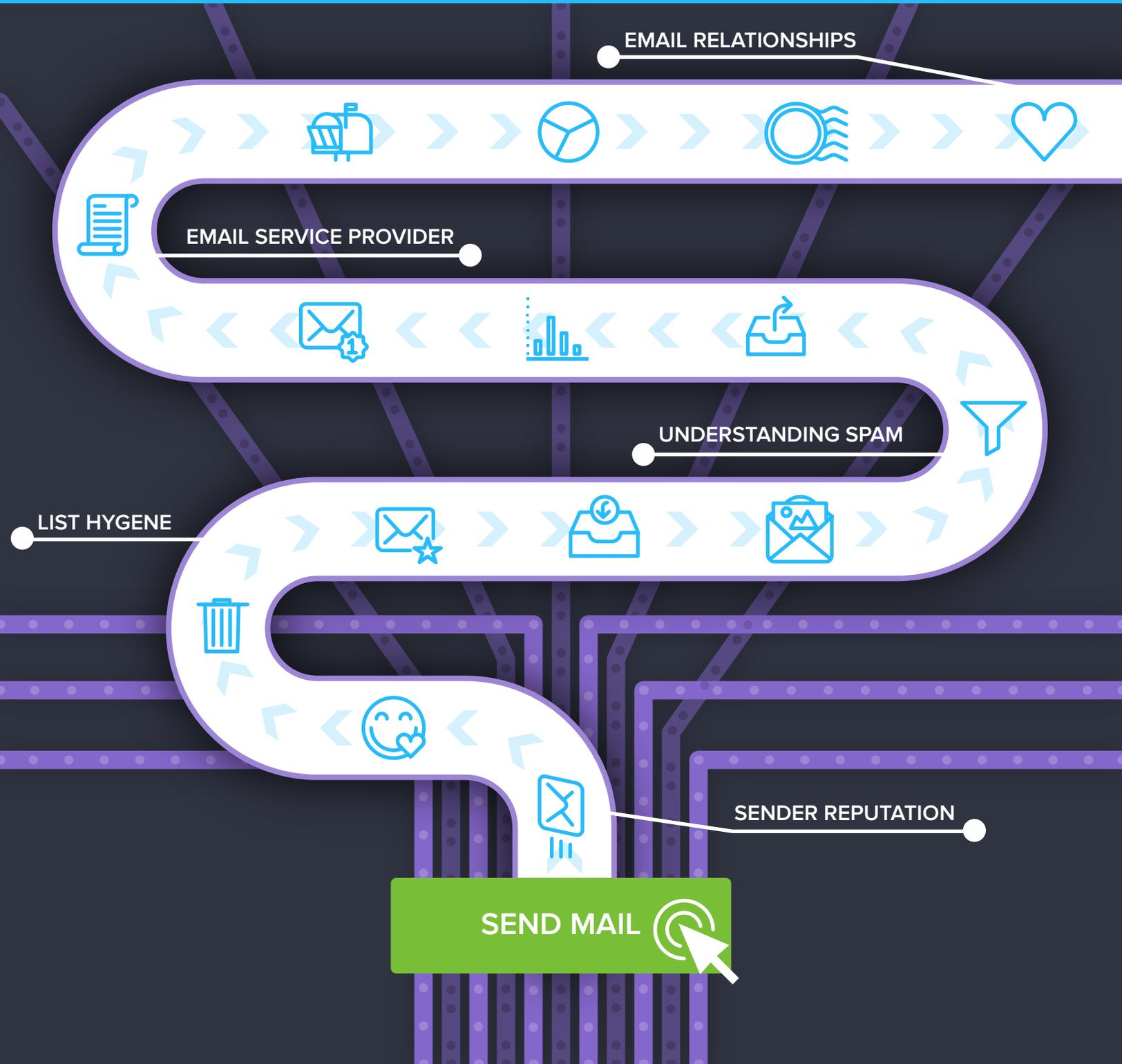
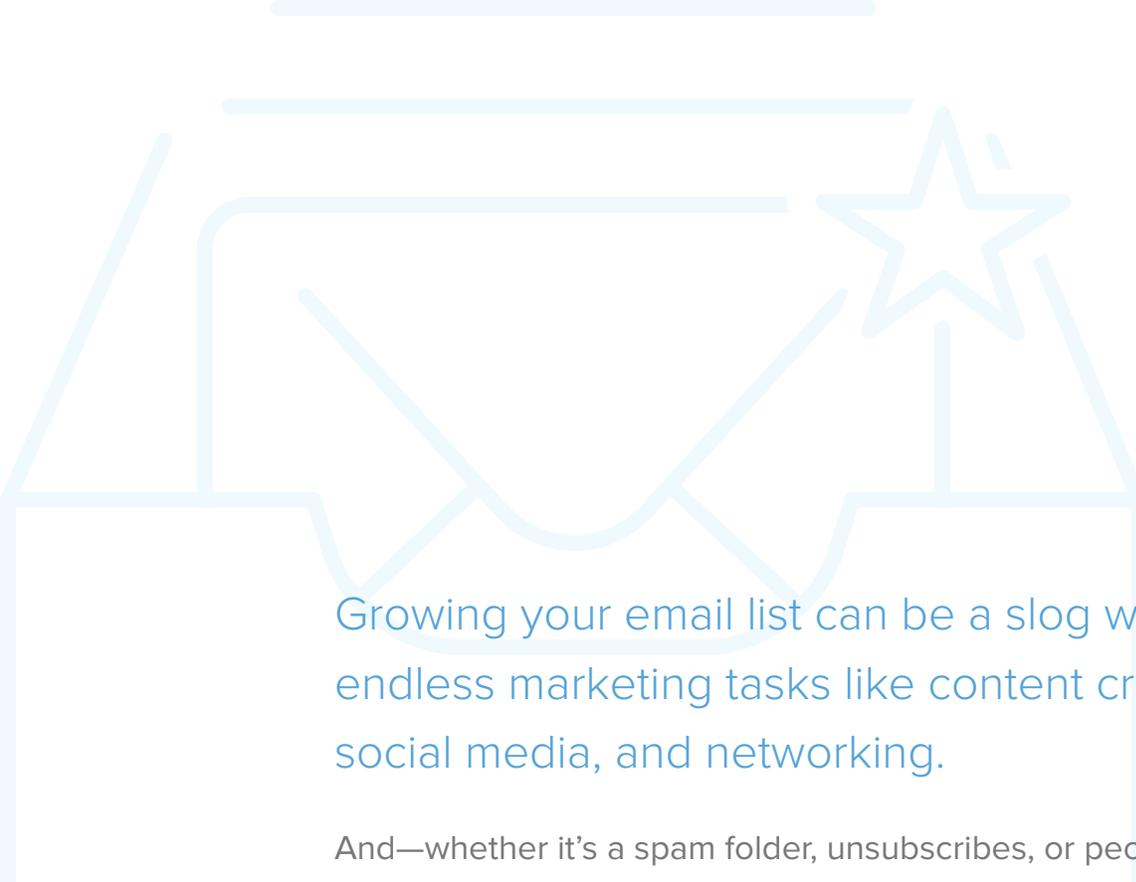


Maximize Your Email Deliverability



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Growing your email list can be a slog with endless marketing tasks like content creation, social media, and networking.

And—whether it’s a spam folder, unsubscribes, or people simply ignoring your offers—**it’s frustrating when your emails to that painstakingly cultivated list go unread.**

Which leaves you asking, “Why?” Why is your engagement rate going down? Why are your emails going to spam? Why are more people unsubscribing?

There isn’t one straightforward answer, but there are a lot of factors at play and a lot of things you can do to increase the deliverability of your emails.

In this guide, you’ll learn:



What a sender reputation is and how it impacts your deliverability;



How spam complaints affect your emails even if you’re not sending spam;



The why and how to keep a clean list; and



Tools you can use to get better inbox placement.



Your Sender Reputation

Remember that guy from high school—the bully who made your life miserable? Chances are that if you see him pop up in your Facebook feed or you run into him at your reunion, those negative memories will be the first ones that pop into your mind, even twenty years later.

Email sender reputation works like your real life reputation: It stays with you.

Think of your email sender reputation like your credit score—it's difficult and time consuming to build, and very, very easy to destroy. A 2012 study by Return Path, a global data solutions provider, found that about **80 percent of email deliverability problems** are attributed to a poor sender reputation. At its most basic, your sender reputation is the reputation that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) associate with your email domain, but in reality, it's far more than that.

Three factors that impact your sender reputation:



Your content

What you put in the body of your email impacts your reputation and your deliverability. This includes:

- Spam-like content, headlines, or images
- Your image-to-text ratio (industry standard is 40:60)
- Your links. If you link to other domains that have low reputations, their reputation will reflect poorly on you think of it as guilt by association



Your server/email service provider (ESP)

Think of an email service provider (ESP) as the engine behind the marketing emails you send. An ESP is not Gmail, Yahoo, or Outlook; Gmail and Yahoo are web mail providers (which means emails are sent, received, and stored through an online browser) and Outlook is an email client (which is computer software that stores your emails on your computer, not online).

ESPs like Infusionsoft, Emma, or MailChimp also have reputations, and their reputation directly impacts your email deliverability. That's why knowing things like an ESP's deliverability rate (Infusionsoft has a rate of 99.5-plus percent) is important.

There are a lot of things ESPs do to keep their deliverability rates up. Just some of the ways they we this at Infusionsoft (and many ESPs will implement some similar steps) include by monitoring and vetting their customers' lists, authenticating

emails, handling bounces, monitoring IP reputation, and having a human compliance and review team. You don't have to know what all of these things are, but it is important to know that ESPs have a lot of measures in place to maintain their deliverability, including ensuring their users follow list hygiene best practices. Otherwise their reputation—and your deliverability—go down.



Your sender domain

This is your domain—the part of your email address that starts with “@” and ends with “.com” (or .org, .edu, or .anything nowadays). The reputation of your sender domain follows you everywhere—no matter which ESP you use or whether you switch ESPs.

If you're falling down in any of these three areas, you're in danger of not making it to the inbox. We know, we know. You're not sending spam—at least not intentionally. But getting into the nitty-gritty on email deliverability means diving into the world of spam, and learning how you might be sending it without knowing it.

Remember, your domain's sender reputation includes everything that's ever been sent from that domain. What if one of your employees, operating under your domain, got a virus on his computer and the virus sent out tons of emails from your domain? Stuff like that can get you blacklisted. That's a nightmare scenario, but it illustrates that having a bad sender domain reputation doesn't mean you're a bad person, it just means there are improvements you can make.



Understanding Spam

Maintaining a good email sender reputation means keeping your external spam rate at less than one per thousand. This isn't something determined by your email provider—it's an industry standard.

There are two types of spam complaints: the external complaint and the internal complaint.

External spam complaints

Recipients make these complaints within their email client—Outlook, Gmail, etc.—when they click the “Mark as spam” button. Most of the clients will then report back to the ESP to opt the user out of the list.

Internal spam complaints

These happen when a recipient clicks the “unsubscribe” button in the email and then choose to report the email as spam on the unsubscribe confirmation page.

To analogize: Let's say there's kid in your neighborhood making trouble and you decide to do something about it. You can either call the cops and let them sort it out (in this case, an external spam complaint) or you can walk the kid to his parents' house, alert them to his behavior, and let them handle it (an internal spam complaint).

In this case—and for our troubled neighborhood miscreant—an external complaint has farther-reaching implications and higher consequences.



Infusionsoft Tip:

At Infusionsoft, our unsubscribe pages come with the option to report an email as spam. At first, users can think this is a bad idea. Why would we allow recipients to mark their emails as spam? But this is actually something we do to protect our users. If someone reports an email as spam to us instead of to Gmail, we get feedback without the penalty.

When your email becomes spam

Your emails are like characters in a Jane Austen novel: Getting engaged is their ultimate purpose. Why? Because spam filters are getting smarter. They've mastered filtering out blatant spam and have evolved to filter out emails that individual users aren't engaging with.

Think about that. Just by not engaging with your email, a recipient can land you in spam city.

But wait. What exactly constitutes “engagement”?

An engaged contact:

- Has recently (within the past four to six months) opted-in
- Has recently opened an email
- Has recently clicked a link within an email
- Has recently purchased a product or service
- Is on a recurring subscription

A contact doesn’t have to meet all of these criteria, but they do have to meet one of them.



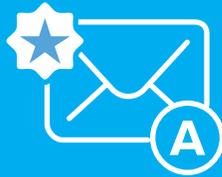
Infusionsoft Tip:

In Infusionsoft, you can tag your contacts by all of these criteria. Once you’ve identified your engaged users, you can opt out your unengaged users.

Opting out your unengaged users doesn’t mean you have to delete their information entirely—and you definitely shouldn’t, especially if they’re past customers and you need to keep their information on file. Instead, you can segment your contacts and move them to a different list.

But here’s something else to keep in mind with engagement: Numbers don’t matter, but percentages do.

Let's say you send Email A to a group of 100 people and Email B to 1,000 people. Here are the stats:



100 recipients



1,000 recipients



50 opens



200 opens



50% open rate

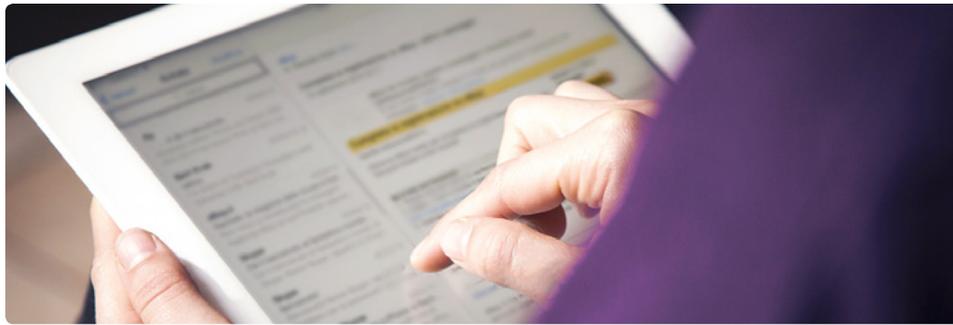


20% open rate

Email A will continue to get good inbox placement, Email B will start to disappear from inboxes—even from the inboxes of people who opened the email—and move to spam folders, even though Email B got a higher number of opens.

That's because **it's all about engagement**, and spam filters measure engagement in percentages, not in numbers. Email B had a 20 percent open rate, and Email A had a 50 percent open rate. Spam filters will infer that Email A has content that recipients find more useful.

Frustrating, isn't it? And consider the fact that if people open your email but don't click your links—or worse, there are no



links for them to click—spam filters will start grabbing that, too. That’s why you want to make sure that you always have engaging content, plenty of high-quality links, and a strong CTA that ensures people will click, and thus continue to receive your emails in your inbox.

Check your email before you send it

The good news is you’re not at the mercy of simply sending your emails and hoping they work out. You can test them!

You can try a service like [mail-tester](#) or [IsNotSpam](#), where you send them your email and get back a spam score. One of the most widely used spam filters SpamAssassin, which is a free, open-source platform that screens incoming emails and scores it based on its defined characteristics of spam.



Infusionsoft Tip:

Infusionsoft uses SpamAssassin to analyze users’ email before they send them. SpamAssassin in Infusionsoft incorporates over 3,000 known spam rules that could negatively impact your SpamAssassin score. Like golf, the lower your score, the better. If there’s a problem, you can adjust the email before it’s sent.

How your ESP can maximize email deliverability

ESPs like Infusionsoft have a responsibility to their users to ensure that their deliverability is at its peak. Here are a few ways that they make sure this happens. As you evaluate what ESP you want to use for your marketing efforts, make sure they are living up to these best practices.

Manual list checks

ESPs should check the integrity of all their users' email lists when users join the service. What are they looking for? They look to make sure users followed proper opt-in protocol, didn't buy their lists, and aren't importing contacts that have gone cold (a cold contact is one that hasn't engaged or been contacted in four months or more).

Throttling

Throttling is the practice of **sending an email to a smaller initial batch of contacts instead of to all of them at once.** It's also a practice specific to Infusionsoft, but it's something to consider when you're looking at the overall reputations of ESPs. When emails are throttled, it doesn't happen all the time—it only occurs with new lists or addresses that haven't been sent an email from Infusionsoft and to addresses that haven't received an email within the last four months.

For example, if an Infusionsoft user wants to send an email to 10,000 contacts, the email will only go out to 500 or 1,000 first.

Then the tool measures the number of spam complaints; if the number of spam complaints is over the allowed threshold, it will automatically stop sending the emails.

While it can seem like a penalty, this is actually a huge boon to users because it protects their domain name's reputation. If the content wasn't engaging to the initial batch of users, it probably won't be engaging to the entire list. So the throttling just saved that user a lot of potential spam reports and gave them the opportunity to further optimize the content in their emails.

Throttling also protects users in the event of a common but nonetheless devastating mistake: importing and sending to a bad list. If you import a list of opt-outs or cold contacts and accidentally send an email to people who don't want it (and this happens), you could do long-term, hard-to-repair damage to your sender reputation when those recipients get mad and report you as spam or opt out if they haven't already.

Think of Infusionsoft as the sober friend trying to prevent you from drunk dialing your ex: We're helping you out, even if it doesn't always feel like it.

Maximize Deliverability Through List Hygiene

Admittedly, on the list of exciting things about running your business, “list hygiene” is probably not up there. But it should be! Practicing good list hygiene can have an enormous positive impact on your email list—and by extension, you’re bottom line.



Quality over quantity

First, we need to get in the mindset of valuing the quality of an email list—and not the quantity of emails. You’ve spent a lot of time and energy growing your list, and you’ve done a great job. But in order for that list to be effective, it has to be made up of recipients who want your quality emails and who engage with them.

Remember, sending emails to those who don’t want them is about as effective as trying to sell Kanye West on the idea of a vow of poverty.

Here are some ways to keep a clean list to increase the deliverability of your emails as you grow your list.

Remove emails from your list

It's tough to remove email addresses off the list you fought to grow, but cleaning up your list will increase your deliverability because you'll end up with fewer unsubscribes or unopens, which translates to higher engagement and better inbox placement and deliverability.

Here are the types of recipients you should remove from your list:

- Unsubscribers*
- Those who mark as spam*
- Hard bounces (invalid email addresses that return your email)*
- Stale subscribers (recipients you haven't emailed or who haven't engaged with or opened your emails in four months or more)

***Infusionsoft will automatically removes these addresses from your marketable list when these actions happen in our ecosystem.**

A note on stale subscribers

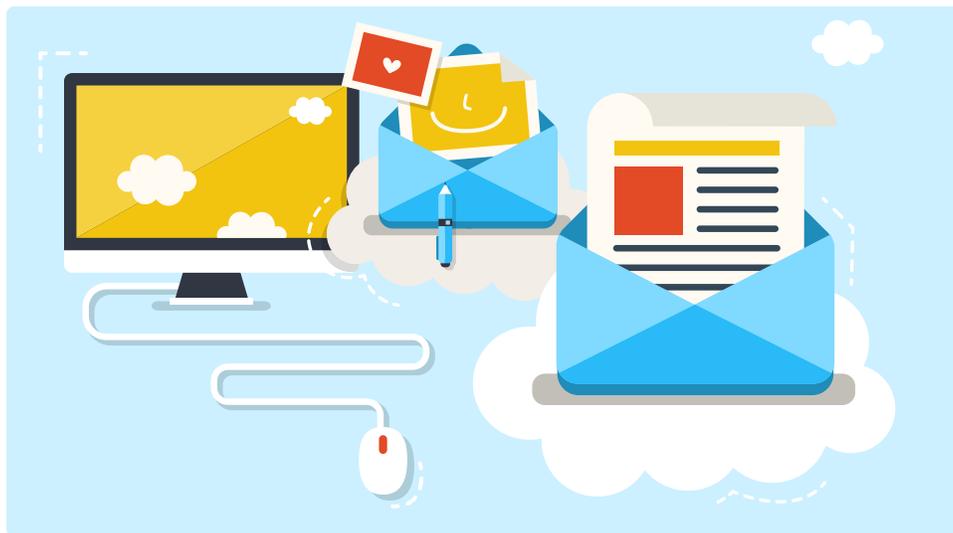
Stale subscribers are perhaps the most difficult to conceive of removing from your list. After all, they opted-in at one point, and they didn't unsubscribe, right?

It's important to understand that an opt-in is not an eternal agreement. You have to get ongoing permission to send emails.

This comes in the form of useful, frequent communications. Stale subscribers can be high risk because they're the most likely to forget why you interacted in the first place and thus are the most likely to mark your emails as spam. Making a practice of sending emails to stale subscribers can really cause your sender reputation and deliverability to take a hit.

You don't have to give up your stale subscribers right away—instead, put them on their own list and send them another email asking them to opt-in again. In the worst-case scenario they won't reply or will unsubscribe. This is actually a good thing as it helps you make sure you keep a list of subscribers who want to engage with you and your emails. Remember, a big but stale list does you no good. It's all about engagement; play the percentages.

In the best-case scenario they re-opt-in to your list and become engaged subscribers, which means you've just added to your subscriber list in a valuable way.



What to do if you switch ESPs

When people switch ESPs, they tend to expect that more people will get their emails, especially since they hear a lot about an ESP's great deliverability rates and good sending reputation. People expect that opt-in rates will go up while spam complaints and opt-outs will go down.

Having read all that goes into sender reputation and list hygiene, at this point you shouldn't be surprised to learn that this is not the case. In fact, the opposite often happens.

But don't panic! There's a good reason, and it's very avoidable.

Remember, your domain's sender reputation remains with you. But when you go through a new ESP, unengaged recipients might suddenly see an email from you in their inbox when your emails had previously been going to spam. After months of thinking they haven't heard from you, they'll see this email from a new ESP and think, "Why am I back on this list?" Then they get frustrated and either opt-out or report you as spam.

If you have a squeaky clean list, you probably won't have this problem. But if your list needs a bit of cleaning, the spike in spam reports and opt-outs can seem shocking. So before you switch to a new ESP, clean up your list and segment it into engaged users and unengaged users.

Before you switch ESPs, send an email to your unengaged (but not opted-out) users and offer them an incentive to reengage or re-opt-in. Then, if they opt-in, move them to your engaged list (which should be your primary list). If they don't, consider them dormant and don't send them regular emails.



You should also send an email to your engaged users, again, before you switch ESPs, that let's them know you're switching email providers and that offers an incentive to send them something for free once the switch happens. Then send the offer from your new ESP. You might also want to ask them to make sure to move you from the promotions folder to the primary inbox, or to add your address to their contacts.

By giving engaged recipients the heads up and an incentive, you create anticipation so that when they receive your first email from your new ESP, they'll open it and your engagement rate will increase.

This way, when you import your list to your new ESP, you'll be assured that your regular, engaged recipients are the one receiving emails from you, and you can mitigate initial opt-out or spam spikes.

Maintaining a Great Email Relationship

As in real life, maintaining a positive relationship with your subscribers requires frequent but not pestering communication. When you're texting with a paramour, both radio silence and continuous messages are not good, you have to hit that sweet spot. It's the same principle when emailing your list.

First, make sure that when you obtain opt-ins, you state what the frequency of your communications will be so that you set expectations from the start. Then, maintain that frequency. If you lapse in your communications for a while, then they suddenly start receiving more frequent emails, people might feel spammed.

That said, don't scale so far back on your communication that your list goes cold. We recommend that you contact your list no less than quarterly.



Maintaining a positive relationship with your subscribers requires frequent but not pestering communication.



You also need to ensure that the content in your emails is relevant and consumable, and part of that is not automatically opting people in to newsletters or other emails. Remember, permission is only explicit when it's voluntary.

Email deliverability isn't always simple, but it is pretty straightforward: Make sure that when you send emails, you're sending them to people who want them when they want them and that they contain the content recipients want. Keeping your goals focused on your recipients instead of just your list-growth goals will help you reap repeated long-term rewards.

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Ellis Friedman

Ellis has spent a lot of her adult life chest-deep in small business adventures, especially the year she spent opening the Beijing branch of a Shanghai-based air purifier and lifestyle business. Most of her experience stems from her diverse media background in film, magazine publishing, blogging, and photography, but she's also a published author and Infusionsoft's blog manager. Ellis has an idiosyncratic fondness for grammar, style, and sarcasm, and fills most of her time away from the keyboard tasting scotch whisky, traveling abroad, and hiking.