

We Know Email: Secrets of Best in Class Email Senders





Secrets of a Successful Email Program

In 2016, 21 percent of legitimate email was diverted to spam folders or blocked altogether, rather than reaching its intended target. Yet among top senders, only two percent of email fails to reach the inbox. What do these best in class senders know that seemingly eludes other marketers?

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix, hidden workaround, or monetary investment that can guarantee access to the inbox. Becoming a best in class sender is a challenging, ongoing process. It requires marketers to look over every aspect of their email program and optimize each component on a continual basis. But there are many concepts—“secrets,” if you will—that best in class senders know and use to their advantage.

We'll let you in on a few of these secrets in the pages that follow. Use this knowledge wisely, and you could be on your way to becoming a best in class email sender.





Secret #1: Best in Class Senders Know the Importance of Reaching the Inbox

Best in class senders know that if their emails don't make it to the inbox, their customers will never have the opportunity to read and react to their messages. Failure to reach the inbox means losing out on the chance to build stronger relationships with existing customers and create relationships with new customers. Every message that gets diverted to spam is a missed opportunity to drive revenue.

On the other side of the equation, mailbox providers want to provide their users with an optimized email experience—delivering messages they want and preventing any spam or unsolicited email from reaching their inbox. To achieve this, mailbox providers analyze incoming mail to determine who the sender is, what kind of sender they are, and how recipients have previously reacted to messages from this sender. Are they a responsible sender whose messages are frequently opened, or do their messages typically generate numerous complaints?

Each mailbox provider has its own filtering algorithm, weighing different elements of an email program to determine whether to accept messages and where to deliver them. While exact formulas for each mailbox provider are different—and unknown to senders—the factors and thresholds they incorporate are generally the same and fall into three categories:



Sending Identity



Reputation



Subscriber Engagement

Best in class senders constantly evaluate and optimize these three factors, earning themselves access to the inbox. There's a lot to learn and understand about these important concepts, so we'll explore each of them in greater detail.



Secret #2: Best in Class Senders Have an Established Sending Identity

Establishing and maintaining a consistent sending identity is one of the first steps in becoming a best in class sender. Sending identity helps mailbox providers to pinpoint the source of an email, and consists of two parts: the IP address and sending domain.



IP address is represented by a unique string of numbers—similar to a telephone number—that essentially indicate where a message is being sent from. In the past, an IP address was the standard form of sender identification. However, as the number of available IP addresses has increased, many spammers are taking advantage of this by jumping to a new IP address whenever their messages start getting blocked. Because of this, mailbox providers also look at domain to identify an email's sender.



Sending domain is a more recognizable form of sender identification. A sender's domain is listed after the @ symbol in their email address. For example, whether you chat with our service team or subscribe to our blog, the addresses of the emails you receive from Return Path will end in @returnpath.com. This serves as an indication to both subscribers and mailbox providers of where the message came from—and unlike IP addresses, domains are a bit harder to dispose of.

Best in class senders know that mailbox providers strictly evaluate the sending identity of any incoming mail, in order to avoid delivering spam to their users. The two main markers mailbox providers look for in a trustworthy sending identity are sending permanence and authentication.



Sending permanence takes into account the sending history of an IP address. Just as banks look at your credit history for credit worthiness, mailbox providers look at sending history for inbox worthiness. A lack of sending history doesn't allow mailbox providers to determine if mail belongs in the inbox or spam folder, so they place additional restrictions (e.g., throttling) on messages from new IP addresses to limit any potential negative impact to their networks, as well as their users, until the IP address builds up a sending history.



Authentication allows mailbox providers to associate an identity with a sender, and the ability to measure and track a sender's reputation. Mailbox providers check for a [SPF](#), [DKIM](#), and a [DMARC](#) record on incoming mail to separate legitimate email from emails spoofing legitimate brands. Messages that are authenticated by all three protocols may see less filtering and consequently a higher inbox placement.

To strengthen your sending identity:



Change your IP address only as a last resort

Moving to a new IP address will not save you from reputation issues. Along with the challenges of warming up a new address, failure to resolve the underlying issues harming your reputation means they will just resurface on your new IP address.



Warm up your new IP address

If you need to set up a new IP address, take it slow. Gradually begin sending a small volume of mail—ideally to your more engaged users—to build up a positive reputation on your new IP address. As you steadily prove you are a legitimate and responsible sender, you can gradually increase your volume.



Maintain consistent send volume

Large spikes in sending volume are viewed negatively by mailbox providers and can impact your ability to reach the inbox. If you need to increase your sending volume, do it gradually.



Authenticate your email

Protect your program and your customers by authenticating your email. Mailbox providers view authenticated email as more trustworthy and are more likely to deliver it to the intended recipient. Authenticate your program with SPF, DKIM, and DMARC.



Secret #3: Best in Class Senders Have a Strong Sender Reputation

Best in class senders know that reputation is a critical factor in determining whether—and where—email is delivered. Mailbox providers evaluate sender reputation in deciding whether email is legitimate or spam.

While the exact reputation calculations for each mailbox provider are undisclosed, many mailbox providers have stated the factors they consider in their postmaster pages. The most common factors that multiple mailbox providers evaluate are complaints, spam traps, and blacklisting.



Complaints are an indication of how email recipients view an email program—generated by a “this is spam/junk” complaint—and weigh heavily on a sender’s reputation calculation. The acceptable threshold differs by mailbox provider: some advise below 0.2 percent while others advocate for a stricter 0.1 percent. In our recent [Hidden Metrics of Email Deliverability](#) report, we discovered that the average complaint rate in 2016 was 0.19 percent.



Spam traps come in two varieties: pristine and recycled. Pristine spam traps are addresses that are specifically created to identify bad mailers. These addresses have never been used by a real user and are hidden on websites, only accessible to harvester robots. Recycled traps are email addresses that were once held by real users, but were later abandoned and converted into spam traps. Mailbox providers severely penalize senders who send mail to spam traps. Having just one spam trap on your email list could harm your sender reputation, resulting in a significant drop in inbox placement.



Blacklists are public listings of known sources of spam. Similar behaviors that harm reputation can cause a sender to land on a blacklist. There are [multiple existing blacklists](#)—some that check IP addresses and some that list domains—and each mailbox provider has different ones they check and factor heavily into their reputation calculation.

To build up your sender reputation:



Monitor your reputation

Sender reputation is not static. Every campaign you send could alter your reputation. It's important to know if, when, and why your reputation declines so you can immediately address any issues and limit the impact on your program. Some mailbox providers offer their own reputation calculation, but you can also check your [Sender Score](#) which incorporates the same factors most mailbox providers use to calculate your reputation. This will help to identify if and when your reputation has been impacted.



Keep your list clean

Spam traps, unknown users, and unengaged subscribers can have a detrimental impact on your email program. Ideally you should run your list through a [list hygiene](#) service, which will validate whether the email address belongs to a active person. Alternatively, you can suppress and remove users who have not engaged with your email program within the last 60 days. This will help you identify addresses that could potentially harm your reputation.



Sign up for feedback loops

While complaints are not ideal, ignoring them will only harm your program. Optimize your program to immediately address complaints by signing up for feedback loops. Each mailbox provider offers its own [feedback loop service](#). Identify which ones are valuable to your program and sign up.



Identify where complaints are coming from

Reacting to complaints is only the first step. If you don't know the cause, the rest of your subscribers are likely to issue their own complaints. By identifying where your complaints are coming from, you can discover what parts of your program need to be fixed to limit subscriber dissatisfaction. Download our [Guide to Subscriber Complaints](#) to learn where and why subscribers complain.



Check for Blacklisting

Mailbox providers include blacklisting in their filtering decisions, so it's important to know immediately if you are blacklisted and where. Make sure you regularly check your IP address on a [blacklist lookup](#) and understand the process for getting delisted.



Secret #4: Best in Class Senders Have Engaged Subscribers

All marketers understand that loyal, engaged customers are critical to business success—they are the repeat buyers and the brand advocates that make a marketer's job easier. But best in class senders know that there's another important benefit to having loyal customers, beyond the steady stream of revenue they provide. They can also help to ensure that your email messages reach the inbox.

In years past, proving that you are a legitimate, responsible sender was all it took to reach the inbox. Now, mailbox providers are enhancing their filtering decisions by using [engagement-based metrics](#) to determine how their email recipients view a particular program. This allows them to not only judge whether incoming mail is legitimate, but also whether it is desired by their users.

Proving “desirability” is not as simple as it might sound. While you might believe your content is doing well and generating a valuable ROI, mailbox providers might not agree with you. This is because they use different metrics to measure your desirability than the ones you use to measure your email's effectiveness. They are also evaluating you against other senders.

Mailbox providers define engagement as the positive and negative actions that users take in their mailboxes. Metrics such as read rate, reply rate, and forward rate show that users are opening, responding to, and sharing your content with others—indicating to mailbox providers that the content is valuable. Messages tagged with “this is not spam” are an additional positive signal that indicates that the content was so valuable that users actively went into their spam folder to find and rescue it.

Negative metrics like complaint rate and delete before reading rate are strong indications of disinterest. As mentioned above, complaints are triggered when a email recipient marks a message as spam or junk, indicating that the content is unwanted. The delete before reading rate is calculated by the amount of messages email recipients actively ignore by moving them to the deleted folder without opening them.

To boost subscriber engagement:



Segment your list

Your subscriber list contains a variety of people with different preferences, so a single message is not going to resonate with everyone. Treat them as individuals! Separate your subscriber list into different segments and create unique messages specific to each group. Some of the more common ways to segment your list include subscriber lifecycle, previous purchase behavior, and level of engagement. The best way to segment subscribers is different for each brand and depends on goals of your email program.



Test everything

One of the great benefits of email is the ability to test every aspect of your program to optimize the subscriber experience. Before you send out your next campaign, try testing one aspect of your campaign to a sample of your list. If you need some inspiration, here are [50 different ideas](#) on what you can test.



Evaluate your past metrics

Analyzing your past performance can provide valuable insight into subscriber preferences. By determining which campaigns were a success and which failed, you can identify what elements are more likely to spark engagement and which will generate complaints.



Certification: The Best of the Best

Among the very best email senders, there's one more powerful secret that ensures consistent and reliable inbox placement: whitelisting. By strictly adhering to all of the best practices we've shared in this guide, top senders earn the opportunity to become whitelisted.

A whitelist is a record of senders who meet established standards for reputation, engagement, and sending practices, thus proving themselves to be legitimate and responsible senders. Whitelisted senders receive special benefits which may include less stringent filtering, zero throttling, and other perks, resulting in higher inbox placement rates.

Whitelists run by individual mailbox providers—like [Yahoo](#) and [AOL](#)—are only able to offer these benefits for mail sent to their own users. However, as most brands have subscribers at multiple mail clients, best in class senders opt for a more universal whitelist that recognizes their proven responsible sending practices and allows them preferred access by multiple mailbox providers.

The [Return Path Certification program](#) is a widely accepted whitelist that receives benefits from many mailbox providers, including:

- **Preferential inbox placement** at global and regional mailbox providers like Microsoft, AOL, Yahoo, Comcast, Orange, and Mail.ru
- **Favorable reputation and treatment** at critical filters like Cloudmark, SpamAssassin, and SpamCop
- **Increased deliverability** during the crucial holiday season when mailbox providers typically throttle and filter high-volume senders
- **Automatically enabled images and links** to maximize subscriber engagement
- **Dedicated 24/7 monitoring team** to provide you with security alerts as issues occur
- **Personal performance data** at select mailbox providers, including complaints, SRD votes, spam traps, etc.
- **Email alerts** that include actionable content if your performance drops

With Return Path Certification, senders are able to elevate their program with a firmly established sending identity, improved sender reputation, and a boost in inbox placement.

Average yearly inbox placement rates of Certified vs. non-certified senders

We took a look at the sending performance of over 5 billion messages sent by 17 thousand brands in 2016. Throughout the year, Return Path Certified senders experience five percent higher inbox placement than non-certified senders. The greatest benefits are at Microsoft and Yahoo mailboxes where Certified senders see an average of 11 percent and seven percent higher inbox placement, respectively.

Increase in inbox placement for Certified senders



Average holiday inbox placement rates of Certified vs. non-certified senders

Certified senders also receive benefits during the crucial holiday season, when many mailbox providers begin to throttle messages in response to the increase in email volume. Over the holiday season, Return Path Certified senders are able to maintain their higher inbox placement rates while their non-certified competition find themselves blocked from the inbox.

Increase in inbox placement for Certified senders



**Return Path
Certified senders
sent to**

97%
**fewer
pristine spam traps**



**Return Path
Certified senders
sent to**

94%
**fewer
recycled spam traps**

Quotes from our customers



Red Letter Days

"Since becoming Return Path Certified, we have seen a massive improvement in our email program. Open rates for marketing campaigns have almost doubled and so have click-through rates. Attributable revenue from email has increased by 10%."

— **Joshna Patel, Head of Online**



IHG

"Email that is not delivered to the inbox means a missed opportunity. With Certification and deliverability monitoring from Return Path we make sure our guests never miss an important message from IHG."

— **Kevin Hickey, Global Manager Email Marketing**



Cedar Fair

"Certification was huge for us. Yahoo and Comcast account for a big part of our file, and our email campaigns reached more people this year because our messages are getting through almost all of the time."

— **Daryle Powers, Vice President of CRM**



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"We have a Monthly Recommendation email that brings in \$200,000 in donations to classrooms each month. We were hitting spam boxes and having placement issues at providers like Microsoft. If it wasn't for Return Path, we would have never known this. Thanks to their Certification dashboards and expert advice, we were able to improve deliverability, and help more teachers get the materials they need for the classroom."

— **Katie Bisbee, Chief Marketing Officer & EVP, Partnerships**



Price Minister

"Without Return Path certification, our deliverability rate would be at least 10 points lower, which would have significantly impacted our business. Return Path has been a major player in the successful migration of our email service provider platform and continues to assist us every day. Email is a complex communication channel, and we are delighted that an expert such as Return Path is with us to optimize our performance in this area."

— **Robin Caillaud, Head RCMP**



Discover how you can get more email into the inbox.

Request a demo to see Return Path's data powered solutions in action. Visit returnpath.com/request-a-demo.

