Pretty Great Guide to
Subject Lines

Our writers create thousands of subject lines each and every month. Boost your own campaigns with some of their most successful secrets.
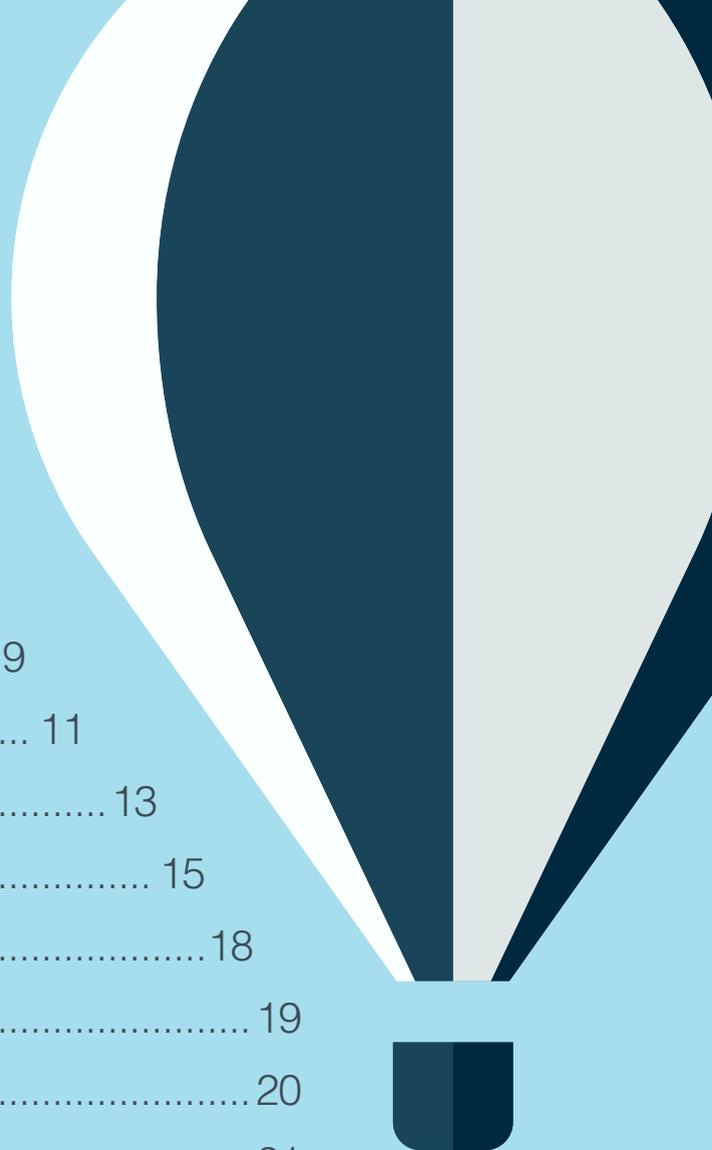
as

On Subject

It's no secret that subject lines can be a bit pesky. Not only can they make or break your email campaign in terms of open rates, they (possibly more importantly) directly impact your deliverability.

Our AdStation subject line experts **write, test and optimize more than 1,000 subject lines each month** to ensure our messages not only reach the inbox, but get the click too.

Now, you can power up your next campaign with their simple subject line tips.

99+

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Message Matters

When your first impression is often your last, very little room is left for haphazard, trial-by-error marketing. You can't leave the effectiveness of your message to chance, and, in email, putting your best foot forward begins with a strategic subject line.

The strength of your email subject is directly reflected in campaign open rates. The subject line alone is responsible for nearly all views of your message. In fact, it may not be surprising to learn that 64% of people say they open an email because of the subject line alone[1]. As the consumer's first glimpse of what's ahead, it becomes overwhelmingly important that the line not only be relevant and clear but also intriguing and entertaining — ultimately helping you get the click while avoiding spam traps.

And avoid spam traps, you must. As if ISP filtering doesn't do enough to make consistent deliverability difficult, 69% of email recipients report email as 'spam' based on the subject line alone[2]. Those consumer-level flags can severely hamstring even the most strategic of marketing campaigns — leaving you with a completely ineffective email effort. Luckily, you can avoid most issues simply by putting a little more focus on making that first impression the right one.

BACK TO THE BASICS

Unknowingly crummy subject lines can foil even the industry's most seasoned marketers. To say that the line between excellent and terrible is fine is quite an understatement. The effectiveness of your subject line is impacted by each and every character used, which requires us to take an all-too-close look at just what it is we're saying in consumers' inboxes.

The Long and the Short of it

Subject line length is one of the most discussed and debated optimization strategies in the industry. MailChimp reports that you should keep your subject to 50 characters or less, unless you're sending to highly targeted subscribers, then a bit more seems acceptable[3]. But, then Adestra swoops in with the claim that subject lines fewer than 10 characters achieve open rates of roughly 58%[1].

Litmus gathered some excellent data in a recent infographic that showed open rates performing their best when subject lines were in the 4-15-character range[4]. However, that same data showed that click-through rates reached their max when subject lines fell in the

Basically, your subject line should be about this long.

28-39-character range instead. While the ultimate decision relies on your goals for your message, the Litmus data supported the idea that subject lines between 4 and 39 characters in length would perform best.

It's worth noting that the high end, 39 characters, creeps in at about the same character count as most mobile devices display in portrait mode[5]. Coincidence? Very unlikely — but we have an entire section just for that.

SHOUTING from the Rooftops

Take a moment to step away from your subject line and you may be reminded that the use of caps is the virtual equivalent of shouting. Don't worry — it's easy to forget when you're in the throes of creating the perfect subject line. Sometimes, you really do want to shout about how awesome your message is and how much your audience will love it. But remember this:

Don't.

Yes, there is the delicate balance of caps, title case, camel case and lowercase that can actually achieve your goal without being offensive. And in very rare cases they're considered socially reasonable. But, more often than not, you run the risk of appearing pushy, rude and aggressive, which is rarely what any of us are aiming to do.

Throw in the simple fact that your caps obsession can very easily get your message flagged by spam filters, and the impact of using caps starts to seem hardly worth it. At least in this situation, we recommend playing it safe. Ditch the all-to-assertive type treatment and find another punchy solution for grabbing attention.

Punctu-wait

Wooing readers to open your message with excessive flair is equally as criminal as writing in all caps. Unfortunately, punctuation in your subject line has all of the same downfalls as caps — too much can be interpreted as being overly assertive, and getting tossed into the spam bin because of it is hardly a decent trade off.

Instead, focus your efforts on a few choice words that will not only clearly convey what your email is about, but will entertain and engage the reader at the same time. Achieving the perfect balance isn't easy, but the added attention to detail will pay off when your readers receive, open and click through.

Good Words Gone Bad

Those spam filters we've mentioned time and time again can be triggered by a number of tactics used in creating your email — down to the specific words chosen for your subject line. ISPs maintain lists of trigger words and phrases that can automatically earn your message a trip to the junk folder. Luckily, by knowing what they are, we also know to avoid them. Keep these top offenders far from your email to help ensure delivery.

!!!
$$$
100% free
Act now!
All natural
As seen on
Attention
Bad credit
Bargain
Best price
Billion
Certified
Cost
Dear friend
Decision
Discount
Double your income
Eliminate debt
Extra income
Fast cash
Fees
Financial freedom
FREE
Guarantee
Hot

Increase
Join millions
Lose weight
Lowest price
Make money fast
Marketing
Million dollars
Money
Money making
No medical exams
No purchase necessary
Online pharmacy
Opportunity
Partners
Performance
Rates
Satisfaction guaranteed
Search engine listings
Selling
Success
Trial
Visit our website
#1
4U
50% off

Accept credit cards
Additional income
Affordable
All new
Apply now
Apply online
Be your own boss
Buy direct
Call free
Cancel at anytime
Cash bonus
Cheap
Click here
Congratulations
Direct email
Direct marketing
Don't hesitate!
Drastically reduced
Earn $
Full refund
Get it now
Gift certificate
Great offer
Home based
Incredible deal

Information you requested
Insurance
investment
Limited time offer
Message contains
No age restrictions
No experience
No gimmicks
No hidden costs
No questions asked
Offer
Online degree
Online marketing
Order now
Passwords
Please read
Risk free
Save $
Serious cash
Special promotion
Urgent
Web traffic

MailChimp has even taken it a step further to identify words that won't get you caught in a spam filter but will negatively affect your open rates[3]. So, avoid those too.

Help   Percent off   Reminder

Alternatively, there are a few power words that are not only spam-filter safe, but will also improve your open rates[6]. When relevant, consider including these power words in your campaign by adding them to your subject line.

[firstname]	We	Year, eg. 2014	Month name, eg. June
Invitation	A	Update	
Introducing	Your/You/You!	New	

Get Read on the Go

eConsultancy reports that 39% of email marketers don't have a mobile strategy while other reports confirm 64% of decision makers read their email on mobile devices[1]. With a vast majority of readers catching email messages on the run — and the number only continuing to rise — you must start to consider small-screen restrictions when planning your campaigns.

Mobile screens most directly affect your subject line's length. As we noted earlier, ideal subject lines in standard desktop browsers fall between 4 and 39 characters depending on your goals. On mobile devices, 39 characters basically becomes the absolutely max. In portrait, iPhone 5 displays only 38 characters of your subject — at least two of which will be lost to ellipses if you go over.

The Samsung Galaxy s4 displays 33 at the same orientation. Smaller and older devices with less screen real estate only continue to constrain subject line character counts.

The solution? Keep the most pertinent and engaging information as close to the beginning of your subject line as you can. And, when possible, keep your message concise to reveal the most relevant content quickly. Alternatively, you can creatively use character count breaks and auto ellipses to create an intriguing line that will drive the most curious of clickers.

TAKE IT TO THE EXTREME

If the basics are under control, you may be ready to take your subject lines to the next level. While more advanced strategies can be time consuming to effectively implement, their payoff in engagement is well worth the investment.

Get Personal

"Personalization" has become one of those dreaded industry buzz words that everyone is prepared to throw around but very few know what effective personalization actually looks like — especially in email. Gone are the days of inserting your consumers' names in manufactured greetings. "Dear [firstname]" is not only overly familiar, but has proven to actually be worse for driving open rates than an un-"personalized" message.

In one recent study, Marketing Land found that appropriately personalized emails deliver 6 times higher transaction rates, however 70% of brands fail to use them[7]. The opportunity is great — but the execution is equally as important as the attempt to personalize.

If you haven't been involved in the technical aspect, note that personalization takes advantage of variables that are placed within the message and, upon sending, merge details from your database into your email. The variables are usually surrounded by brackets of some sort (like shown above) and use the name of the database field to inject customized content for each individual subscriber. If this is your first soiree into personalization, it will save you some stress and headaches if you involve a web designer, developer, IT expert or email guru to ensure that your database and email communicate correctly and distribute your intended results.

To make personalization really work, you have a few options.

1. **Personalize by product.** If your site hosts a shop, you may know which products your subscriber has most recently viewed. Consider adding a variable to your subject line that notes a product in which they've shown interest. Shop more like [recentlyViewed]

2. **Cater to the locals.** Your brand may not be sitting in your subscriber's back yard, but, when personalizing email, it doesn't need to be. One of the easiest ways to find common ground is to connect through localization. Add a mention of your subscriber's hometown or area to your subject to achieve immediate relevance. See what's happening this weekend in [city]

3. **Make custom offers.** Some subscribers may need a tad more encouragement than others. Using personalization variables, you can inject a custom offer for each subscriber into your subject. Save [percent]% with coupon inside!

Optimize, Test and Repeat

Email is a digital medium and regularly falls into the same patterns as web design, app development or user experience planning. Once created, your message must be pushed, pulled, crushed, stretched and tested in any way imaginable. And, after you've sufficiently worked it over, it's time to optimize and test again.

Subject lines are much of the same. Don't let your impulsive first draft pose as the crash test dummy for your entire campaign. Use every distribution as an opportunity to test something new and/or optimize something previously tried.

Fine tune your subject lines with each and every test and mailing. Keeping email evolution at the top of your mind will not only help you to create the most efficient campaigns possible, it will also keep your strategies open to adopting new trends, taking advantage of new strategies and optimizing your mailings as more effective solutions are available.

Subject line checking

The most basic of subject line testing is "checking." Free subject line check tools are available across the web and empower marketers to test a single subject across a number of email clients. For example, the Subject Line Checker by Litmus[8] lets you type your subject line and preview how it will display in various clients and devices. These simple tools

can help to ensure that the most engaging parts of your subject line are visible regardless of where your subscriber chooses to see it.

A/B Testing

Have more than one perfect subject line? You're such an over-achiever. With so many strategies and opinions for building the perfect line, it's easy to see how you could end up wrestling with multiple options. A/B testing provides an excellent solution.

Many ESPs will offer an A/B testing feature, but if that isn't included in your current platform, don't fret. Simply divide your list into two parts. Assign Group A one subject line and Group B the other. When you send your message, ensure that each group receives the same email, but with the different subject. Once your open rate and click-through data is returned, you can compare the success of the two groups to determine which subject line performed best. The discovery can be used to guide future subject line decision-making or to determine which line to use for mailing your message on a larger scale.

STAND OUT

Let's face it — there is a lot of "what not to do" in the subject line space that pretty significantly impacts just how wild and crazy you can get with your email. If you're willing to get creative (and maybe a little gutsy), there are still some pretty awesome options for grabbing attention. The trick remains, though, to use them in moderation so as not to affect your deliverability.

Keep it Simple

Subject line length is one of the most easily manipulated aspects of line creation. One of the most impactful strategies for making a statement is to make almost no statement at all. Amidst the chaos and chatter of a full inbox, subject lines of one simple word can often draw more attention than even the most informative of phrases.

Be wary of overly catchy and clever phrases — many don't help to get your email opened by readers. Instead, aim for clarity. After all, a subject line should inform the reader of what they can expect from the email, and should be easy to understand.

Panic.
Enjoy.
Found!

Add it Up

Dotting your subject line with numbers can also work a bit of magic to set your email apart from others. In the case of sales or deals, percent-based offers provide great attention-grabbing content. But your numbers don't have to be eCommerce-related. Consider impressive stats that will not only intrigue, but will also provide some visual separation from the other subject lines on your readers' screens.

2015 Bedside Astrologer
Sample our 14-lb cheeseburger
127 Adorable Kitten Photos Inside

Get Graphic

With the rise of emoticons, emojis, stamps, symbols and other text-able graphics, some email clients have started to support the mini images in subject lines. It's a high-demand tactic for snagging attention in crowded inboxes however they still land in a bit of uncharted territory[9].

Tread lightly, though. Not only do you run the risk of symbols not being supported, Outlook.com and iOS both convert symbols to emojis — so the end result can vary between clients. While studies have shown that the use of symbols do a pretty great job to improve open rates, make sure that you test and check sufficiently before sending to ensure they display as intended.

Say What's Inside

Current trends also involve tagging your subject line with the type of content or media inside. Bracketed flags such as [VIDEO], [INFOGRAPHIC] or [INTERVIEW] give the reader a clear overview of what's ahead when used at the start of a subject line. Unfortunately, they also break the golden rules of avoiding all caps and strange characters. Still, they're worthy of a test. If they do make the cut for your mailing, be sure to use them in moderation so that they don't flag future emails to be caught in spam filters.

It can also be beneficial to include a call to action that informs the reader of what to do next to benefit from the message — that includes making a call, filling out a form or visiting a landing page.
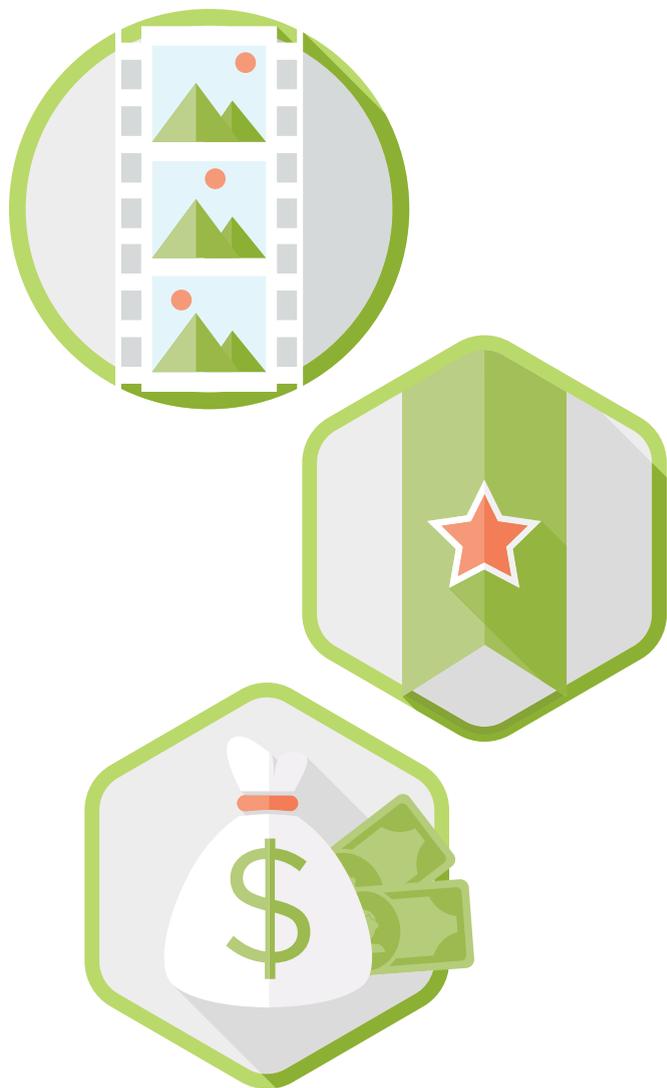
Be Entertaining

One of the most surefire ways to engage your readers is to be truly entertaining in your subject line. While it's a small space with many rules, a phrase that can evoke shock, laughter or other emotion is incredibly likely to earn clicks. If you can manage to entertain in those first 39 characters, who knows what you could do with the full email.

Resources

[1] blogs.salesforce.com/company/2013/07/email-marketing-stats.html

[2] convinceandconvert.com/convince-convert/15-email-statistics-that-are-shaping-the-future/

[3] kb.mailchimp.com/campaigns/previews-and-tests/best-practices-for-email-subject-lines

[4] litmus.com/blog/how-to-write-the-perfect-subject-line-infographic

[5] marketingtechblog.com/mobile-email-subject-line/

[6] campaignmonitor.com/blog/post/4210/power-words-in-email-subject-lines

[7] marketingland.com/study-70-brands-personalizing-emails-missing-higher-transaction-rates-revenue-73241

[8] litmus.com/resources/subject-line-checker

[9] campaignmonitor.com/resources/will-it-work/symbols/

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As a channel of the largest privately held digital marketplace — Adknowledge — we leverage the resources and insights of top-tier social media, video delivery, app monetization solutions and more — giving us powerful insight into digital marketing's top trends and opening the doors for unmatched innovation.

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