Email marketing database management

Getting the most from your email marketing database

Many clients come to us with questions about how best to manage their existing contacts database in order to get the most from it.

We advise they follow our data management process to extract a good quality email marketing database from their existing contacts, and continue to grow that database through a number of data acquisition initiatives.

What's wrong with using lists of old contacts?

You might think that it's OK to use an old list, because any gone-away contacts won't receive your emails and those still with the same address will, so there's no harm done. However, incorrect or out of date email addresses will have a negative impact on the deliverability of those emails. So even if 'good' contacts are in the list, they are less likely to receive the email in their inbox.

For example, a high number of bounces (emails being rejected by the recipient's mail server) diminishes the sender's IP reputation making it appear that the emails have come from a less trustworthy source. This in turn makes it more likely for the recipient to reject the email. It is also more likely for a poorly maintained database to contain spam traps which can result in the sender being blacklisted so that very few emails make it through to the intended recipients.

The challenge:

One of our clients recently came to us with a mix of data, both old and not so old (although acquired over 12 months ago), from different sources. Our challenge was to create an email marketing database that delivered high open rates, low bounce rates and low unsubscribe rates.

From an export containing "*all our clients and suppliers, about 25K contacts bought from CorpData a couple of years ago, a couple of thousand gathered at exhibitions and networking events in recent years and 50K contacts acquired when we merged in 2009. Oh and we've got a big list I bought last year online it was a really good deal, I think I paid £300 for 800K opted in email addresses*" – Client A

Our method:

In this case the client's data extract included information about the source of the data, so we were able to assign a risk rating to all the contacts within the database based on the following set of rules:

High Risk – Data that is older than 2 years, out of the terms of its licence or from a disreputable or unknown source

Medium Risk – All bought data that is within the lease/purchase terms*

Low Risk – Data collected personally or confirmed within the last 2 years. This includes contacts who have been on the database for more than 2 years that are known to be active

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For example, this is how the risk rating was applied to the data in this instance:

- **Existing clients and suppliers** – **Low Risk**

- **25K contacts bought from Corp Data** – **High Risk** initially but the original database was replaced with an updated version leased for a further 12 months so it became **Medium Risk**

- **A couple of thousand gathered at exhibitions and networking events in recent years** – **Low Risk** if it was added within the last 24 months. If it was added more than 24 months ago and there had been no contact within the last 24 months – **High Risk**

- **50K contacts acquired when we merged in 2009** – **High Risk** if there had been no contact within the last 24 months. **Low Risk** if in contact within 24 months.

- **Big list bought last year online from an unknown source at a price that sounds too good to be true** – **High Risk (Permanent exclusion)**

The Low Risk data was segmented into 4 data pools (Customers, Warm Prospects, Cold Prospects and Influencers) and after removing duplicates and tidying up the 'First Name' field, became a list fit for purpose.

Similarly the Medium Risk data was compared to the low risk and duplicates removed. Then it was ready to be emailed in small batches to maximise deliverability and control any element of risk. ISPs (Internet Service Providers) set limits to control the volume of data travelling over their networks and sending out too many emails at once can cause some to be rejected due to time out errors. To avoid this we send bigger lists in smaller chunks, over a period of time.

The High Risk data was further segmented and some data in this case the 800K bought online was permanently excluded**. The rest became a source of leads to be used in the client's internal sales process. Each month a number of these contacts were telemarketed to establish whether they should be added to the permanent exclusions list or moved into the warm contacts list, thus growing the email marketing database with quality warm leads.

The result:

With a little work, we were able to extract the high risk data and refine a good quality and up to date list. The deliverability of our emails was good, there were no issues with spam traps, and the rate of hard bounces and unsubscribes consequently low.

The client enjoyed a good sending reputation, and the response to the email marketing was positive.

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*Most reputable providers will sell their data on a licence for a period of 12 months, after which they advise the list be replaced with a new, updated version. This is considered best practice, and a responsible approach to handling data. If data is purchased outright from a supplier we advise that it is used for no more than 2 years from the date of purchase.

**In our experience 'data deals' that look too good to be true usually are. There are disreputable data suppliers selling on big lists of what they call double opted in data very cheaply but the chance of the list containing spam traps is very high and it is not worth the risk. The cost to a company to verify each person on a list is very high, so common sense tells us that if the price is low, the company cannot possibly afford to keep the lists up to date.

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