

Email Frequency: Could you “kill the goose that lays the golden egg”?

BY REGINA BRADY (published in Catalog Success Magazine, April, 2009)

I had breakfast over a year ago with the Vice President of Marketing for a major online retailer and cataloger. She told me she was worried that she had fallen into the trap of emailing too frequently. This e-tailer sent at least 3, if not 4 emails per week. She noted that every email generated sales which pleased senior management; but she was concerned that she was hurting her list. Today, after careful analysis the company now usually sends one email a week.

Every email you send will generate sales. How do you figure out the cadence that’s right for you?

The Pro’s and Con’s of Frequency

Yes. It is categorically true that a strong email contact strategy with compelling offers for products will generate sales. At the same time industry consumer surveys have shown that one major reason consumers opt-out is the frequency of contact.

You can measure the impact on your business. For example, if you step up frequency of mailing during the holiday gift-giving season, you can compare those results with those times when you send fewer emails. Or, you could create a holdout group that receives fewer emails, and track both groups over several months. (Even if you don’t create separate group, you can monitor activity to help you determine whether your current frequency schedule is working.) Here are some metrics you should be watching – aggregate this activity on a monthly basis, do simple trend analysis and project out over a full year what this might mean to your company. Do this projection based on your current list size; new additions to your list can mask performance issues and list fatigue.

- **Revenue Increase** — it is likely this will be stronger with a stepped up mailing schedule. Are you trading short-term revenue gains for a loss in long-term revenues?
- **Revenue per delivered email** — this could be the statistic that tells all.
- **Opt-outs** — does frequency have a direct impact on your list size?

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- **Spam complaints** — high complaint rates can put your emails in danger of being blocked by ISPs or having them send your emails to a bulk folder.
- **Bounces** — if you are sending more emails and using a good bounce processing strategy, more of your list will be moved to a do-not-email status.
- **Open and Click-through behavior** — if you don't get opens, you're not engaging your list. Mailing to a list that is increasing inactive can be a problem. Plus, low open rates can impact your reputation with some of the ISPs.

This analysis takes time and discipline to do, but it will give you an assessment of the health of your email program. I've seen examples where the revenue increase is 40% higher with more frequent emails, the revenue per delivered email is about half, and opt-outs are more than double. You also should take into account the deployment costs as well as internal overhead costs. It may be hard to assign internal costs, but each email requires support from copywriters, design, quality assurance and the web team.

At the end of the analysis, you may find that a less frequent strategy is more productive for your company and the vibrancy of your list.

Allow Customers to Control Frequency

If you send emails once a week or less frequently, you probably do not need to consider this option. But those companies who mail more than once a week should implement a program to allow recipients to adjust the frequency of their messages.

Here's a look at the footer from JoS. A. Bank Clothier:



Valid March 12 - March 15, 2009 (until midnight PT)

Valid online only. Discount on regular prices only and not valid on prior purchases.

*Free shipping applies to all US online orders \$175 or more.

Jos. A. Bank Clothiers, Inc., 500 Hanover Pike, Hampstead, MD 21074



[Change Frequency](#) or [Unsubscribe](#) or [Modify](#) your email subscription.

A subscriber who clicks on the Change Frequency link is presented with a simple choice:

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The Experts in Men's Apparel

I'd like to reduce the number of times I receive your special offers and sale events to:

- Once a week
- Every other week
- Once a month

Submit

Some catalogers make frequency the focus of an email promotion. These catalogers have sent an email that highlights the recipients' ability to receive fewer emails. And, they provide a link to allow recipients to adjust their preferences.

When Frequency is fine

If you have a plan in place to send triggered messages based on the activity of the recipient, don't stop! You may step up the frequency of contact with certain individuals on your list, but these messages are highly relevant based on purchase activity, browsing behavior or other targeted information. This is pertinent marketing and should be extremely productive.

During peak selling seasons such as the gift giving holiday season, many marketers make a conscious decision to increase frequency. Smith-Harmon, and email marketing agency, released a study that examined the number of promotional emails sent by online retailers in 2008. They found that email volume reached a peak in December when retailers sent consumers an average of 14.6 emails. That equates to an email every other day.

This stepped up frequency is still a calculated risk, due to the factors discussed earlier, but the holiday season also represents a time period when many catalogers have the largest amount of sales. It may be prudent to capitalize on a peak buying season.

There are no absolutes in the frequency debate. But what you can do is strategically assess the risks and rewards and put a plan in place that makes sense for your business. Email works! Just don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

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