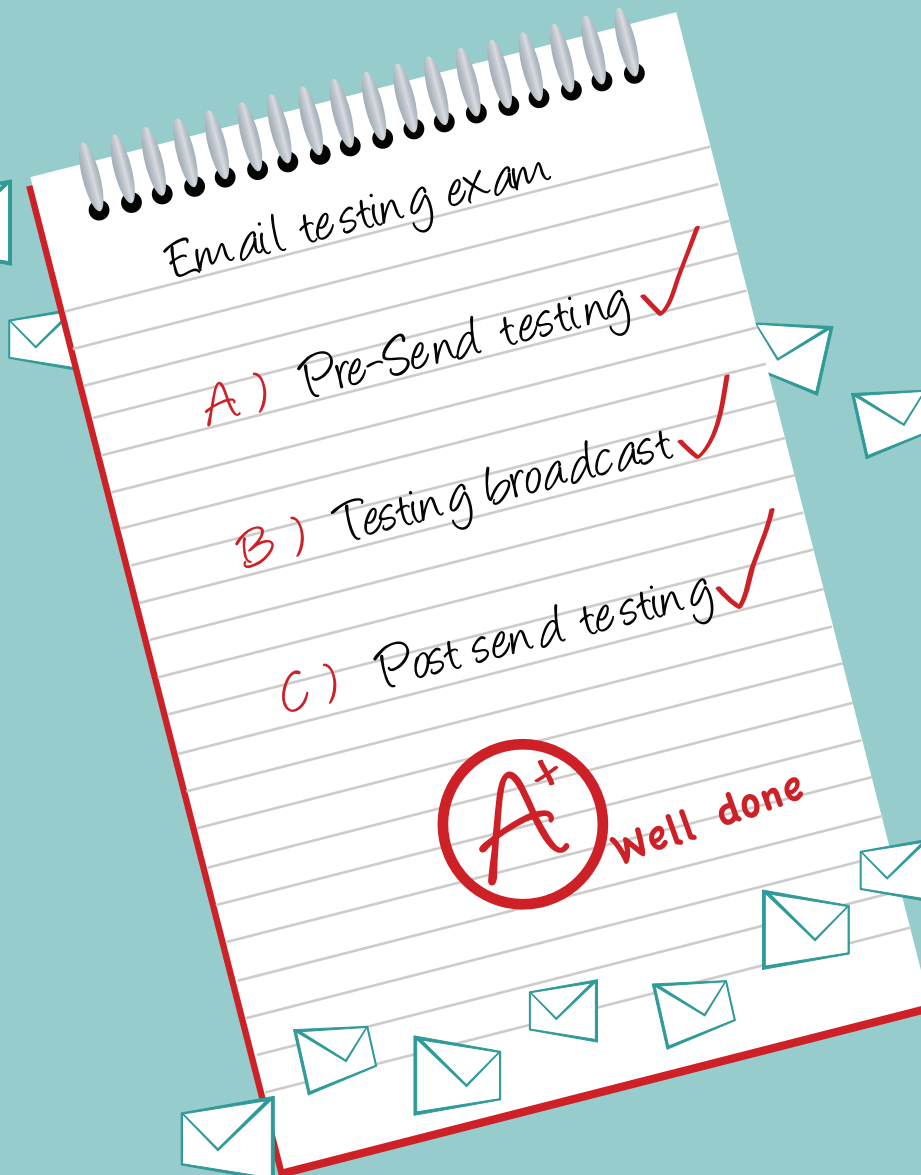




Guide to email testing



Email testing exam

A) Pre-Send testing ✓

B) Testing broadcast ✓

C) Post send testing ✓

A+

Well done

Contents

Introduction	—————	Page 3
How testing helps create and protect revenue	—————	Page 3-5
Testing timetable programme	—————	Page 5
Pre-send testing	—————	Page 6-7
Testing as you broadcast	—————	Page 7-8
Post-send testing	—————	Page 8-9
Final comments	—————	Page 10

Introduction

There have been a flurry of surveys recently, the gist of most being that somewhere between 50 and 60% of email marketers do not test on a regular basis, Econsultancy in fact has suggested that only 32% test frequently, in some extreme cases even fundamental tests such as 'spam checking' are omitted. But why this concentration on testing? To misquote President Clinton "It's the money stupid", make a mistake of any sort in your email campaigns and you can bet that a whole clutch of problems will happen, but whatever the issue, whatever the error, it could be your potential revenue that suffers.

I am always conscious that dull techno oriented articles don't always encourage readers to take the main message on board, so let me put mine into a clear unambiguous way right now before we proceed further with the following examples...

How testing helps create & protect revenue

The Apple example

Steve Jobs, was amazingly successful, he knew that asking consumers what they want could be a recipe for mediocrity. Jobs would have said that you know your customers better than anyone, and if you don't shame on you. So you need to be creating breakthrough broadcasts that enable an email experience unlike anything they've seen. But this doesn't mean that testing is bad. Rather, the "test, test, test" mantra in email is a recipe for incremental improvements in response rates from various elements of your email programme.



Jobs considered that breaking down a device, say, an iPad, into a dozen components to visualise how people might use and react separately to the power button, the volume button, the touch screen, the Safari browser or iTunes, would enable the construction of a successful unit. So, in the end the overall experience rather than individual elements would be what makes an Apple product great. I believe emulating this structure for your email programmes will enable you to create those breakthrough email campaigns, by testing individual sections.

Taking a scientific approach

Over the years television, especially the BBC, has thrown up some amazing science programme presenters, by this I mean real scientists, not the Blue Peter variety. The ability of these presenters, Joseph Bronowski, Robert Winston are just two that come to mind, to explain complex issues in a way which enhances public knowledge has been a joy.

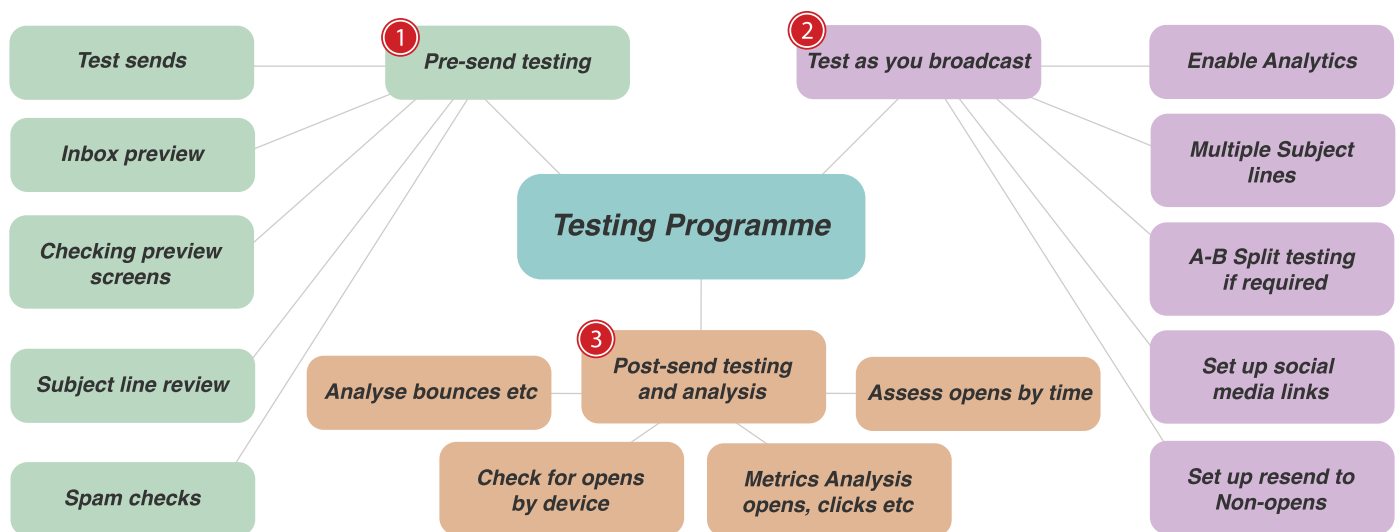
Recently we have had Brian Cox, ex rock star, fronting his Universe series, wildly popular. But for me the best of contemporary presenters has to be Jim Khalil, in his current series on electricity, sorry the pun was only half intended, he provides a real spark to the subject. OK, enough of the puns. The point is that Jim presents his series in a way that explains the science of electricity in a straightforward understandable way and, at the same time, emphasises some of the necessary discipline that is essential to the eventual production of a product or service, including testing...

Time and time again he emphasises testing, testing at the experimental stage, testing at the development stage and testing at the pre-production stage. He mentioned that Thomas Edison, whilst perfecting the humble lightbulb, tested several hundred different materials to establish the best one to use as a filament.

I see no essential difference in applying this same discipline to email marketing. Marketing as a whole is becoming a much more technical activity, I have recently discussed neuromarketing where volunteers are hooked up to brain scanners to establish where in the brain marketing messages impact most. So why not apply some scientific discipline to email marketing especially when considering ongoing testing.

Testing timetable programme

Below I have inserted a mind map, to illustrate the lengths you can and should go to when testing. These procedures will enable you to test all the individual email components in a structured methodical way, striving towards that magic breakthrough campaign.



Following the pattern of the mind map, I have broken the programme into three sections each with headers and a brief description of what each function achieves and how best to use it. Each client will adapt a programme to suit their business type and the requirements of their target audience but where I believe any individual testing procedure is effectively mandatory I will indicate as such.

Pre-send testing

Preview screens

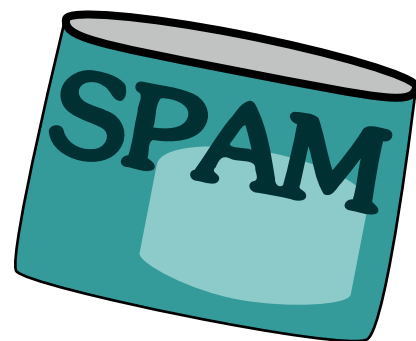
This is the most basic testing mechanism but one that is often ignored and unused. There are several ways this screen can be entered depending on where in your account you have navigated. As you work it always pays to view as you go to ensure nothing is amiss with either the email format construction or the text.

Inbox preview

An invaluable tool especially for the email marketing newbie, a representation of how your email will look in up to 30 or so email clients. Outlook of course, and all the smartphones clients, the web hosted systems and even some of the more obscure, little used functions. Conducting a full test at least a day before your scheduled broadcast will ensure you have time to edit if you spot an error. Once you have a standard structure for your emails, one that is successful in gaining responses, you shouldn't need to continue the tests for each broadcast, but do remember to do a test if you change the layout.

Spam checker

This is a mandatory test, to be truthful if it were up to me I would not allow a broadcast to go out if a spam test had not been conducted. Whatever testing you do before your broadcast make a spam check the very last one and don't ignore the results, if you have spam warnings delay the send if need be to allow you to fix any issues.



Setting multiple subject lines

Most ESPs these days will provide some form of testing mechanism by the use of alternative subject lines. As with the Inbox Preview it is especially useful for the email marketing tyro. Using the mechanism to test a variety of subject lines gives the marketer a chance to test what floats the boat of the target audience. Via the campaign report you should be able to see which subject attracted the most opens, in most systems, you can choose an option of letting the system pick the best subject for you, taking automation to a higher level.

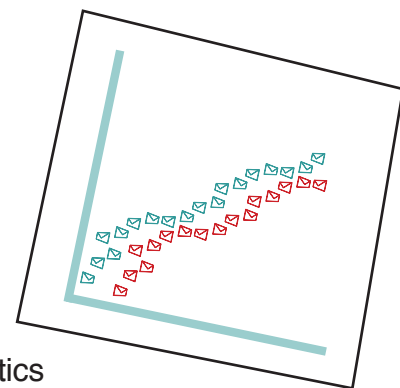
Test broadcasts

In my view another mandatory test, when you believe your message is ready and perhaps tested internally with colleagues, send out a broadcast test. You should have created a test list with company email addresses of your colleagues, but do include some web hosted addresses too, hotmail, gmail etc. The main reason I suggest that this test is mandatory is that some links notably those that contain a mail ID, send to a friend, view on line, will only work with a broadcast send, the very last thing you want is to send to a large list then find those links are inoperative.

Testing as you broadcast

Enable analytics

If you have an analytics package enabled for your website, Google is a favourite because for most free is good, then make sure it is enabled for each broadcast. You should be able to then view in a subsequent report how many and who navigated to your website from the email and where they then went to on the site. One additional tip is go to your analytics outside the email platform. Sometimes people choose not to navigate from the email but go to your site independently when they have seen the email. It's sometimes known as the Nudge Effect and can reveal an extra layer of interest.



Resend to non-opens

I have included this in the testing procures though strictly it is an analysis feature. Yet again I believe it is especially useful for those new to email marketing. Sending an email back to all those who didn't open first time with a different subject can give the marketer insight as to the impact the emails are creating. It's ultimately the senders choice as to when to utilise this procedure but for many it's a worthwhile exercise to garner a few percentage points of opens.

Subject line selector

I include this in the section as well as the Pre-Send. If your broadcast is going to be regularly more than 10,000 records then I would recommend you continue to use the multiple subject line feature and then allow the system to choose the best one for you. The report will indicate clearly which was the most successful in terms of open rates and on a broadcast by broadcast basis you can tweak your subject lines to maximise open rates.

Enable Social Media links (Twitter and Facebook)

Gaining a presence on Social Media pages is rapidly becoming, if not essential, desirable. If you have a company Twitter account and/or a Facebook page you should be able to post your email message to these and in return see results in your reporting system, for example Facebook likes. Though again not strictly a testing procedure this will provide you with valuable information as to the impact your business is having on Social Media and you will be able to adjust the time you spend catering for and responding to this impact.

A/B split testing

When this feature is applied with some flair by your service provider it can be liberating. Why?...consider this, you have a message carefully crafted by your team, stripped down to the essentials relevant to your list. Problem..... within the message there are two links both of which are important for the email goal project. Which one then should feature as the Call to Action at the top section of the email? With an imaginative Split Test feature that is easy to cope with. What you do is create two messages with differing CTA positions, send out the broadcast enabling the A/B testing facility and, if you wish, allow it to decide which message is achieving the better results, of course you can do this manually, however automating functions within emailing systems is liberating for marketing resource. More about this in the next guide.



Post-send testing

It may seem an oxymoronic title, how can you test after a broadcast? Believe me not only can you but you should, testing is a continuous process, you should always be looking to improve your broadcasts, honing them to squeeze out the maximum open rates and thus constantly boosting your ROI? in the next guide in the series I'm going to discuss how you can get the best out of post send analysis so keep an eye out for that.

Metrics analysis (opens, clickthroughs)

Post broadcast analysis of the basic metrics reported back via your ESP are an essential component of testing. From the analysis you can determine whether the send achieved the goals set out prior to broadcasting the, should you think it necessary, schedule some test send to verify the information gathered from your analysis.

Checking opens by device

A relatively new feature to appear but one dictated by necessity, namely the increasing use of mobile devices to view emails of all kinds, whether in a personal or business environment. I would strongly predict that this feature will become key in changing the orientation of the message design of many companies in the future in catering for the restrictions dictation by the screen size of most mobile devices. Utilising the information fed back from the report you can assess the numbers using smartphone and also the various desktop browsers.

In addition I would recommend that as the numbers of smartphone users are relatively high, and for B2B senders I have recently seen percentages of 50% plus, testing more mobile orientated versions of emails would be useful.

Checking opens by time

For all organisations who send out emails to a mass audience the timing of the broadcast is crucial. There is no point in sending emails to a list of businesses at 6 in the evening, your email will be lost in the overnight clutter by the time most recipients read it. Likewise sending to a list of consumers can be problematic in terms of when the best sending time is so you can appear at the top of the inbox when they login. An opens by time facility will enable you to judge when the bulk of opens occur and adjust your sending times accordingly, a simple but effective feature.



Analysis of hard bounces, blocked, soft bounces

As with the assessment of opens, click etc this is an essential part of your post broadcast debrief. If, for example, you are seeing a high rate of blockages you need to return to the message and run further tests and spam checks to determine the cause. The percentage figures in all of the metrics available within the report will dictate whether you need to conduct further tests before the next broadcast.

Final comments

Let's not call this a conclusion, because when conducting a full and conscientious email testing programme there can be no final resolution. If as an organisation, large or small, you are scheduling a series of email campaigns then the testing will be continuous. Each time you commit yourself to a particular broadcast you will throw up new metrics to analyse, encounter new issues, a high opt-out rate perhaps or an unusually high mobile open rate, which you then have to assess and perhaps test to ensure your sends continue to attract high response rates.

The stakes are high with email marketing, your outlay can be quite modest but the rewards can be very rewarding indeed. Research from various sources, both in the USA and the UK is still suggesting a £40+ return on an initial outlay of £1, last year the top TV advert in the UK, a series of ads for a bread company achieved a ratio of 5 to 1, a reflection of the ongoing advantage of using the email marketing tool.

At the same time the stakes are also high for the loss of brand value by the poor use of emailing. The classic example is duplication of emails, nothing is more calculated to denigrate a brand image by sending two or more identical emails to the same recipient within seconds of each other. It smacks of incompetence and illustrates a lack of adequate testing.

Email can both enhance and destroy brand value so it becomes very much more important to structure your testing programme alongside your campaign schedule. Very simple errors such as an important word misspelt, a link not tested and so not working properly, a rendering error which breaks your layout in certain email clients. All of this can have a serious damaging effect on your credibility and thus your ROI. An error free email is not a guarantee of high brand value but it's a valuable platform to base a successful email campaign upon. The testing programme you adopt will assist in creating a message without errors.

The mind map at the start of this guide can be easily copied if you wish to use this as an illustration for your schedule but I urge all readers to follow most, if not all of these testing procedures. The next guide will deal with analysis and email marketing audit, which is a natural follow on to this one. If any reader has any suggestions for this please email us or Tweet and I will very happily incorporate these into the piece.

Author of this guide, *Professor Bairstow* is one of the many talented and experienced people who make up the team at **Pure360**.

Pure360 is an email & SMS marketing provider who specialise in helping businesses get the best results from their campaigns. Pure360 work with over 1000 organisations including brands such as Rightmove, Virgin and innocent drinks. Our customers stay with us through choice, not contract, and they tell their friends about us – but never their competitors!

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You can find the team working to improve our customers' email campaigns, down in Brighton, pop in or give us a call on **0844 586 0001** to discuss how we can help you get excellent results from your email & SMS campaigns. Or email us at **contact@pure360.com**

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