

How to increase the size of your database

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In conjunction with Pomegranate Group

This week's article looks at building, maintaining and growing a profitable email databases...

Data is commonly seen as a business asset, and it is argued by many that the financial worth of a database should feature on company accounts in the same way as any other asset would. This has long been the view of the traditional direct marketers. And as email marketers find themselves under the same scrutiny over issues such as targeting and spamming, brands are working to establish banks of online data and secure opt-in permissions from their audience. Of course, as with any acquisition versus retention debate, as much time and attention must be devoted to maintaining your current database as is devoted to acquiring new names and email addresses.

First things first: making friends and influencing people

The starting point of every robust database is a good data capture mechanism or subscription process. A key point to remember here is that your average consumer is busy. On top of that, they may also be suspicious of handing over too many personal details, so incorporate these considerations into your approach. Generally, subscription should be made with as few clicks as possible and completion should be possible without any scrolling. Don't be tempted to ask for more information that you need. Essentially, you probably need to capture name and accurate email addresses to begin with - and that's it. It may well be tempting to stray prying into preferences and personal info for marketing purposes, but asking too much, too soon can drive people away. Think of it as a tentative new friendship. Tread gently, and you will slowly build trust, and indeed, a comprehensive picture of your recipient. Pry too soon and you risk scaring people off.

Starting the relationship – what works...

Once you have initiated contact via initial communications there are a number of ways you can establish an ongoing relationship. Features such as 'Forward to a Friend' links are a low-maintenance way of allowing your

recipient to be ahead of the pack and spread the message, whilst also encouraging others to sign-up. Special online offers or prize draws can provide great hooks, particularly when supported by online advertising. Standalone lead generation campaigns can also be extremely successful.

What doesn't work.

Links or images which don't work; too high a frequency of send-outs; irrelevant content; misleading subject lines - these are all common complaints. You also need to monitor and subsequently act on inactive email addresses and bounces. And, if the worst comes to the worst, before you kiss goodbye to the dying embers of a fleeting affair, it might be worth attempting to reactivate inactive addresses one last time with some kind of special offer. Over half of all email marketers send one more message to inactive email addresses before deleting them from the list.

Take advantage of every single touch point

If you give your recipients one chance and one chance only to enter into dialogue with you, then you could be missing a trick. Think about every way you can increase subscriber numbers, taking advantage of every contact you have with your customers and prospects. Have a subscription box on every page of your website; at events or in-store promotions ask if the interested person would like to receive the newsletter and preferably obtain permission there and then; add a footer to all staff emails; promote the benefits of signing up by enhancing the subscription value with customer testimonials and offering incentives for sign ups (if you're sending B2B campaigns whitepapers and surveys work well and for B2C campaigns money off tokens or discounts are successful).

Remember that consumers aren't single-channel. They absorb brands through a multitude of channels, and the world's strongest brands are the ones that operate through a number of touchpoints. Capitalise on these touchpoints and welcome subscriptions from whichever channel your consumers prefer. Let them dictate how you talk to each other – just make sure your processes are ready to register their preference and start the dialogue.

Out with the old, in with the new – keep your database clean.

Increasing your database is half the battle. The other half is keeping your database clean by monitoring the results of each mailing so you can see who hasn't opened, clicked or responded to your messages as well as spotting dead email addresses (people who have left their company etc). Remember that a huge but inaccurate and outdated database is far less use to an email marketer than a tightly-maintained, smaller database.

Strive to boost your database, but don't forget to clean behind you as you go. Our industry still sits under the specter of 'spamming', and it will take rigorous action by responsible marketers to rid it of the junk mail tag.

Let the consumer be king, let them decide what pace the relationship will move at. Once they're onboard, remember to make your content relevant, your approach innovative and your contact details correct. By observing these simple steps you will be well on the way to building a profitable database.