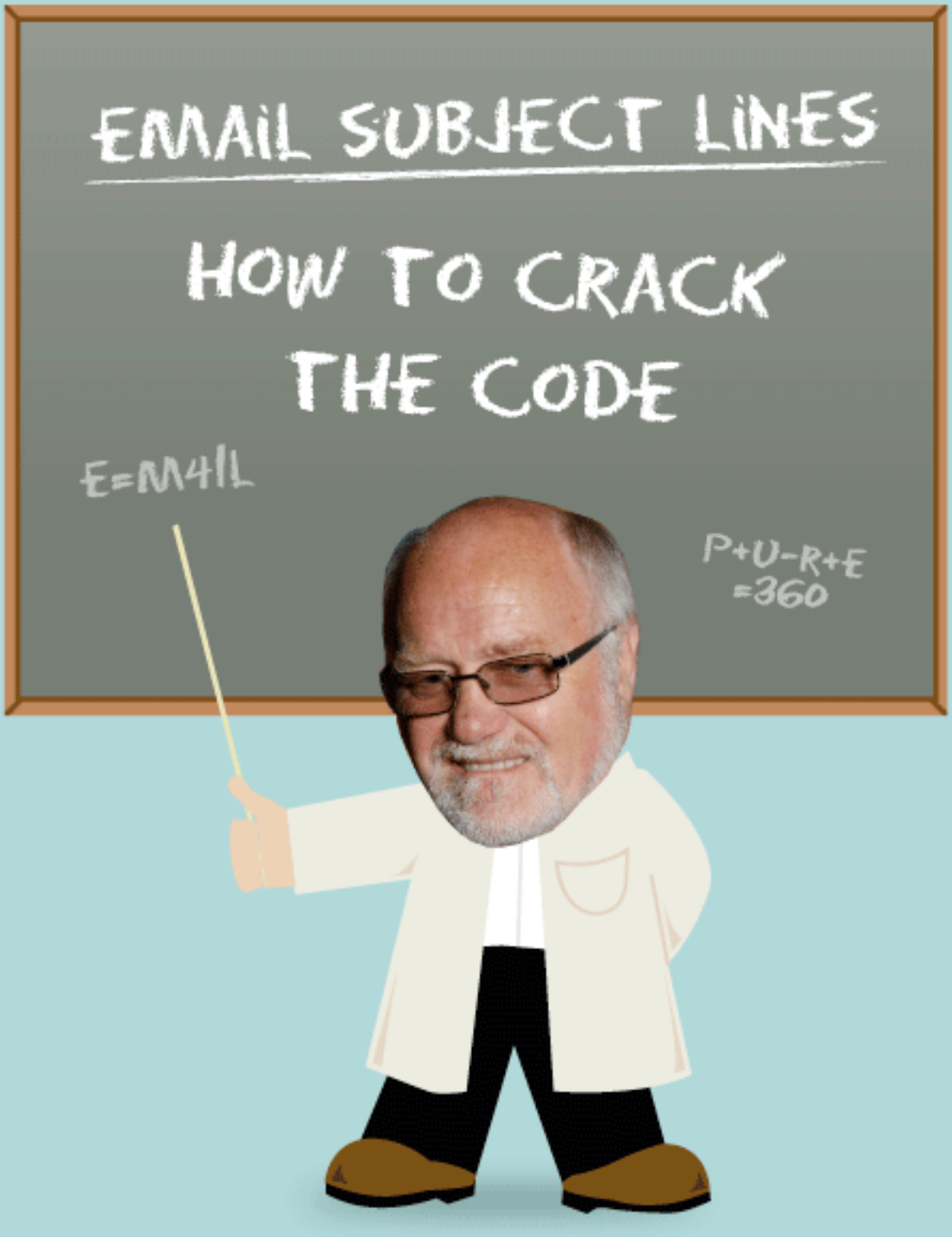
EMAIL SUBJECT LINES

HOW TO CRACK THE CODE



BY MICHAEL BAIRSTOW

Welcome to the Guide

I am afraid I may have told a white lie, you have been subjected to an example of the effects of a good subject line. In truth there is no code to cracking subject lines, how can there be? We all know how many different types of organisations are sending out emails and so subject lines that work in some cases are not going to work in others.

The purpose of this guide is to present you with a selection of advice, based on our own experience and other useful ideas from some well respected email marketing commentators.

Before continuing, an important point should be made, this header may have attracted your attention, as good subject lines should, but it is not a model, the content has nothing to do with code cracking of any sort. It is vital to maintain the trust of your readership, if the email content does not live up to the promise of the subject line it may be the last time some recipients open your emails.

Rule one There are no simple rules...just remember these two words, Interest and Relevance. If you ignore all the other tips below, but ensure your subject lines are compelling and relate closely to your list demographic then it's a great start.

Learn a lesson from print media

Chatting to a colleague recently I made the observation that I have been reading subject lines since I first learned to read, indeed we all have. The penny dropped and she realised I was talking about newspaper and magazine headlines and sub-headlines rather than emails.

What are they if not inducements to read the article beneath? Skimming through the more heavyweight Sunday papers I rely on headlines to indicate articles that will be of interest and then, in effect "open" the article, surely an exact parallel of what email subject lines should be achieving? Just to show I am even handed, some of the tabloids efforts are even better examples of compelling subject lines. Their headlines can often be quite specific in appealing to the demographic the paper markets too, another role of an email subject line.



Taking this analogy further I would draw attention to surveys dating as long ago as 1990 (Undertaken by the Poynter Institute in the USA using eye tracking technology). This was pretty much before the email era, but even then indicated that the body of the text is the least read whereas the headline is the most read, albeit in newspapers articles. Incidentally the same research also suggested the longer the article the less people read, perhaps suggesting that shorter emails might also be the right strategy.

The Four U's Approach

Follow the advice of Patty Keller from posterous.com, and consider this checklist, based on a Four "U" Approach to headline writing: (note the use of the term headline, the newspaper analogy again).

U1 – **Useful:** Is the promised message valuable to the reader?
U2 – **Ultra-specific:** Does the reader know what's being promised?
U3 – **Unique:** Is the promised message compelling and remarkable?
U4 – **Urgent:** Does the reader feel the need to read the email now?

Seems straightforward enough, but be careful, there could be bear traps here, for example if every message you send out is 'urgent' then in effect, none are. Remember also that the email content has to reflect the substance if the subject line, if it fails to do so you risk losing the trust of your audience.

Subject Line Importance

Extracted from **"Does the Subject Line Matter Anymore?"** By Loren McDonald,

Knowing which factors apply to your program can help you evaluate how much your team should focus on subject lines. For example:

Brand/From Name
If you have a powerful, recognised and trusted brand, coupled with the right "from" name, then your subject lines theoretically shouldn't matter as much as that of a lesser-known brand or poorly executed "from" name.

Email Program Value
Does your email program consistently deliver value? If so, recipients will be more likely to engage regardless of subject line, because they know they will probably discover something valuable inside.

Current Subject Line Style
If almost every email you send out is some variation on *"Last Chance for Free*

Shipping" or *"Save 15% & Free Shipping Till Friday,"* then you've created a virtual Catch-22. These subject lines work and pull people in, just like *"Sale"* signs in store windows. But successive subject lines will have to work harder to stand out.

Email for Mobiles



Again I should acknowledge Loren and additionally Mark Brownlow, for their joint insight.

While many mobile devices like the iPhone/iTouch/iPad can show most of the characters in a subject line, others such as the BlackBerry tend to show fewer than 10. In this case your brand and "from" name will be so much more important than what you could achieve in less than 10 characters.

Continuing the theme of length Mark Brownlow has posted some fascinating articles about the dizzying rise of the smart mobile and through his, and other similar work, it is quite clear that much thought needs to be given to how a subject line will appear on a Smartphone.

As an example Mark suggests that if you are aware that a substantial portion of your target audience are likely to be reading your emails on a mobile, consider leaving out personalisation, saving character space for the useful information.

Preview Panes

In the B2B world, many recipients view the top of an email message through their email client's preview pane. Thus, the top portion of the email can support, enhance or even trump the subject line content. A pre-header, or snippet, as some call them can almost be considered as an adjunct to a subject line.

In some instances, viewing emails on smartphones for instance, the pre-header will be the only text visible. Using this line of text as a marketing message that enhances or more fully explains the subject line, is a valuable tool.

Subject Line Length

There are probably as many theories about subject line length as there 'experts' out there to provide them. It has been a general rule of thumb to keep the subject line to 50 characters or less. Some analysis finds this to be the case however exceptions might be highly targeted audiences where the readers appreciate the additional information in a longer subject line.

Perhaps you should have faith in your audience, try out longer but informative text, if it is compelling, of interest to the demographic and satisfies the 'what's in it for me' imperative it's worth a test. You can always adjust for future broadcasts once the metrics are analysed.

Testing

Too often subject lines are added as a last minute exercise, this should be avoided whenever possible. Firm up your subject lines as soon as possible so that you are ready for pre-testing to a seed list, especially important if you are using multiple subject lines.

In addition if you use an Inbox Preview Tool is it recommended that a test be sent out 24 hrs prior to broadcast schedule.

Pre-headers (again)

These are very important, yes I know this article is about subject lines but the pre-header should be considered as an ancillary and be given the same care and attention. It can help to further explain and enhance the power of the subject line.

Consider this brilliantly simple example submitted by Sherry Shigger of the The Big Fat Marketing Blog.

"The subject line was **"Cookbook, special offer + more…"** the first line of the pre-header was **"Hungry yet? You will be after reading this."** Honest it worked.

Support the "from" line.

Recent research shows readers often look at the "From" line first when deciding whether to open an email, and then the subject line. The "from" line tells the recipient who sent the email, and the subject line persuades the recipient into opening. If your "from" line lists your company name, you don't have to repeat it in the subject line, which frees up space in the subject line.

If you're sending a regular newsletter give it a memorable name and put that in the subject line, people like continuity.

List your key information first

Some email clients allow more characters in a subject line than others, but most give you at least 50, including spaces; see the section of mobiles above. So, load your key

information at the start of that first 50. Also, make sure the cut-off doesn't occur in the middle of a crucial word, such as a price or date, testing is vital here.

Once again it should be emphasised that if the content is interesting many of your recipients will make the effort to read it all, Amazon for one very often use loads more characters.

Open rates don't always measure subject-line success

Look at the subjects' associated with the highest number of conversions, such as registrations, clicks to view newsletter articles, sales or downloads. If you drill down into your web analytics, you might find some anomalies, such as an email with a relatively low open rate but a high sales-per-order rate. That could mean something in the subject line strongly appealed to a narrow segment of your email list and could point the way to a more lucrative segmentation.

Remember, your end goal is not necessarily high open rates, but to have email subscribers take specific actions and spend money with you. Focus on the primary goals of your email then your post broadcast analysis will enable you to adjust future subject lines.

Urgency drives action

Set a deadline: **"Order by midnight tonight;" "Last day to ensure Xmas delivery."** Use urgency and deadlines as part of a planned series of emails as well. For example on Monday incorporate **"5 Days Left…"** and then on Thursday follow it with **"Only 24 Hours".**

A word of caution though, this kind of subject line should only be used when you have confidence in your audience and your email CTA's are obvious and appropriate.

Watch those spam filters

There's a fine line between "catchy" and "spammy."

Run your email copy through a spam checker to identify any spam-like words, phrases or textual contortions. The spam checker should tell you which phrases to avoid.

Two common errors that trip spam filters: email subject lines with all capital letters and using loads of exclamation marks, its looks unprofessional to boot. In fact, we recommend against using exclamation points at all if you can avoid it.

Brainstorm ideas within the marketing team, it's surprising how much creative a bit of competitiveness can generate and how group thinking can identify the obvious spam issues.



Write early and test often

Writing the subject line is too often the last and most hurried step in email campaign development. As you plan the email marketing campaign, start thinking about what will go into the subject line as this will help you sharpen your campaign's focus and may lead to a change in emphasis, which will enhance the campaign.

Ideally, you should test subject lines on a segment of your email list, but if you're pressed for time, run them past an informal focus group including your marketing team, others in your department and even colleagues from outside the department to give a wider view.

Review subject-line performance over your last campaigns

See which email subject lines delivered the action you wanted – the most conversions, the highest average sale per order, the highest click-through rate, etc.

Review your web analytics reports to see which email topics draw the most clicks or forwards, which white-papers get downloaded most often, which brands or departments get the most traffic. This analysis should drive content and product selection strategies, but it can also show you what information is most relevant or useful and future subject lines can be adjusted to suit.

Conclusion

The days when people opened absolutely everything that landed in their inboxes are long gone. Now, you have to intrigue them, and do it quickly. Appeal to their need for information, to be an insider "in the know."

If you have previously created a conversation with your readers, a reference to it in your subject line will persuade them into opening your email to see the next instalment.

Testing is vital, take time to organise your tests, perhaps consider a test list of trusted subscribers. If a test recipient isn't excited by the subject line and doesn't open the email, nor will the bulk of subscribers. They should always feel like they are in the

loop so try to ensure they feel that if they miss this offer that they will regret not taking advantage of it.

Overall this all seems like a lot of fuss over 50 or so characters. But those characters may have the greatest impact on your email marketing campaigns' success.

It pays to get them right. If this list of tips and hints helps you to do this, it has done its job. It can't be considered definitive, nor should it be thought of as in any way obligatory to follow any of the tips. Each one of you will interpret them in different ways depending on the audience you are addressing, the goals of the email and how your emailing campaigns fit with your overall marketing strategy.

But, and I have to introduce one more rule, the most important of all, think, think and think again about your subject lines. If this piece persuades to do spend more time in crafting good subject lines it has more than achieved its purpose.

Want to know more?

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



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