

The Complete Guide to

Email Marketing Analytics

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This guide has been lovingly created by Sign-Up.to - we provide email marketing, mobile marketing and social media tools and services to organisations of all shapes and sizes and we've been helping people get the most from their emails for over 7 years.

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Why email analytics matter

Using analytics to measure your email marketing gives you a fantastic opportunity to learn about your customers and improve your communications, more so than any other medium as with email you can trace actions back to specific individuals.

In this guide we'll look at how analytics are captured, what statistics you'll see, what they mean and how you can put all of this data to good use.

You'll learn about the real benefits you can see from putting email analytics to use, including:

- Identifying your best prospects to prioritise your sales efforts
- Finding out what time to send your campaigns to get maximum results
- Fine-tuning your subject lines to boost your open rates
- Maximising sales by studying goal data



How email analytics are collected

In order to get reliable statistics easily you'll need to use an email service provider (ESP) like Sign-Up.to to send out your campaigns. They will automate a lot of the tracking for you but an understanding of how email analytics are gathered can prove very helpful in making the most of the data you collect.

Email analytics can be divided into 4 types of data:

- **Delivery** – data collected during the transmission of the email to the recipient
- **In-email** – activity within the email itself, for example clicking a link
- **Post-click** – activity that takes place on a website reached from a link in an email
- **Sharing** – passing on the message to others

Delivery analytics

These statistics are captured by the email delivery engine whilst sending your campaign and are based on the response or bounce codes received from the recipient's email server.

In-email analytics

These statistics are captured by modifying the code of your email campaign in two ways:

Firstly any links are re-written so that they direct the user through a click-through server. These re-written links contain data which lets the analytics system identify the user, the specific link in the campaign and the actual link destination. When the reader clicks the link they go to the click-through server which records the data and then instantly redirects them to the true destination – the process is so quick that the user only sees the destination website.

Secondly a small (usually 1 pixel by 1 pixel) tracking image is placed in the email, generally at the bottom. This image is invisible to the viewer but, like the links, it has been specially crafted.

When someone opens an email and loads the images this special image is loaded from a URL on the tracking system that is unique to that recipient of that email campaign. By recording when the image is loaded we know when a given user opened the campaign.

Post-click analytics

In-email analytics show what users clicked within an email but not what happened next. This is where post-click analytics come in. Unlike the other statistics these require code to be inserted on the destination website in order to operate and rely on tracking cookies being stored on the user's computer. This can be in the form of a web analytics system like Google Analytics or an email specific tracking code like Sign-Up.to's Goal Tracking code.

Sharing

Tracking how your message has been shared uses a combination of methods. Tracking email forwards uses specially created forms which people can complete to send a copy of the message to someone – these forms contain data which identifies the sender. Tracking social media pass-along generally involves monitoring services such as Twitter to track occurrences of a unique URL created for your campaign.



What statistics are available and what they mean

The different collection methods result in a wealth of data about what's happening with your campaigns. There are standard industry terms for many of these figures but there are often misunderstandings of exactly how certain figures are calculated or what their actual meaning is.

To make the meaning of these statistics clearer we can divide them into 6 stages that follow the typical flow of actions that occur with an email campaign:

- **Sent**
- **Opened**
- **Clicked**
- **Shared**
- **Goals**
- **Unsubscribed**

Let's take a closer look at the statistics available at each of these stages.



As you've probably guessed, these statistics are all related to sending the message to your recipients. These numbers will tell you how successfully you've tackled the first hurdle of the email marketing process.

- **Sent** – the number of messages you attempted to deliver. This is the raw size of your starting list.

- **Delivered (accepted)** – the number of messages that were accepted for delivery by the recipient mail servers. These messages got through the first phase of ISP filters (which look at the reputation of the sending domain and other technical characteristics) but this doesn't guarantee that the message got to the inbox, as further spam filter checks will be applied to the message to determine if it goes into the junk mail folder or straight to the inbox.

- **Bounced** – how many messages were rejected by the receiving mail servers and so were definitely never received by the intended recipient. Bounces can be classified into two types:
  Hard – a permanent, fatal error, e.g. the mailbox for that user no longer exists.
  Soft – a temporary error, e.g. the recipient's mailbox is full.
  When a message is bounced an error code is supplied by the rejecting server in the format 5.x.x (hard bounce) or 4.x.x (soft bounce). These codes can yield useful information about the cause of the bounce and tell you if you're being intentionally blocked (and what to do about it) but they are not consistently applied across different ISPs.

Opened

Once you've got your message to the inbox the next challenge is to get your time-poor, information overloaded recipient to open it. The two big factors here are your relationship with the recipient (which should be permission-based, so they're expecting your message) and how appealing your subject line is to their interests.

- **Open rate (unique opens)** – this figure is probably the most misunderstood in email analytics. It shows you how many people have rendered your email and/or interacted with it by clicking a link. In plain English, this is how many unique recipients loaded images and/or clicked a link. This figure will only include emails rendered in HTML format.

  It's not a guarantee that they fully read the email, or a definitive indication that people not listed as opens didn't (especially if you follow best design practices and your email is readable without images) but it is an excellent benchmark for measuring engagement across different emails sent to the same group of subscribers.

- **Web/online views** – if you've crafted a beautifully designed email it's a great idea to create a web version that recipients who can't view your email correctly in their email client (for example if they can only view text emails) can see. A good email marketing platform will do this for you and track which users access this version.

Clicked

So you've got the message to the inbox, interested the recipient enough to open it – what now? For most email campaigns (but not all) the goal is to get the user to click through to a website or landing page. This is where click tracking comes in.

- **Click-through rate** – this is the proportion of unique recipients who click at least one link in your email, so you know that this many people interacted with your email beyond just opening it. This number gives you a good basis for judging the relative success of your campaign, particularly if you have a clearly defined objective that you are directing readers towards.

- **Total clicks** – this is a broader measure of the total click activity in your email as it counts each unique link click by each recipient. This can be a useful measure of engagement if you have a lot of links in your email – for example an email newsletter.

- **Individual link activity** – this is a more detailed analysis which presents click activity for each individual link in your campaign. This is extremely useful for identifying which calls to action work best or which product or articles most appeal to specific recipients. As we'll see later this data can be put to very effective use for targeting follow-up activity.



Shared

As a savvy marketer, email marketing will likely be one part of your wider strategy and encouraging sharing of your message directly via email and through social media channels like Twitter and Facebook is often an important addition. Tracking this pass-along lets you see how well your campaigns resonate with your audience and lets you identify the people who spread your message further.

- **Forwards** – if your email marketing service enables you to include forward to a friend links then this will show you how many recipients forwarded your message on, and to how many people. This statistic won't show you forwards actioned directly within the email client (i.e. by hitting 'forward' in Outlook) so it's not 100% accurate, but it's a good benchmark for comparing campaigns.

- **Twitter views** – if you're also broadcasting your message through Twitter (as platforms like Sign-Up.to enable you to) then you can track views and re-tweets of your message to see how far it spreads.

Goals

When your campaigns have specific, precisely defined online objectives – for example getting a recipient to make a purchase from your ecommerce store, or download a whitepaper, then Goal Tracking enables you to accurately measure the success of your campaign by tagging the pages on the destination website where these goals are completed. This could be done using Google Analytics or a specific tracking code provided by your email marketing platform.

Unlike the other statistics discussed here Goal Tracking requires that you have access to the pages of the destination website and add the appropriate tracking codes before you send your campaign. The extra effort is well worth it though!

- **Goals** – for every goal that you have tagged on your site this report will list the number of completed actions (and the value, if you set this) along with details of who completed the actions, letting you precisely identify the people that performed your desired action, and therefore exactly measure the response to your campaign.

N.B. Depending on whether you used your web analytics or email service provider's code this data may appear within your email report of your web analytics system – or both! Your web analytics system should also let you drill-down to see the path of each user through your site after entering from your email.



Unsubscribed

This is the end of the road for your relationship with these particular subscribers. These statistics show who has opted out from hearing from you again. Try not to take the rejection too hard – sometimes these relationships just aren't meant to be. Do keep a close eye on these figures though, if they spike then it's a clear indication that your email wasn't in keeping with your subscriber's expectations.

- **Unsubscriptions** – the number of recipients who opted out after receiving this campaign. This is measured using the unsubscribe link that is added into your campaign by your email service provider (this should always be in every campaign you send as it's a legal requirement).

- **Complaints** – as part of their whitelisting program (to ensure your messages get delivered) your email service provider should be linked in to the feedback loops of the major ISPs. This means that when someone clicks their ISP's 'this is spam' link they receive a notice back to register the user's complaint and unsubscribe them from your lists.
  Unfortunately lack of user education by ISP's means a lot of users treat this as an unsubscribe option, so its meaning has become a little fuzzy. Provided you don't see this number spiking it's generally safe to regard these as regular unsubscribes (indeed they'll be counted in that figure as well).

Viewing these statistics

To get the most from these statistics you need to be able to view them in at least 3 different ways, which your email marketing provider should facilitate:

- **Overview** – a summary report of the headline numbers and percentages. This report makes it easy to spot major trends and compare one campaign with others.

- **Detailed drill-down** – you should be able to drill-down into each of these figures and see the actions of individual subscribers, with time-stamps. e.g. for click data on a link you should be able to see exactly who clicked and when.

- **Activity over time** – you should be able to plot activity over time (most usefully the first 24 – 48 hours after sending) this will help you identify optimum sending times for future campaigns.

In addition, being able to perform campaign comparisons and generate aggregate reports is invaluable for helping you identify broader trends for your subscriber base. For example comparing open and click times for a broad range of campaigns can help you choose the optimum day and time to send your campaigns.



Putting your analytics to use

Now you know how your figures are calculated and what the numbers mean - but what can you actually do with them? To get true value from your email statistics you need to be able to put the information to good use.

What do you want to achieve?

The first step is to decide what your goals are for your email campaigns. If you're running different types of campaigns you may well have different objectives for each of them.

The aim of your emails to new prospects may be to get them to download a whitepaper; you might choose to measure your email newsletter to customers based on the percentage of people who click through on specific articles; the email for the latest products on your e-commerce site may be judged on the value of resulting sales.

Once you've determined your goals it's much easier to home in on the numbers that matter most to you.

Tip: Remember that statistics are captured and displayed in real-time, so when analysing a campaign you may need to wait 24–72 hours to see the most relevant results.

What good are averages?

Comparing headline figures (bounces, opens, clicks, unsubscribes) for a campaign with your overall averages is a good way to quickly benchmark its success. For example an unusually high bounce rate could indicate problems with your content or your domain reputation that you need to address.

Comparing with industry averages can also be useful but remember that everyone's audience and their relationship with them are slightly different. For an insight into average results for your industry see Sign-Up.to's Email Marketing Benchmark Report (http://www.sign-up.to/knowledge/uk-email-marketing-report.php)

Identifying your best prospects to prioritise your sales efforts

If you're using your email campaigns to sell a product or service then you can use your results to quickly find your 'hot prospects' and focus your follow-up on them. Identify the key links in your campaign which an interested prospect will click (for example a link to a specific product page on your website) and then use the click data for that link to identify the subscribers who clicked that link. You can then follow up with them by email or even by phone if you have that information.



Finding the best time to send your campaigns

By using your activity over time reports you can identify when most of your subscribers are opening and clicking on your emails – you may find that this differs from when you are sending your campaigns, indicating that by moving your send time closer to the average activity time you may see an uplift in results.

Be sure to look at both open and click data – in most cases these will align but it's possible that the optimum time for each will differ, this may affect your future scheduling decisions.

Using open rates to fine-tune subject lines

Comparing the open rates for one or more campaigns with identical content but different subject lines is a great way to fine tune your subject lines to optimise your open rates. Small changes can produce dramatic differences as we found when testing the use of our brand name in our newsletters (http://blog.sign-up.to/2009/11/25/ab-split-test-results-what-a-difference-a-brand-makes/).

If your email marketing provider has a split-testing feature this can automate the process for you, saving you running manual splits of your lists and comparisons of your data. More advanced tools will even allow you to test on a small sample and then automatically send the winner to the remainder of your list.

Maximising sales by studying goal data

If you've set up goal tracking on your site then you have access to a wealth of information to help you optimise the sales process. From your link click reports you can see who accessed your site from your email campaign and by cross referencing this with your goal completion data you can see who did and didn't complete your desired goal.

If you have multiple calls-to-action in your email this can help you identify the most successful ones or you can combine this with split-testing to test different campaign creatives. You can also follow-up with those who clicked but didn't convert, perhaps with a more compelling offer or a different proposition.

Profile your audience – it's time to get personal!

The most important thing you can do with the data you have available is to learn about your audience, profile their interests and start to understand what works best. No two people are alike but you should be able to identify core segments of your audience that respond to particular material or would benefit form different approaches.



Using your open, click and goal data like this you can create campaigns personalised to specific groups of customers, making your messages more relevant to their needs and more valuable to them – strengthening their relationship with you. Using advanced tools like dynamic content you can automate a lot of this process and really take your email marketing to the next level.



Useful resources

The UK Email Marketing Benchmark Report
A detailed report of average email results for a wide range of industries.
http://www.sign-up.to/knowledge/uk-email-marketing-report.php

When do people open their emails?
An analysis of average opening times for emails.
http://www.sign-up.to/knowledge/email-open-time-report.php

UK email marketing law
A summary of UK and EU regulations affecting email marketing.
http://www.sign-up.to/knowledge/uk-email-law.php

EmailMarketingReports.com
An excellent resource for all things email marketing related.
http://www.email-marketing-reports.com/

