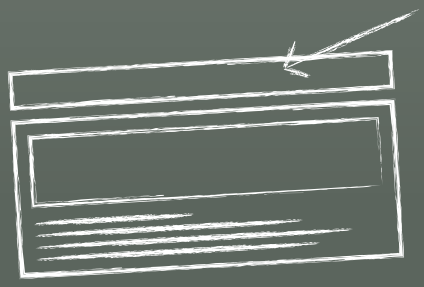
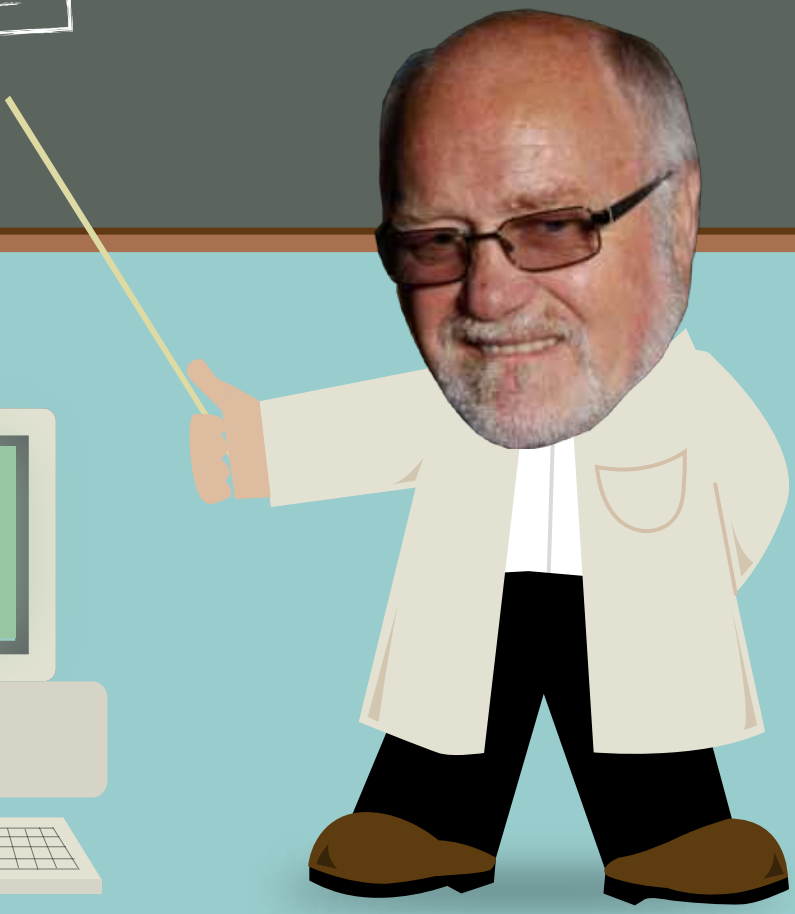
PRE-HEADERS

KEY TO IMPROVING OPEN-RATES?



E=MAIL

P+U-R+E
=360





BY MICHAEL BAIRSTOW

Pre-headers–key to improving open rates?

When I first became involved with email marketing, pre-headers had a different name; they were often called “trust earning text statements”. In these Twitter times many types of feature names and ‘idents’ are abbreviated especially in the digital marketing industry and very often to the detriment of clarity.

In the case of pre-headers the old name was certainly more descriptive, providing a clue to one of the functions it performed. Stefan Pollard of whom I am great admirer, often used the term ‘Snippets’ and indeed many email marketing systems will incorporate a ‘snippet manager’ within each clients account.

I shall call them pre-headers from now on, but whichever name is used shouldn’t diminish their importance.

What are pre-headers?



Put simply they are lines of text that are placed above the body of the email, and I mean lines not paragraphs, pre-headers are like chocolate, too much is bad for you.

Generally they will include some sort of link, a simple example of which would allow the recipient to view an online version of the email, perhaps hosted by the Email Service Provider (ESP), or on your own servers.

Importantly the pre-headers can be viewed before opening the email or activating images, in the context of viewing emails on smart-phones this could be crucial. Even when viewing on a desktop the pre-headers can be seen in an Outlook preview pane, again before activating images.

The screen shot alongside shows a typical pre-header set, in this case two lines of text with accompanying links.

The sheer diversity of companies and organisations using email as a marketing tool dictates that there cannot be any hard and fast rules concerning when or how to use a pre-header, what is appropriate for your organisation is the key factor. However common sense should prevail here, having no pre-headers at all or providing too many are both undesirable.

In the example above the pre-headers are justified right but in the view of many they should either be centred or left justified, the reason being that right aligned text can be cut off by vertical preview panes.

So, what are pre-headers used for?

Below is a short list of some of the main uses of a pre-header, some of which I will go on to describe in detail later. Clearly there is a lot of scope for you to be imaginative and change the pre-header to suit the needs of each individual email.

- **Incorporating a special offer link a pre-header to a landing page.**
- **Linking to an online version of your email.**
- **Asking recipients to add your email address to their address book and white lists.**
- **Delivering a online summary of your content to provoke their curiosity.**
- **Informing recipients as to why they are getting this email and who it is from.**
- **Provide voucher information for a promotion.**
- **Inform subscribers of a time-limited sale.**

The pre-header as an extra incentive to open the email

I believe the first line of a pre-header can and should be multifunctional. It can act as an extension of the subject line adding substance to an otherwise short statement. It can be, in effect, an abbreviated marketing message.

As previously stated we live and work in the age of Facebook and Twitter so composing single line messages with meaning is surely a skill many have learned and can apply to useful effect.

This first line could also be utilised as a send to a friend link. Having a pre-header which encourages the reader to begin the clicking process is useful and why not begin the viral process there? The email marketing blogger Stefan Pollard called this space at the top of the email ‘valuable real estate’ and I believe that using it in the way I am advocating here doesn’t waste that space.

If you choose to use the pre-header as an invitation to download vouchers and then link it to a landing pages, this provision of a link fulfils the third question that often

runs through peoples mind when in receipt of an email, ***"what do I next?"*** This comes after the question ***"what's in it for me?"*** which should be satisfied by the subject line with the assistance of a snappy pre-header.

The email pre-header as a call-to-action

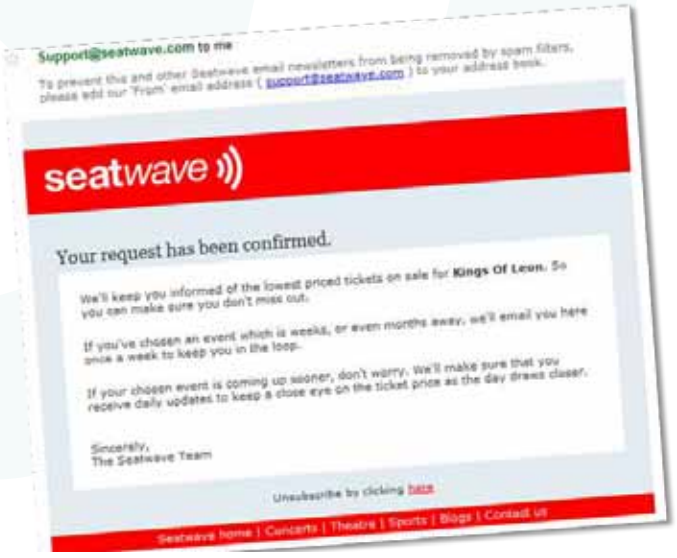


Some people in the email marketing industry maintain that pre-headers should be used for such tasks as 'add us to your safe list' and sometimes for an unsubscribe link, the latter we can come back to later.

Another school of thought to which I belong, believes that they should be used as a primary incentive to open the email. To quote from a recent blog ***"Click here to see images"*** doesn't take my finger off the delete key, but ***"Take 20% off your favourite item"*** just might.

The distinction between 'incentive to open' and 'call to action' is blurry and has much to do with the link or links you provide in that opening statement. I would describe the former as a definite extension of the subject whilst the latter is a more positive statement such as a link to a landing page, for vouchers as an example.

The email pre-header as a trust earning text feature



As stated in the introduction, pre-headers were, and sometime still are, called trust earning text statements. One interpretation of this was the idea that you should use a line of text explaining who the email was from, and why it was being sent, as an example that the recipient has previously subscribed and, finally, provide an unsubscribe link.

The theory was (is) that spammers would never go to this much bother and so you, the recipient, could assume that the email was legitimate. As a procedure it has value

especially when emailing new lists or email addresses. Perhaps when broadcasting to an established list that has already been in receipt of your emails you might assume this trust is by now established and leave this one out.

The choice as always is down to you marketers and should be used or discarded as part of your overall strategy.

The pre-header as a request to add the email address to a safe senders list

Many emailers use this type of pre-header, especially when emailing to a B2B list and it can be effective in creating trust and making it more convenient when recipients receive emails. As I cannot emphasise enough, if any particular email marketing technique works for you and your organisation then use it, but why not do comparative tests to see what works best?

Some commentators believe there are downsides to this technique. Firstly it uses up valuable space, driving the actual email content further down the screen when viewed. As was stated previously if you have sent a series of emails to a particular subscriber then it is logical that if your previous email content is relevant and interesting enough they are going to OK future mailings, they will look forward to them.

Secondly if that is the first piece of text the recipients see before they open the email or activate images will they really stop them pressing that delete key? Of course they may have recognised your brand in the from address and will open it anyway which can make this particular type of pre-header a lower priority.

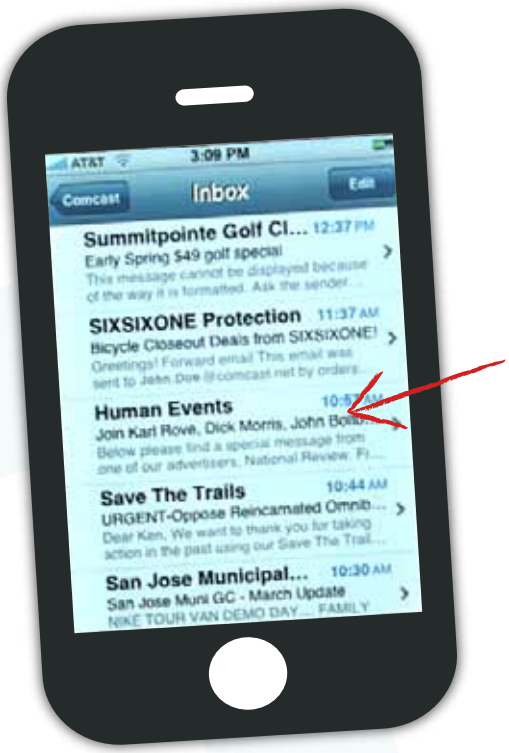
The pre-header's importance to viewing email on Smartphones

I have already referred to the value of pre-headers in the context of smartphone use and here's why, I believe that they are not only valuable but almost mandatory.

In the example on the following page, an iPhone screen shot which I am sure some will recognise, you will note that there isn't much to see. Who is it from, a bit of subject line and the odd line of text. The line of text is your pre-header and in the context of the emails listed here you should be able to see how important they can be.

Pre-headers–key to improving open rates?

As an example let's look at the Human Events email.



What can be seen as an abbreviated subject line is a list of names, perhaps meaningless to us within UK but in the USA they mean a great deal, all of those people are well known and respected by a particular political faction. If we make the assumption that the list demographic is one whose members are sympathetic to that faction then the clever association of those names to the special message is more likely to persuade them to open the email.

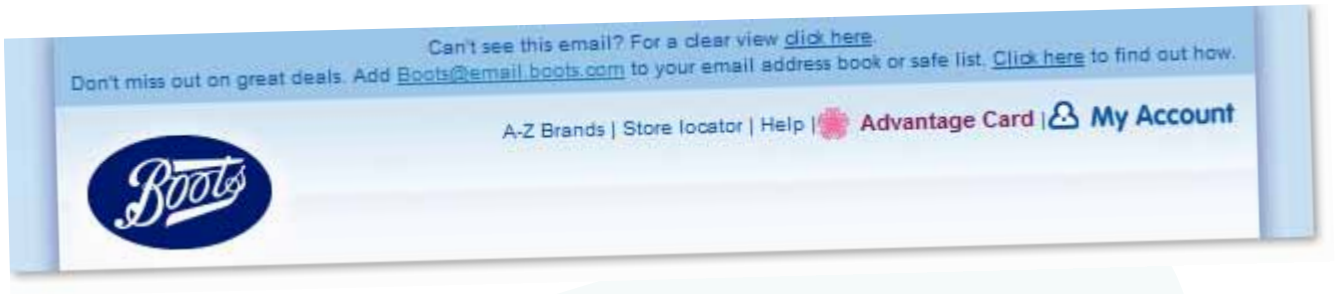
Of course this is an email specific to a particular business sector, but the point is surely that if your recipients are viewing emails on their phones, which they will be in increasing numbers, then you don't have a great deal to work with. You have to throw effort into thinking about your pre-headers, using them imaginatively making them compelling and interesting, driving the subscriber into opening the email or making the first click.

The most beautifully designed content in the world is utterly useless if the recipient chooses not to open and proceed. And as an affirmation of my views on the importance of pre-headers being seen on mobile below is a quote from the DMA's recent newsletter edited by Mark Brownlow.

"Traditionally, the pre-header directed people to some kind of online or mobile version of the email. However, they now often include a call-to-action and provide the snippet text picked up by Gmail for display alongside the subject line in the Gmail inbox itself.

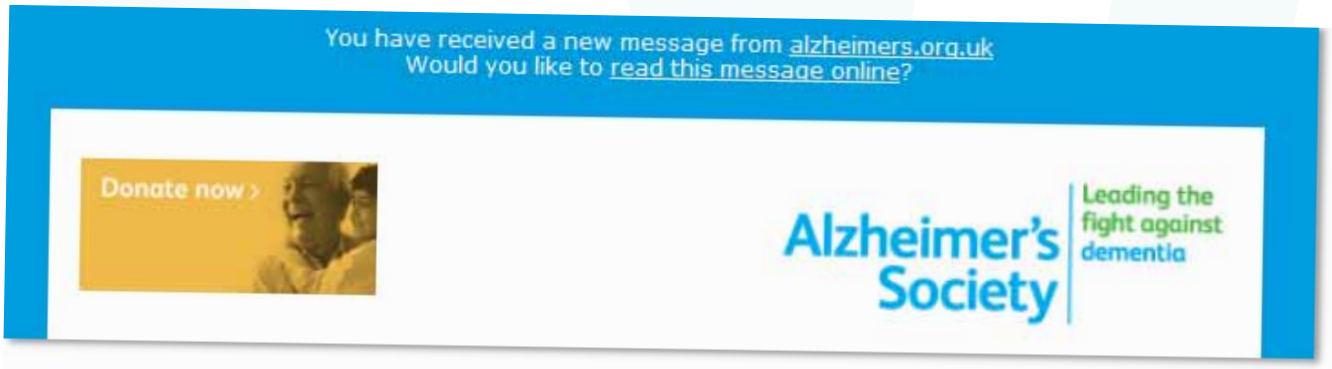
Pre-headers can also quickly communicate the purpose and value of an email, which helps you survive the cut when mobile email users rapidly triage their inbox."

The Pre-Headers incorporating a View Online link



If I was to rank my top pre-headers this would be my second choice just behind the incentive to open.

In the screen shot on the right it is at the top, not my preference but maybe the marketing team felt that to be a better choice, perhaps they sample tested it? It is simple, straight forward enough to link it and performs an additional important function. Obviously it allows viewers to see a browser version of the email but to do that they have to positively click a link and that action in effect both opens the email. As with a send to a friend link, this fulfils the third element in the mantra that all email marketers should be aware of, which is what is going through peoples' minds after receiving an email - who is it from, what's in for me and what do I do next?



Clicking on the view online link starts the viewing process and, with luck, the receiver will see your call to action and further engage with the email. One thing though, please try to avoid the term 'click here', it's hackneyed and frankly unimaginative.

The pre-header as an extension of the subject line.

In my opinion, based on reading many on-line posts, blogs and newsletters, and from my practical experience in email marketing, this is by far the most important virtue of using pre-headers.

In today's climate where technological change is driving consumer behavioural change at an increasingly rapid rate, email marketers need to maximise the immediate impact of their emails.

It may be that the space available on new technology platforms for the subject line to make sufficient impact is no longer enough. If this is the case then the pre-header becomes practically mandatory. Of course there are other things to be considered holistically, design, layout etc., about the email but before anything else happens the consumer has to open it. Intelligent and creative use of pre-headers in conjunction with sharp subject lines will greatly enhance this process.

Further ways to make the pre-header work for you

✓ **Firstly you should decide whether you need a visible pre-header at all?**

This seems an odd thing to say so what is meant by that? Well, there is a school of thought that says by placing a single pixel image above the email body and then ensuring that you place an image description in the Alt Text box, the text will appear as if by magic before images are enabled. Perhaps you think that might be useful but I would suggest it be thoroughly tested to ensure it works on mobiles, Outlook inboxes etc.

✓ **Check out your email in the various email clients via your Inbox Preview Tool.**

What if you try a version without the pre-header and then one with, run them through the Inbox preview. It may be your email is fine without a pre-header, more likely though that you will note how it renders in some email clients and therefore how much the pre-header helps. If you have already optimised for the Outlook preview pane you may obviate the need for those text lines completely

If your primary call-to-action or value proposition isn't visible and clickable? What if your email design is heavy on images that might get blocked? A pre-header is called for, and it only takes a few minutes to add a simple, unobtrusive text snippet to the very top of your email.

✓ **Decide whether or not you need better inbox-teaser text.**

Look at your email using your standard testing routines, Inbox Preview, Outlook preview indeed any other testing mechanism and see what shows up as teaser text.

Is it a long, meaningless URL? A housekeeping request that won't entice the reader to open? Or something that adds additional punch to your email subject line? If you are sending mainly B2C remember many people will view your emails away from a standard desktop, so you have to work extra hard to get your recipients to open.

✓ As with so many aspects of email marketing you should always be testing, then testing again, then finally, doing some testing, it is just as important with pre-headers as with all other areas when constructing your content.

Want to know whether pre-headers will make a difference? Simply test them, you should know the metrics that your email broadcasts, open rates click throughs etc. are achieving. Sample your lists and create one of a size which will produce significant results. If you've never used a pre-header before, send the regular version of your email to one part of your list and send the pre-header version to the list created. Or, if you've been using the standard "click here to view images" pre-header, send a call-to-action pre-header to half your list. Compare your open and click-through rates for each version, and may the best email win. Split testing is a worthwhile exercise, especially if you are concerned about falling open rates.

And, finally.....



This is the equivalent of the health warning on a packet of cigarettes, the disclaimer in a proposal from the bank, the small print in an insurance proposal. This article is a guide not an instruction manual. I hope I have been able highlight some of the reasons why all of you email marketers should use pre-headers and do it in a way which will get you thinking. It is by no means definitive and certainly shouldn't be thought of as gospel.

The phrase 'best practises' is bandied around a great deal in reference to all forms of marketing, in my field, email marketing, it seems to be especially prevalent. Whilst in general I agree that we should acknowledge best practise it should never be thought of as a completely rigid code. Certainly there are some 'best practices' which should be adhered to, for example being in compliance with codes regarding acquisition of email addresses. But in other areas best practise is often what is best for you and your business, you have to assess and judge whether your organisation will gain from adherence to it. The use of pre-headers is no exception to this, there is loads of evidence which suggests they can make a quantifiable difference but you are the best person to decide how best to use them.

I urge you you to consider the points raised here, research some more then make the decision that will most benefit your organisation. To quote someone or other if I have encouraged you to think about pre-headers then ***"My work here is done".***

I welcome your feedback on this subject, both positive and negative, you are free to tweet me on **@babyboomerboy**, but please keep it clean guys!! Or contact me via the information below.

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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