Return Path

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Your Reputation Holds the Key to Deliverability

Twenty percent of legitimate email never reaches the inbox. Blame the ISPs' ongoing fight against spam—and then, look in the mirror. Today, your sending practices play the major role in determining whether or not your email makes it to the inbox.

The crude, content-based tools that ISPs used to counter the "spam crisis" are no longer the main factor in determining whose mail gets through. ISP relationships aren't that important any more, either. It's your sending reputation that drives deliverability, and your reputation is all about your numbers.

The Data That Drives Deliverability

A Return Path study found that 77% of delivery problems were based on sender reputation. That reputation is based on five very concrete data points that each ISP looks at when assessing the email sent into their system:

- **Volume:** How much total email does your organization send? Spammers have high numbers. So do many legitimate permission-based mailers. If your volume numbers are high, it's critical that your complaint, hard bounce and spam trap hit rates be low.

- **Complaint rates:** How often do people hit the "report spam" button when they receive your messages? Small variations up or down can have a dramatic effect on your inbox performance.

- **Your "hard bounce" rate:** A hard bounce is caused by a non-existent or unknown address. The lower your rate, the better chance you have of maintaining your reputation.

- **Spam trap hits:** Spam traps are old inboxes that ISPs reactivate specifically to trap spammers. Since these addresses have never been registered to receive email, any mail that lands in the trap inbox is spam. The major cause for inclusion of spam trap addresses on a mailing list is poor list hygiene. Spam trap addresses may also come from a purchased list if questionable practices were used to assemble that list.

- **Authentication:** Authentication lets an ISP know that the sender is who they say they are. Spammers spoof email addresses; when email is authenticated, the ISP knows that the return address is the actual sender. Authentication is an easy first step to improving your reputation, and it can make a significant difference. But, authentication alone isn't enough. Many spammers authenticate their IPs so you have to be doing all of the above in addition to authenticating your mail.There are three major approaches to authentication: SPF (AOL), Sender ID (Microsoft) and DomainKeys Identified Mail, aka DKIM (Yahoo!). You'll need your IT department to help you get this right.

- How important is content? It depends on the ISP. Return Path has found that some ISPs now appear to give little or no weight to content (these include AOL, Roadrunner, Bell South, Gmail, ATT, NetZero). Others give content some weight, but only a few give it a weight of 25% or higher (including Adelphia, Cox, Hotmail, MSN).

Protect Your Reputation: Monitor!

When content was deliverability king, everyone learned to monitor their email for content filter triggers before hitting "send." Today it's more important to monitor deliverability from the viewpoint of sender reputation.

Monitoring is the only way to know whether your mail is reaching the inbox. If you're only looking at open rates, you've only got a piece of the story. If a message wasn't opened, maybe it never reached the addressee. It might be ending up in bulk folders or just lost in the ether. Monitoring tells you what the situation truly is.

The only effective way to get a full picture of what's happening is to use seed email accounts—accounts created by a monitoring service with each of the ISPs. These accounts have good addresses, so if you send mail to them and it doesn't get through, look to your sending reputation with the relevant ISP.

Repair Your Reputation: Fix the Problems

When monitoring reveals a reputation problem, take immediate action. Start by preventing or eliminating "unknown user" addresses on your lists:

- On the registration form for your permission-based email, require recipients to enter their addresses twice, to ensure accuracy.

- Send a welcome message to everyone who registers. Pull any bounced addresses off your lists immediately.

- Implement and maintain list hygiene processes.

All of these not only lower your hard bounce rate, they also reduce the chance that your email will get caught in a spam trap.

Preventing Complaints

The actions you need to take to prevent and manage complaints ("This is spam") will depend on what is causing them.

- Sign up for ISP feedback to receive immediate notification when subscriber complains – and immediately remove that email address from your list.

- If complaints are coming from new subscribers they probably are not getting the content they wanted or expected. Make changes on your subscription page so people have a clear picture of what they will receive.

- If all the complainers are from one data source (e.g. a purchased list), stop using addresses from that source or reconfirm their permission.

- If your complaints seem to be coming primarily from non-responders, remove them from your lists.

Complaints that don't fall into any of these categories may be caused by your creative and copy or by excessively frequent mailings. If you've just increased your mailing frequency and complaints increase, try reducing frequency again. Monitor the change in deliverability.

If frequency doesn't seem to be the issue, look to changes in creative. You may need to experiment. Ensure that content remains relevant to what each person on your list. Customize your message to people's buying habits. Personalization is a helpful touch, although not potent enough by itself to prevent complaints.

If you aren't on a recipient's address list, their ISP may block images and links on your email by default. It's important to check to see what your email will look like for recipients from each ISP when you aren't on the recipient's address list. If your recipients can't make head or tail of your message, they are more likely to call it spam.

Use Best Subscribing Practices to Control Complaints

Using best practices for subscribing can help keep complaints to a minimum.

• Give subscribers detailed sign-up options that make clear what they will receive by selecting each option.

• Provide instructions on adding your email to their address book, both on the sign-up page and in your welcome email.

• Use the highest permission standard you can support. Verified ("double") opt-in yields the lowest complaint rates, but may also mean smaller lists. At a minimum use confirmed opt-in.

It's equally important to make it easy for people to unsubscribe. An unsubscribe removes one uninterested person from your list. If that person were to hit "Report Spam" because they couldn't unsubscribe easily, it would affect your ability to reach thousands of interested people. Respond immediately to unsubscribe requests (before sending again).

Maintain Your Reputation: Keep Monitoring

Monitoring can't stop once you've fixed the problems that were dragging your reputation down. Continued vigilance is required. Your deliverability picture can change at any time as your email program changes—or even because the program has stayed the same for too long.

An example: During a peak sales period your company increases mailing frequency from once to three times per week. You get a nice lift in sales. Great! Meanwhile, some recipients feel overwhelmed by the increased message volume and hit "This is spam" rather than "Unsubscribe." Your complaint rate goes up, your messages don't get through, and that nice lift turns into a prolonged loss of sales while you work on repairing your sender reputation.

Without monitoring, by the time you see the loss of sales, your sender reputation is already severely damaged. With continuous monitoring of deliverability, you would be able to spot the deliverability problem very quickly and intervene to prevent further complaints.

A Good Reputation = Maximum Deliverability

You know what the ISPs are looking for. You can monitor your deliverability, identify problems affecting your sender reputation, determine the causes, and fix them. Continue using best practices and you might well achieve deliverability of 90-96% on mailings to your internally-generated lists. Just be sure to continue monitoring, and safeguard your reputation.

Would you like help increasing your email delivery rates? Find out how Return Path can improve your email performance. Email rpinfo@returnpath.net or call 866-362-4577 for more information.