

## Developersaurus Tarpit - Email Marketing

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If it hasn't happened to you yet get ready - it will. Some client or potential client is going to ask you if you can do an "email blast". Now, they might mean that they want to send a newsletter or announcement to their own customers. Or they might mean they want you to contribute to the juggernaut of spam that is flooding the Internet. To you, spam is a battle - a titanic struggle between good and evil. To them, spam is minor annoyance, or (due to the fact that many clients are salesman turned businessman) a goldmine of nearly free marketing. Of course, they may not read 200 to 300 emails a day. In any case you will have to consider how to respond and what kind of advice to give your client. Here are a few important things to consider.

### 4>Tracking customer "read" requests

The first question you will get after you tell him or her it *is* possible (resist the temptation to lie) is, "How do I know if a recipient has read an email? The answer is to use a web bug for tracking. What's a web bug? It's usually a transparent 1 X 1 pixel gif image that is embedded in an HTML email. For example, let's say you have this IMG tag:

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If this looks unusual to you, spend some time looking at the source code of some email marketing messages. Here's what the Coldfusion code looks like on the other end:

```
<cfset transGif = "c:\1x1.gif">
<cfparam name="url.emid" default="0">
<!-- increment for the email --->
<cfquery name="update" datasource="#dsn#">
    UPDATE    myCampaign
    SET       hasRead = hasRead + 1
    WHERE    emid = #val(url.emid)#
</cfquery>

<cfcontent type="image/gif" file="#transGif#">
```

The query code and operation could be a lot more complicated, but the principle is the same - mark the user as "read" and serve up a GIF image. When the user reads the message by opening or reading it in preview mode the gif image is retrieved and "displayed" on the page (obviously it's tiny and transparent so it does not really serve any purpose). Straightforward right?

### How good is "read" information?

The short answer is, "not very good". This is what you need to drive home to your client. I promise, you will have to say it over and over again. They can go to any one of the popular email marketers (the Internet version of a cross between a snake oil salesman and a lawyer), and get claims of 100% accuracy or 60% click through rates - yada yada yada. This point may even have to be "proven" to the client. It's hard for them to believe or sometimes comprehend how many things have to go right over and over again for the data to be worth anything intrinsically. You will simply never be able to say with certainty that "500 people read our email out of 50000 messages sent." Here are some points to drive home.

- *Many people don't read HTML email* - In order for the "read" data to be correct and accurate it must be rendered in HTML. If a user only reads in text mode they will never be listed as "read".
- *Major email providers now require user pro-action to display graphics* - Yahoo, Gmail, and Hotmail aggressively filter advertising email into a bulk folder and *require* a user to proactively unblock the images to see them. No images, no tracking. The next version of Outlook will contain the same feature - set "on" by default.
- *ISPs, network spam control and filters can and do block requests for web bugs.*
- *Email messages with interesting content are often forwarded* - This can screw the numbers of "reads per send" if you are doing targeted marketing.
- *Users can open an email multiple times* - skewing the results as well.
- *Spam is universally hated and despised by all* - make sure you are following the rules, sending to legitimate lists, and that your email messages are relevant and interesting - not just clever.
- *Your message will be filtered* - Things are tightening up. Spam is a legitimate problem on the internet costing companies billions per year. More and more resources are being devoted to fighting it, and more can be expected.
- *Remember the preview pane* - an email displayed in the preview pane of an email client (like outlook) will count as "read" - even if the user was simply moving through his inbox and deleting messages.

Add all of that up and it should be obvious that the data delivered by a web bug is at the least unreliable and at the worst crap. I tell customers that they can use such data as a way of determining the effectiveness of campaign "A" against campaign "B". Click throughs are much better for understanding the effectiveness of a campaign, but clients like "read" numbers because they are always higher than click-throughs, and that makes them sexier.

### Textual Content is Important

Get your client to think - really think - about the textual content of the campaigns. So many campaigns are nothing more than groups of images and links - with no textual content at all. You are throwing away a chance to reach a large percentage of users if you pay little attention to the text. Remember, all those hotmail, yahoo and gmail users may *not see* your images, but they will *all see your text*. It's amazing how clients will often spend a great deal of money to design amazing graphic content for email delivery, but then totally blow it when it comes to the actual message. Along that same line, take advantage of multi-part messaging. Send out emails with both html and text mail parts. Doing so paints with the broadest possible brush.

### Beware of the numbers

Try to emphasize to your client to not trust statistics. Especially if they use a third party email service! The numbers of reads, response rates, campaign efficacy etc. - can all be misinterpreted or downright deceptive. I ran across this [excellent article](#) by Loren McDonald (email labs is an email marketing company) on the subject today.