

## Subject lines – length is everything

**Conventional wisdom about subject line length is about to be turned on its head, as the result of a new study by Alchemy Worx, a leading digital marketing agency with 100 percent focus on email. Our analysis of over 200 million emails shows an unexpected relationship between click-to-open rates and subject line length, suggesting very strongly that past subject line analysis may have led email marketers seriously astray...**

Studies of subject line length have been done before but our study goes a step further. MailerMailer's Email Marketing Metric Report (2008) studied two groups of subject lines – fewer than and more than 35 characters – and found that those of fewer than 35 were stronger for both opens and clicks. Our study replicated these findings but goes on to look at the data in a more granular way and adding an additional level of sophistication in the form of click-to-open rates.

Instead of grouping subject lines into two categories, we used 13 groups of 10 characters (11-20, 21-30 etc) and also investigated the effect of subject line length on click-to-open rates as we believe they provide a better indication of relevance – and after all, is an open without a click really a measure of success?

Subject lines of less than 60 characters proved best for optimising open rates, while click and click-to-open rates are optimised by subject lines of over 70 characters. A dead zone of subject lines of between 60 and 70 characters was identified, where neither metric is optimised. Based on a general understanding that shorter subject lines are best, and the difficulty of summarising complex or multiple propositions into as few characters as possible, there is a danger that marketers, trying to find a balance between length and communicating the proposition/s may end up with subject lines that fall into this dead zone.

### Methodology

Alchemy Worx handles the entire email marketing process of many well-known brands and this study is based on analysing years of data using our customer based reporting application developed in-house. All the campaigns analysed are retention-based email messages sent to existing customers of client companies in the media, retail, leisure and travel, B2B, B2C, financial services and networking sectors – a wide mix. Our study was conducted on 646 subject lines across 205 million messages sent between 10/10/2003 and 11/03/2008.

### What subject lines work best?

Our ground-breaking research proves that subject lines under 60 or more than 70 characters generate the highest response – but that the response is actually different at each end of the spectrum:

- shorter subject lines generate higher open rates, a measure of reader interest, but much lower click-to-open rates
- longer subject lines earn a much higher click-to-open rate, an indication of real relevance
- the open rate and click-to-open rate curves intersect at about 60-70 characters, a "dead zone" where neither metric is optimised

The research proves that, as well as influencing open rates, subject lines also influence click and click-to-open rates – an indicator of whether or not subscribers find the proposition/s within your messages relevant. So even after an email has been opened, subject lines continue to influence the expectations of your customers. The research indicates that the proportion of customers who go on to click on a link in an email they open is directly affected by the length of the subject line.

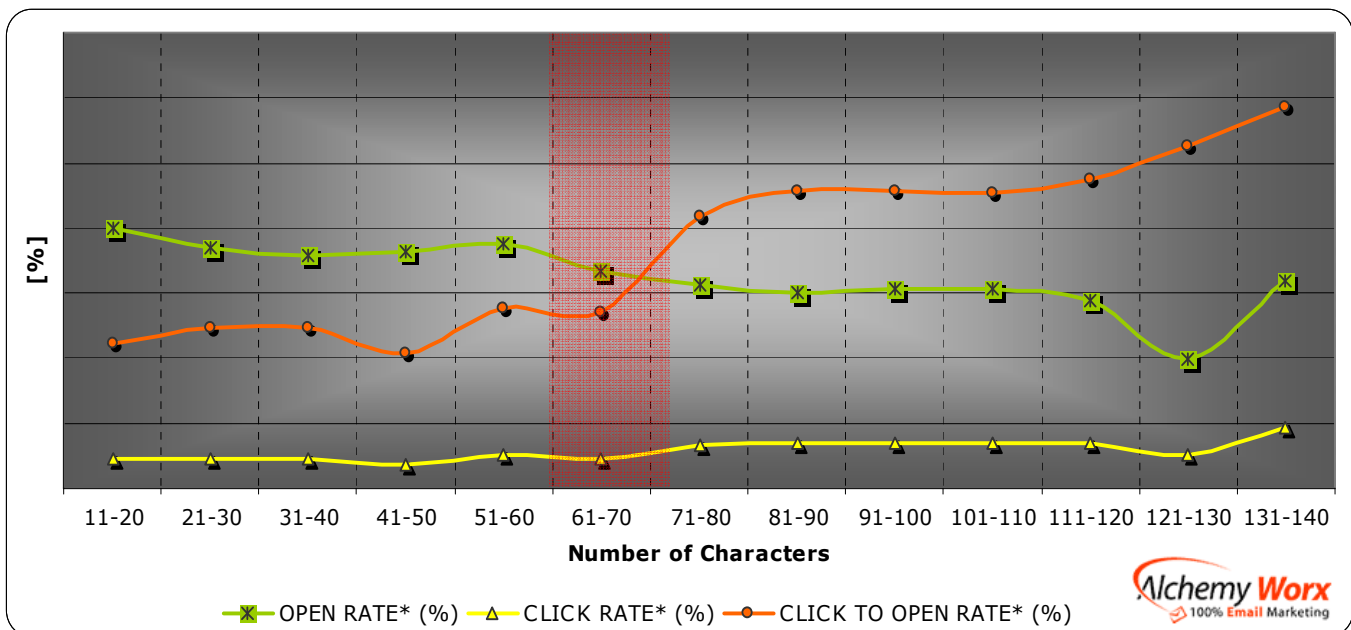
### Deeper analysis provides the answers

The general consensus regarding subject lines is the shorter, the better – and for years most experts have advised that fewer than 50 characters are best. This advice originally came about as some email clients (software), such as AOL, which at the time dominated the landscape, truncated the subject line at 40 characters. However, things have changed. Most email clients now allow up to 100 characters to be visible, and users can also control how they view an email subject line when they configure their email client.

Over the years, Alchemy Worx amassed plenty of circumstantial evidence that suggested longer subject lines could be just as effective as shorter ones but could not source any research to support this view. To verify the hypothesis, we conducted this study which looked at over 205 million delivered emails (a total of 646 subject lines) across its client base, which includes global brands like PayPal, Hilton Hotels and Deloitte. We studied both the character count and word count of subject lines – and found longer subject lines to be markedly more effective for driving an action. We found this to be true whether we looked at the number of characters, word count or the number of propositions included in a subject line.

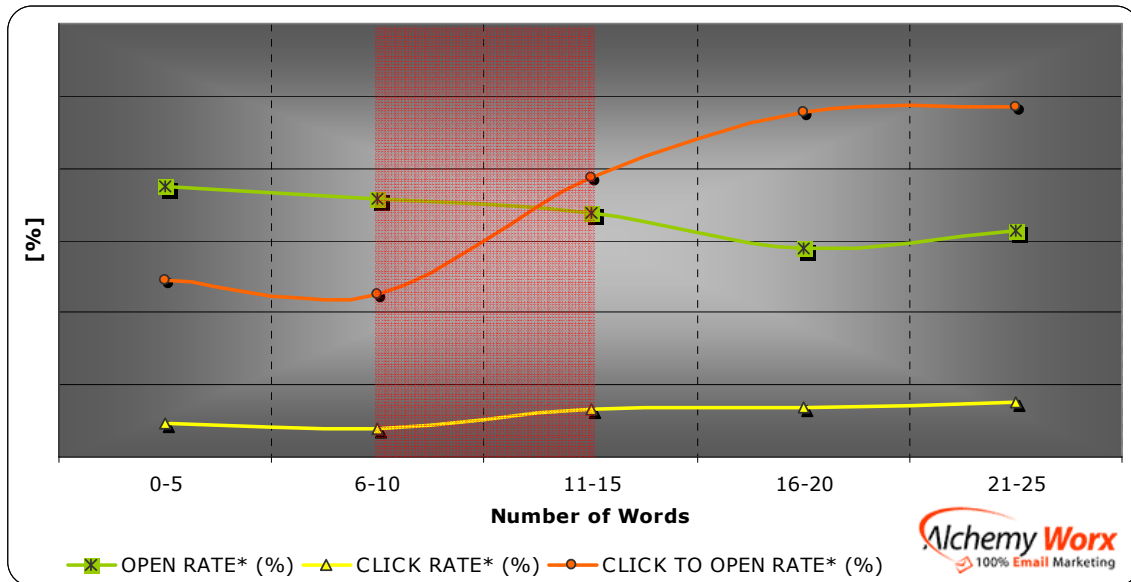
Our study analysed promotional emails from various brands covering a cross section of campaigns and creative executions across a number of sectors to reduce the impact of these factors on the results.

The chart below shows the inverse relationship between open rates and the number of characters in the subject line, as well as the trend for click rates and click-to-open rates to increase as the number of characters in the subject line increases. The click-to-open rate intersects the open rate trend line at the end of the “dead zone”, an area where none of the metrics analysed are optimised.



\*Open and click-to-open rates are calculated as weighted means. There were relatively few subject lines over 121 characters in length, resulting in a smaller sample and higher standard deviation for extremely long subject lines.

We also found the same relationships occurred when numbers of words were examined rather than characters. In fact, the relationships between the number of words and the open, click and click-to-open rates are more pronounced. We believe this is due to the fact that words are a better indicator of the number of concepts conveyed in a subject line than characters. The dead zone is also more pronounced in this analysis, and lies between subject lines containing 6-10 words.



\*Open and click-to-open rates are calculated as weighted means

These results conclusively prove the hypothesis that longer subject lines elicit a higher click-to-open rate regardless of whether characters or words are analysed. The question is why?

### Longer subject lines as a filter for relevance

We believe the number of people for whom any given proposition, whether it is an offer or a piece of content, is largely fixed and cannot be influenced by the subject line for any number of reasons. For example a heavily discounted pair of Nike trainers will only be of interest to a fixed number of people on your list. By comparison, the number of people who open an email communication is variable and is much more readily influenced by the subject line. The most common way to maximise open rates is to use ambiguous or potentially misleading subject lines, a technique often used by spammers. Shorter subject lines are more likely to be ambiguous or misleading than longer ones.

Getting more people for whom the message is relevant to open the email requires a subject line that is specific and detailed, which usually requires more words or characters.

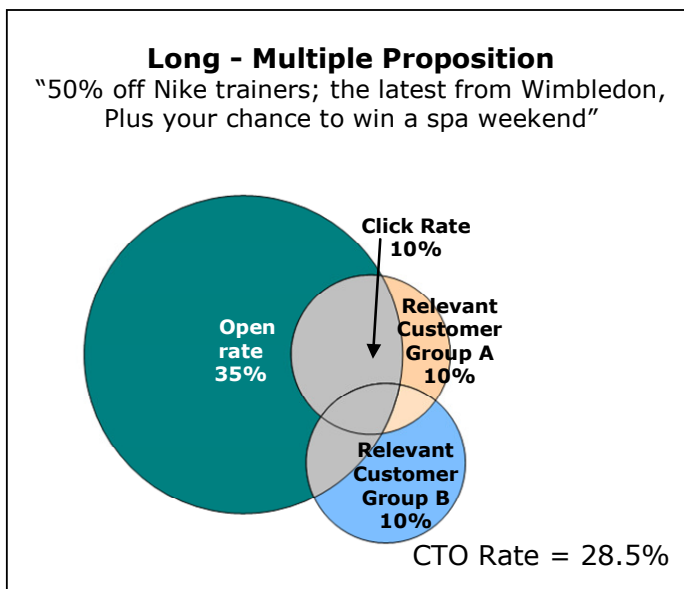
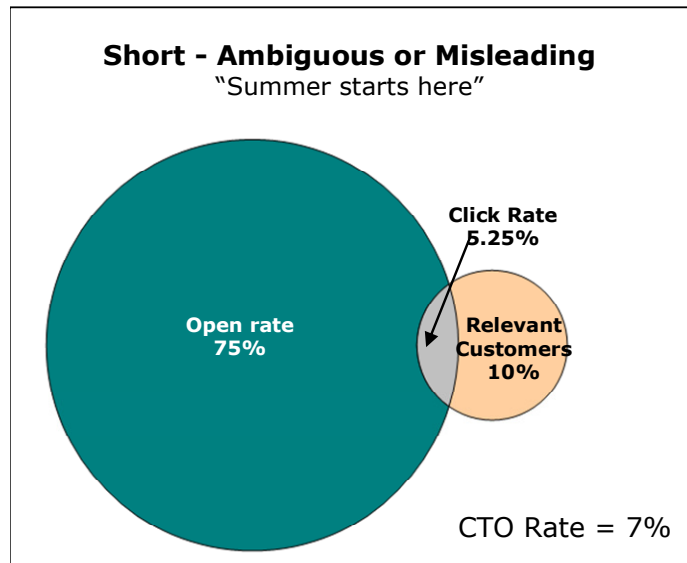
Making the people for whom the email is relevant to, go onto click once they have opened a message is affected by factors such as the email's design, creative and effectiveness of the copy. The one metric that brings all these factors together is the click-to-open rate which is why we use, and recommend, incorporating it in subject line analysis.

**More customers open emails when subject lines are shorter – but are they the right customers?**

The following diagrams provide examples of situations that are likely to occur with different types of subject lines. The diagrams are to scale, but the rates provided are for illustrative purposes only.

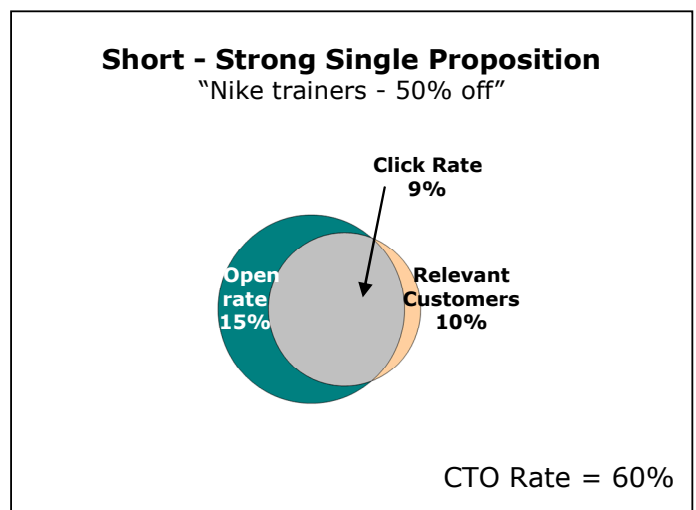
A short subject line, such as “**Summer starts here**”, containing an offer for discounted Nike trainers is likely to result in the situation shown here.

Subscribers are likely to be opening because of their relationship with the brand and/or curiosity. Relevant customers may not realise that the email contains a proposition of interest to them, and may not open, and therefore cannot click.



A more specific subject line, containing more than one proposition such as “**50% off Nike trainers; the latest from Wimbledon, Plus your chance to win a spa weekend**” ensures that all the propositions contained in the email are communicated, maximising the number of relevant customers that open.

Strong, valuable, single proposition emails are the exception that proves the rule that longer is better. A subject line of “**Nike trainers - 50% off**” conveys the entire contents of an email, to as many people as it is relevant to, in a clear and concise way. Increasing the number of words or characters in this situation is unlikely to make the contents of the email more obvious to relevant customers.



## **Stay out of the dead zone - there's no advantage in compromise**

Subject lines that attempt to over simplify or shorten multiple propositions, or unnecessarily lengthen strong, single propositions are highly likely to end up in the dead zone between 60-70 characters where neither metric is optimised. Many marketers attempt to include details of the proposition to appeal to as many customer groups as possible in a short subject line, but simply cannot do this in less than 50 characters, so go slightly over and fall into this group. The lack of optimisation of both metrics here is a direct result of the compromise between communicating the proposition(s) contained in the email and short subject line length.

- ENDS -

### Definition of the metrics used in this report:

Open rate - opens divided by number of emails delivered.

Click rate - unique clicks divided by emails delivered.

Click to open rate - number of clicks divided by the number of opens.



Alchemy Worx is the UK's only full-service email marketing agency. We create strategic email campaigns to help you build strong, personal, long-term relationships with your customers. We believe that email marketing should focus on customers, not campaigns and are an industry leader in the development of advanced reporting analytics. Our reporting and analysis goes beyond open and click rates to give you informed, long-term insights into how customers respond to your communications.

We provide our clients with services to optimise their email communications effectiveness based on their individual objectives and targets.

For more information on how Alchemy Worx can help you optimise your email marketing campaigns and overall strategy visit [www.alchemyworx.com](http://www.alchemyworx.com)