The Nudge Effect: Unlock the Branding Power of Email
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Email marketers are all about the “open” and how to get more of them. How to persuade more of their subscribers to open their emails and how to get those subscribers to open their emails more often.

They tweak and test subject lines to see which ones drive more opens. They track open rates by campaign and over time. They quiz their marketer allies and scour benchmark reports to compare how they rank. They rejoice over a high campaign rate and despair over a low one. But should they?

Yes, in one respect, because the open is crucial to email success. Customers who don’t open your messages don’t act on them. But the open, by itself, doesn’t tell the whole story.

However, all the obsession number crunching can obscure what the open rate really indicates and, more importantly, what it does not.

The open rate by itself is probably one of the least reliable metrics for measuring campaign success. A high open rate doesn’t always translate into campaign success, especially if you have many opens but few conversions. Marketers focus too often on campaign-level open rates rather than total opens.

And then there’s this radical concept: An email doesn’t even have to be opened to create a sale if you have paved the way with emails that capture your customers’ attention, even if they don’t open them right away, or even at all.

That’s the “Nudge Effect” of email marketing, which can make your emails work their magic day in and day out, sometimes days or months after you send them.
Email: Sales Versus Branding

Strange but true! Just being seen in the inbox can drive awareness and conversions when you populate your emails with useful, compelling information instead of the same old “Open This Now!” message.

Naturally, you want your subscribers to open your emails so they can witness the full power of your email story and leap into action. That’s what made email so successful: connecting directly with your customers and seeing the conversions mount up.

But that direct-sales model of email taps into only one email benefit. Email is also a solid branding tool, silently building name recognition and brand equity even on the days when your subscribers pass you by.

What other marketing device can put your name in front of your customers as often and as inexpensively? TV commercials are fleeting; Facebook reach is declining; more and more people are blocking ads on websites.

But everybody checks email, often more than once a day. Having a well-crafted message and subject lines that use carefully chosen terms that intrigue, explain and anticipate action can build your brand, even if your subscriber just glances at your subject line. That's the “Nudge Effect” of email.

The ‘Nudge Effect’

As the name implies, the “Nudge Effect” is the impact that accumulates every time your customers see your emails in their inboxes. In this way, you are nudging, or gently moving, your customers in the direction you want them to go, whether it’s to make a first purchase, to buy again or to move up to a premium product or service or even just to open an email message.

This is email performing for the long-term gain. It doesn’t settle for short-term gains from one cookie-cutter email campaign to the next. Instead, it abandons that disjointed approach and incorporates a whole new approach to email messages.

Here, the focus is on coordinated series of messages that inform, educate and entertain and, by doing so, lead to more opens and sales. You keep up a gentle rhythm of nudging them to the point where customers are ready to act.

A significant aspect that builds Nudge Effect is your choice of subject lines. Using the same old subject lines day in and day out -- “Your Daily Deal for Monday”/“Your Daily Deal for Tuesday”/“Your Daily Deal for Wednesday,” ad infinitum – is more likely to generate inbox blindness than to nudge your subscribers into action.
Taking the time to create fresh, original variations on your subject lines. These are more likely to pique interest and capture attention, even if your subscribers don’t open them immediately.

By doing so, you create emails that your customers are more likely to open and to keep around for future reference. Yes, they really do that!

That doesn’t happen with your one-off emails whose “Open This Now!” subject lines do nothing to build up brand equity or image.

Ignoring the Nudge Effect can lead you to shortchange your email programme and either overlook the cumulative good your emails can generate (thus underestimating its long-term value as a budget investment) or fail to see the harm you can inflict by treating your programme as merely a long series of stand-alone messages.

By taking the Nudge Effect into account – that is, considering the cumulative effect of sales-channel attribution. Email frequently gets overlooked if the purchase isn’t tied to an email offer, especially in last-click attribution.

So, how can you make the nudge effect happen in your email marketing? By changing your mindset and your approach, looking beyond a sale and upgrading every part of your email program for maximum branding. Keep reading to find out how.
What the ‘Nudge Effect’ can do for your email programme

The nudge effect is an organic process that builds on positive experiences with your emails. You can’t force it, but you can encourage it to happen by doing whatever you can to get your emails delivered to the inbox and to attract attention with intriguing, informative subject lines that imply to your subscribers that something worth their while is inside.

The Nudge Effect happens when your subscribers learn on their own that your emails have value, whether they open and scan the message contents and then delete the message or save it for later or don’t even open the email.

Think of each email generating a quiet little “ping” whenever your subscribers see it in your inbox. When those pings pile up, the nudge effect begins to work its magic.

Your experience might vary depending on how you structure your program, but these are some of the benefits you’ll receive with an email program that uses nudges instead of bullhorns:

1. Build the brand.
2. Keep customers on the journey.
3. Eliminate frequency worries.
4. Understand email’s true role in generating sales across channels.
Here are the details:

1 Build the brand

Unopened emails and low click-through rates are frustrating, but be reassured that even if your subscribers don’t open your email message, its presence in their inboxes leads to a tangible impact on brand awareness and sales via online and other channels.

The ‘Nudge Effect’ emerges when you move away from using email only as a direct-sales vehicle. Open your eyes to all of the branding possibilities that email presents for your brands and for all of your sales channels: in-store, website, social media, mobile apps, even print catalogues.

This means you must change your approach to everything, from your email programme’s vision and value proposition right on down to how your emails appear in the box.

Adding brand-building content instead of using trickery or variations on the same theme over and over does not build name recognition and brand equity that keeps your brands top of mind no matter what your subscribers do with your emails.

Delivering a consistent brand message and experience in email is a key ingredient in building brand equity and recognition. Forget that Ralph Waldo Emerson quote about consistency being the hobgoblin of small minds. Emerson might have been a great thinker, but he wasn’t an email marketer trying to build a brand across multiple channels and devices.

Finally, remember that “brand-building” does not ignore sales. See Chapter 4, “How to optimise emails for nudging,” to learn more about combining sales and branding.

2 Keep customers on the journey

Your customer’s relationship with your brand isn’t a straight shot from prospecting to purchase to loyalty. It’s a journey, with stops and starts all along the way.

Mapping out your typical customer’s journey and queuing up email messages that correspond to their behavior will help keep them moving along in their journey with you.

You’re sending a video demo of your product or a buying guide or customer support contacts. In this way, you’re nudging them to take another step rather than shouting meaningless messages at them or grabbing them by the elbow and pulling them down the path.
3 Eliminate frequency worries

Modern email marketers worry about sending so many email messages that they’ll annoy their customers into inactivity, unsubscribing or – worst of all – clicking the “report spam” button.

Well-meaning experts counsel marketers to send less often, but the real value is to send more but better email. (Emphasis on “better,” please!)

If subscribers value your messages, showing up regularly in their inboxes generates those little pings we mentioned earlier. If they don’t, every email you send becomes an affront to be ignored or deleted, and there’s no opportunity to nudge them into action.

Moving your email to a brand-building approach means you’re sending more relevant, useful and entertaining email that gives them more reasons to open but doesn’t hurt your programme when they don’t.

You don’t do anything to make them unsubscribe, but you keep up a gentle rhythm of nudging them to the point where they are ready to buy.

4 Understand email’s true role in generating sales across channels

We at Alchemy Worx have noticed email creates some interesting phenomena among our clients:

- An increase in their organic, paid and affiliate search results after sending a customer email
- Sales occurring from people who didn’t even open the email.

The chart below shows a company’s sales performance for a fortnight across all channels. The vertical embedded orange area indicates when the email is sent, while the orange horizontal line shows sales from people who didn’t receive the email. Note the dark blue line. That represents people who got the email but did not open it but then went on to purchase via another channel. In other words, your email might have prompted that customer to pick up the phone, go to a store or hop to the website. That’s the Nudge Effect in action.
Given that the nudge effect can produce so many measurable benefits, why do so many email marketers miss out? The next two sections show you where marketers go wrong with email and how to make things right.
Why marketers go wrong, and six ways to make it right

Your bosses and even some of your fellow marketers think email is just a cheap channel to make money. The ISPs say you’re a spammer who should just stay the heck out of everybody’s inbox. Industry hipsters keep telling you email’s dead, and some days even your dog looks at you funny.

No wonder you’re unhappy. You’re suffering from “fear and self-loathing.”

That’s what Alchemy Worx CEO Dela Quist calls the malaise that keeps many email marketers from realizing email’s true potential email.

These suffering marketers have bought into the fiction that subscribers hate getting email. They think the only way to make people happy is to send fewer emails with content that’s so basic and unadorned it practically whispers a call to action. They’re so terrified of triggering ISP blocks that they drop any email address that shows the tiniest slide toward inactivity.

In short, they’re so terrified of making mistakes that could shut down access to ISPs, kill their programmes and get them all fired that they end up sending email that has little or no value.

The myth of the overloaded inbox is especially damaging. In reality, email users have become adept at managing their inboxes, using a triage system to sort their inboxes into messages to read now and to read later, trashring everything else.

When you build value into your emails, your recipients are more likely to keep them around. The day will come when they need what you’re offering, and when they search for your messages, they’ll be there.
This is another way that marketers go wrong: Their email programmes have neither a clear mission nor a value proposition that means anything to the company or subscribers.

This didn’t happen because these marketers are poor planners or too busy to think past their next campaigns. It’s because the company doesn’t value email as anything other than a moneymaker.

Branding doesn’t have a place in this shortsighted vision. Without that higher goal, emails don’t have a chance to do any serious nudging.

If you inherited this kind of email-marketing programme at your company, you can retool it for the nudge effect with these tactics:
1 Why would anybody sign up for your email?

Nobody needs more email. But everybody could use better email – messages that inform, entertain and offer genuine value beyond another 20-percent discount.

Because email has such a strong effect on branding, it should be part of your mission statement for your programme. Yes, you’re serving customers but you’re also serving your company’s needs. Building brands, cementing loyalty … these all are worthy email goals.

Okay, so you really do want to use email just to make money. That doesn’t negate email’s unique branding effect. In fast, the better you communicate your brand and its values through your email, the more your customers will recognize and respond to it – overtly and subtly – when they see your messages in your inbox.

Let the nudging begin.

2 Develop your branding strategies

Sit down with your branding team and work up a series of brand-focused emails that you can send over the next 12 months. Consider everything from the inbox view – sender name, subject line and snippet – to the content and the landing page at your website.

Review the emails you send now, and come up with ways you can add to or improve the branding.

One branding strategy that email is perfect for is establishing and building value, especially priming customers to accept your prices. Email content can frame the conversation and establish an anchor point on price, especially for new products or to present choices among services at different price levels.

For example, a coordinated, value-based series of emails can help you steer a “freemium” customer to a paid service.

Without branding, your emails simply become one price or discount promotion after another. That’s a race to the bottom, with no opportunity for the Nudge Effect to move your customers out of that mindset.
3 Upgrade your inbox appearance for maximum recognition

This is where the nudging begins. You have three opportunities to make even an unopened email a source of potential success across all your channels in the inbox:

- **The “from” or sender name:** Every day we see “do-not-reply@xyz.com” or somebody’s name. Zero branding value. But, it’s an easy fix. Go into your list software and make sure it isn’t using your default sending address as the sender name. You get to figure out what your subscribers would recognize and remember: brand name? Loyalty program name? A value prop built into the name like “Marriott Rewards” instead of just “Marriott?”

- **Subject line:** Front-load your subject lines with value and branding. They should deliver maximum information at a single glance, create urgency, and tell readers what they’re supposed to do with the email. Most importantly, vary your approach with every subject line. Focus on urgency one time, value the next. Pique their curiosity; appeal to FOMO (“fear of missing out”); write a shorter subject line, then follow up with a longer one. Above all, do not simply repeat a subject line that worked once in an A/B split test. It might not have the same effect a second time.

- **Snippet:** This is the first line of copy inside your email body that many desktop and mobile clients pull into the inbox. Don’t waste it with boilerplate copy like “View in your browser” or “Add us to address book.” Use it instead to support your subject line or call to action with extra content.

Who has figured out how to use snippets?
4 Optimize emails for inbox searching

Many subscribers just let read-later emails pile up in the inbox. Others sort emails into folders as neatly as they organize their sock drawers. These elements will help subscribers find your emails quickly when they are ready to act:

- Uniform sender name to help users who search by sender name or email address
- Brand name in the sender name or subject line.
- Search terms in the email’s body copy instead of using a full image.
- Specific language. “Discount” will return a long list of irrelevant (and maybe even competing) results. Having your brand visible in the results will trigger recollection and retrieval.
- Use alt tags in case the email client blocks images.

5 Look for new meanings in your analytics

Opens and clicks don’t tell the whole story about how well your emails are performing or how your subscribers actually engage with them. These tactics will give you a more accurate picture:

- Check for sales spikes in all of your channels as soon as you send an email. Online sales are the easiest: Compare purchasers’ addresses to your sender list. Follow up several days, a week or even longer to see how long your email drives results.
- Check website page views and results from organic, paid and affiliate searches that correspond to your sending dates.
- Include search keywords that perform well for your brand in your email copy and compare those to your email send dates.
6 Change up the content in your email copy

Sending the same message, whether it’s “Open This Now!” or “Read this blog post!,” gets boring. Bored subscribers don’t care about your emails.

Give your subscribers a rest from relentless sales pitches with “white space” emails that inform, educate and entertain your subscribers. Our email colleague Loren McDonald of Silverpop coined that phrase to mean emails that engage your subscribers’ attention rather than simply selling to them.

Remember the jeans-buying guide we talked about earlier? That’s a white-space email that aims to sell you a pair of jeans by showing you how to buy the right pair.

Your customers aren’t always in the market to buy, but they probably would still like to see what’s going on at your company. Think about what they’d like to know. What would make them trust you or feel more comfortable or enthusiastic about buying from you?

These, by the way, are the emails that they’re more likely to keep and/or remember. The more value you add, and the more clearly you articulate that value, the more recognizable you are in the inbox.
About Alchemy Worx

Alchemy Worx is the only global agency with a total focus on helping clients grow their business through email marketing.

If your company is looking for the most effective email strategy, creative execution, production and/or deployment our team - unrivaled in expertise and experience - will deliver the best results for you.

We are an agency dedicated to helping clients transform their business through data-driven analysis and techniques that range from smart, tactical changes to completely new strategies using rocket science (yes, really).

Alchemy Worx has a global footprint supporting 24/5 email marketing managed services with offices in London UK (EMEA), Atlanta Georgia (NA-EAST), San Diego California (NA-WEST) and Sydney Australia (APAC).

As a full service agency, Alchemy Worx provides a full breadth of creative and technical services to its clients, so please contact us and let us help you to achieve better results with your email program.