



List Building

GraphicMail White Paper 2011

GRAPHIC MAIL 

email & mobile marketing solutions

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Building your email address list

The list building voyage

The best marketing emails use the power of words and images to prevail the winds into unexplored digital waters and draw a response from the reader.

Their persuasive qualities lead to sales, registrations, downloads, donations and a host of other positive actions and influences that can make a significant difference to your success.

All of which is utterly meaningless if you don't have anyone to send them to.

The more people you have on your email address list, the more marketing emails you can send out and the more responses you can get.

But is it really that smooth sailing?

Is the size of the list all that matters? And just how do you go all ahead full and build the biggest and best list you can?

This white paper casts you a lifeline. It introduces you to the **key principles and practices that help you build a responsive list of addresses**...so those emails can get to work for you and your organization, keeping your email marketing campaign from going on the rocks.

List building starts with permission

You don't actually want the biggest possible list of email addresses. You want the biggest possible list of email addresses for people who have asked to get your messages.

This is the idea of permission: only people who have explicitly requested your marketing emails should be added to your list.

Why?

First, in most countries (the USA is a notable exception), sending bulk marketing email without some kind of permission is often against the law. And having to walk the legal plank over your marketing strategy, bringing your trust-factor into question, is something to be absolutely avoided.

Second, those organizations managing incoming email (webmail services, corporate IT departments etc.) aren't limited by legal definitions: they view marketing email sent in bulk without the recipient's permission as **spam**.

Consumer surveys also reveal that a main reason for marking or reporting email as spam is "I never asked for this". Spam reports are a major factor used by webmail services and others to tag "bad" senders, potentially leading to **outright blocking of all that sender's emails**, making your marketing messages miss the proverbial boat.

For detailed information on the role of permission in getting emails delivered, see the GraphicMail whitepaper "How to make sure more emails reach your subscribers".

Third, a key factor in email marketing success is identifying the kind of emails people find valuable. Messages offering no value get no response (other than the unwanted kind: people leaving your list or marking your emails as spam).

Permission provides a foundation for delivering value, because the people on your address list are pre-selected for relevance. They have raised a hand and said "I am interested in the email you send".

What constitutes effective permission?

While everyone agrees that permission is important to building a successful email list, there is disagreement about what constitutes effective permission.

Consider, for example, a typical website registration form which also allows people to add their address to the site's email list. The "quality" of permission deteriorates as you move from Option 1 to Option 4:

Option 1:

Check the box if you would like to get weekly special offers from us via email
(Customer must take a specific action to get on the list)

Option 2:

Uncheck the box if you would not like to get weekly special offers from us via email
(Customer is signed up unless they take action)

Option 3:

By registering at this site, you agree to receive weekly special offers from us via email. You can unsubscribe from these at any time.
(Customer is "forced" to grant permission if they want to register)

Option 4:

See full registration and conditions

(The agreement to receive marketing emails is a footnote in a long list of terms and conditions that nobody reads)

The permission ideal is where someone makes **an informed and explicit decision to join your list**. The more you deviate from this ideal, the more risks you take with permission...and the more likely you are to have the problems outlined earlier: possible legal issues, spam reports, delivery blocks and lower response rates.



Why not just buy an email list?

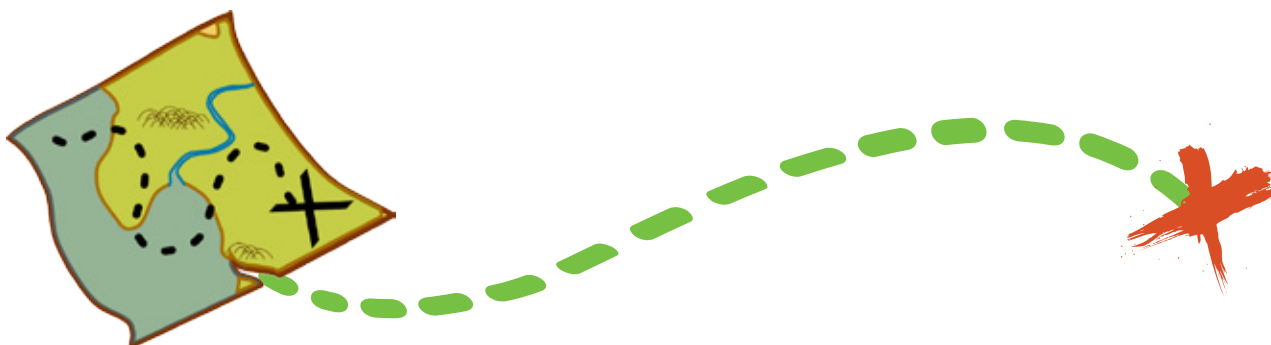
One short-cut to building an email list is simply to go out and buy one. Knowing how important permission is to email marketing success, it's clear that **you should never do this**, however cheap they might seem. Email list piracy is viewed as unfavorably as any other bootleg practice.

The people on that "list for sale" have not specifically granted YOU permission to send them emails. Sending to some or all of those addresses (depending on their location) may be illegal. And, even if legal, many recipients will likely perceive these messages as spam.

Consider also:

- These lists are often compiled by cobbling together old lists or copying addresses off websites. The people behind those addresses are very unlikely to be your target audience (whatever the seller may claim), meaning you can expect **extremely low response rates**. Many addresses are likely outdated, and sending email to dead addresses is also used by webmail services and others as an indicator of a spammer at work.
- The legal and delivery problems associated with purchased lists are so severe that respectable email marketing service providers (including GraphicMail) expressly forbid their use in service terms and conditions.

Writing at ClickZ, delivery expert Stefanie Miller describes how one company used a purchased list and found up to 85% of the addresses were defunct. And half of the messages that did get through were reported as spam. Ouch!



Collecting addresses

So, if purchasing address lists is a non-starter, how do you get people to “opt-in” to your email list?

Website sign-up forms

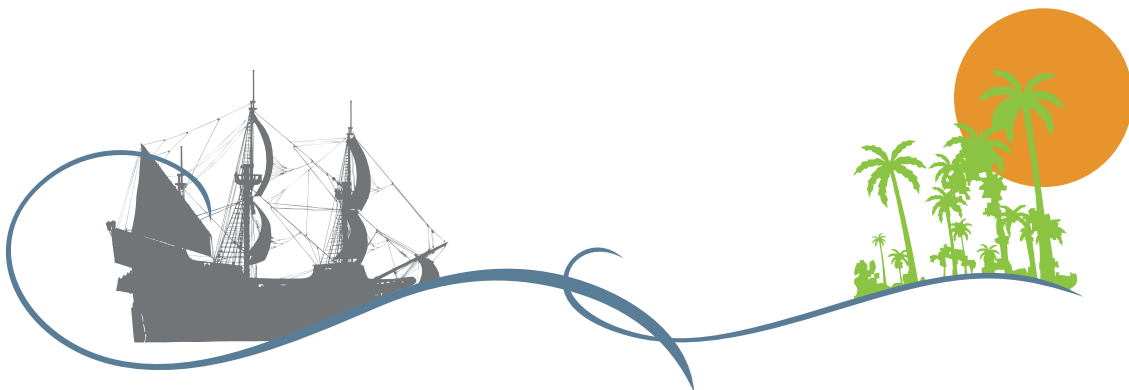
The ideal time to ask someone for their email address is when they’ve declared an interest in you and/or you have their attention. The obvious and most important example is when someone visits your website.

So you should feature a list sign-up form in a prominent position on every page of your site. Include text that:

- Describes the benefits of signing up
(e.g. “Get exclusive offers and product news”)
- Makes it clear this is a sign-up form for getting email
(e.g. “Get exclusive offers and product news by email”)
- Indicates how often email will arrive
(e.g. “Subscribe to our weekly deals email”)

This sets appropriate expectations and ensures the would-be subscriber is giving you explicit permission to send them your marketing emails.

If you don’t have enough space, then feature a link to a dedicated sign-up page or use a pared down version of the form with this link included for those seeking more information. The sign-up page can then expand on benefits, showcase sample emails, etc...



Test your form

The sign-up form is the foundation on which many email marketing efforts are based. So it makes sense to test different aspects of the form or sign-up page to ensure it does as good a job as possible of converting website visitors to subscribers. Consider:

- The language on the “submit” button: does subscribe, join, sign-up, submit, enter, go, or add persuade more people to get your emails?
- Social proof: does telling people how many others have signed up lift conversion rates? What about adding testimonials from satisfied subscribers?
- Copy: which benefits and pull the most subscribers?
- Position: does the form work better on the left or right of the page? Top or bottom? Should a subscription form pop-up automatically when a visitor has browsed a certain number of pages or spent a certain amount of time on your site?
- Layout and design: experiment with font types, sizes and colors, background highlighting and form layout.
- Privacy: does a clear link to a privacy policy (or a quick reassuring statement) improve sign-ups?
- Incentives: what about rewarding subscribers for joining your list, for example by offering access to a free e-book or a coupon? This needs careful monitoring to ensure the incentive attracts responsive subscribers and not people just interested in getting the incentive.



What information should you collect at sign-up?

The sign-up form is a good place to ask for additional information you can use to send better targeted emails to recipients. There is a tradeoff here: the more information you ask for, the more effective your emails...but the less likely people are to complete the sign-up process.

The golden rule is to only ask for information you will truly use. Examples might be:

- First and last name (for adding a personal touch to your messages)
- Postal or ZIP code (for targeting messages to specific regions)
- Content/product preferences (for splitting your list into sub-lists based on interest)
- Date of birth (for sending birthday greetings or a birthday gift, such as a discount offer or coupon)

You are more likely to get people submitting this kind of information if you:

- Make the benefits of your emails clear (you have to give to receive!)
- Indicate your trustworthiness through a solid privacy policy, privacy and email certification program seals, memberships of relevant business or standards organizations.
- Reveal how the subscriber benefits from submitting accurate information (if it's not self-evident), e.g. "Your ZIP code lets us tell you about any local in-store promotions".

A common tactic is to use a two-stage sign-up form. After simply submitting an email address, subscribers are then invited to fill out a more detailed, second form on the subsequent confirmation page.

Should you require confirmation?

Once someone submits their address, they can automatically be added to your list (known as single opt-in) or can get an email asking them to confirm their subscription (known by various terms, such as double or confirmed opt-in). They confirm by clicking on a special link in that message. Most email marketing software and services support both alternatives.

The two-step sign-up process requiring the confirmation eliminates the chance of any address getting on your list that isn't a real person wanting your email. If someone enters a fake, mistyped or someone else's address, then the confirmation email never arrives or gets acted on. So the "bad" address stays off your list.

However, it's not unusual to find a third of submitted email addresses failing to confirm the sign-up. This may be because of bad addresses or delivery problems, but also because the recipient simply overlooked the confirmation email.

As a result, many senders favor single opt-in, especially since most sign-up forms now include basic address-checking capabilities. Which means clearly invalid addresses, like alex@yahoo (missing the .com) would not be accepted.

Best practice with single opt-in is to send an immediate welcome email following sign-up. Email to invalid addresses then comes "back to sender" so the address can be removed from the list. Those rare few who were signed up unwittingly have the chance to immediately unsubscribe.

However, double opt-in still has value under certain circumstances. For example:

- Double opt-in defends you against allegations of sending email without permission and many organizations involved in protecting inboxes from spam specifically recommend double opt-in sign-up procedures. Such allegations should not be an issue if your sign-up process is transparent (see above), but double opt-in becomes important:
 - ...if you have any doubt about whether people have truly granted permission to add their email address to your list, then double opt-in allows people to confirm their alleged intentions.

- ...if you have any doubt about whether people have truly granted permission to add their email address to your list, then double opt-in allows people to confirm their alleged intentions.
- ...if you have had delivery problems in the past and need to prove to individuals or organizations managing incoming email that you are a “good” sender. “good” sender.
- In some jurisdictions with particularly strict email regulations, double opt-in may be a pragmatic requirement to avoid legal complications.

Talk with your email marketing service or advisor to discover which sign-up option is best for your circumstances.

How else can you collect addresses through your website?

If the ideal time to invite someone to join your list is when they have shown interest in your organization and you have their attention, it makes intuitive sense to build a sign-up opportunity into transactional forms and processes. For example, whenever people:

- Go through the checkout process for a product or service
- Register at the website.
- Register for an event, particularly webinars.
- Submit their details to get access to content, such as a print catalog, or downloadable e-books and white papers.
- Enter an online competition or complete an online survey. Many senders run competitions specifically to build their email address list.

Email marketers surveyed by MarketingSherpa rated purchase, online event and content registrations as the **three most effective tactics for email list growth**.

Where else can you collect sign-ups?

Of course, this idea of making timely use of a customer or prospect's interest and/or attention to invite an email sign-up extends way beyond your website. The opportunities are limited only by your imagination.

Social media and other online venues

People interact with your organization online outside your website, too, such as through your social media presence, iPhone apps, online ads, etc...

Surveys consistently show that people have a strong preference for receiving commercial messages through email. For example, Crossview found that four times as many shoppers preferred to receive promotions via email rather than via social media. A Merkle consumer survey revealed that:

E-mail is the preferred method of commercial communication of 74% of all online adults"

So a common strategy for many organizations is to encourage their social media contacts to sign up for email, which provides a better and more-effective context for direct promotional efforts. Examples include:

- A tweet announcing the imminent publication of your next newsletter, inviting followers to sign-up to see it
- Using Twitter to promote the online version of your email
- Embedding your sign-up form in your Facebook page

This approach needs to give social media contacts a compelling reason to open another channel of communication with you. A successful tactic is to ensure your emails contain information or offers that are only sent to email subscribers.

This exclusivity is a powerful incentive to join a list.

Your list building efforts can also benefit from your pay-per-click search engine advertising (like Google's AdWords). Ensure the pages visitors are directed to from your search engine ads include a prominent sign-up opportunity. You might even consider advertising the benefits of your list and send people directly to your sign-up page from the ad. The same principles apply to any paid online advertising you do.

Ask your existing subscribers for referrals

Another good online source of new subscribers is...old subscribers!

Any professional email marketing software or service lets you put a "forward to a friend" (FTF) link in your emails, leading to an online form the subscriber uses to recommend your message to their contacts.

The principle is a great one: your subscribers know who'd enjoy getting your emails and the personal recommendation carries weight. But simply adding a brief FTF link to an email rarely has much impact.

Instead:

- Ask for the referral directly in your editorial text or copy. For example:
"Share this email with a friend or colleague"
- Give people a reason for recommending you. For example:
"Help your friends save money. Share this email with them"
- Make sure your email contains information on how to sign-up for emails from you. For example:
"Did a friend send you this? Sign-up for your own email updates at..."

The use of the word "share" in these examples is deliberate, because people are increasingly likely to "forward" your email's content to others via social networks. Many email marketing services (including GraphicMail) now let you incorporate "Share with your network" (SWYN) links in your emails. These links lead subscribers directly to pre-filled forms suited to posting material at Facebook, Twitter and other social sites.

Offline list building opportunities

The “interest and/or attention” concept applies offline, too. Examples of good sign-up opportunities are:

- Tradeshows and networking events.
- Encourage people to sign-up with appropriate words, links and/or QR codes in your offline ads (radio, TV, print), direct mail, fax headers, catalogs, receipts, invoices and other marketing and communication materials.
- Put out sign-up forms at the point of sale, reception and customer service desks. Ensure staff (including those doing customer service or taking orders by telephone) are trained and incented to highlight the benefits of subscribing and get the opt-in.

Two important principles here are:

- **Don't forget permission.** When someone hands you a business card, for example, this is not an invitation to sign them up to your email list. You need to get permission, either in person at the time or by including a sign-up invite in your one-to-one follow-up communications.
- **Enter the information into the online system as fast as possible,** so that confirmation and subsequent emails are sent out in a timely manner. If you wait too long, it makes a poor impression and the would-be subscriber may forget they asked for those emails.

The permission and timeliness issues that can plague offline list building can be solved by **using mobile devices to record the email address and opt-in.**

This might involve a dedicated mobile application. GraphicMail, for example, offers an **iPhone app** that allows the user to add new subscribers to a list or edit existing contact details and subscriptions. Staff can use the app to sign-up people direct from, for example, the store or tradeshow floor.

Alternatively, staff and customers could use a handy tablet, netbook, PDA or smartphone to connect with a sign-up form on the web. Another mobile alternative is to let people submit their address via SMS/text message.

Don't forget to monitor the results

Given the huge number of potential sources for new subscribers, it's helpful to track how subscribers from a particular source compare to the rest of the list in terms of responses to your emails. That way you can:

- Focus your list building efforts on those sources that give the best return.
- Better estimate how much you can (or should) invest in those list-building tactics that cost money. Perhaps you can justify a bigger sign-up incentive, like a larger one-off discount for new subscribers.
- Identify and address those sign-up sources that cause problems, such as excessive spam complaints.

Good luck, clear skies and safe seas!

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