



EMAIL DELIVERABILITY GUIDE:

Making It to the Subscriber Inbox

Executive Summary

The ultimate objective of most email campaigns is to convert recipients either by prompting a click or a purchase. However, the first and arguably most important step to achieving that objective is reaching subscribers' inboxes.

With a median ROI of 122%¹, email is among the most effective marketing channels. In order to take advantage of its consistently high performance, marketers need to ensure that each campaign reaches its intended recipients; otherwise, every time an email lands in the spam folder or is not delivered at all, that's revenue loss.

Consider the example on the right:

With this in mind, you can take a look at the size of your subscriber base, its composition, and average conversion rate to figure out what it would cost YOU every time an email campaign doesn't reach the inbox at any of the major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) – AOL, Gmail, Hotmail, or Yahoo.

While deliverability is a complex matter, marketers can tackle any issues if they have the proper tools and support. To help them build the foundation, Yes Lifecycle Marketing's deliverability team has drawn from their decades of expertise working with enterprise-level marketers and ISPs to develop this deliverability guide focusing on:

- The building blocks of deliverability
- The importance of a clean subscriber list
- How emails travel to the inbox
- How to improve inboxing rates

ACME

When **all subscribers**
are reached

When **Gmail** (20% of total
subscribers) is blocked

Monday | Campaign #1
+\$250,000

20%
loss of
revenue

Monday | Campaign #1
+\$200,000

Wednesday | Campaign #2
+\$300,000

20%
loss of
revenue

Wednesday | Campaign #2
+\$240,000

Thursday | Campaign #3
+\$200,000

20%
loss of
revenue

Thursday | Campaign #3
+\$160,000

Saturday | Campaign #4
+\$275,000

20%
loss of
revenue

Saturday | Campaign #4
+\$220,000

\$1,000,000

\$800,000

The Building Blocks of Deliverability

So why do emails fail to reach their recipients? When it comes to deliverability (i.e. reaching the inbox), marketers should be familiar with the following concepts:

Spam: An email sent to someone who has not given permission to be contacted (i.e. hasn't opted into a brand's subscriber list) is spam. A user sees this kind of message as a nuisance, does not interact with it, and often moves it to the junk folder. In order to ensure that users are not dealing with unauthorized messages, ISPs and commercial organizations set up traps to identify senders who aren't following best practices and are emailing without permission. There are three types of spam trap addresses used to identify spammers:

- **Inactive Recipients** - An email address that has not been active in the last 12 months or more.
- **Honey Pot** - An email address that has never been released to the world, nor subscribed to any mailing program.
- **Typo Trap** - An email address with a purposely misspelled domain name that helps ISPs identify senders who do not have a confirmed opt-in process (explained in more detail on p.7)

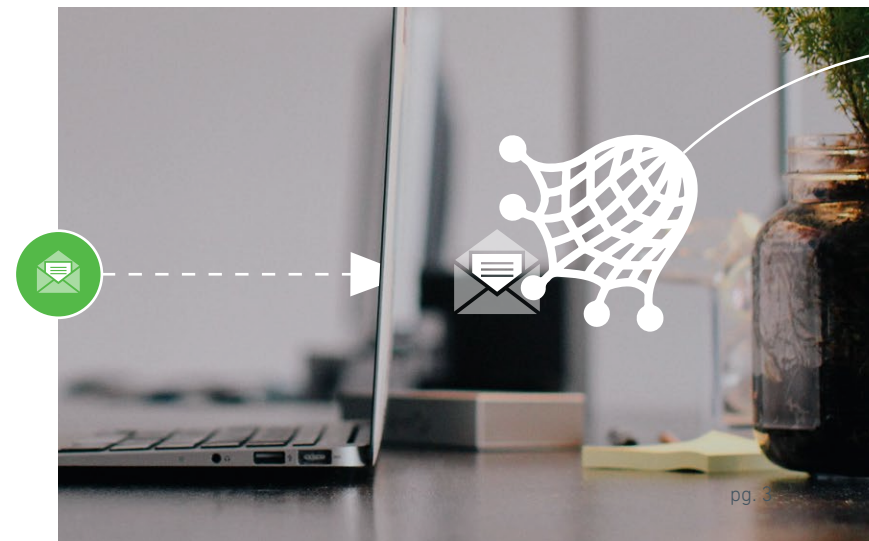
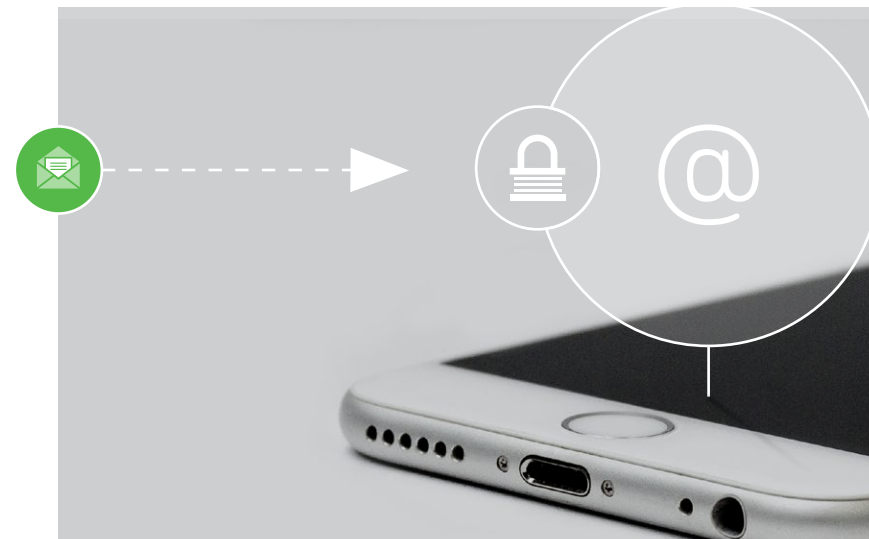
If a marketer is caught sending to any of these, their campaigns are seen as spam and blocked.

Bulking: The process of an email message being trapped by spam filters and sent to the junk folder.

Blacklisting: A blacklist is a publicly available, real-time database of IP addresses (i.e. a return address) that send spam. If a sender lands on a blacklist, it's likely that all of its campaigns will be blocked at all major ISPs. Blacklisting generally results from a sender's poor list quality, an unexpected spike in sending volume, or end-user complaints. ISPs may maintain their own list or consult public lists when determining whether or not to block emails from a particular sender. Among the major public blacklist databases are Spamhaus and Barracuda.

Bounce: An email that can't be delivered is said to bounce (as in bounce back to sender).

- **A soft bounce** occurs when the address is valid but couldn't be delivered because the mailbox was full, the message was too large or the ISP server was down. These are short-term deliverability issues that can be easily resolved.
- **A hard bounce** results from an email address that is either invalid or doesn't exist. They should be removed from the subscriber list since they will never get delivered.



The Building Blocks of Deliverability

Next, marketers should understand how the four largest ISPs (Gmail, Hotmail, AOL, and Yahoo) evaluate marketing emails to decide whether they make it to the inbox. They look at how their users engage with messages by tracking:

How many subscribers click the "spam" button



How many subscribers ignore the message (i.e. don't open it)



How long do subscribers view/read a particular message



How many subscribers move a message from the inbox to the spam folder



How many subscribers move a message from the spam folder to the inbox



These metrics inform ISPs how their users interact with messages from specific senders and, in turn, determine the rate at which a message will inbox.

The Importance of a Clean Subscriber List

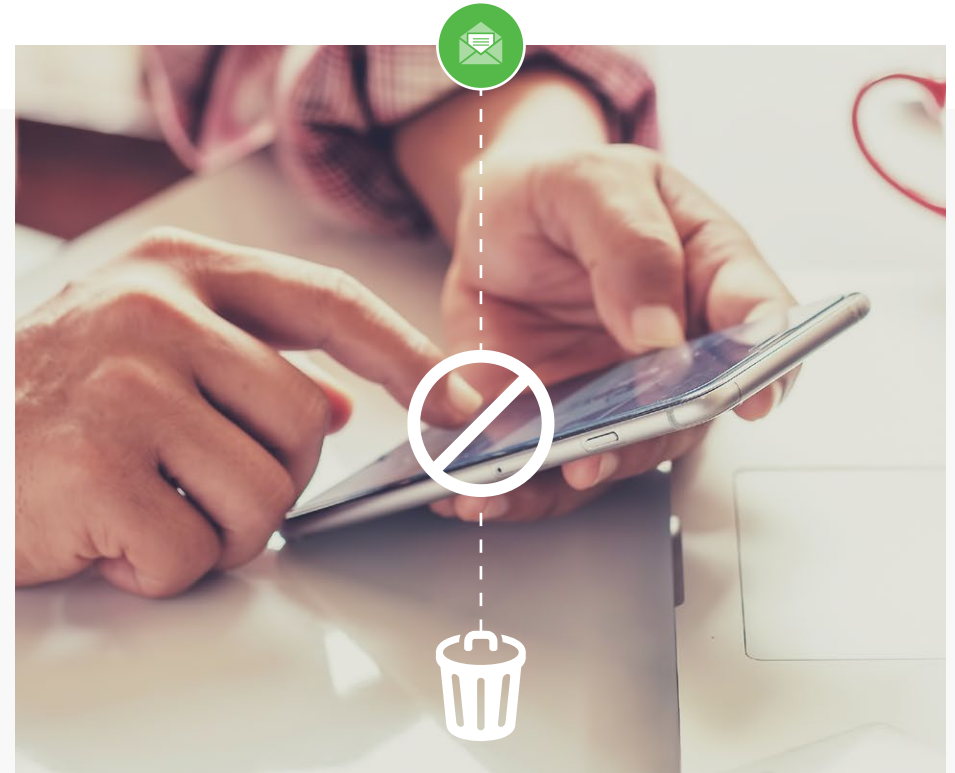
Marketers are constantly working to grow their subscriber base and keep it active; and rightfully so – subscribers are the key to revenue as they go through different stages towards conversion: from email opener to clicker, to website visitor, to purchaser.

But having a clean subscriber list is as important as having a constantly growing one. A clean subscriber list should meet two criteria:



Correctly spelled and formatted email addresses

If an email is sent to an address that's misspelled, improperly formatted, or no longer active, it will result in a **hard bounce**. If an ISP detects that too many hard bounces are coming from a brand's IP address they can conclude that the brand is mailing to invalid subscribers and block its emails.



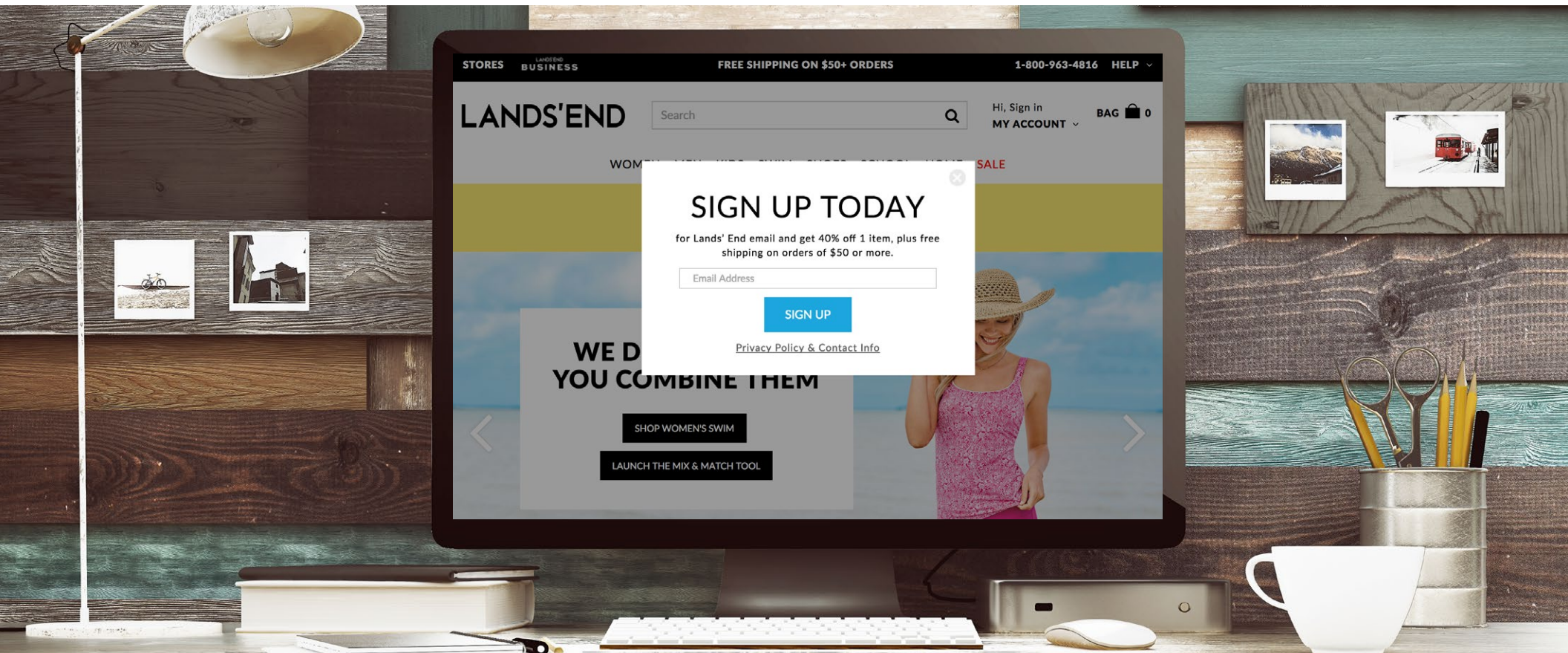
Properly opted in subscribers

Deliverability best practices call for sending messages only to people who have given permission to be contacted. If someone hasn't engaged with your brand, they're less likely to open an email and more likely to report the message as spam. This is one of the key considerations against buying mailing lists comprised of consumers who have not willingly opted in.

To improve deliverability, consider using these strategies to maintain a clean subscriber list:

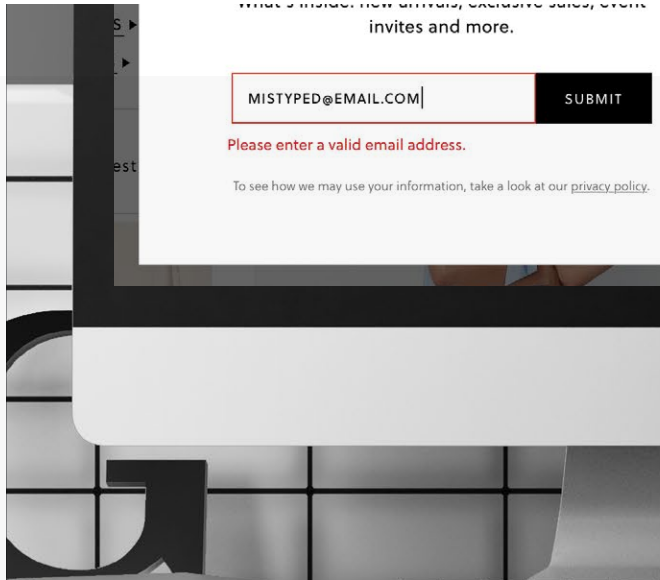
#1 Be strategic about form placements

Many marketers employ aggressive web acquisition strategies with interstitial forms and pop-up windows that prompt sign-up before a visitor can determine if a brand is of interest. Land's End, for example, delays "the ask" for an email address until consumers had selected a category to browse. This provides a more seamless consumer experience and helps ensure an engaged audience who will be happy to opt into a brand's email program.



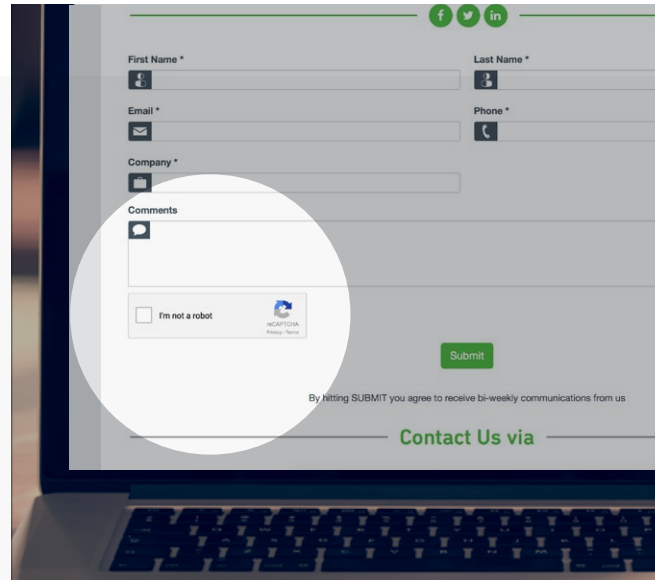
#2 Verify email addresses when they enter your database

The best way to ensure that subscribers have knowingly opted into a mailing program is to validate each new email address when it is first provided – be it via a landing page, in-person, or referral. Verifying email addresses can be done in a few different ways:



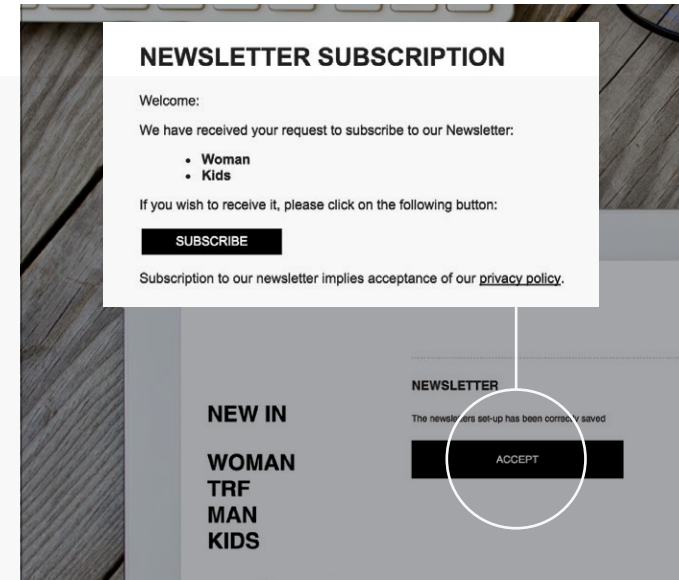
Real-Time Verification

Through a real-time email verification tool that confirms new subscriber emails are properly formatted and spelled as well as coming from an active domain.



Captcha

Through the use of a "captcha" or checkbox selection which requires an action by the person opting into the mailing program.



Confirmed Opt-in

Through the use of confirmed opt-in (also called double opt-in). This process entails that a brand sends an email with a verification link to all new subscribers, which they must click in order to confirm their subscription. This two-stage process helps protect against an email being added to a list without a person's knowledge. If the recipient didn't deliberately opt in, his failure to confirm the link will result in his subscription being terminated.

In addition to having a clean database these three practices safeguard against increasingly frequent 'list bombing'– when malicious software attempts to mass upload addresses into a brand's database, filling it up with random emails that are fake, inactive, or belong to unsuspecting consumers.

#3 Employ an Opt-in Page

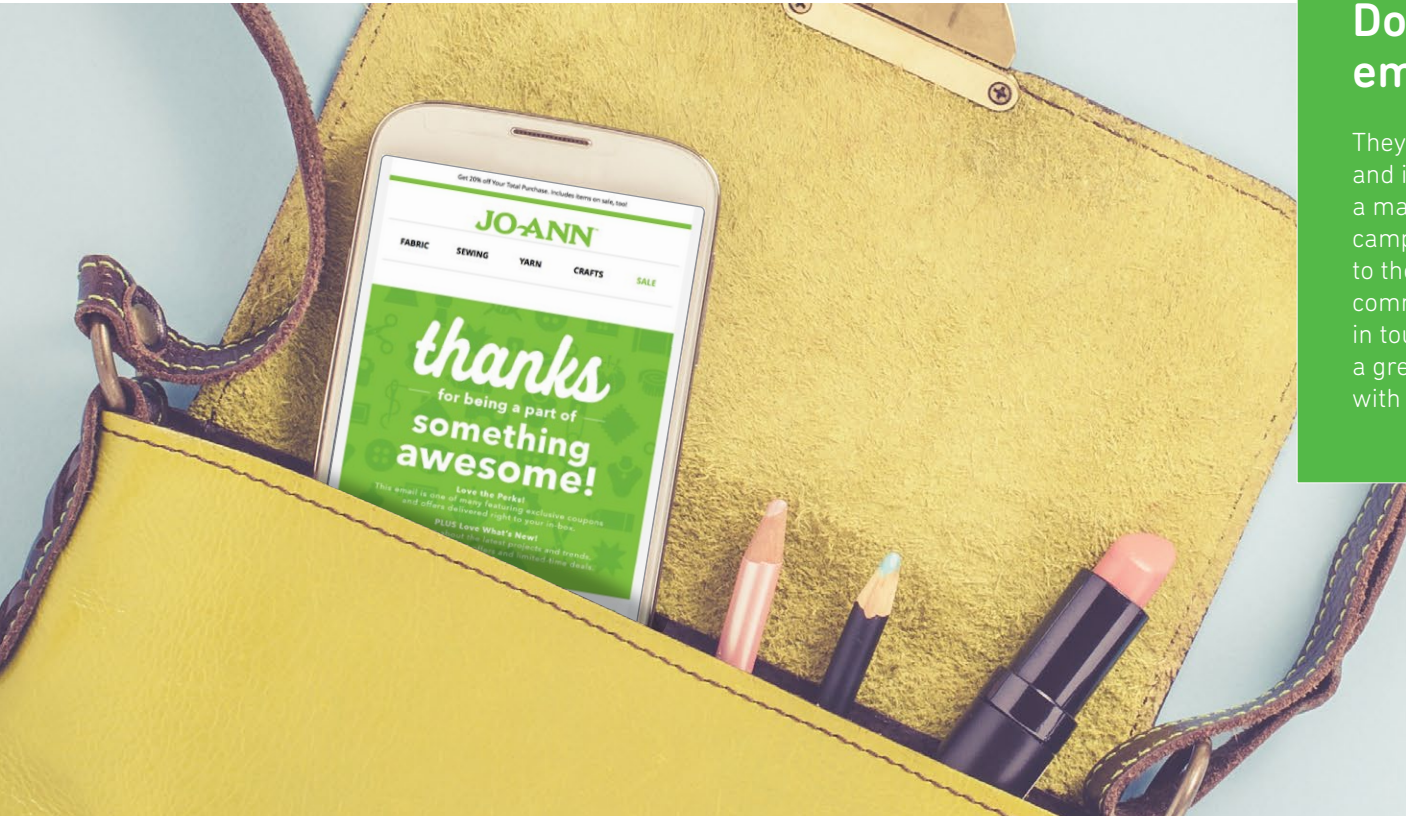
Starting off a relationship with a subscriber by setting proper expectations and introducing your brand will decrease the number of unsubscribes or spam complaints when you begin mailing. An opt-in page lets a subscriber know what to expect from future brand communications. It can include:

- An example of the type of content a new subscriber will receive
- The benefits of receiving brand communications
- The frequency of communications
- Privacy policy information

The screenshot shows the West Marine website's email sign-up process. On the left, a form titled 'To subscribe, please fill in the required fields:' includes input fields for Email Address, Verify Email Address, First Name, Last Name, and Zip Code/Postal Code, with a 'Submit' button. The main content area features the West Marine logo, a search bar, and navigation links. Below this, a section titled 'Sign up for our email list' includes the text 'Staying in touch with West Marine is even easier than ever!' and a bulleted list of benefits: being the first to hear about new products, receiving special offers, getting advance notice of sales and events, and expanding boating knowledge. To the right of the list are three promotional images for 'TRIPLE POINTS WEEKEND', 'YOU BOUGHT A GREAT KAYAK', and 'PER BOYS'.

Don't forget the welcome emails!

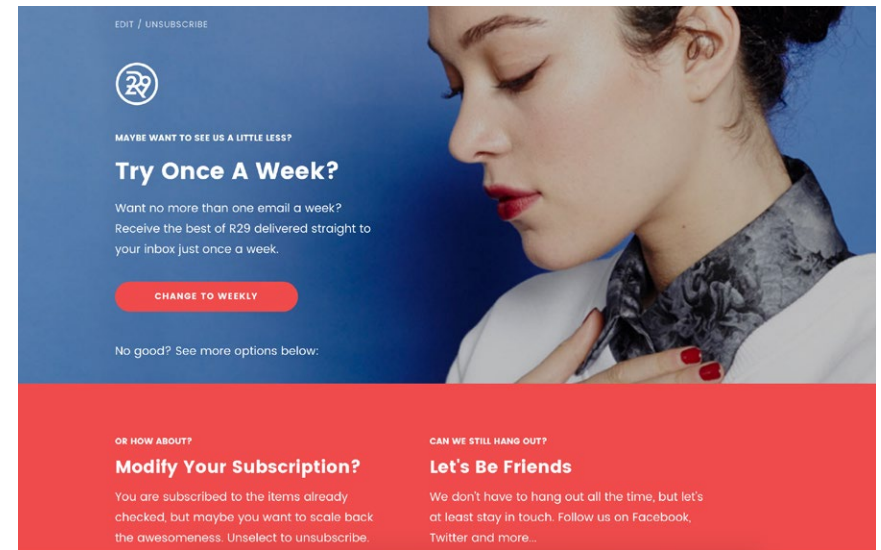
They're an integral part of greeting new subscribers and introducing them to your brand. Opting into a mailing list should always trigger a welcome campaign that introduces new subscribers to the brand, sets expectations about future communications, and promotes the value of keeping in touch with the brand. Welcome campaigns provide a great base for brands to build a lasting relationship with new consumers.



#4 Use Preference Centers

The user experience is essential to building trust in the email channel. Putting a subscriber in charge of the relationship with your brand will increase engagement with your messages and reduce the risk of emails being marked as spam – both of which affect deliverability. Using a preference center puts subscribers in control of the interactions they have with brands and enable them to choose:

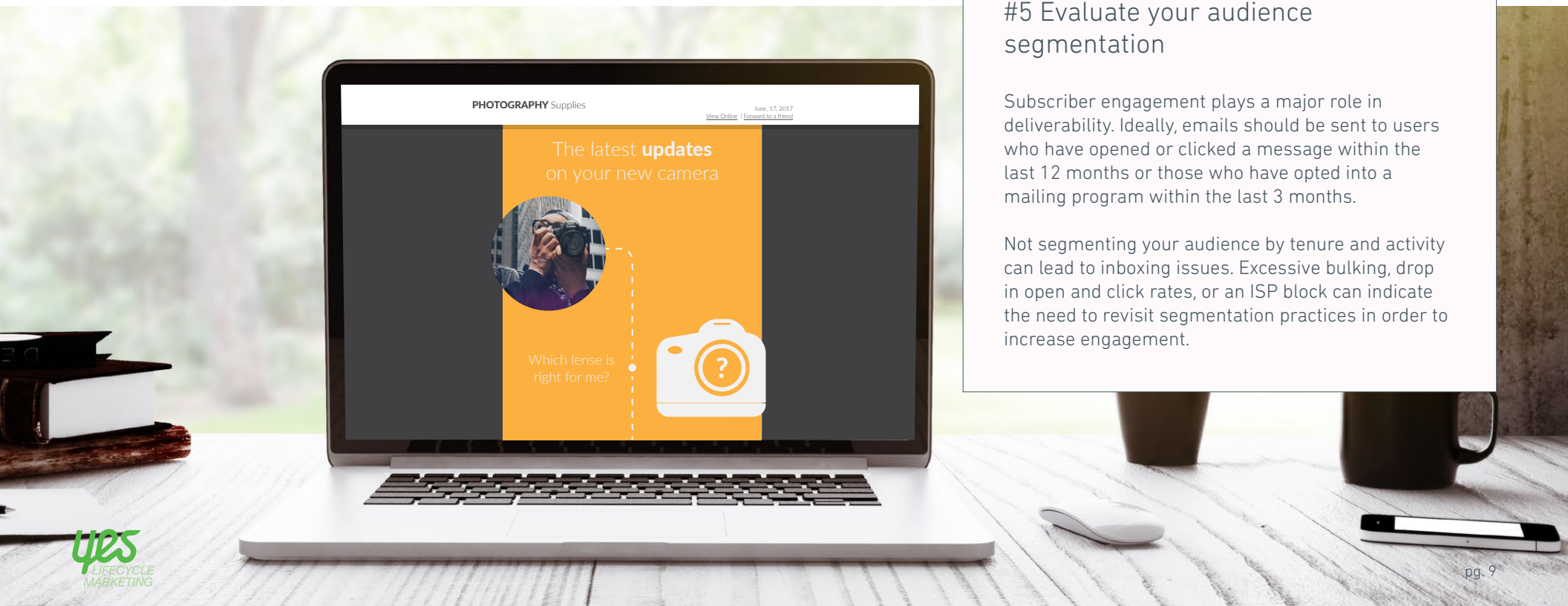
- what type of communications they would like to receive (newsletter, promotions, sneak peeks, communications from accompanying divisions, etc.)
- when/how often they wish to receive messages (it's important to reach out to your audience on a regular basis which varies depending on industry and business objectives. At a minimum, however, brands should reach out to subscribers once a month.)
- what programs to unsubscribe from when they no longer wish to hear from your brand



#5 Evaluate your audience segmentation

Subscriber engagement plays a major role in deliverability. Ideally, emails should be sent to users who have opened or clicked a message within the last 12 months or those who have opted into a mailing program within the last 3 months.

Not segmenting your audience by tenure and activity can lead to inboxing issues. Excessive bulking, drop in open and click rates, or an ISP block can indicate the need to revisit segmentation practices in order to increase engagement.



#6 Practice Regular List Hygiene

Over time, a subscriber list will end up with invalid or inactive email addresses. If brands continue to mail to them, they risk an ISP block because deliverability best practices dictate that marketers send exclusively to active and valid accounts.

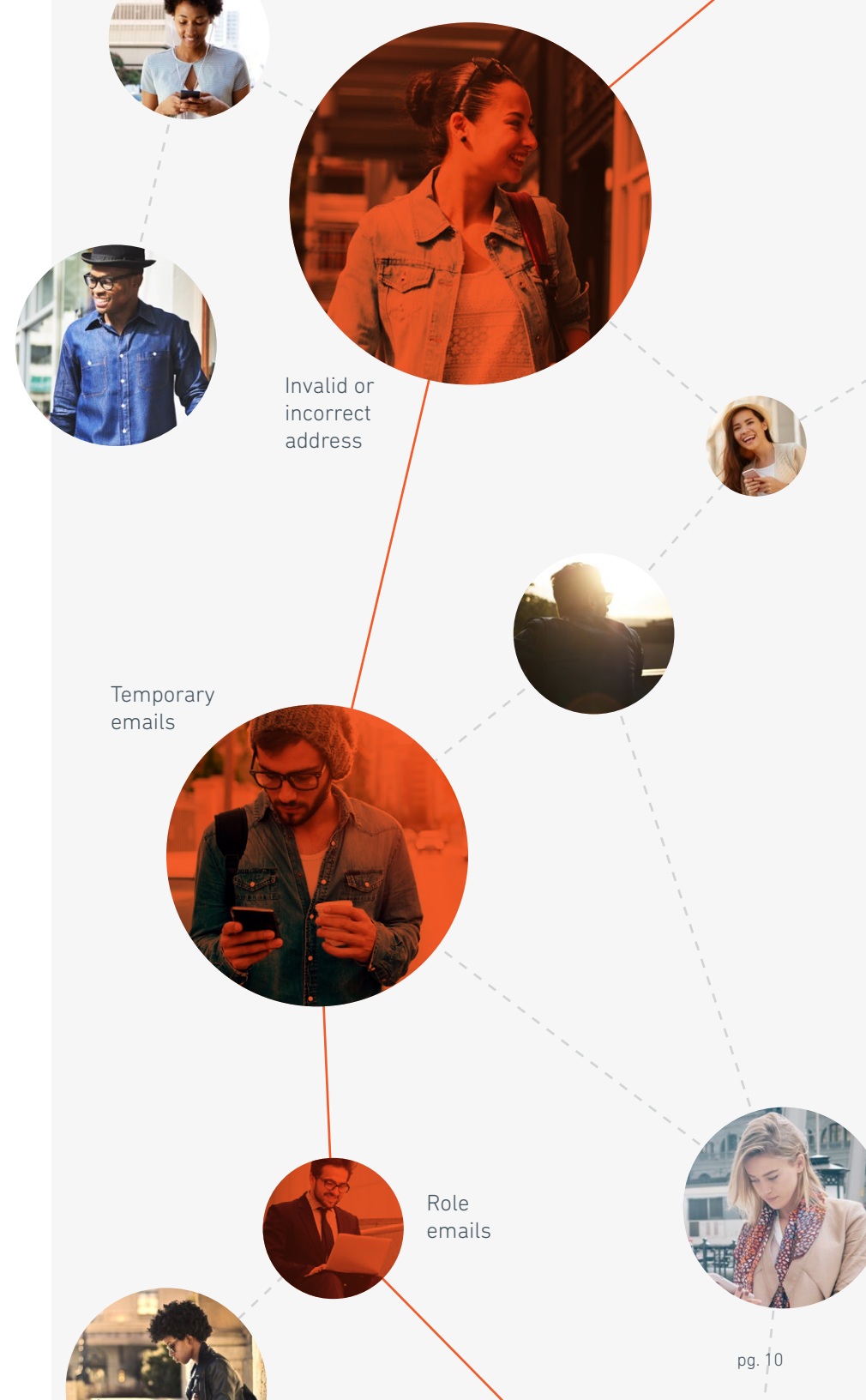
The process of keeping your subscriber list free of invalid and inactive accounts is called list hygiene. List hygiene can be accomplished through bounce-handling settings, establishing rules on how you reach out to less active subscribers and utilizing third-party list hygiene services. List hygiene helps to identify the following:

- **Invalid or incorrect addresses** that don't match existing email accounts. (e.g. *Joe123@ghst.com*)
- **Inactive emails** that have not opened or clicked emails over a defined period of time. (Note: marketers can try a reactivation campaign to see if they can get these subscribers to remain interested in communications but if a consumer hasn't been active in over 12 months, removing them might be the best option.)

If there is not a confirmed opt-in process in place for the subscriber list, marketers should be particularly vigilant about removing inactive emails from their subscriber base, as they may be spam trap addresses.

- **Role emails** that aren't associated with a real person, but rather with a company, department, position or group of recipients (e.g. *info@ABCcompany.com*)
- **Duplicate emails**
- **Temporary emails** are typically disposable and/or temporary addresses used for very specific purpose like Craig's List ads. They disappear after a short period and, if mailed, would result in a hard bounce.
- **Bounced addresses (both hard and soft)** are those that cannot be reached at the time of a mailing. Rules for removing these are generally customized based on the recommendations of a deliverability expert.

How often brands perform list hygiene depends on their mailing frequency and the rate at which new subscribers are added to their mailing programs. At a minimum, we recommend performing list hygiene on an annual basis but ideally, it should be done every six months. Regular list hygiene allows a sender to keep tabs on the overall health of their email subscription process and could potentially reveal gaps that allow invalid emails into a brand's subscriber list.



How Emails Travel to the Inbox

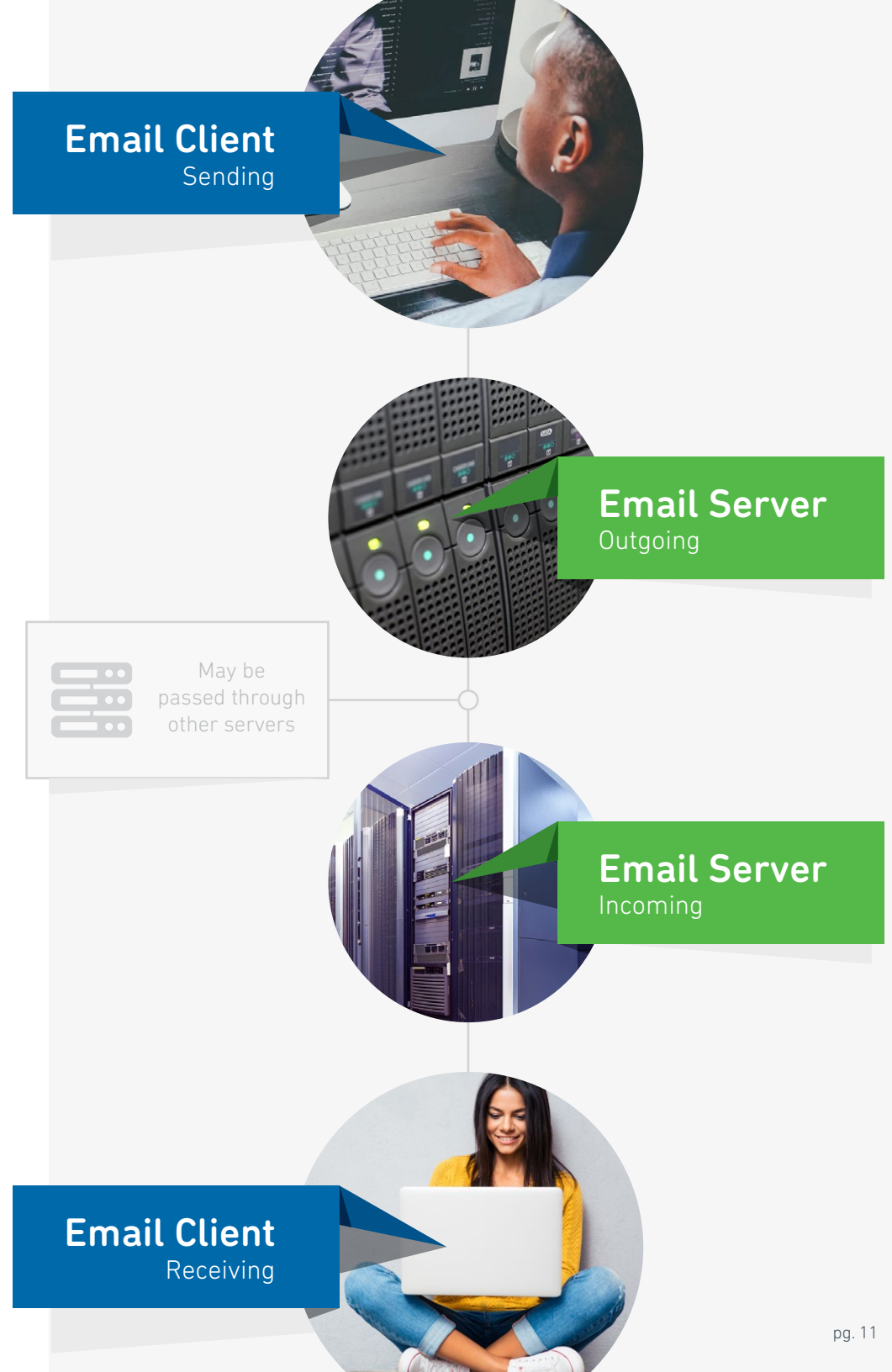
It's estimated that 269 billion emails are sent every day.² But what's the actual process that delivers an email to a subscriber's inbox? We'll keep the explanation simple.

The company that is sending an email campaign starts by creating a sending domain (i.e. return address) and sets up an Internet Protocol (IP) address (or mail stream) which is used to send communications. Usually several IP addresses are assigned to a single sending domain depending on a brand's expected mailing volumes.

When a marketer sends a campaign, it's uploaded to a server (email client) which assigns it to an IP address (i.e. mail stream.) That IP address is sent to an outgoing mail server which operates as a post office. There, the mail is sorted according to an IP address (i.e. incoming email server) for the subscriber. That incoming mail server is the ISP the subscriber uses which, if everything goes right, places the message in the inbox.

For the post office to deliver the campaign, it needs a valid recipient address. For an ISP to accept the campaign and deliver it to the inbox, it requires a reputable return address. In both instances, servers function best when they aren't overwhelmed by a high volume of mail.

To prevent deliverability issues such as bulking, ISP blocking, and blacklisting, consider using the following tactics to ensure optimal inboxing rates.



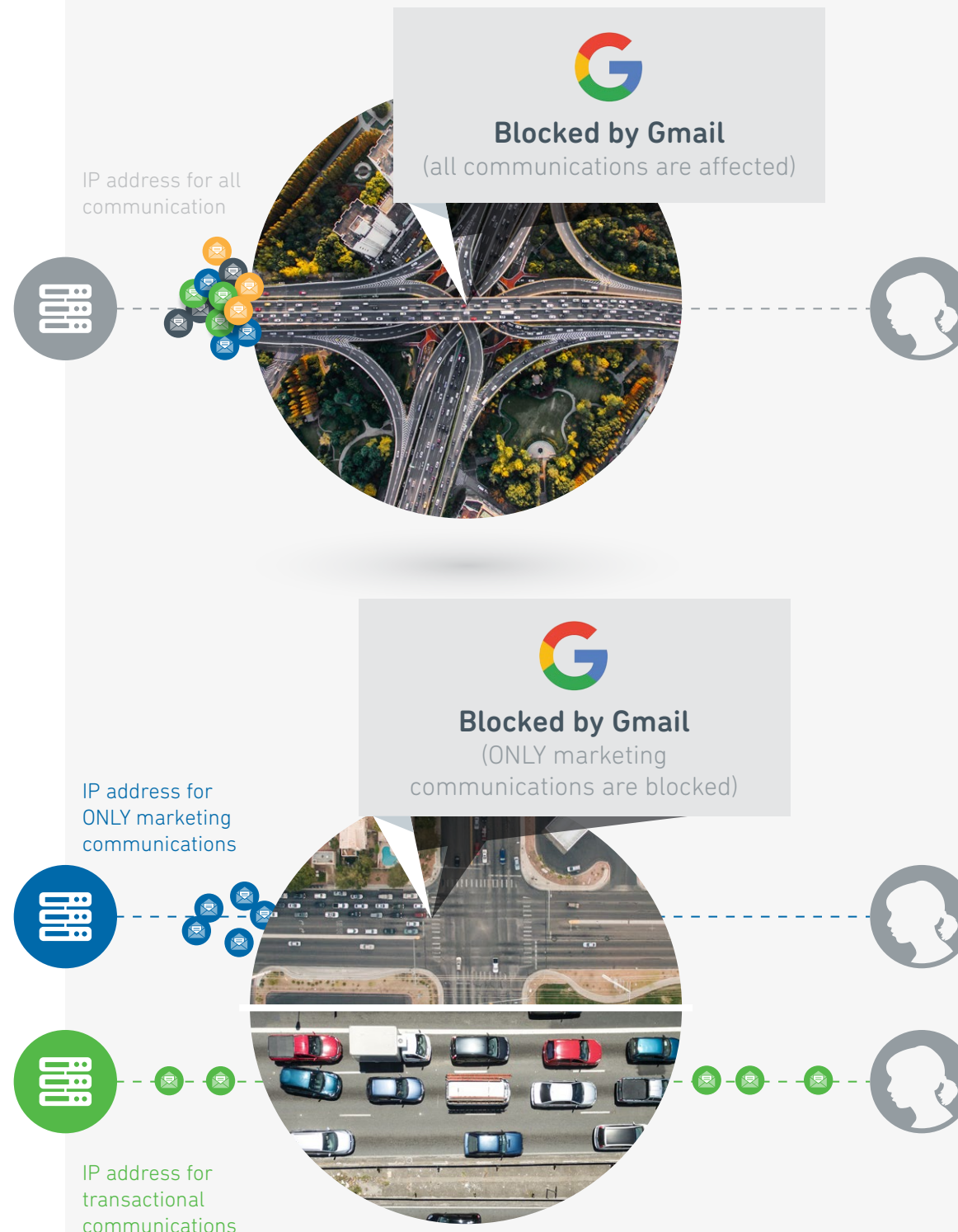
How to improve inboxing rates

Practice Mail Stream Separation

While a single IP address can be enough for a marketer's sending needs, the best practice is for brands to use separate IP addresses (mail streams) to send different components of their mailing program. These email streams can be dedicated to different types of messages like:

- Subscriber retention
- Marketing offers and communications
- Transactional

The idea behind the tactic of mail stream separation is to prevent a deliverability issue from affecting all of a brand's mailing programs. For example, if a brand practices mail stream separation and the IP address that sends marketing communications gets blocked at Gmail, the block only affects the marketing component of the mailing program. If, however, a brand uses a single IP to send all of its communications, a Gmail block would mean that none of the brand's campaigns will make it to any Gmail users. Separate mail streams mean marketers can avoid incurring the sizeable losses associated with bulking or blacklisting.



How to improve inboxing rates

Review campaign volume and frequency

Marketers should strive to send a consistent number of messages every hour, day, or month. If an ISP detects irregular activity or unusual spikes in email volume without an established sending history, they may implement a block. For example, if a marketer usually sends 100,000 emails per day and then sends a campaign to 2,000,000 recipients at once, an ISP may deem this a spam risk and block the sender.

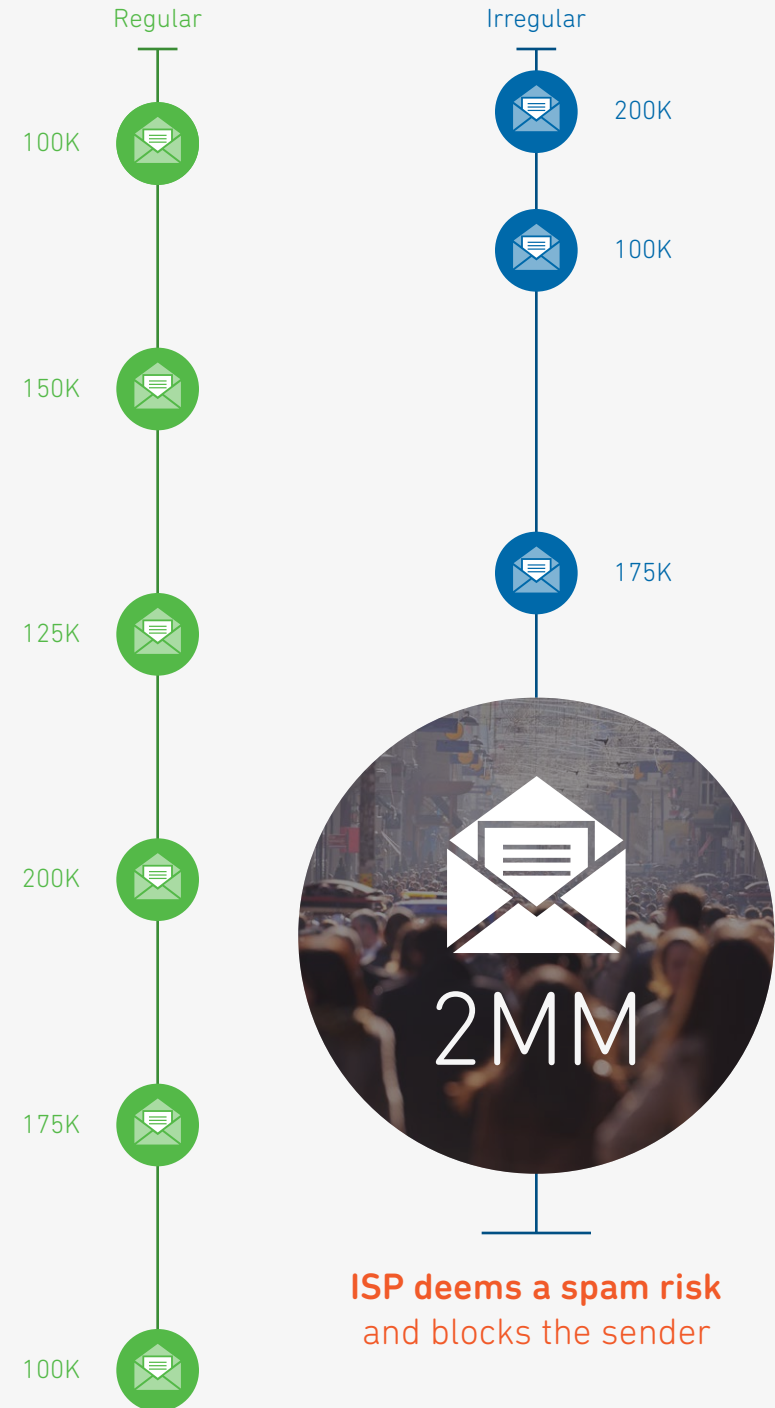
The use of preference centers which allow subscribers to indicate how often they wish to be contacted gives marketers information that can help them identify the optimal mailing frequency for their audience.

Use throttling

To prevent being labeled as spam by an ISP and to ensure proper mailing consistency, marketers should control the number of emails they send per hour and per day to ensure sending volumes remain consistent and don't catch an ISP by surprise. This practice is called throttling and is especially important when a brand is first launching a new email program or warming up an IP address. Based on our experience with enterprise clients, in order to avoid overwhelming an ISP, marketers can limit the number of emails they send to 100,000 per hour.

Always keep in mind that this number will, of course, depend on various factors such as sending history, campaign objectives, type of campaign/audience, and more. When a marketer reaches a strong and well-established sender reputation with the ISPs, throttling may no longer be necessary.

Email Volume and Frequency



How to improve inboxing rates

Authenticate your emails

Subscribers have chosen to receive communications from a brand because they see them as valuable. A company's reputation can be tarnished by third-parties who spoof (i.e. hijack) a sender's domain and send emails intended to collect and exploit personal information (phishing) or take over a subscriber's account.

Authenticating emails (i.e. verifying that they come from the specified sender) limits the risks of domain spoofing or phishing attempts that can irreparably damage a brand's reputation and cost thousands of dollars. There are three major ways to authenticate emails:

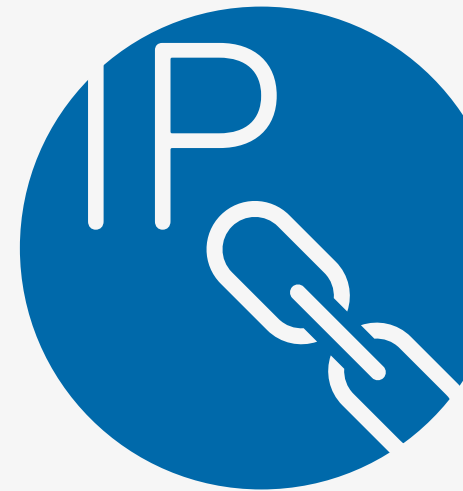
- **Sender Policy Framework** – This email authentication protocol allows the owner of a domain to specify which servers they use to send emails. The list of authorized sending hosts is published in the Domain Name System (DNS) records and ISPs can check this list.
- **Domain Keys Identified Mail** – This is a "digital signature" affixed to an email which associates it with an authorized IP address.
- **Domain Based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance** – This protocol enables marketers to decide how ISPs like AOL or Gmail, treat unauthenticated emails coming from their domains.

Monitor blacklists

There are hundreds of blacklists in the email industry, but two of the most heavily used ones are Spamhaus and Barracuda. Your deliverability support team (either internal or through your ESP) should be monitoring blacklists on a daily (if not hourly) basis. They should be responsible for immediately detecting and resolving any blacklist issues that can have devastating effects on revenue.



Sender Policy Framework



Domain Keys Identified Mail



Domain Based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance

How to improve inboxing rates

Conduct inbox placement testing

Marketers can identify and fix delivery problems before deploying an email campaign by running a “pre-flight” inbox placement test. This test involves sending an email to a seed list - a list of valid addresses that are not associated with a real person. Seed list mailings provide information on how an ISP would handle a campaign from the specific sender but do not provide any email engagement data. The data available to marketers from seed list mailings is limited to whether an email:

- Missed the inbox completely (meaning that it was blocked)
- Landed in the junk folder
- Reached the inbox

These mailings can be run a few hours prior to campaign deployment. However, the longer the lead-time the more equipped marketers are to identify any inboxing problems and suggest fixes.

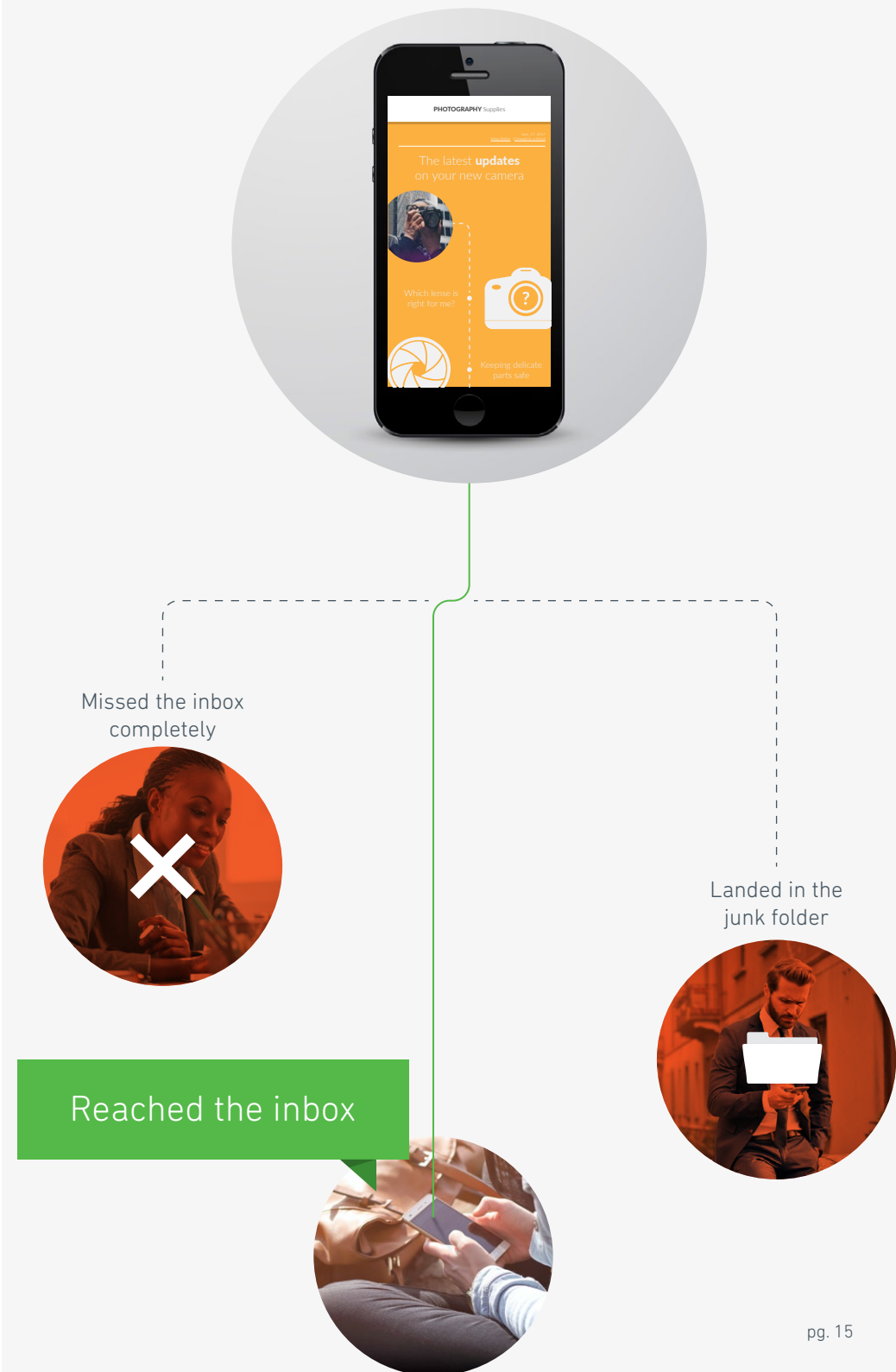
Employ email panel data to test audience interaction

Marketers can conduct another form of inbox testing using a consumer panel. This differs from a seed list in that a panel is comprised of live email accounts with real consumer owners. The panel subscribers have given permission for limited access to their email accounts so marketers can gain insights into the way they interact with emails.

Panels provide engagement data such as:

- Opens
- Deletes without open
- Deletes after open
- Moving email to spam

It's not recommended to do pre-flight testing with panel data because, in order for the results to be representative, panelists need to receive the send at the same time that subscribers would. This ensures that bias (deflated or inflated engagement rates) based on timing of the message is avoided.



Conclusion

Most marketers spend a great deal of time and resources planning and creating email campaigns because they know email marketing offers the single best ROI. But having an email campaign make it to the inbox shouldn't be taken for granted.

Getting an email delivered to the inbox can take just as much attention and planning as the strategy and design stages. By taking advantage of the deliverability best practices in this whitepaper, marketers can lay the foundation that will help them achieve optimal inboxing and consistent email marketing ROI.

Additional Deliverability Resources:

- [Data Hygiene: Clean Data Boosts Marketing ROI](#)
- [How "List-Bombing" Led to Recent Spamhaus Blacklistings](#)
- [2016 Email Marketing and Unsubscribe Audit](#)

Sources

- 1 – [eMarketer: Email Outperforms Social Media, Paid Search for ROI](#)
- 2 – [Expanded Ramblings: 80+ Incredible Email Statistics and Facts](#)

Have questions about deliverability?

Looking for assistance with achieving optimal inboxing rates?

Wondering about blacklisting, spam traps or the integrity of your database?

Contact our experienced deliverability team!



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