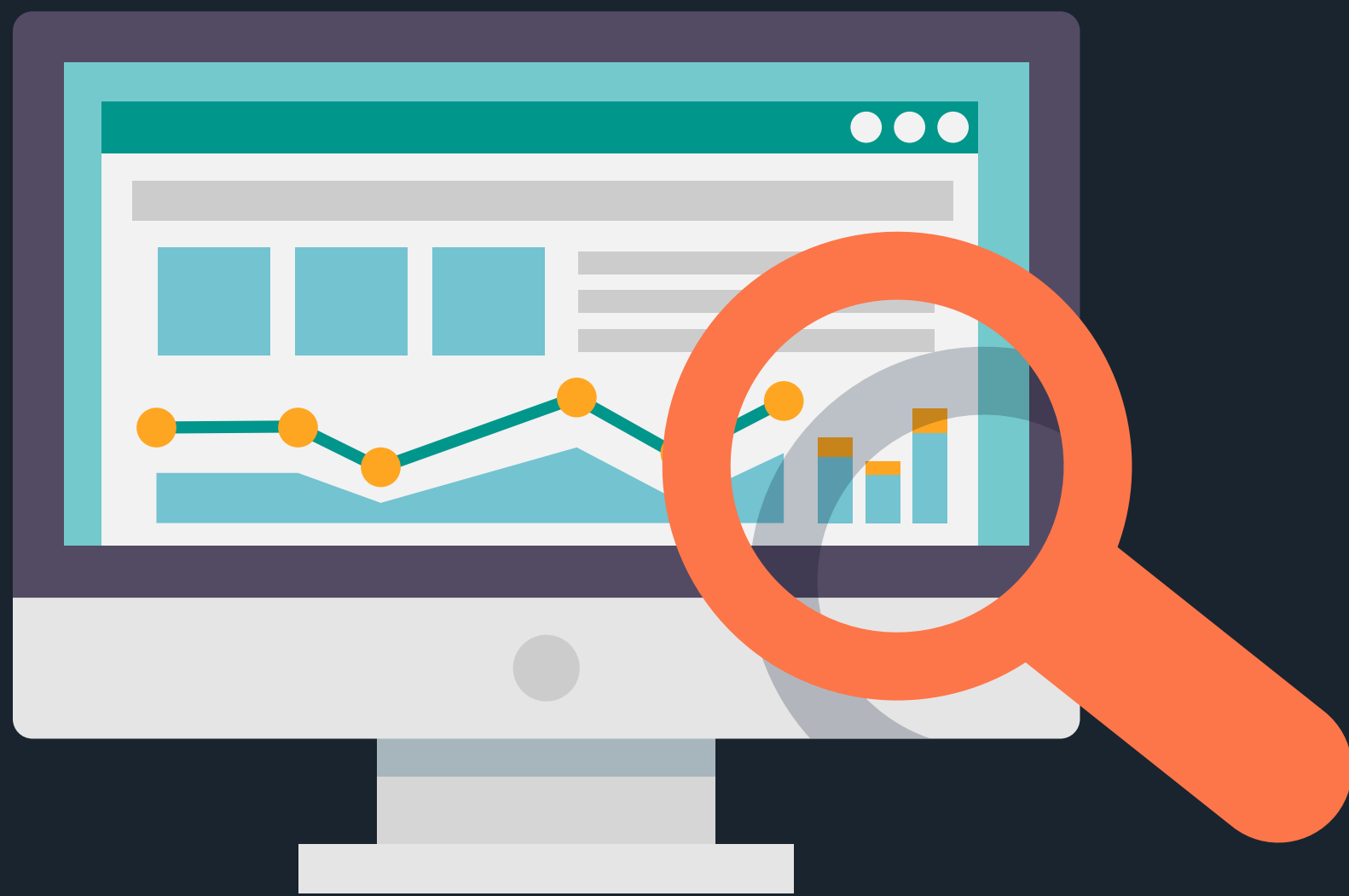


Getting into **Gmail** and other email inboxes:

A marketer's guide to the toughest
spam filters



What Really Determines Inbox Engagement?



Do Internet service providers (ISPs) monitor clicks and the use of such words as “free” in subject lines to determine email deliverability? The answer to that question is no, according to a 2015 Email Evolution Conference (EEC) panel discussion. If you’re surprised by this answer, you’re not alone. Prior to this revealing panel discussion, many email marketers would have answered yes to that question.

This white paper shares valuable deliverability insights and tips from the 2015 EEC. Plus, you’ll also find some specific recommendations for how to get into the Gmail, AOL, Comcast, and Outlook.com inboxes.

Engagement Is Key, But Clicks Don't Count

The final session at the EEC featured four representatives of the largest ISPs fielding questions on email deliverability from email marketers.



The ISP panel included:

- **Gmail** (Sri Somanchi)
- **AOL** (Paul Rock)
- **Comcast** (Matthew Moleski)
- **Outlook.com** (John Scarrow)

All four ISP representatives agreed that engagement is key to determining deliverability. But surprisingly, clicks are not one of the criteria that ISPs use to measure engagement. Sure, if someone clicks on an email, they are demonstrating a level of engagement. But ISPs don't measure clicks because not only is it a technological challenge, but ISPs consider the tracking of clicks to be a violation of user privacy.

Keep in mind that, although ISPs aren't looking at clicks to determine deliverability, click rates are still an important metric that senders should track. Click rates provide a strong indication of whether or not your email content is relevant and engaging your subscribers—ultimately what the ISPs want.

Deliverability Is Personalized

What impact does using words such as free in subject lines have on deliverability? All of the ISP representatives were in agreement that a word, in and of itself, would not cause a deliverability problem. If a word tends to trigger a recipient to mark an email as spam or delete it without opening, however, the email would more readily end up in that person's junk box. Therefore, it's not the word that impacts deliverability, but rather a recipient's reaction to the word.

This also demonstrates that deliverability is personalized, at least to a certain extent. If a recipient marks an email as spam, for example, emails from that sender may not make it to the individual's inbox in the future. But that doesn't mean emails from that sender will end up in the spam boxes of other recipients, too. That email, however, could end up in many junk folders if a lot of subscribers marked it as spam. In effect, the algorithms that determine deliverability are both a) personalized, so individuals can influence whether emails from a sender land in their own inbox or junk mail folder; and b) generalized, meaning behavior from the broad group of recipients will impact the ISP's treatment of that email.



What Are the Seven Most Important Actions Impacting a Sender's Deliverability?



So, now that we know clicks and certain words don't determine your email deliverability, then what factors do have an impact? All of the ISP representatives on the panel were very clear that a single factor never determines deliverability. Rather, it's a combination of factors that indicate inbox engagement and ultimately affect a sender's ability to have strong deliverability.

The following seven actions play a significant role in determining a user's engagement with your email campaigns and, thus, deliverability, for specific recipients:

1. Opening an email—Good

Thanks to some email clients that now download images by default, email opens have become a less important metric. But it's still something most ISPs track.

2. Deleting an email without opening it—Bad

This indicates recipients took a quick look at the subject line and sender address, and determined that they weren't interested in the email.



3. Moving an email to a folder–Good

If recipients are taking the time to move messages around, they're indicating a level of interest.

4. Junking an email–**Very bad**

This is a strong indication that the recipient doesn't want to receive the emails. In fact, AOL will automatically put email from that sender in the junk folder when recipients mark a sender's email twice as spam.

5. Moving an email from the junk folder to the inbox–**Very good**

This indicates that a recipient has an interest in receiving these emails. For AOL, it takes just one time of moving an email to the inbox to reset the previous spam classification.

6. Adding a sender to the address book–Good

This indicates that the recipient is engaged with the sender.

7. Replying to an email–**Very good!**

A reply is a strong indication that a recipient is engaged with the sender.

When it comes to an indication of email engagement, a reply to a message is a very strong sign. So what can marketers do to drive replies? One way is to create calls to action that actually reply to the email message. This may help to improve deliverability, especially on a segment of inactive users. Plus, it's for this reason that using a no-reply email address isn't a good practice for email marketers.



Keep in mind that regardless of how email engagement metrics impact deliverability, you must [authenticate your emails](#) and closely comply with [CAN-SPAM regulations](#) to help ensure optimum deliverability. For example, some of the basic CAN-SPAM regulations include promptly removing bounced email addresses from your database and efficiently processing spam complaints. Download our quick guide to the [U.S. CAN-SPAM Act here](#).

The first section of this white paper focused on deliverability issues that all four of these major ISPs were in agreement on at the EEC meetings. The following sections delve more deeply into some of the deliverability issues unique to the individual ISPs: Gmail, AOL, Comcast, and Outlook.



How to Optimize Email Deliverability for Your Gmail Users

Google Relies on Gmail User Behavior to Define Spam

Google has no clear definition of spam. Rather, Gmail relies on its users to help define what is (and is not) spam. In other words, if its audience believes in your organization, then Google will not stand in the way of your Gmail recipients getting your emails.

Overall, Gmail primarily uses a sender-reputation rating system to determine how email should be delivered. If you do the right things, then your reputation will increase. Numerous factors affect Google's sender-reputation scoring. For example, Gmail algorithms leverage a combination of personalization and reputation factors—as well as a wide spectrum of user behavioral feedback—to determine how email is delivered. So, essentially, if users are not taking negative actions relating to your email, you'll have good deliverability.



Google Deliverability Tips

Here are some tips for optimizing deliverability with your Gmail subscribers:



- **Right acquisition** — Use best practices for building your lists of subscribers, which include always getting explicit opt-in to ensure a permission-based email-marketing program.
- **Right engagement** — Understand your subscribers and send compelling, relevant email campaigns that motivate engagement.
- **Right measurement** — Leverage performance metrics to effectively track engagement and determine if people like and want to receive your email.
- **Right adjustment** — Warm up slowly during the first month with a new IP address. This is important because spammers typically mail heavily on new IP addresses without any warm-up. In addition, make adjustments to your email campaigns in response to engagement metrics and analytics.
- **Right opt-out** — Make it very easy for subscribers to opt out—such as including a prominent unsubscribe link—so they don't hurt your reputation by marking your emails as spam.

Plus, don't try to get your subscribers to move your company's emails from the promotional tab to their inboxes, which could end up hurting deliverability in the long run. Email marketers actually get better engagement with promotional email by keeping it out of the main Gmail inbox.

Links for More Information on Gmail Deliverability

To help ensure good Gmail deliverability, senders must be [authenticated](#) and should use the Gmail feedback loop. If you create a feedback loop with Gmail, for example, you'll get a copy of each complaint generated when a Gmail user reports your email as spam.

Here are some useful links for more information about how to optimize your Gmail deliverability:

[Gmail Feedback Loop](#) — This is a Gmail Feedback Loop form for email service providers (ESPs).

[Gmail's Bulk Email Guidelines](#) — This provides a list of Gmail's best practices and a good set of general guidelines.

[Troubleshooting for Bulk Email Senders](#) — This Bulk Email Senders' tool walks you through possible issues and provides a link to a support form.



AOL.

**How to Optimize
Email Deliverability
for Your AOL Users**

AOL Listens to Customers to Determine Which Emails Get Filtered

When it comes to filtering email, AOL listens to its customers. AOL doesn't want to deliver email that its users don't want or expect. Fewer than 5% of the email messages that arrive at AOL's server door are legitimate, permission-based emails. The rest of the emails, AOL filters out.

What may come as a surprise to many marketers is that AOL doesn't have visibility into whether an AOL subscriber clicks an email message. This is both a technological challenge for the ISPs as well as a privacy issue. AOL's privacy team won't allow them to look at clicks.

Some of the factors that AOL uses to measure subscriber engagement and determine sender reputation include the following:

- A user moving an email among folders is a positive signal.
- A user marking an email as spam is a very bad signal.
- A user marking an email as not spam is a very good signal.



Aol.

Where Does AOL Stand on Spam Traps and Migrations?

When it comes to inactive email accounts, AOL simply disables the email account after a certain period of inactivity so it can't be used. Although AOL created some spam traps out of abandoned accounts years ago, that's not the case today.

Where does AOL stand if you're migrating to a new IP address or new email service provider (ESP)? AOL allows such migrations with relative ease, if you have a valid, well-managed domain.

What Should You Do If You're Having AOL Deliverability Problems?

If you find that your email campaigns are not making it to your AOL subscribers' inboxes, here are a few links to help you solve the problem:

In addition to using Spamhaus and CBL/XBL blacklists, AOL also maintains its own blacklists. So, if you receive a bounce-back from AOL, your IP may be blacklisted in its system. If you get on one of AOL's blacklists, you must contact them to get off of the list. To check your reputation, you can query your server IP against AOL's database at the following link: <https://postmaster.aol.com/Postmaster.Reputation.php>.

AOL uses domain-based reputation and domain-based whitelisting. This means your emails must pass [authentication](#) checks, including:

[Sender Policy Framework \(SPF\)](#)

[DomainKeys Identified Mail \(DKIM\)](#)

[Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting and Conformance \(DMARC\)](#).



For more information about AOL's DMARC policy, click on the following link: <http://postmaster-blog.aol.com/2014/04/22/aol-mail-updates-dmarc-policy-to-reject/>.

If you're having deliverability issues with AOL, you can also check out the following link, which provides a number of resources to help you troubleshoot the problem: <http://postmaster.aol.com/Postmaster.Troubleshooting.php>.

You'll find suggested best practices for sending email to AOL at the following link: <http://postmaster.aol.com/Postmaster.Guidelines.php>.

You should use feedback loops. If you create a feedback loop with AOL, for example, you'll get a copy of each complaint generated when an AOL user reports your email as spam. For more information about AOL's feedback loop, click on the following link: <http://postmaster.aol.com/Postmaster.FeedbackLoop.php>.

Additionally, pay attention to the spam that arrives in your own personal email account. By doing this, you can figure out what those senders are doing wrong and learn from their mistakes.

The AOL logo is displayed in a large, white, sans-serif font. It consists of the letters 'A', 'o', and 'l' in a bold, blocky style, followed by a period. The 'A' is the tallest, the 'o' is shorter and wider, and the 'l' is the same height as the 'o'. The period is a solid white circle.



How to Optimize Email Deliverability for Your Comcast Users

How Can You Get Your Emails Through the Comcast Spam Filters?

Comcast filters out about 95% of the emails that arrive at the company's proverbial front door as spam. So, even if your company is part of the 5% that is permission-based and following best practices, you still need to be vigilant.

Comcast has become more transparent when it comes to how it filters spam. In fact, check out this [link](#) that lists the nine things you need to know to get through Comcast's spam filters.

Here are four items to which marketers really need to pay attention to get into Comcast inboxes:

- Get your [Internet Protocol \(IP\) address properly authenticated](#). Essentially, email authentication verifies that the domain used in the From address is really under the control of the sender, which protects email users from spammers and phishing scams. That's why it's also important to keep your IP reputation clean—not associated with organizations that send spam, spyware, or other deceptive emails.





- Stay off Domain Name System Blacklists (DNSBLs) and keep your distribution lists clean. ReturnPath and Spamhaus Zen are two examples of the DNSBLs that Comcast uses. If you're on one of the lists, Comcast won't be the only ISP blocking your emails. Plus, be sure to treat all nondelivery notifications (NDNs) as an unsubscribe request, because a large number of undeliverable emails will cause the sending IP to be blocked.
- Design messages that are intriguing. This is an important way to engage users. And, as we covered in the first section of this white paper, engagement is key to email deliverability.
- Don't flood the market with too much email. According to [Comcast's list of what you need to know to avoid being blocked](#), for example, Comcast allows 25 simultaneous connections per sending IP address and 100 recipients per message.

What About Migrations and Spam Traps at Comcast?

Comcast representatives will work with professional email marketers on large migrations. The company is fully aware that email marketers are constantly changing vendors and will readily assist you with any IP migrations.

But what happens when a subscriber disconnects his or her email service? Does Comcast convert it into a spam trap? The answer is no. Instead, Comcast inactivates the email address. Most Comcast spam traps are brand-new, never-used email addresses. And they are obvious spam traps—typically made up of random characters.





What Should You Do if You're Having Comcast Deliverability Problems?

Comcast will assist marketers who are having difficulty getting through its spam filters. The underlying caveat, however, is that your organization must be using professional, permission-based email-marketing practices.

If your email campaigns get blocked by Comcast, you can submit an online request to be removed from the spam list at the following link: <http://postmaster.comcast.net/block-removal-request.html>.

So what can email marketers do to help optimize Comcast deliverability? Work with your metrics to better understand your email campaign trends. In this way, you'll see how subscribers are engaging with your emails so you can send better messages. In addition, it also doesn't hurt to build relationships with your receiving ISPs.



How to Optimize Email Deliverability for Your Outlook.com Users

Microsoft Personalizes Deliverability

Deliverability has become more personalized for Microsoft. Outlook.com subscribers today control whether or not an email is delivered to their inbox. For example, specific actions taken by a user in the past—such as opening or deleting certain messages—help determine how other messages from a sender get delivered to that individual’s inbox.

In fact, much of Microsoft’s sender-reputation scoring is based on machine-learning algorithms, which are heavily driven by user input. Microsoft also leverages some external blacklists as part of building reputation scores.

For Outlook.com, a bad sender reputation is usually a result of noncompliance with [Microsoft’s policies and guidelines](#). And if senders have done something wrong, Microsoft will hold them accountable. On the other hand, if a server had a breach and senders can legitimately explain it, Microsoft will work with the senders to get their reputation score corrected. Does your organization currently share transactional email and internal company email? That practice is okay with Microsoft. You may have issues with deliverability, add however, if you then use the same IP to send marketing mail. Some companies try to transactional email to promotional email in an attempt to get a lift in reputation. That practice, however, is not recommended. Transactional emails should always be sent separately from promotional emails.



Engagement Indicators for Outlook.com

As detailed in the first section of this white paper, Microsoft and other ISPs look at whether an email is opened, but not if it's clicked. Microsoft doesn't use clicks as a measure of engagement due to user privacy considerations. This was a surprising revelation, because most email marketers previously believed that ISPs used clicks as an important measure of subscriber engagement.



So what does drive engagement—and hence better sender reputation—in the eyes of Microsoft? The following subscriber actions:

- **Deleting an email without opening** it is bad for a sender's reputation. This is an indication that a user determines that an email's content is irrelevant just by the sender's address.
- **Moving an email from one folder to another** is good for a sender's reputation because it indicates that the user is interested in the email content.
- **Moving an email out of the junk folder** is exceptionally good for a sender's reputation, because it's a strong indicator of the user's interest.

As far as email account closure and spam-trap policies are concerned, after 2 years of not being used, a Microsoft account goes inactive. And Microsoft doesn't use inactive addresses as spam traps.

Should You Mail to Inactive Subscribers?

For Microsoft, inactive subscribers don't directly affect sender reputation, unless those subscribers decide to mark your emails as spam. Keep in mind, however, that deleting an email without opening it is a negative signal for ISPs (including Outlook.com), so your emails sent to inactive subscribers may still end up in the junk folder.

In terms of increasing engagement and especially email opens, marketers really need to work on subject lines to strike a balance between saying too much versus saying too little. If you say too much, your email may not get opened. But if you say too little, people won't open it.

Some other Microsoft tips include:

- If you have a big migration to conduct, call Microsoft and a representative will help you through the migration.
- Join [Outlook.com's Junk Email Reporting Program](#) to help get complainers off your email list.



Engagement Indicators for Outlook.com

Check out the following links for additional information about Outlook.com's deliverability guidelines, policies, and troubleshooting advice:



- [Outlook.com Postmaster](#) - This is an informational site designed for IT professionals who send email to Outlook.com.
- [Policies, Practices, and Guidelines](#) - This link provides guidance to help senders avoid deliverability issues by outlining the industry's best practices and regulations in place at Microsoft to protect Outlook.com users from getting unwanted emails.
- [Outlook.com Troubleshooting](#) - If you've already checked out the Policies and Guidelines page and you're still having trouble delivering email to Outlook.com recipients, this link discusses solutions to common problems.

FulcrumTech Can Help Optimize Your Email Deliverability

Are deliverability issues taking a toll on the return on investment of your email-marketing efforts? FulcrumTech can help. [Contact us](#), and we'll help you identify and determine the best solution for your deliverability problems. For more information, please [visit our website](#).



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