

# Summary: Constructing Effective Email in the Community Sector

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Penelope Rowe, CEO of the Community Sector Council NL, is a Co-Director of the SESRN and also serves as Co-Coordinator, with Dr. Ivan Emke, Associate Vice-President: Research at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, of Sub-node Six of the network. This report is part of the work of this sub-node, which focuses on communication practices and tools within the social economy.

**Keywords:** Email, Communication Technology, Internet Promotion, Community Sector, Social Economy

## **Abstract**

Understanding and practicing effective emailing strategies contributes to successful communication among organizations in the community sector, their employees and volunteers, and the communities in which they operate. In this study, we surveyed 251 individuals in Newfoundland and Labrador's community sector to discover their preferences and patterns in opening and reading email. The aim of the study is to enable effective mass email-based communication that reflects the preferences of the target audience. We found that email recipients, when opening and reading emails, most importantly look for a familiar sender, a descriptive subject line, a personal greeting from the sender, and a short and concise message that conveys relevant content. Based on our analysis of our survey responses, we propose an emailing strategy for the community sector that will result in successful email-based promotion.

## **Introduction**

Email is cost-efficient, simple, and does not require much training. These strengths correspond with challenges facing the community sector: saving on costs, coping with high turnover rates, and maintaining efficiency. Effective email-based promotion in which the "the message sent is decoded by the receiver as the sender intended" (Seshadri &

Carstenson, 2007, p. 77-78) is essential to community sector organizations. Accordingly, this research seeks to inform mass emailing strategies in the community sector. The goal of these strategies is to help the sender construct emails that result in the recipient taking a requested action. Due to the myriad factors that can influence whether or not a request is acted upon, this report addresses only the *controllable* aspects of emailing strategies. Controllable features include, for example, the design and content of the message, the frequency at which emails are sent, and the time of day they are sent.

The functionality of email allows wide access to target audiences, such as volunteers, clients, and potential donors. In 2009, email ranked as the most popular online activity for home Internet users in Canada, with 93% reporting email as one of their online activities (Statistics Canada, 2010). However, a large body of literature suggests that the for-profit sector has generally been more advanced in computer technology than the nonprofit sector (Henley & Guidry, 2004; Pinho & Macedo, 2006; Schneider, 2003). In addition, a 2008 Epsilon study indicated that, despite a 90.7% email delivery rate, the nonprofit and education industry has lower than average email open (16.6%) and click-through rate (1.7%). If appropriately understood and practiced, computer technology, especially email, can offer community organizations an affordable and effective way to arrange meetings (Seshadri & Carstenson, 2007), solicit donations (Waters, 2007), recruit and retain volunteers (Dhebar & Stokes, 2008), publicize upcoming events or publications (Cameron, 2006), and promote organizational missions.

When promoting events or newsletters, soliciting donations, or putting out a call for volunteers, it is more efficient to send a *mass email* to a large group of individuals or organizations than to send a large number of individual emails. As Weare, Loges and Oztas (2007) note, "one person can send a single message to all others in a group without loss of fidelity, usually with no extra marginal cost" (p. 224). Mass emails save time and money for organizations (Olsen, Keevers, Paul, & Covington, 2001; Seshadri & Carstenson, 2007; Spence 2002) as they do not incur the financial cost of long-distance telephone calls or travel generated by face-to-face meetings. These advantages are lost, however, if the emails are not read. In 2005, a sharp rise in email marketing led to a decrease in click-through rates (McCormick, 2006). The more emails people receive, McCormick suggests, the less time or interest they have for it. As Hargrave (2008) notes, "consumers are now very web savvy and are turned off by impersonal mass mailouts" (p.26). With an already high chance of an organization's message being discarded, it is crucial to be aware of recipient preferences and to adjust emailing strategies accordingly.

## Literature review

The literature on email communication in the community sector is dominated by strategies for internal communication between members of an organization (Seshadri et al., 2007; Weare et al., 2007) and strategies for soliciting donations (Dhebar et al., 2008; Waters, 2007). Much of the literature describes general (rather than specific) factors that might influence how effective a promotional email will be for an organization, such as the phenomenon of over-emailing, which leaves people feeling exhausted and uninterested in emails (Hargrave, 2008; Spence, 2002), or the relative impersonality of email compared to telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings (Chesney, 2006; Olsen et al., 2001; Seshadri et al., 2007). There is also a body of grey literature (i.e., self-published reports and material not published in peer-reviewed journals) and websites that recommend promotion and marketing email strategies not specific to the community sector (Arnold, 2008; Best Resources for Web Developers, 2009; Castelein, n.d.; Egan, 2010).

Once an email is effectively crafted, the next step is sending it. Controllable features here include the individuals or groups to whom the email is sent; the “from” address; and the subject line. Temporal and technological factors include the time at which the email is sent, and its readability on mobile technological devices. Castelein (n.d.) suggests that a segmented email list, which groups recipients according to their interests, missions, or location, increases the likelihood that the message will be read. Senders may do this by setting up online preference centres in which recipients select the types of editorial or promotional material they want to receive (Johnson-Greene, 2008). McCormick (2006) expects that click-through rates will increase as emailing lists become more segmented and relevant messages are sent to selected audiences only, rather than entire databases. A familiar “from” address is important (Arnold, 2008; Egan, 2010; McGhee, n.d.; Mind Tools, n.d.), as the receiver is more likely to open an email from an individual or organization they know. A catchy or attractive subject line no longer than thirty-five characters should indicate the main message (Castelein). Reaching the recipient at the right time and through the appropriate technology (e.g., by ensuring readability on smart phones) further increases the probability of its being read (Best Resources for Web Developers, 2009; Castelien; Lexell, n.d.). Seshadri et al. (2007) noted that some email communication breakdown is a result of senders and/or recipients lacking a clear understanding of how to

communicate via email. This understanding is central to the construction of effective emailing strategies in the community sector, warranting an in-depth examination into the specific interworkings of email communication.

## **The current research**

This project sought to inform mass emailing strategies for promotional purposes in the community sector. Specifically, the research explored factors that influence the receiving, opening, and reading of email. Recommendations are offered based on the findings.

### **Method**

#### *Approach and design*

In exploring the promotional effectiveness of email in the community sector, it is necessary to investigate recipient preferences regarding the format, organization, and content of received emails. To do this, we attempted to contact and survey individuals who were most frequently emailed by our organization, the Community Sector Council of Newfoundland and Labrador. This research used both telephone and web surveys with 251 individuals in the community sector in Newfoundland and Labrador. The survey consisted of both open and close-ended questions about participant preferences with regard to opening and reading emails. There were no differences between the responses provided by participants reached by telephone and those reached by web. Qualitative data was coded through content analysis, and direct quotations were recorded during telephone surveys. Participant responses were keyed directly into an online survey tool. Themes that emerged from a number of informants or that stood out as important were noted and expanded upon.

## **Results and discussion**

Current findings suggest that a variety of factors influence whether or not recipients opened and read an email. Recipients looked at the personalization, the subject line, and the relevance and design of the email. Temporal and technological factors also weighed in the decision to read or not.

#### *Personalization*

Email has an inherent “low social presence” (Cameron, 2006, p. 6) because it lacks non-verbal cues and interpersonal interaction. In this way email sacrifices a personal connection with the receiver (Garrett & Caldwell, 2002). This study found that familiarity with the sender was one of the most important factors for participants in deciding whether to open an email: they preferred to recognize the sender before opening a message. This factor is not always controllable for the sender, but the sender can choose from whom the email is sent (i.e., an individual or an organization). The majority of respondents (67%) said that it does not matter whether the email is from an individual or an organization; many of this group noted that familiarity with the sender was more important than if it was an individual or an organization. Arnold (2008) suggested that emails with a known “from” address had a better chance of being opened than one from an unknown address. In contrast to the personalization of the “from” address, findings show that an email personally addressed to the recipient (e.g., Dear John) did not have an impact on the decision to read an email for just over half of participants (51%), although the other half would be more likely to read it. Many participants noted they were likely to read it because they considered it a personal touch, perceived it as an important email, or assumed that it came from someone they know.

#### *Descriptive subject line*

The subject line is one of the first prominent features of a new email. The majority of participants (68%) noted that subject line *does* affect the decision to open an email. Overall and consistent with the literature (Arnold, 2008; Castelein, n.d.), participants wanted to see that:

- 1) There is a subject line
- 2) The subject line is descriptive enough to indicate what the email is about and that it is safe (i.e., contains no viruses)
- (3) The subject line is brief and to the point.

Participants noted that the subject line indicating content was important in determining whether or not the email is of interest to them. Some noted that the subject line told them whether the email was spam, junk, or advertising, or if it was urgent or important. As described by participants, effective subject lines were descriptive of content, short, concise and easy to read; and they were relevant to their work or organization. These characteristics all encouraged recipients to open the email. In contrast, “red flags” in the subject line, such as language unfamiliar to the recipient, ambiguous text such as “Check this out” or “Hi,”

excessive punctuation, symbols, or all capital letters (Arnold, 2008) all appeared suspicious to many participants and discouraged them from opening the email.

### *Relevant content*

Sending effective emails involves learning the interests and concerns of recipients. A large percentage of participants (48%) said that if the content is relevant, interesting, or important to them, they would probably read it. Notably, relevance of content is more important in the decision to read an email than to open it in the first place. Ensuring that content is relevant is difficult for the sender to control, however, as it depends on the interests and work of individual recipients. The literature suggests that in order to avoid bombarding recipients with unwanted email, senders should segment email lists by asking recipients to select the type of email they wish to receive (Castelein, n.d.; Epsilon, 2008; Johnson-Greene, 2008). The majority of participants did not prefer to select emails from our organization (60%), but a large percentage did prefer the option (40%). Many participants feared they would miss potentially important or interesting information if they were to select specific topics. However, if given this option, individuals and organizations could select all topics if they desired, and thus not miss anything.

### *Organized and accessible email design*

In deciding to read through an email, participants were strongly influenced by the design of the email. Design includes the layout of the content, the clarity of the text, and forwarded or original messages. Participants (61%) noted that they were receptive to easy to read emails with well-organized content, an obvious message, clear and concise writing, and correct grammar (Seshadri et al., 2007; Spence, 2002). Moreover, the majority of participants (72%) were receptive to shorter rather than longer emails. These were noted to be easier to read and interpret, and quicker for those who were busy. As quantity of free time is important in deciding whether to read an email, short messages that make their point quickly are appealing to time-pressed individuals. There is disagreement in the literature pertaining to graphic-rich emails (Olsen et al., 2001; Spence 2002), which was not resolved by our findings. Our results indicate that the use of visual effects such as different colours or graphic images did not have a positive impact on the decision to read an email. Also consistent with the literature was that participants who were more likely to read emails with visual effects said that it was the effects that sparked

their interest. Those who were less likely to read them considered visual effects to be unnecessary, distracting, unprofessional, or likely to cause downloading and computer problems.

### *Temporal and technological factors*

Temporal and technological factors include when the recipient receives the email and on what technological device. There is debate in the literature about what time of day and what days of the week are best to send an email (Castelein, n.d.). Participants in this study were most likely to read their emails in the morning (53%), or throughout the day (43%). This suggests a slight advantage to morning email. Days did not matter at all: most participants (74%) did not have a particular day during the week when they were most likely to read their emails, and they checked their emails equally during each day of the week. The increasing popularity of cellular telephone technology may impact how emails are received, opened, and read. The majority of participants in this study did not receive emails on a smart mobile device (72%), but many did (28%). Most participants noted a lack of capacity for (e.g., they did not own a mobile device or they did not know how to email on their device) or a lack of interest in receiving emails on that type of device. Most respondents who did receive email on a mobile device actually read it on the device. Since the popularity of mobile devices or smart phones will likely increase, the ability to format emails for readability on these devices should enhance email promotion.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to discover the preferences of email recipients with regard to the sender-controllable factors of email. We found that the factors that most encouraged recipients to open and read new emails include: familiar senders; descriptive subject lines; and relevant, well-organized and grammatically correct content. Most of our respondents did not receive emails on a mobile device. Our findings, together with current literature, suggest that community sector organizations should segment their email lists according to recipient preferences; make their organizations known to the community and individuals so that their emails will be recognized; use descriptive subject lines; write accessibly; use links, visual effects, and attachments sparingly; and learn about the interests and technologies of their target audiences. These steps will help build effective email promotion.



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