EmailLabs

Unsubscribing in 2007: Marketers Can Get More Out of Goodbye

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By Stefan Pollard

Here's what our survey of unsubscribe policies and practices among email marketers turned up in 2007:

The good news is that almost all are complying with best practices about giving customers the opportunity to unsubscribe from their mailings, making it easy to find and use the unsubscribe link and honoring that unsubscribe relatively expeditiously.

However, marketers can do so much more to learn about their customers from the unsubscribe process and to offer alternatives that would retain them as customers somewhere within their databases.

Why scrutinize unsubscribe practices? Because providing a method for subscribers to leave your mailing list is a crucial component of email marketing, contrary to almost any other form of marketing and advertising.

- Consumers who don't trust your unsubscribe process are more likely to report you to their ISPs as a spammer.
- The unsubscribe process itself is a rich vein of information about how your subscribers are thinking, how they see your company and what they want from you.
- Having a workable, trustworthy unsubscribe process can even retain a customer for you if you give them other options.

So, when done correctly, unsubscribing can actually benefit your email program.

In this publication, we will present the major findings of our survey, analyze what they mean to you as an email sender and recommend how you can improve your own unsubscribe program and boost your email marketing program performance overall.

The Unsubscribe Picture 2007: Compliance Amid Lost Opportunities

Finding 1: 96% of marketers include an unsubscribe link in their promotional emails but fail to include it in other critical contact points in customers, including email communications, including welcome emails, transactional and customer support messages or autoresponders.

Which of your email messages on this list includes a method for subscribers to request removal?

	Do	Do Not	Don't Know	Don't Send One
Welcome Emails	63.20%	15.70%	3.50%	17.60%
Marketing Promotional Emails	96.00%	1.00%	0.50%	2.50%
Customer Service Emails	45.20%	30.90%	10.60%	13.30%
Auto Responders	40.10%	29.00%	9.00%	21.90%
Transactional Emails	31.00%	37.80%	10.60%	20.60%

Analysis:

Marketers are, for the most part, including unsubscribe instructions in all promotional emails. However, they're missing the opportunity to build customer trust and allow them to control their inboxes by adding the unsubscribe to other critical customer contact points.

Key to this is the welcome message, normally sent out as soon as the subscriber confirms the request. Why would you give your newest subscribers the option to jump off the wagon right away? Because people do sometimes subscribe by mistake. (You can alleviate this by not using prechecked boxes on your registration form, by the way.)

When you don't provide an unsubscribe method in that welcome email, you force recipients to receive more email from you. That increases the risk that they'll click the spam button, since they don't want to hear from you, and they don't trust you to honor the unsubscribe request.

(Are you among the 9% to 10% who don't know if your nonpromotional emails do or don't carry this information? Better find out fast!)

Recommendation:

Provide unsubscribe information in every email sent to subscribers or customers.

Finding 2: More than three-quarters of marketers use an easy unsubscribe method, such as a one-click unsubscribe link or reply to the email message, and another 25% let sub   scribers access a profile-update page without having to log in first.

For marketing email messages, which of the following methods do you use for enabling subscribers to request removal from future mailings? (Check all that apply)
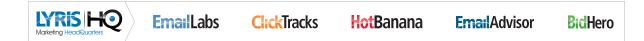
	Response Percent
1-click URL for instant removal	53.33%
Reply with unsubscribe request in subject line	28.64%
URL to profile update without required log-in	24.94%
Send email request to a custom address for removal	17.28%
URL to log into account profile and changes preferences (requires password)	16.79%
URL to pre-populated form with additional survey questions	5.19%
URL to pre-populated form that requires confirmation	1.98%
No option provided	1.23%
URL to form that requires the address be entered	0.99%
Other (please specify)	2.72%

Analysis:

Easy unsubscribing is paramount here, because it will encourage more subscribers to use it rather than click a spam button or just ignore your messages. However, that also limits the options, both yours and your subscribers.

An unsubscribe isn't always about saying goodbye. Maybe the subscriber's needs or interests change, or he wants to update an address, or hear from you more or less often. This is where profile pages can help you reduce unsubscribes and give users a more valuable experience.

Marketers, however, aren't using this option as much as they might. The survey found only 25% give subscribers this option. Another 16.8% do direct traffic to the profile page but require a password or other log-in method.

This defeats the purpose in some way because people often forget passwords. So, they'll either have to request a reminder or generate a new one. That adds at least another step to the process and boosts the chance they'll just give up and spam-button your email out of frustration.

Even the one-click option, the one a slim majority of email marketers use, has its problems. In a new development in the war on spam, some filters can now click all links in an email messages to determine where the links ultimately go. This is an attempt to thwart spammers who use redirects to prevent domain-based blocking.

The unfortunate result for you as a sender, especially if you're a B-to-B marketer rather than a B-to-C marketer, is that these filters can end up unsubscribing some recipients without informing them.

Recommendation:

Use a two-step process. Click One takes the user to a profile page that loads with their data populated in all the fields. Click Two confirms the removal request or changes in the profile. Also, provide other opportunities to request removal, including contact information for a Web form or customer-support contacts if the profile page doesn't work.

Finding 3: Over half of marketers acknowledge the unsubscribe on the landing page, while less than a third send an email confirmation. Eleven percent of marketers either don't acknowledge the unsubscribe or have language that says they might continue to mail to the address until the 10-day CAN-SPAM window closes.

Which of these actions do you take once the subscriber has asked to be removed?

	Response Percent
Acknowledge unsubscribe on landing page	54.37%
Send an email confirmation that the address has been removed	28.17%
Immediate removal from list - automated	5.68%
No confirmation, just end messaging	3.06%
Record unsubscribe but continue to email until legally permitted 10 days has expired	2.40%
None of the above	1.31%
Send postal notice of removal	1.09%
Send postal mail incentive to update profile and re-subscribe	0.66%
Phone notification	0.44%
Other (please specify)	2.84%

Analysis:

Acknowledging the unsubscribe helps to build trust in your email program because it tells the subscriber immediately that the request was successful. It also gives you an opportunity to maintain a relationship with that subscriber, because you can offer other ways to get information, such as changing frequency, format or content.

Even if the subscriber does intend to leave your program, a graceful goodbye, with thanks for their previous patronage, can strengthen that relationship.

One caution for marketers who are subject to U.S. email regulations: The law gives you 10 days to process the unsubscribe, but that does not give you the license to keep emailing the address until the window closes. Once your subscribers say "Stop!," they're done, and so are you.

Recommendation:

Acknowledge the unsubscribe immediately in the same medium that was used to request removal: confirm on the landing page when the request comes via clicking a link, and email the confirmation when the user uses an auto-reply unsubscribe or sends in a personal request.

Finding 4: Fewer than 20% of marketers use the unsubscribe confirmation to remind recipients about other communication options or seek valuable exit information.

If your email unsubscribe process links to a Web page, does the landing page contain any of the following?

	Response Percent
Statement confirming the unsubscribe request	42.60%
Goodbye message	18.49%
No link to Web page	11.25%
Customer service phone number	6.27%
Incentive to update profile and re-subscribe	5.31%
Survey to understand reasons for unsubscribing and gather suggestions to improve future programs	4.98%
Simple feedback form for customer comments	4.82%
Reminder of other messaging channels (RSS, direct mail, catalog)	3.70%
List types of communications opted-in for	0.32%
Other (please specify)	2.25%

Analysis:
Along the same lines as Finding 3, marketers are not using the unsubscribe to offer recipients other options for receiving information or explaining why they unsubscribed.

The unsubscribe doesn't have to be a final farewell, but marketers too often treat it that way, given the nearly half who use the message format merely to confirm the unsubscribe. Less than 20% include any kind of goodbye message, and fewer than 1 in 10 includes any kind of outreach, including a customer-service phone number, an incentive to resubscribe or update a profile, offer an exit survey to learn the reasons for unsubscribing or offer suggestions, or remind the subscriber of other channels, such as RSS feeds or direct mail.

Recommendation:
Always acknowledge the unsubscribe with a personal message thanking the subscriber for his patronage, offering other options for receiving message and an opportunity to explain the request and providing contact information including phone numbers and links to your Web site.

Finding 5: The bottom of the message, the area commonly called the "footer," is the most likely location for the unsubscribe instructions.

Where in your email messages do you tell subscribers their options for unsubscribing? (check all that apply)

	Response Percent
In the footer of every email	93.32%
Within the privacy policy	16.34%
During the online subscription process	16.34%
On the subscriber profile page	13.12%
At top of every email	11.63%
In terms and conditions policy	9.16%
At the bottom of every email	0.74%
Other (please specify)	1.73%

Analysis:

This is an important finding because it shows marketers are training email readers to scroll to the bottom to look for unsubscribe information. If you move this critical destination in a message template redesign without highlighting its new location, readers might fail to find it, which in turn can drive up your complaint rate.

This also validates one of our key best practices, folding important reader information into a singe space called an email administration center, and positioning it near the end of each message, set off from other copy but able to be spotted quickly and read fast. The admin center is an excellent place to house your unsubscribe information without distracting from the rest of your message content.

(Find more on admin centers in this article:
http://www.emaillabs.com/email_marketing_articles/article_emailadmin.html

Also noteworthy in this finding is the 12% of marketers who put the unsubscribe up at the top of the message. This enlightened design helps readers who view the email in a preview pane or on a mobile device to find it easily, thereby increasing trust and utility.

We were interested to see 25% of marketers include unsubscribe information in their privacy policies and terms-and-condition statements. One caution: These should be additional locations, not replacements for listing in your email messages. The unsubscribe needs to stand on its own for best functionality.

Recommendation:

Place unsubscribe information in the same location each time, most commonly the footer, accompanying it with other important information but calling attention to it from elsewhere in the message body.

Finding 6: Marketers continue to use tricks to discourage users from unsubscribing.

Which of the following techniques do you use to discourage unsubscribing?

	Response Percent
Use tiny (8pt or smaller) font	30.55%
None - don't discourage or hide it	28.53%
Use very light grey font on white background	8.65%
Use several line spaces to push the unsubscribe language far down in the message body	8.65%
Place in the middle of a large block of administrative text	4.90%
Use a complicated multi-step unsubscribe process	3.17%
Place at very bottom of email	2.88%
Place unsubscribe language in an image	2.02%
Match the font colors to the background to render invisible	1.44%
Don't discourage - keep simple and easy	0.86%
Offer change in frequency	0.86%
Provide good content	0.29%
Other (please specify)	7.20%

Analysis:

This is a tricky subject. We're going to trust the 29% of you who claim they don't discourage or hide the unsubscribe, and pay attention to what the rest of you are saying.

Tiny type (8-point or smaller), the kind you need reading glasses to see) is the most common deterrent marketers use. This doesn't violate the letter of the U.S. commercial-email regulations called CAN-SPAM, but it does go against the spirit. And, it defeats your email program by trying to keep people around when they don't want to be.

Face it – today's email consumers want to retain control over their inboxes. Tactics like the ones people admitted to in the survey, such as obscuring it with tiny type, type colors that match the background to render it invisible, forcing users to scroll through long blocks of white space to find the information or burying it administrative copy so it blends into the background will not keep the user around until he or she buys something.

This only makes them angry, and angry people click the spam button.

Recommendation:
Follow your regular message format for typeface size, design and font size for the unsubscribe. Place it close enough to other live copy in the message so that readers can see it without scrolling through white space or unrelated message copy.

Finding 7: Most marketers rely on their email list software to encode the unsubscribe mechanism without testing the program to make sure it's working.

What do you do to make sure all emails contain an unsubscribe mechanism?

	Response Percent
Encoded into email template	41.11%
Manual inspection	31.88%
Rely on email software to apply an unsubscribe footer automatically	18.82%
Provide multiple options	5.57%
None	1.39%
List-Unsubscribe Header	0.17%
Flashback testing	0.17%
Other (please specify)	0.87%

How often do you test your unsubscribe process to make sure it works?

	Response Percent
Periodically on a regular testing schedule	27.32%
Only after receiving a complaint that the unsubscribe process is not working	22.31%
Each time before sending a message	21.80%
Rarely or never tested	18.80%
Once, during software set-up	9.77%

Analysis:
These two results together show marketers don't pay enough attention to make sure their programs comply with regulations that mandate unsubscribing. We're not against automation, which reduces the chance that human error will cause the unsubscribe link to get overlooked. However, we are concerned that half of the marketers surveyed don't go back to make sure their systems are working, and 1 in 4 checks only when someone complains. This puts too much of the burden on the software and raises the exposure to failure.

Recommendation:
Test your subscribe and unsubscribe process at least once a month to make sure both work properly.

Finding 8: 83% of marketers act to prevent future mailings to unsubscribed addresses, while 14% only delete the data records.

When you receive an unsubscribe request, which of the following actions do you take?

	Response Percent
Email/list management software suppresses email addresses from future mailings	41.60%
Address added to a "do-not-email" suppression list	24.32%
Remove consumer data from email programs and database (record deletion)	13.92%
Address added to a global suppression list	11.20%
Change record status and transfer information to third-party database application	6.40%
Update Database - no deletion	1.92%
Other (please specify)	0.64%

Analysis:

Using a suppression list, whether in-house or a third-party application, guarantees that you will not lose valuable subscriber information even as you prevent future mailings from going out to unsubscribed addresses, as CAN-SPAM requires.

When using a suppression list, remember to set it up separate from the mailing lists you use to send the campaign, so that you can't accidentally mail to it. (Yes, this has happened!)

Deleting the record from your database, which on the face of it looks as if it would prevent future mailings, actually can cost you because you lose that information and nothing will prevent an accidental resubscription.

Recommendation:

Move unsubscribed addresses to a suppression list, housed separately from your live mailing lists, as soon as you process the unsubscribe.

Finding 9: 6 in 10 marketers offer only a global removal option for unsubscribers.

When a recipient unsubscribes from your email program, which of the following choices do you provide?

	Response Percent
Global removal without choices	61.46%
Link to preference page with options to change format, frequency, address or content	27.80%
Removal only from current subscription (specific newsletter received)	3.41%
Link to page with more list options	1.22%
Provide multiple options in email (single list and global list)	0.98%
Other (please specify)	5.12%

Which of the following actions do you allow subscribers to take during the unsubscribe process?

	Response Percent
Request not to receive ANY future emails from any part of your company	46.10%
Unsubscribe from other specific email messages from your company	37.42%
Unsubscribe from any third party or partner emails	8.91%
None	3.12%
Remove only from the message received	2.45%
Other (please specify)	2.00%

Analysis:

People unsubscribe for many reasons, and not just because they don't want to hear from you anymore. Often they are changing email addresses but see no way to do that without leaving your list, or they want to hear more or less often, or receive different kinds of offers.

When you merely remove the address from your active list, you lose the connection you worked hard to make. This is one of the hazards of the one-click unsub process.

A subscriber-preference or options page adds the flexibility that the one-click URL process lacks. Your subscriber can change addresses, opt out of one newsletter and opt into others, change frequency and format. Allowing them to tailor your messages to their own needs will help subscribers retain control over their inboxes and boosts your trustworthiness in their eyes.

Recommendation:

Create a subscription-options page that loads with the subscriber's data and allows easy changes, then confirm those changes with a follow-up email.

Finding 10: Fewer than one-third of marketers go beyond the standard "click here to unsubscribe" language to include options that add value to their unsubscribe messages.

Which of the following options do you include in your email message's unsubscribe or administrative section?

(check all that apply)

	Response Percent	Response Count	Percent of Total Response
"Click here" to unsubscribe language	81.63%	320	33.44%
Link to privacy policy	30.61%	120	12.54%
Link to update profile page or preference center	30.10%	118	12.33%
Email address of the intended recipient	22.96%	90	9.40%
Customer service email address	21.94%	86	8.99%
"Send an email" to request removal language	18.37%	72	7.52%
Explanation how the email address was added to your list (how they subscribed)	18.88%	74	7.73%
Customer service phone number	16.33%	64	6.69%
Postal address	1.28%	5	0.52%
Reason for sending email	0.26%	1	0.10%
Other (please specify)	1.79%	7	0.73%

Analysis:

The unsubscribe message too often is strictly a procedural one, telling the user what to do to be removed from a list. However, we see the unsubscribe process itself as a key component of the email-marketing feedback program. As noted previously, the unsubscribe doesn't have to be the end of the road.

The survey showed 8 in 10 marketers use "click here to unsubscribe" to launch the process, which makes it a recognizable direction. Without any other information or contact information, that effectively ends the relationship. More information gives your subscriber more options, whether to change subscription preferences or to contact other departments.

Recommendation:

Create an email administrative section with as much information as possible to help retain subscribers.

Finding 11: 90% of marketers honor unsubscribe requests that come through alternative channels.

Do you offer subscribers alternative ways to opt out of email, other than in the email itself?

	Response Percent
Call centers can accept opt-out requests	43.77%
Process postal mail requests	27.54%
None offered	9.86%
Opt-out at a POS (a real-world location - store, restaurant, trade show booth, etc.)	7.25%
Received email requests	5.80%
Through Website Account Settings	3.48%
Other (please specify)	2.32%

Analysis:

We found 44% of marketers empower their customer-support centers, such as phone support, to manually remove addresses. However, given that only 16% include a customer-service phone number in their unsubscribes, this forces your subscriber to hunt down your contact info at your Web site and adds another barrier to successful unsub-scribing.

The same is true for the other methods listed above. While it's encouraging to see that marketers do accept unsub requests from other channels, they don't have the same accountability for making sure the request is processed in the 10-day window.

Recommendation:

Honor unsubscribes from alternative sources, but include directions and contact information in unsubscribe directions and in all message templates.

Finding 12: Most marketers use one- or two-click unsubscribe procedures, although 1 in 10 requires three clicks or more.

How many clicks does it take for the subscriber to be removed (including the click on the link in your email)?

	Response Percent
1	36.25%
2	49.00%
3	9.50%
4	1.50%

	Response Percent
5	0.25%
6 or more	0.25%
Don't use links	3.25%

Analysis:
Every click you force a subscriber to take, whether it's to opt in or opt out, adds a barrier to the process. So, it's encouraging to see marketers using processes that achieve the result with one or two clicks.

The good news is that only 1 in 10 requires three clicks to work through to removal, so the advice to simplify, simplify, simplify is working.

Of course, this works best if one of those clicks leads to a preference page rather than oblivion.

Recommendation:
Test-drive your own unsubscribe method to see how many clicks it takes to go through. The more clicks, the more likely the user may give up and just click the spam button instead.

Survey Background and Methodology

Unsubscribing has evolved from the early days when marketers pulled every stunt in the book to keep subscribers from leaving. Not only did that tactic backfire, it brought on the curse of the "report spam" button. That in turn led marketers to the other extreme, the "no-questions-asked" policy that freed subscribers with one click but broke the connection with subscribers.

The unsubscribe process, then, has to serve multiple needs. It has to be legally sound, trusted by recipients and deliver value to the company. We at Lyris intended this survey to measure how well marketers are meeting all of these challenges by assessing their practices, attitudes and experiences.

More than 400 email professionals responded to our invitation to fill out the survey in fall 2007.

If you were one of our survey participants, we thank you for sharing your practices, attitudes and experiences. We will follow up on several of these issues in future Intevation Reports and regular columns in ClickZ.

For a collection of more than 150 articles on email marketing best practices, as well as tools and statistics, please visit our Resource Center at http://www.emaillabs.com/tools/email-marketing-tools.html

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