Email Open Rate Woes: Why Not to Be Fooled by Email Open Rate?

by Fritz Walts

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If you've implemented an email marketing program but aren't satisfied with or are confused by low email open rate numbers, Comm100 explains in this article why traditional email open rate metrics don't tell the true number of people who opened your email. Comm100 then explores how to use email open rate numbers to improve your campaign's performance even if the open rate itself isn't completely accurate.

What is Email Open Rate and Why is It Important?

Email Open rate is the number of people (in percentage form) who opened and looked at an email. It is considered to be one of the most important performance metrics of Email Marketing because it ultimately tells you how much your audience cared about your email and how many people looked at it. You'll see many statistics about what your email open rate should be. Often, what you'll be told is that, for an opt-in house list, your average email open rate should be approximately 20%. And that's great, if your email open rate is being tracked reliably. Unfortunately, it's less and less possible to track email open rates correctly, and, increasingly, the metric needs to be used in a relative term. Let's first discuss why email open rate metrics aren't reliable any more and then discuss how you can make email open rate useful to you as a metric.

The Imperfect Nature of the Email Open Rate

To understand why an email open rate is an unreliable way to track email performance, you need to understand how an email open rate is tracked. A small one pixel by one pixel graphic is inserted into the email that you send. Then, each time the pixel is loaded, the email registers as having been opened. In some advanced cases, the pixel is tied to the recipient and is only counted once. But the point is that the graphic needs to load in order for the email to get counted as having been opened. There are three problems with this tracking method.

The first problem is that for the open to register, your user must have the graphics loaded in the email. As Comm100 has previously discussed, many email providers and users never load the graphics in an email. Without the graphics loaded, it's entirely possible that your email has been read but that the open or reading of the email has never been registered.

The second problem is users who choose to receive their email in a text only format. These users will read your email, but because the version of the email that they are reading doesn't include any html, it also doesn't include any images. Again, the opening of the email is never recorded.

Finally, and increasingly, the number of users who read their email on the phone will only see the text version of your email. And, of course, seeing only the text version means not having an image, thus not having a pixel graphic, and thus not having an open recorded even if they do read.

It's a generally accepted metric in the email marketing world that email open rate reporting can be off from anywhere from 11% to 35%. That's a lot! So while it may look like nobody is opening your email, it could actually be true that your email is doing quite well.

Three Ways to Make Email Open Rate a Relevant Metric for You

Once you accept that your email open rate really isn't your email open rate, there are some ways to make the metric useful to you regardless.

Extrapolate the Real Success by Comparing to Better Metrics: Email open rate is not a variable metric these days. However, email click-through rates and (if your tracking is set up correctly) conversions to sales or sign-ups are hard numbers, which means that you do know how successful your email was by looking at them. You can work backwards from those metrics. Find your most successful emails in terms of click-through and conversions and then see what the email open rate was on those emails. You'll be able to then target what a good "relative" email open rate for your email program is. It's not a perfect number because factors like offer and creative assist with the click-through once an email is opened, but it can give you an idea of what to aim for.

Make the Email Open Rate Relative to Other Email Sends: You may not know what your true email open rate is, but you know what the relative email open rate between emails that you've sent is. If you sent an email on the first Friday of the month that got a 25% open rate and an email on the second Friday of the month that got a 10% open rate, then something that you did in the first email send was better. It may have been the offer, the subject line, the time of day or even just that people have more money at the beginning of the month. Whatever it was, you know that your email open rate for that email was a better performance, and you should repeat what you did there in other opportunities to improve your overall open rate moving forward.

Use A/B Testing: It's true that not everybody loves setting up a complicated A/B test, but with email it's fairly easy to just split your list in half and send two different emails to see which one performs better. Comm100 certainly suggests, at a minimum, sending two different subject lines to learn which one will perform better to generate opens. Doing an A/B email test with two factors and then seeing which one fared better in opens can draw value from the email open rate metric by showing you which strategy will work better in future emails.

It's not as though email open rates are an entirely useless statistic or metric. However, they're not used the same way that they used to be because they don't log numbers that are reliable any more.Knowing how what you've done with your email has impacted its success or failure is the only way to make your email campaigns better. Use email open rate metrics in comparison or as relative numbers to improve your campaign, but don't be discouraged if your email tracking software says that your email open rates are very low percentages! It's likely that they aren't as bad as it seems.

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