

4 Top Tips to Help
You Land in the Inbox
this Holiday Season





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There's a lot on your plate leading up to (and throughout!) the holiday season. So keeping tabs on open and click rates, avoiding blocklistings, and standing out in your subscribers' inboxes can add to an already exhaustive list.

To help you get holiday-ready, Marigold's deliverability experts have gift-wrapped these 4 top tips, so you can maximize inbox placement and engagement during the busiest time of the year.

TOP TIP 1:

Understanding deliverability & why it's important *(especially in the holiday season)*

First, it's essential to understand what deliverability is and the role it plays in email marketing. It can be complicated and may sometimes seem part science and part magic. So, to help demystify deliverability, let's take a quick look at the two main stages of sending an email — from when someone clicks “send” to its arrival in the individual recipient's inbox:

→ **STAGE ONE** is where our system compiles the email and sends it to the Mailbox Provider (MBPs - also known as an Internet Service Provider or ISP) like Gmail, Yahoo!, Hotmail or business domains. The mailbox provider will either accept the email or reject it. If the email is accepted, it's a successful email delivery. If the email is rejected, it's either a hard bounce, due to the address not existing, or a soft bounce, due to a temporary issue (such as an ISP block or the recipient's mailbox is full).

→ **STAGE TWO** is what happens after the email is accepted. There are more automated checks carried out by the mailbox provider's system, and these checks determine where the email ends up. If you have a good sender reputation, your email will land in the recipient's inbox (we cover more on sender reputation later in this guide). Otherwise, your email may be filtered to their spam folder.





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TOP TIP 1: *(cont.)*

Throughout the holiday season, you may face even stricter filters due to the increase in email volume that MBPs receive during this busy period.

Given the nature of this time, marketers send more emails with greater frequency, and as a result, mailbox providers are strained to manage the surge in email volume. This generally peaks around the Black Friday/Cyber Monday weekend, with the average daily volume of emails **doubling** or sometimes **even tripling** over these few days.

Understandably, MBPs need to protect users from “bad actors” (spammers, phishers and malicious senders) who use the increase in global mail volume as an opportunity to send more harmful emails during the busy season. This is why MBPs have stricter spam filtering in place and may limit how much mail they receive and process in a day.

Taking all of this into consideration, mailbox providers must then strike a balance between over-filtering incoming emails and placing legitimate emails in the spam folder. Alternatively, they may not filter enough emails and let spam through to a recipient’s inbox.

In order to successfully reach your subscribers’ crowded inboxes (especially at this time of the year), it’s important to understand the constraints and impacts to the email ecosystem. Otherwise, you may find that your well-crafted and curated holiday content is being filtered and not reaching its intended destination — your subscribers’ inboxes.

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TOP TIP 2:

Stay on the MBPs nice list with a strong sender reputation

Having a healthy sender reputation is essential to reaching both your recipients and your marketing goals for the holiday period. To put it simply, sender reputation is based on two main factors; **your audience engagement levels and the quality of your lists.**



- **Audience engagement:**

High open and click rates are a strong, positive signal to MBPs that your audience engages with your emails and directly contributes to a healthy sender reputation — but there are other factors that contribute, as well. In fact, MBPs use hundreds of indicators to determine if you're a healthy sender, as they have access to specific details about how your subscribers interact with your emails. For instance, MBPs have insight into how long your audience spends reading your email, if the recipient has added you to their contacts, or if your email was deleted without being opened (plus, so much more).

- **List quality:**

During the holiday season, you may notice that your audience increases as there is more online activity driving signups. The key to successfully expanding your subscriber list is prioritizing *quality* over quantity. To do this, we recommend:

- Having a proactive approach to re-engage dormant or disinterested subscribers. This includes using varying messaging to users based on a number of factors including their level of engagement, signup date, and last message sent, for example. This helps you to maintain a high-quality list, which leads to improved engagement, better deliverability, and ultimately, higher returns on your email marketing efforts (don't forget — permission to send is not evergreen).

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TOP TIP 3:

Try not to (pumpkin) spice up your email program too much

Just like those Black Friday deals, it's tempting to expand your reach and change up your email program by sending your holiday campaigns to more people at an increased cadence. However, this is not ideal with MBPs introducing more strict filtering (outlined above). We recommend **not** deviating from your current email strategy or cadence, and following these do's and don'ts.

Do's:

- If you want to begin sending to lesser engaged users, **do** begin this well before the holiday season starts. That way, if deliverability issues arise, you have time to mitigate them prior to the holiday season with ample time to reassess the value of sending less engaged subscribers — and the impact it may have on your active, engaged audience.
- **Do** start testing new acquisition sources prior to the holiday season to ensure you're only sending to people who have directly opted in for your email content. Be sure to monitor if any segment of your list causes higher bounces, complaints or other engagement issues.
- **Do** use caution if editing your sign-up and opt-out pages. Make your sign-up pages easy to navigate and ensure they are protected from bot activity.
- **Do** provide preferences to allow users to opt down (rather than just out) from increased marketing.

Don'ts:

- ✗ **Don't** start sending to new lists (or even super old lists) that you don't typically use, as this can result in lower open rates and higher bounces or spam complaints — undoing all of your hard work to build your brand and sender reputation.
- ✗ **Don't** immediately increase your sending cadence just for the holiday season. MBPs will notice sudden spikes in send volume — increases in cadence should happen slowly and with a solid ramp-up strategy.
- ✗ **Don't** change your sending domain. A new sending domain requires a ramp up plan to train MBPs and your audience to receive emails from a new domain and to build a healthy sender reputation. Given stricter filters are implemented during the holiday season - ramping up a new domain will be challenging.

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TOP TIP 4:

Monitor the important metrics

During busy seasons, even the most effective marketers may experience greater variations in deliverability metrics than normal, likely due to targeting less engaged users and sending emails more frequently than usual.

Not only can this get your mail blocklisted, but it can also have a longer lasting impact and damage your sender reputation. And once that happens, your chance at generating a return from your email campaigns can be impacted for weeks — or even months.



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TOP TIP 4: *(cont.)*

Below is a list of metrics to closely monitor during the holiday period to make sure you're not putting your deliverability (and your marketing efforts) at risk:

- **Bounce Rates.** A small number of bounces are to be expected over the lifetime of an email subscriber list, however a sudden increase could indicate authentication issues, or poor list hygiene. Generally, anything above a 2% bounce rate is worth an audit of your sending practices.
- **Complaint Rates.** High complaint rates indicate that your subscribers aren't resonating with either the content or frequency of your emails. This should be monitored with each send.
- **Review opt-out rates.** You don't want to sacrifice your loyal year-round list for the holiday season. If opt-out rates rise, you may want to evaluate your strategy and adjust.
- **Open Rates by top domains.** Open rates should be consistent across the top MBPs, if one is significantly lower than the rest, you may have an inboxing issue at that top domain.
- **Ensure your holiday-season open rates aren't vastly lower from your normal open rates.** Low open rates can indicate reduced engagement — and can heavily impact your sender reputation.
- **Gmail Postmaster Tool (GPT).** If your IP and/or Domain Reputation dips below Medium to Low or Bad, it's usually a flag that your sender reputation has been affected at Gmail — and your emails are likely being filtered to the spam folder. If you haven't already, you may want to [set up GPT](#) — a free tool to monitor your domain reputation with Gmail.
- **Increase in opt-ins or sign-ups.** Any major spike in sign-ups or opt-ins should be investigated. They could be bots or invalid users that may contaminate your subscriber base (remember quality over quantity). And be sure to secure your signup forms with ReCaptcha!



Our Marigold solutions have helpful tools that make it easy for you to view these metrics — so you can effectively analyze your campaign performance and audience engagement and optimize where necessary.



Landing in the inbox is a gift

(rather than a right)

To be a welcome guest in your subscribers' inboxes this holiday season, you need to make sure you present as a trustworthy and respectful sender who is mindful of sending best practices and the expectation of your subscribers.

While it's tempting to maximize sales by sending at an increased cadence or to unresponsive subscribers, any small boost in ROI is not worth the longer lasting negative impact to future inbox placement, especially leading up to and post Black Friday/Cyber Monday period.



To help you safeguard your sender reputation and deliverability, here's a recap of our top tips:

- Ensure your email content is both expected and wanted by your audience — you must have explicit permission and voluntary opt-in to send emails to your subscribers
- Maintain good healthy sender reputation — focus on increasing recipient engagement and reduce the risk of high spam complaints
- Refresh your lists by re-engaging inactive subscribers, with a compelling holiday offer and remove dormant ones with no activity over 12 months
- Don't make sudden or drastic changes to your current email strategy. If you do want to implement changes be sure to test, plan and slowly introduce before the peak holiday campaigning begins
- Monitor your metrics and optimize or pivot your plan if you're not seeing the desired results.

And it goes without saying that you should always authenticate your sending domains, or at the very least set up DKIM for the domain you use to send emails.

By following the above tips, you can increase the quality of your email list, better manage your database, and increase the overall effectiveness of your email programs and inbox placement this holiday season (all treats and no tricks!).

Meet Marigold's deliverability experts



KEN PFEIFFER

Senior Director, Global Deliverability

Ken is an industry veteran with over 20 years of experience sending email at scale and working with senders to ensure their emails are inboxing.

Fun fact: Ken holds a Master Near Coastal Captain license and he is currently leading the Ocean City Marlin Club with most tuna caught for a 28 ft and under vessel for 2023.



JOHN PETERS

Deliverability Manager

John is the Deliverability Manager for Marigold Express, and has been part of our Compliance and Deliverability team for ten years. He's a regular contributor to our deliverability-focused content and has presented at various industry events.

Fun fact: John is a keen boardgamer and especially enjoys marathon gaming sessions of Twilight Imperium where players vie for galactic domination.



Where *relationships* take root.

Marigold's approach to Relationship Marketing stands alone in a world of one-size-fits-all marketing technology companies. Our solutions are designed for your specific size, industry, and maturity, giving you the technology and expertise you need to grow the relationships that grow your business, from customer acquisition to engagement to loyalty. And, with a team of strategists that provide insights into what's working, what's not, and what's changing in your industry, you're able to maximize ROI every step of the way.

Great marketing isn't just about conversion, but true connection. Learn why 40,000 businesses around the world trust Marigold to be the firm foundation they need to help relationships take root.

Find out more at [MeetMarigold.com](https://www.meetmarigold.com)

