

7 Best Practices for Time-Sensitive Email

Real-World Tips for Transactional and Marketing Email Senders



Introduction:

It's All in the Timing

In using email to engage new prospects and existing customers, it's not enough to deploy the right target and the right message. More than ever, success depends on reaching them at the right time. But that's often easier said than done. Businesses that rely on email engagement face both technical and customer expectation challenges that cause their email programs to run the risk of running out of time.

It's not news that every message, from promotional offers to transactional alerts, must navigate the increasing impatience and expectation of relevance and personalization expressed by consumers. It's a fact of life, given the sheer volume of distraction and clutter in the inbox.

However, that challenge is particularly acute for time-sensitive emails. In the past, a consumer might have been satisfied to receive a "time-sensitive" email the same day, or within the week! That casual approach won't fly anymore. Times have changed, and so has the way businesses use email to support real-time business processes.

All of this has resulted in ever-shrinking email engagement windows for organizations trying to connect with prospects and customers. There's less and less time to react and reach out to consumers before losing the chance to convert. And consumers are increasingly selective about opening anything in their inbox. When it comes to customers' expectations of message relevance, **hitting the inbox at just the right time is as important as optimizing a subject line or tailoring message content.**

WHAT IS TIME-SENSITIVE EMAIL?

When we're talking "time-sensitive" emails, we mean any email where delivery at a specific point in time is crucial. They're not necessarily triggered emails—though in many cases they can be.

| TRIGGERED EMAIL | TIME-SENSITIVE EMAIL |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are expected or anticipated by recipients• Are highly relevant, with content and calls-to-action personalized for each individual• Are appropriately timed to address their immediate or potential needs, key dates and life events | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• May or may not be anticipated by recipients• Are timed to drive optimal awareness, open rates, and click-throughs• Often deliver information, promotions or calls-to-action that are themselves timesensitive, i.e. the recipient has a limited time to act |

What are the benefits of employing time-sensitive emails?

- They allow you to reach a recipient at the moment when they're most receptive, especially if driven by accurate personas and Big Data insights.
- If properly timed, they're viewed as appropriate and relevant—not spammy.
- As promotions, or as pre-event buzz-building tactics, they create a sense of urgency that drives response.
- Done right, they position you as being engaged and communicative.

What are typical types of time-sensitive emails?

- **Instant emails** are emails sent immediately after a trigger event or another cue, and are anticipated by the recipient. Examples? Welcome and confirmation emails, security alerts.
- **Delayed emails** are sent after a certain amount of time, ranging from minutes to days, even months and years in some cases. Some examples include follow-up emails and reminder emails, such as cart abandonment reminders or re-subscription promotions to former customers.
- **Date-based emails** align with key dates on either the consumer's calendar or the general calendar, and can be sent before or after a date, too. Birthday and anniversary emails, event reminders, holiday promotions and expiring membership or discount alerts are just a few examples.
- **Limited offer emails** are usually promotional, giving the recipient a limited time or other constraint ("while supplies last!") within which to act. These can be anything from a sales alert to a sweepstakes promotion.

- **Event-specific emails** are usually relevant only within a finite period; these are often used for sports or entertainment events, webinars or business conferences, and are sent before, after or even during the event. Think of a session reminder email you might receive while you're at a convention, or a coupon you can redeem at the stadium gift shop as you're attending the game.
- **Notification emails** aren't triggered by consumer actions or set dates, but are aligned with activities or developments that may be unscheduled but require (often legally) emails to be sent out within a given period; a shareholder notification about a proposed merger or an employee alert are prime examples.

Real-World Examples of Time-Sensitive Email

Here are a few notable examples of how the timing of email is fundamental to a business' success...and some imaginative ways some email businesses have made timing work to their advantage.

ZILLOW'S WORKING FOR THE WEEKEND

Real estate search site Zillow relies on perfectly-timed emails, because they know subscribers need to see open house alerts on Friday so they can visit the listings over the weekend. It's a great case of email having value only at the right place and right time. In the past, Zillow faced challenges with email service providers who couldn't hit that window before they found the right platform to make this time-sensitive email program work consistently—so be sure your delivery service provider is capable!

PEAPOD SALVAGES CARTS WITH SEND-TIME OPTIMIZATION

Peapod uses send-time optimization, analyzing past emails to see when customers engaged with them to predict the best future sending times for each individual. One place they apply it is in cart abandonment emails, reminding customers to complete their purchases, alerting them to cut-off times for adding items to orders, and including prompts about items they've bought in the past but haven't included in the current cart.



WARBY PARKER ENGAGES YOU WHILE YOU'RE WAITING

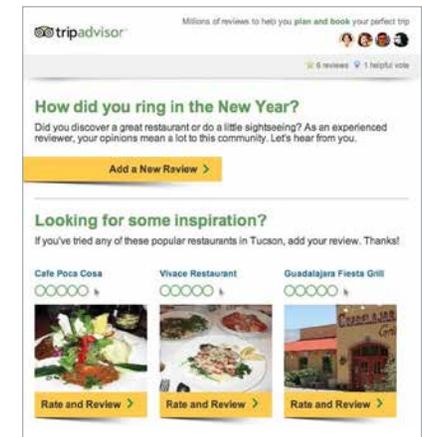
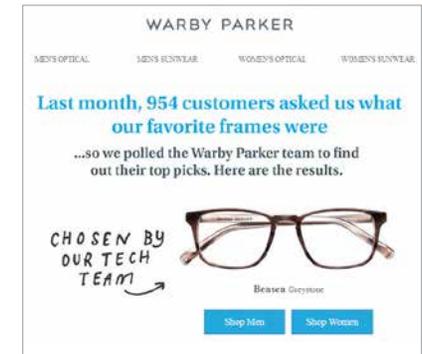
Warby Parker sends notification emails to alert customers when their try-at-home frame orders have been shipped, and also to let them know they've arrived. That's common practice. But what's innovative is how they also send an email timed just before delivery that doesn't just serve as a reminder, but also works as a tool for deepening brand-customer engagement by giving creative, funny, humanizing "behind-the-curtain" peeks at Warby Parker.

TRIPADVISOR'S HOLIDAY CHASER

TripAdvisor stresses community engagement via user reviews, so for New Year's Eve they put a different slant on things by emailing subscribers after the holiday to ask them what how they'd celebrated, and inviting them to post a review of whatever bar, club, hotel or other destination they'd enjoyed. It's a clever and standout way of generating engagement, and just one of many smart tactics TripAdvisor uses in its timed emails.

THE EBAGS TIMING TEST

Online retailer eBags had an interesting hypothesis: That users would be far more receptive (and available) to receiving an email if it was sent at the same time of day as when they'd originally signed up. So each target received a promotional email timed based on their individual subscription time. The results? CTRs improved by 20%, conversion by 65%, with the average value per order increasing by 45%, and the overall average revenue per recipient going up 187%.



Seven Best Practices for Time-Sensitive Email

Just as with any other facet of enterprise email, there are right ways and wrong ways to use timed sending to get the results you want. So here are seven best practices we've found effective in getting the most out of everything in the time-sensitive email toolkit.

1. BUILD IN BIG DATA

Big Data seems to pop up everywhere these days. But with time-sensitive email, as anywhere else, data-driven insights you can glean about your prospect or customer can drive higher open rates, click-through rates, and long-term customer value.

Calibrating what you send when can make all the difference between relevance and annoyance in the eyes of your recipient.

The Peapod example cited in the last section is a good example of using Big Data analytics to predict the best time to engage customers based on the times when they'd been most receptive to past emails.

2. MAKE SURE TIMING SUPPORTS RELEVANCE

Relevance means first understanding the customer or prospect you're serving so you can build a campaign and message flow that fits their need. That includes timing that suits their expectations, too, since the relevance of an email is absolutely subject to timing.

Sending somebody a Black Friday coupon on Black Friday afternoon isn't going to bump your sales or your brand image. But getting it to the inbox right when they're planning the shopping day? It's got all the relevance in the world.

Or consider a fraud detection alert from a credit card company, It's relevant when it arrives as soon as the fraud is detected. But if it only shows up a day or more later? It's lost critical immediacy while it's earned your business a black eye.

3. TEST YOUR TIMING

Do A/B testing to determine the best timing or cadence to hit that "window of opportunity" we've mentioned when you'll mine the best response. You might uncover some surprises about when your target audience is most primed to engage.

Or you might even try testing different content or promotional offers at different times to see if there's any change in performance. When accessories retailer Radley London used split testing to find the best timing for cart abandonment emails, they learned to send them within 30 minutes after the visitor had abandoned their order, insight that drove an impressive 7.9% cart recovery rate.

4. GET CREATIVE

Ever received a half-birthday e-card? It's a tactic used by businesses like bakeries, but also insurance agents and others who want to imaginatively show they're invested in their customers, and know them well enough to drop them an e-card when there's still six months to go before the next cake and candles.

That's a case of using the calendar and your email timing in an inventive manner that really jumped out of the inbox. So think about how you might innovate with dates and timing to connect with your audience. Just be careful—if it looks too arbitrary or silly, it'll come across as a (failed) attempt at being manipulative.

Be sure send your email enough in advance they'll be able to take advantage of any offer. That timing is specific to different categories, of course: A hotel getaway offer will need to give them more lead time than a cake coupon.

5. PROMOTE YOUR PROMOTIONS

Too many email promotions arrive “cold” in the inbox, and if a business is running a large, tentpole promo program, there’s no excuse for that. Build expectancy and engagement by teasing the promotion beforehand, same as you’d preview an event or new product release, and you’ll get greater participation. Used judiciously, timed teasers build anticipation—but be careful, too. When done poorly or overused, it’s very easy to become relentless spam.

On a related note? If you’re running a promotion where there’s the possibility you may run out of prizes before the program end date, make sure to have an alternate landing page ready that (gently) gives people the bad news. Having an end-of-promotion page ready to launch as soon as the program is over is just good practice for any program. Some recipients may be late on clicking through from your promotional emails.

6. BE CONSISTENT

Be rock-solid steady about your timing, especially when it comes to important emails; notifications like password resets or customer service responses should reach a customer’s inbox without delay every time, so they’ll view you as reliable and responsive.

Another kind of consistency? Standing your ground when using limited-time promotions. If you ballyhoo a “Special Sale!” and then extend the sale closing date...and extend it again...and again (don’t scoff, we’ve seen it happen too many times), your customers will never again view your “urgent” emails with any sense of urgency.

7. USE THE RIGHT EMAIL DELIVERY SERVICE

Many in-house legacy email systems or traditional marketing platforms like list-oriented ESPs aren’t up to the tasks described above. But cloud-based, API-driven email delivery services with high deliverability—like SparkPost—are ideally suited to meeting the needs of time-sensitive email.

A SalesCycle study found that the sooner a cart abandonment email is sent, the better its results, with a 5.2% conversion rate if sent within 20 minutes, 4.5% if sent within the hour, but just 2.6% if sent after 24 hours.

Summary

Whether it's marketing or transactional, time-sensitive email may seem utilitarian. But as we've shown, the timing of your messages is increasingly critical in a digital universe swarmed with distractions, subject to consumer impatience...and crowded with competition.

By honing the timing of its emails so they're reaching a target's inbox at just the right time, an organization makes itself more relevant and authentic to that recipient. Nowadays, that's more important than ever.

The willingness to engage on users' terms helps in securing their continued loyalty and evangelism, and doing the "little things" well—like finessing how you use time-sensitive email—can actually prove to be a big step toward deeper engagement.

ABOUT SPARKPOST

SparkPost is the email delivery service for sending API-driven transactional and marketing email from the world's number one email infrastructure provider. Our customers—including Pinterest, Twitter, CareerBuilder, LinkedIn, Salesforce, Zillow, and Comcast—send over 3 trillion messages a year, over 25% of the world's non-spam email. SparkPost provides the industry-leading performance, deliverability, flexibility, and analytics they need to drive customer engagement for their business.

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