

# Nashville Business Journal

## ENTERPRISE

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### Guest Commentary

## Remember: Electronic marketing is extension of your brand

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I just received an e-mail announcement from the corporate office of a restaurant chain. Yes, I signed up for it, so it's not spam. But what's the problem? Plenty: misleading subject line, odd characters in the message body and a call to action that annoys me before I get through all the steps.

If your electronic communications are anything like this e-mail missive, then you're doing more to hurt your brand than promote it.

Way too often, companies treat electronic marketing products as an afterthought. E-mail newsletters, Web sites, and CD-ROM calling cards should be given the same care as printed brochures, annual reports and television commercials.

What makes electronic products any different? Perhaps the ability to quickly develop and publish these products gives us an itchy finger to pull the trigger too early.

It's pretty amazing: We can update a Web site in a couple of minutes or e-mail tens of thousands in a matter of hours. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't think about this process and product. Like I tell my clients on a regular basis, "Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should."

Back to this e-mail from the restaurant chain we'll call "Larry's." First off, the subject line of "Welcome to Larry's" is misleading. Didn't I sign up for these e-mails months ago? Why are they just now welcoming me? E-mail recipients can all too easily delete your e-mail solely based on subject line and sender. Be sure to include a relevant subject line.

Second, the body of the e-mail contained those bracket characters at the front of each line, making it look as if the message was forwarded to me. Did the company not care enough about me to remove the weird characters? A printed brochure with odd characters would never have made it out the door. Pay attention to your e-mails in the same way.

Next, the fulfillment or payoff from this e-mail was to download a sound clip. But the Web link included in the e-mail took me to the company's main Web page, not directly to the download itself. Hence, I had to navigate the site and find the download page on my own. Believe me, if you make your audience work this hard, they'll give up.

Last, nothing about the e-mail I received was personalized to me. When I subscribed to the Larry's e-mail list, I handed over some personal information such as my full name and ZIP code. Why didn't Larry's use this information to its advantage and personalize the subject line with my name or inform me about new restaurants opening near my home? Personalized messages have a higher open rate than generic e-mails.

So how do you avoid Larry's mistakes? Put the same care into your electronic communications that you put into printed materials and offline collateral. Ask yourself the following questions, especially regarding e-mail:

- Is my communication relevant? If you don't have something to say, don't say it. Too many messages lead to higher unsubscribe rates.
- Is my audience expecting a message? Set a regular editorial calendar and stick with it. Too frequent messaging will result in a higher unsubscribe rate, while communications that are too infrequent will result in your

customers forgetting why and when they subscribed.

- Is the message accurate? Misspellings and errors will spoil your image with your audience.
- How can I personalize the message to my individual reader?
- Does the communication reflect the quality of my company's brand?

Remember that nine out of 10 interactions a company has with a customer or prospect are not transactions, but instead are some form of communication. Think of how many times you contact your bank, either by phone or online. The vast majority of these interactions involves no commerce, but instead are everyday "touchpoints."

From the company's perspective, these are perfect opportunities to build trust in its brand - even if no money changes hands. Your business is no different. Determine where your electronic touchpoints are and treat every interaction, including electronic communications, as a trust-building "conversation" so you don't make the same mistakes Larry's did. Your customers will thank you with their business.

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