



# Digital Fundraising Playbook Series: Ensuring Email Deliverability

## Introduction

It's getting harder and harder to get into your friends' and supporters' email in-boxes. Some reports say that 30% of all email is sent to spam boxes. In the past, content ruled, and writing good content was enough. Now, if you don't work to keep your email lists [clean](#), you'll end up with fewer and fewer people seeing your emails, even if your list size is growing.

By adhering to proven practices (both generally and in regard to content) and respecting the bounces, you can increase your effectiveness in all areas of email deliverability.

## General Proven Practices

Ignoring any of these four proven practices can severely impact your ability to send email. Adhering to them will set your email program on a solid foundation.

### 1. Always send email from an email box that exists and receives emails.

Email is a two-way conversation. Email addresses used to send email must be able to accept email. That means avoiding the use of any fake email, including the noreply@ email address, to send emails to your supporters.

Many individuals will respond to your emails (regardless of your topic) with requests such as asking to be removed from a list or changing email addresses. Every response must be read and addressed. Failure to do so can cause major deliverability issues. You may even be blocked by some email providers from sending emails to their users.

Checking email replies regularly is smart for other reasons, as responses requesting more information can often lead to fundraising and volunteer opportunities.

### 2. Send from your business email address, not a free email service like Gmail, Yahoo or Hotmail.

Bulk email should be professional in every sense and that includes the basics, such as the "from" and "reply to" address where the email originated. It's not just a matter of proven practices. There are security issues and specific rules in some anti-spam systems that prevent you from using free email addresses such as AOL, Gmail, Hotmail and Yahoo in bulk email sends.

When Gmail gets an email that you've sent via an email provider (like Mail Chimp or Constant Contact) and that email uses your Gmail address, it knows you're not sending a message from Gmail. This makes Gmail think the message is fraudulent, and it will treat all your messages as spam if you continue the practice.

Pick one domain that is actually yours (e.g., animalshelter.org or animalservices.gov) and stick with it. Even the smallest domains need to build a reputation to succeed, and reputation-building is based on consistency and authenticity.

### **3. Give permission for your email platform to send email on your behalf.**

If you use a marketing email provider (like Mail Chimp or Constant Contact) to send your emails, you have to give the provider permission to send email on your behalf in a very specific way called [Sender Policy Framework \(SPF\) and Domain Keys Identified Mail \(DKIM\)](#).

Here's what is happening and why SPF and DKIM are important: Every time an email provider (like Gmail) gets an email sent from an email platform (like Mail Chimp) on behalf of your domain (like animalshelter.org or animalservices.gov), the providers want to know if that email is spam or fraud. To determine that, Gmail pings your domain and asks "Does Mail Chimp have your permission to send email on behalf of animalshelter.org?"

If you have SPF and DKIM set up, Gmail hears this back from your domain: "Yes, they do." If you don't have SPF or DKIM set up, Gmail will hear something that conveys this instead: "I've never heard of Mail Chimp. Don't trust them." Your deliverability is then compromised.

Both SPF and DKIM require technical know-how to implement. Work with whoever manages your domain name system (DNS), website or email to set them up properly. You can check if your SPF has been set up properly through this [website](#).

Once you have created SPF and DKIM records, make sure that all emails you send come from the same domain for which you created the records.

### **4. Remember the basics of list management: People must opt-in for your emails.**

Simply because someone takes action, donates or becomes a member of your organization, you cannot assume that the individual wants to receive email from you. Two factors that will improve your email results are (1) making sure you're emailing only valid emails from people who want to get your emails and (2) verifying that expired addresses cannot be emailed.

Trading, borrowing or renting email lists is ill-advised (and may be illegal in your state, so be sure to obtain legal advice appropriate for your community). Reports show that [97%](#) of all email received is unwanted by users. Handing your list to someone else will only add to the amount of email your supporters receive, drowning out your message and forcing you to compete with other organizations. By using a traded list, you also take the risk of having your potential supporters impacted by poor list management practices of the original organization.

Spam traps (ways for anti-spam organizations and email providers to measure if you clean your list or obtain non-opted-in emails) are also a rising deliverability issue. There are two types of spam traps:

- Pristine traps are email addresses never used as regular email. These are the most severe and will result in at least a block of your messages.
- Recycled traps are email addresses that were valid at one point. After a length of time of inactivity, these email addresses are turned back on as a spam trap.

Accumulate enough traps of either type and you will be blocked, and your email program will be shut down at least temporarily. If you are caught with traps on your list, you will be forced by your email provider to reconfirm that each individual on your list wants to receive your emails. To avoid those outcomes, take these two actions consistently:

- Identify expired emails. Addresses that haven't been opened or clicked in the last 12 months should be considered lost for the ages. Stop messaging them. Take them off your list or tag them in such a way that you only message them rarely.
- Identify emails you've gotten from list trades or rentals. You don't technically have permission to send to them and sending to them is almost certainly putting your emails into spam traps that providers will notice. Remove them.

After a month of inactivity from a supporter (no opens or clicks), change the messaging in an attempt to get the person to react, or drop that supporter. Surveys do this nicely, as do simple asks requesting that they join your various social networks.

After six to nine months of inactivity, consider sending a series of emails suggesting that they'll be removed from the list if they don't take a particular action. Those actions can be simple: clicking on a link or completing another email opt-in form. Remove from your list all those who don't respond, or tag them and message them sparingly.

## **Email Content**

Good content no longer means great words, but instead how many individuals respond to those words. The more people who open, click, submit forms and reply, the better. If large chunks of your list are lying dormant, you will eventually run into issues, no matter how those individuals got on your list.

Ensure that the content of your emails follows proven practices and avoids low quality (often called [spammy](#)) content that offers little value to the reader. Investing in a service like [Litmus](#) or [Email on Acid](#) can be helpful to test this. For instance, image-to-text [ratio](#) does matter, as well as the size of the email. Avoid very large images with no text, and always use [alt text](#) text for images.

Here are additional content tips to consider:

- Make sure email has both [html and plain text](#) versions.
- Always place alt text for images, especially in emails with one large image.
- Make sure individuals are receiving content they want by segmenting your sends and by using good tags or codes to manage your lists. By providing interesting content, you increase interaction and decrease complaints.
- Segment and watch the results of your emails. If an individual never opens or clicks a donation email, send that person a different ask. If you notice that a particular email or email type has a high complaint or unsubscribe result, investigate why that might be.
- Add a welcome series to your email program for new people. A good welcome series should remind individuals how they got on your list and lay out expectations as to what they will receive from engagement with your program.
- Action is an important indicator that people like your content. Emails need an action to complete (e.g., clicking a link or completing an advocacy or contribution form). The more people who interact with the email, the better your delivery.
- Provide an unsubscribe link and accept unsubscribes, [bounces](#) and complaints.
- Under no circumstances should you re-subscribe people, unless you've been specifically asked by the individual to do so.

When you think your email is ready to be sent, consider sending it through an email checker like [Litmus](#) or [Email on Acid](#). These checkers will help ensure that you haven't made any simple mistakes in your email build.

## Bounces

There are two types of bounces that merit your attention:

- **Hard bounces:** Email addresses that can't be delivered due to a permanent failure (e.g., the recipient's email server says the account no longer exists). These email addresses are automatically set to unsubscribed, as the email providers are saying emails will never be deliverable to that address.

- **Soft bounces:** Email addresses that can't be delivered due to a temporary failure (e.g., the recipient's email server says the account has reached its in-box limit). These addresses will continue to receive your emails until they have soft-bounced three times, at which point the email addresses should be set to unsubscribed.

Respect the bounces: Do not attempt to circumvent an email's bounce status. The risk is not worth any reward you might envision.

## Conclusion

Investing time in choosing email technology or crafting email content makes no sense unless you also take the time to ensure deliverability. This means acquiring email addresses in ways that do not raise questions with donors or email providers, paying regular attention to the maintenance of your email list and respecting the proven practices of the email industry.

Nowhere is there a better opportunity to think through how you wish to be treated and offer that same respect to others than in the online giving experience made possible through email.

## Resources

- NTEN provides numerous articles on email fundraising [here](#).
- Many nonprofits are unaware that they should be registering with the states into which they send emails. If this is a new topic for you, begin [here](#) to learn about it.

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