GET YOUR EMAIL MARKETING STRATEGY PREPPED FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

Although it's still hot and humid outside for most of us, the holiday season will soon be here. So, before the first snowflake hits the ground, your email marketing strategy needs to be ready for those holiday conversions.

"Customers will see a more personalized approach across multiple channels, not just email," said Sean Henry, Success Manager for Listrak. "This will be the year that customers begin to notice and expect cross-channel orchestration through channels such as social and SMS that many retailers already have or plan to put into play this coming holiday season."

In a recent study by Listrak, email marketing had the highest acquisition rate (81%) and retention rate (80%) of the marketing tactics measured. Below that, acquisition by organic search (59%) and retention by social media (44%) were the top performers.

Henry added that retailers should plan an earlier send schedule this year, as Black Friday and Cyber Monday are no longer the start of the holiday season in most consumers' minds.

Listrak reported that on-site popups used to encourage shoppers to join an email list are a great tool for acquiring new customers, with average list growth of 20%. "Welcome" email series revenue is 23% higher for subscribers that enter the conversation through the popup.

As a retailer, you should plan to test holiday popups before you implement this strategy. Incorporating these popups can help you build lists and remarket to site browsers and abandoners during the holidays.

If you already have a popup in place, make sure you evaluate its performance. If you're only asking for email addresses, update the popup to promote your SMS campaigns.

Another best practice is to share a keyword and short code that lets customers start the conversation on their own instead of asking them to enter their mobile number into a field.

Engaging with Customers

The relentless competition for attention from consumers is only elevated during the busy holiday season, as they are bombarded with even more ads, emails and catalogs.

According to Listrak's study, recent developments in artificial intelligence, machine learning and predictive analytics can help automate the use of consumer data, thus ensuring every message you send is personalized, timely and targeted.

Email today can have predictive content and product recommendations, personalized programmatic display ads and triggered messages on changes to the product catalog. Retailers can be as individualized as possible and tailor their message to customer segments or specific customers.

Another way to engage with your audience is through "Back in Stock" and "Price Drop Alerts." By generating five times more revenue per email than broadcast messages, these tactics can help retailers drive engage-

ment and sales with an average conversion rate of 16% for back in stock and 4% for price drop alerts.

Here's the best part: After you set up the campaigns, any changes to price or availability of individual items or actions taken by subscribers on your site will automatically trigger these campaigns.

Product recommendations based on SKUs in the same category or subcategory will also enhance the performance of these campaigns while aiding in product discovery.

The Multichannel Merchant Outlook 2017 survey results revealed that 85% of retailers said they use email as a channel. However other channels were cited by a greater percentage of merchants, including ecommerce site (100%), social media (95%), retail stores (95%) and catalogs (90%).

On a scale of 1 to 10, respondents rated email an average of 8.8 out of 10 in terms of importance to their ecommerce strategy. This was the highest rating, followed by mobile at an average of 7.3 out of 10.

How Robert Graham Uses Email to Gain Customer Loyalty

Robert Graham, a U.S.-based lifestyle clothing and accessories brand, has come up with creative digital marketing campaigns that engage customers, promote the lifestyle and drive revenue. It does this by focusing on customer loyalty with its "Collector's Club," a loyalty program designed to engage and reward collectors and provide a one-of-a-kind brand experience.

The retailer deploys automated messages offering status updates and additional information as well as invitations to VIP events and exclusive promotions.

Robert Graham increased its email list by 103.8% through multichannel acquisition tactics, including a modal lightbox on its site, a signup form on Facebook and through POS and in-store forms.

New subscribers receive a series of three welcome messages designed to make it easy for them to join the Collector's Club, which has seen a 2.24% conversion rate increase because of the series.

Robert Graham's promotional messages, focusing on brand and lifestyle, drive traffic both online and in store. The retailer regularly invites customers to its stores and provides free valet parking, whiskey tasting and public appearances by its founder Robert Stock. These promotional messages make up 86% of Robert Graham's total email revenue.

"Even though email is a traditional marketing channel, we try to be unconventional in our approach," said Naomi Holland, Vice President of Marketing for Robert Graham in a case study. "Our email channel drives 33% of our ecommerce revenue, returning greater than $46 for every dollar we spend."

When it comes to re-engaging shoppers, Robert Graham's cart abandonment rate is lower than the industry average of 69%. However, it is recovering many of those lost sales through two remarketing campaigns. The first is sent three hours after abandonment and the second deploys two days later.

With an 85.7% click-to-open rate and a 22.4% conversion rate, the remarketing campaigns are recouping the lost revenue at an astounding rate.

When a customer makes an online purchase, Robert Graham sends a thank you message eight days after the sale. Customers who don't open that message receive a follow-up email two days later with a different subject line. Although the message is a simple thank you and is not promotional in nature, it has an 11.4% conversion rate.

Robert Graham also focuses on loyalty and retention through a win-back campaign that it sends to lapsed customers 120 days after their last purchase. In addition, the retailer re-sends the message two days later to non-openers, and the original win-back campaign has a 6.3% conversion rate.

These automated re-engagement campaigns make up 14% of Robert Graham's total email revenue. Based on the success of these triggered campaigns, it will soon launch a Collector's Club re-engagement campaign targeting subscribers enrolled in the club who have not made a purchase.

What Worked and What Didn't in 2016?

Henry said that Listrak saw a lot of retailers last year who found success sending Black Friday and Cyber Monday emails days before the actual sales events.

"We saw a 17% increase in spending between Thanksgiving and Cyber Monday, and we assume that it's related to shoppers having more time to eye up the deals they want," said Henry.

Something that didn't work so well was over-segmenting. Henry said while Listrak generally recommends clients take a more segmented approach, the holidays are a prime time for targeting a larger list.

"There's a chance that there are contacts on your list who haven't purchased since last year, and they won't be included in your usual active audience," said Henry. "This year, we suggest opening up your segments to reach as many people as possible."

In general, timelines have moved up for holiday email marketing campaigns, as retailers have been targeting customers earlier.

"Shoppers have become more knowledgeable and therefore have greater expectations," said Henry. "Personalization in ecommerce is now at the point where retailers can give a white-glove experience without having to walk the customer through the store themselves. Email is still king with regard to acquisition and retention. Both retailers and customers rely on this channel more than anything else."

In The National Retail Federation's 2017 Holiday Planning Playbook, NRF reported that shoppers made the same amount or fewer impulsive purchases during the holiday season last year than in 2015. But triggering that emotional, on-the-spot purchase can still prove to be a beneficial tool for retailers. To drive this type of desired consumer behavior in 2017, NRF recommends sending limited-time promotional offers through multiple channels.

Jane Sherlock, Chief Information Officer for Carters and a member of NRF's CIO Council, said in the report that retailers should leverage creative promotions based on clickstream data that identifies what a consumer has viewed in the past. It should include customized display ads on their website or social media, email reminders and even direct mail.

"It's these little things that can help give a push over to inspire them to buy during the holiday season," said Sherlock.

The report also found that more than 50% of shoppers said they preferred email notifications while another 24% preferred to receive offers through direct mail.

To rise above the noise this holiday season, best practices include a targeted subject line, offering a clear path for consumers to unsubscribe at any time and keeping volume consistent.

NRF reported that brands such as O'Neill, Adidas and Converse use bold imagery, personalized and compelling copy and simple calls to action to drive high awareness levels.

Holiday 2017 – What to Expect

Henry said that gift guides will be big this year. Gifts under a certain value, gifts for him, gifts for her, etc., are what retailers will promote for the 2017 holiday season.

"We started to see these a little more last year and for our clients, the response was great," said Henry. "These are good to send slightly before Black Friday/Cyber Monday as it gets those gift-giving wheels turning. This isn't a new concept, but the '12 days till Christmas' campaigns work."

Henry said customers respond very well to these promotions and engagement is usually really high. People anticipate what that deal is day after day, leading up to the holidays. In addition, retailers are going to focus on personalization this holiday season, for example, leveraging previous purchases and their customers' shopping behavior.

"For many retailers, some customers purchase once a year and this is that time," said Henry. "It is important to have that order history to recommend products and content related to that purchase."

THE NUMBERS BEHIND IT

Retailers are using data to create a more personalized experience for the customer. They will use browse, purchase and behavioral data to automate their email, display and social media campaigns.

A key component in measuring the success of these campaigns is the associated click-through rates. In fact, according to the Multichannel Merchant Outlook 2017 survey results, click-through rate was the top metric that respondents look at (100%), with all respondents also citing unsubscribe rates. This was followed by sales metrics, deliverability and open rates, all coming in at 83.3%.

For example, apparel and accessories retailer Rainbow collected customer data from an email and SMS campaign with the goal of acquiring the email address of every shopper. As a result, the brand has an active customer base that it reaches through email campaigns designed to initiate an action, either online, in store or on its mobile app.

However, Rainbow was challenged when it came to collecting email addresses in store. Associates sometimes failed to ask for the customer's information as it slowed down the purchase transaction. Customers also didn't have an incentive to provide an email address; as a result, many ignored the request.

If the store associate did receive a customer's email address, many of these addresses were invalid due to associate or customer data input errors. Even if a valid address was captured, data transfer wasn't immediate, so Rainbow needed a better way to collect this vital information.

To solve the problem, the retailer implemented an in-store SMS program to take the data collection burden off of its associates while incentivizing shoppers to provide accurate personal data.

It launched its SMS program by placing signage in its stores asking shoppers to text "Rainbow" to a short code 49889 in exchange for a 10% off coupon. Doing this triggered a Text-to-Join campaign, an automated response asking customers to reply with their email address that stated the coupon would be delivered through SMS.

When the campaign launched Rainbow saw 25,000 weekly SMS subscribers, 92% of whom provided an email address, 53% remained active in email campaigns and 8% clicked through on broadcast SMS messages.

"The campaign has enabled us to capture mobile numbers and email addresses in a way that makes customers happy and increases sales while adding no administrative or technical burdens on our brick-and-mortar stores," said David Cost, Ecommerce and Digital Marketing Executive for Rainbow. "It's a rare win-win."

The Marriage of UGC and Email Marketing

This holiday season, user-generated content (UGC) will have its biggest role in product reviews. People rely on them for almost every purchase they make online.

"UGC is especially important for independent retailers, as it helps to combat people going to Amazon to see the review for that product," said Henry. "For some companies, social media photos of children playing with a toy can reach a sentimental spot for the subscriber that can't be done with other content."

The holiday season is a great time to reach out for that emotional connection to your subscribers and customers, and UGC is a great way to connect with them on a personal level. Capturing these sentimental moments and sending them via an email campaign is a great way to marry the two mediums together.