



# YOUR GUIDE TO EMAIL DELIVERABILITY

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# Overview

You compose a new email and queue it to send to your list of subscribers. You expect it to show up in their inboxes a few minutes later, right? But then a customer contacts you asking why he never got his coupon. What happened? You sent the message out to all of your subscribers, but not everyone received your message. Some of them found it in their junk folders, and some of them didn't find it at all.

You just had a deliverability problem. But what does that mean, and how do you fix it? The process of getting your emails delivered is more than just clicking send.

## THE STORY OF DELIVERABILITY

### The Process

To understand email deliverability, think about how postal mail gets delivered from one address to another. When you mail a letter, it doesn't go from you directly to the recipient. Your mail carrier takes your letter to the post office, which sorts it and sends it off to another sorting facility, which loads it on a truck - or in some cases an airplane - to send to another sorting facility near your recipient's zip code, which sends it to their local post office where it's picked up by a mail carrier and finally placed in your recipient's mailbox. Whew!

Email delivery works in a similar way. An Internet Service Provider (ISP) - like Google, Yahoo, AOL or Comcast - acts like the post offices and sorting facilities a letter travels through before getting delivered. After you click "send," the ISP "sorts" your email by checking to make sure both your address and your recipients' addresses are real. Bulk or commercial email gets extra "sorting" with special filtering software that checks for common spam tactics - more on those (and how to avoid them in your campaign) later.

Once the ISP has verified that your address is valid and you're a sender that your recipient actually wants to receive mail from, your message should ideally get delivered to their inbox. This guide will walk you through tips to ensure your email gets delivered if you're currently running into problems.

### Make Sure Your Mail Is Legal

One big step you can take in the very beginning is to make sure your email is compliant with laws for business and commercial email senders. The US, Canada and the European Union all have regulations for marketing emails. These required elements in your messages act sort of like the required return address and postage stamp on a piece of postal mail, keeping your message legally deliverable.

## United States

In the United States, the [CAN-SPAM Act](#) protects consumers from unwanted emails. Under this act, your message must contain:

- A subject line that relates to the content of your email - avoid using a deceptive subject line.
- A valid mailing address for your business - either a street address or a Post Office box.
- A clear way to opt out from receiving future messages. This means providing an unsubscribe link that your customers can click to get removed from your list if they'd rather not receive your emails anymore.

When you do get requests from customers who want to unsubscribe, the law requires you to honor that request within 10 business days and stop sending them mail. This protects consumers from unwanted emails and protects you from getting too many spam complaints from people who just want off your list.\*

Several US states have their own separate regulations for sending commercial email. To see the spam laws in your state, [visit this link](#).

\* If any of your subscribers click the spam button, AWeber takes care of automatically removing these subscribers from your list.

## Canada

Canada passed their [anti-spam law](#) (sometimes referred to as CASL) on July 1st, 2014 to protect consumers from unwanted commercial email. Similar to anti-spam measures in the US, Canadian law requires businesses sending emails to:

- Get permission (written or oral consent) from Canadian users. Do not use social media as a form of personal consent.
- Timestamp of when you got that address, why you got that subscriber and how you got that address (if opt-in - log IP, timestamp, etc).
- Be clear about products and services you're marketing. Any misleading information is a violation of the law.
- Only send to email addresses given to you by your actual subscribers. "Address harvesting" - using computer software to search for and add emails to your list - is not allowed.

Note: CASL does not apply to mail sent between individuals. If you are sending mail for affiliates, identify how you got that address and specify clearly that you are mailing on behalf of someone else. Software that searches for and adds emails to your list is not allowed.

For more information about Canada's anti-spam law, visit the legislation's [website](#).

## Europe

Unlike the US and Canada, the European Union (EU) allows businesses to email people who did not opt into their mailing list. However, you do need to have an established relationship with the people you're emailing before you send them promotional messages. This means the people on your list must be customers of yours before you can send them marketing emails.

Similar to the US and Canada, marketers in the EU must provide a way for subscribers to opt out of their mailings and must be honest about their identity - disguising your name or the nature of your message is illegal.

[Read the full text](#) of the EU's Privacy and Electronic Communications Directive. Article 13 addresses commercial email.

So as long as your message meets these legal requirements, it gets delivered, right?

Not quite. You still need to convince the ISP that your customers welcome your marketing messages.

## MAKING IT TO THE INBOX

Remember the postal mail analogy from before? Just like several sorting facilities are positioned between you and your mail recipient, filters and special requirements from ISPs stand between your email and your customer's inbox. Getting your email delivered involves paying attention to those requirements to avoid accidentally getting filtered out as spam.

ISPs use specific measures to make sure that only mail their users asked for gets through to their inboxes. This often comes in the form of filters and monitoring reports from individual users - as well as how many people open and click links in your emails. If enough people mark your emails as spam, the ISP will block future emails from getting delivered.

Different ISPs filter emails a little bit differently. Let's take a look at some of the major ones to see how they determine what gets through and what doesn't:

### Gmail

With more than 550 million users, chances are that a big percentage of your subscribers use Gmail.

Aside from standard practices used by other ISPs like [sender authentication](#) (which we'll explain in more detail later on), Gmail relies heavily on reports from their users to determine which emails to filter as spam. Any user can report mail in their inbox as spam, or unmark messages that Gmail accidentally sorted into the spam folder. Gmail learns which senders are reliable and which ones aren't based on what their users tell them.

Because of this, [getting permission](#) to email your customers first is a big part of improving your deliverability with Gmail.

Read more details on Gmail's deliverability from their [Bulk Sender Guidelines](#).

## Outlook

Outlook uses Microsoft's [SmartScreen](#) technology to determine which emails are spam and which are not. SmartScreen depends on both spam reports from Outlook users and content filtering - blocking emails based on certain words and phrases that spammers often use.

To make sure your message hits the inbox, avoid the kinds of tricks that spammers typically use, which we'll discuss later on in this guide.

Read more about improving deliverability to Outlook from their [Fighting Junk Email information](#).

## Yahoo

Yahoo's spam filters emphasize content and URL filtering - checking URLs to make sure they don't lead to malicious or [blacklisted](#) websites - in addition to spam reports from Yahoo users. As with Gmail and Outlook, getting delivered to the inbox involves sending out good content to people who request it from you and avoiding practices that spammers use when attempting to get around spam filters.

Don't worry, this guide has more specific advice to help your email content stand out - in a good way!

Read more about Yahoo's practices in their [guide for bulk senders](#).

## Comcast

Comcast puts a lot of weight on clean lists when deciding which emails to deliver. Does your list have a lot of old subscribers who haven't opened your emails in a year or longer? It's probably time to [get those subscribers off your list](#) to make sure your emails get through to other Comcast users on your list.

Read more about Comcast's delivery methods [in their FAQ](#).

## RoadRunner/Time Warner Cable

RoadRunner uses some content filters to check for spam, but mostly depends on reports from their users to block senders and route email to the spam folder. RoadRunner recommends using confirmed opt-in to make sure your subscribers are really interested in getting your emails, which we'll talk about in more detail later on.

Read more about [RoadRunner's delivery guidelines](#).

## WHAT AWEBER HANDLES FOR YOU

Keeping all those regulations straight might sound like a hassle. Filters and authentication - who has time for all that?

If you choose to run your campaign through an email service provider (ESP) like AWeber, we take care of all that for you so you don't have to worry about the technical side of getting your email delivered.

### Authentication

Email authentication acts like a signature on a credit card receipt - it verifies your identity and allows you to claim responsibility for the mailing. Spammers often try to forge their email "signatures," and authentication helps to prevent that and tells the ISP that you really are the sender you're claiming to be.

There are a few different places to authenticate your email address. Most ISPs recognize DomainKeys Identified Mail (DKIM) or Sender Policy Framework (SPF). Outlook uses SPF to authenticate sender addresses. It's a good idea to authenticate your address with both.

Most email service providers like AWeber take care of DKIM, SPF and DMARC authentication for you. For SPF authentication, you'll need to take a small extra step by [editing your domain's SPF record](#) to include your email service provider.

Visit these links for more information on using SPF, DKIM and Sender ID authentication:

- [SPF Overview](#)
- [DomainKeys Identified Mail](#)
- [DMARC](#)

### Keeping Your Address Off Blacklists

If too many subscribers mark your emails as spam, ISPs will add you to a blacklist to block your future messages from getting through. Getting yourself off of those blacklists can be a time-consuming process, as you'll need to contact each ISP that blacklisted you and request that they remove you from each list.

ISPs trust email sent through AWeber (and other ESPs), which helps protect you from getting blacklisted. There are extra steps you can take, too, which we'll outline later in this guide.

Learn More About Blacklisting:

- [Tips for Staying Off Blacklists](#)
- [How One Real Business Got Blacklisted and Got Back Off](#)

## Opt-In Email

Maintaining opt-in only email lists is a huge part of keeping a high deliverability rate. Mail that is requested from subscribers is much more likely to reach the inbox than unsolicited emails sent to purchased or rented lists. We monitor all of our users' accounts to make sure they only send to subscribers who asked to hear from them.

Deliverability doesn't stop at the technical side of things. Now that you know the steps we take to make sure your email gets delivered, let's look at what you can do on your end to ensure that your email reaches your subscribers' inboxes.

## WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

While there are plenty of technical details to getting your email delivered (which are often handled by your ESP), there are steps you can take yourself to help your message get through to the inbox:

### Get Permission

The first step to improving your deliverability begins before you even create your message. Getting permission to send marketing emails is essential to avoid getting marked as spam.

There are two main ways to end up in your subscribers' junk folders: either something in your message trips an ISP's spam filter or a user reports you for spam. If you show up in a person's inbox uninvited, that person is likely to report you as spam.

To make sure this doesn't happen, [get permission](#) to email your customers first. There are a few ways you can do this:

#### On Your Website

If you have a blog or website, place a sign up form somewhere visible that your visitors can use to request information from you. When a visitor fills out your web form, your ESP automatically adds that person to your mailing list.

If you don't have a website, you can still collect subscribers online [using a web form hosted](#) on your ESP's site.

Share the link to this form on your social networks to invite people to join your list.

#### Offline

What if you don't have a website or want to go beyond your website to grow your list? There are plenty of opportunities to add subscribers offline:

- **Ask customers at a cash register** if they want to get email updates from your store. Have a sign up sheet or cards at the register for them.
- **Bring a sign up sheet to local events.** If you have a booth or table, advertise your email list.

However you choose to collect email addresses, make sure the people signing up [fully understand what they're signing up for](#). They can't give you permission if they don't understand what you're planning to do with their information!



To learn more about building your email list online and offline, [review our checklist of acceptable practices](#).

Confirming your subscribers is another important aspect of permission based email marketing. When new people join your list, they'll receive an email with a link to click confirming their interest in receiving emails from you.

But what if people don't confirm? It's true that not everyone who signs up for your emails will confirm their spot on your list. But this works out in your favor. People who can't be bothered to click a confirmation saying they want your emails likely won't be interested in future mailings from you, either. By asking people to confirm, you're building a list of truly interested and fully engaged subscribers.

Your confirmation email doesn't have to be boring - go ahead and inject some personality into it. Just make sure it relays the important information your new subscribers need to know:

- You're sending them this email because they asked you to.
- They need to click the link to confirm that they want to receive emails from you.
- You respect their privacy and won't share their personal information with any other marketers.

To learn more about confirmation, visit our resources below:

- [What Is Confirmed Opt-In?](#)
- [Why Use Confirmed Opt-In?](#)
- [Confirmed Opt-In Myths Exposed](#)

## Get Added To Personal Whitelists

Asking subscribers to add you as a contact in their address books can also improve your deliverability. When you're added to a subscriber's address book, that sends a signal to the ISP that your subscriber trusts you and wants to receive your emails. There are a few ways to encourage subscribers to add you to their personal whitelists:

- **Request it on your thank you page.** Include a line on your thank you page - the page new subscribers see after submitting their email address on your sign up form - asking your new subscribers to add you to their address books/safe sender lists.
- **Include it in your welcome email.** This is the first message your subscribers will receive after confirming to your list. Remind them to add you so they'll receive the rest of your messages, too.
- **Add a link at the top of your emails.** Not all of your subscribers will know what you mean when you ask them to add you to a personal whitelist or address book. Link to [a page of prewritten instructions](#) in your preheader so readers will know exactly how to add you. Not sure how to add a preheader? Follow our directions [here](#).

## Keep A Good Reputation

You might have heard that getting your emails delivered depends on avoiding words like "free" or not using all capitals in your subject lines.

The content of your emails is certainly important. But more and more ISPs are looking at how readers interact or engage with your content, not just the content itself, to decide if your emails make it to your readers' inboxes or not. Making sure you have a good reputation with your subscribers will help improve your deliverability.

Keeping a good reputation involves a few practices:

## Getting Rid Of Outdated Email Addresses

Your list shouldn't have any outdated addresses or people who just aren't opening and reading your emails. It's a good idea to clean your list every so often by running a reactivation campaign.

Identify who hasn't opened your emails in a while and send them a specially targeted message to see if they're still interested in being on your list. Offer a special incentive for confirming their interest. Keep the people who respond and delete the addresses of people who don't open your attempt at reconnecting.

Download [How to Run a Reactivation Campaign](#) for more detailed instructions.

## Sending Good Content

The top ISPs put weight on how people are interacting with your content - do they open your messages or just delete them unread? Senders whose subscribers open their emails regularly and click through to their sites have a much better chance of reaching the inbox. If too many of your subscribers delete your emails without reading them, your deliverability will suffer.

But there's a simple fix - send content that your subscribers will want to read. That might sound easier said than done, but there are a few tricks to creating compelling content:

- **Make it about your readers.** Nobody wants to hear a person go on and on about himself all the time. Talk about your readers more than you talk about yourself. Speak to their wants and needs before you mention anything about your business or product. Send them content they ask for instead of what you think they want to read.
- **Survey your customers.** Send a quick survey to ask your readers what they're interested in getting from you. Frame the content for your next message around their feedback.
- **Pay attention to open rates.** Look over old messages you've sent to see which ones have the highest open rates. Can you spot any similarities in the content of your best performing messages? Use similar content in your next message.
- **Get your subscribers involved.** Ask for personal stories, feedback or reviews from your customers and get them involved in your message creation. Adding your customers' voices to your messages makes your brand friendlier, plus your customers will look forward to seeing their own words featured in your emails.

## Keeping A Regular Schedule

Have you ever received an email from a business that you didn't remember signing up for? Maybe you signed up a year ago, got a message welcoming you to the list, then didn't hear anything else from them for several months. By that time, you'd forgotten you ever signed up, so you marked the message as spam.

If you're not emailing on a regular schedule, your messages might meet the same fate. The average Internet user receives about 5 marketing emails a day per mailbox from various organizations. With all those emails coming through, it's easy for consumers to forget what they subscribed to and what's unsolicited.

Sending your messages on a regular schedule will help your subscribers remember who you are. It can be daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly or anywhere in between as long as you set a schedule and stick to it. Make sure to mention your frequency on your sign up form, too. Your readers will remember you better when they know what to expect from you.

Setting a schedule can also help you control your frequency. Sometimes it's tricky to know how often to email your subscribers. Sending too often can make readers feel overwhelmed. They may start [ignoring your emails](#) entirely - which is bad for your reputation. But sending too little - say, less than once a month - may cause them to forget who you are or that they even signed up for your emails in the first place.

How often should you send? It depends on what you're sending and what your subscribers expect from you. If you promised daily coupons, your customers will expect emails from you daily. Sending less frequently may make them lose interest. If your readers signed up for a monthly newsletter, they'll probably get annoyed if you email them more frequently than that.

You might consider asking your subscribers how often they want to hear from you and set your frequency [based on their personal preferences](#).

### Keeping Your "From" Name The Same

If you constantly change your From name, you'll confuse your subscribers and they won't realize that your emails are coming from you. If you need to change your From name for a good reason, then [follow the advice in this blog post](#) to alert your subscribers to the change in advance.

### Not Looking Like A Spammer

The best way to not accidentally get filtered as spam is to not engage in practices that make you look like a spammer.

That doesn't mean you can't use words like "free" in your subject line. It does mean you should be careful with the design and content of your message, though:

- **Don't send your message as one big image.** Using images in your email is fine, but don't depend on just one image to get your message across. Spammers often use this trick to avoid using any text in their messages to get around content filters. Use a balance of text and images instead.
- **Stay away from excessive punctuation.** Rows of exclamation points and separating words with extra characters (like f\*r\*e) not only looks sloppy, but [is another practice spammers use](#) to try getting around spam filters. As long as you're sending to people who gave you permission to email them and you're sending the kind of content they asked for, you shouldn't need to worry about any "trigger" words in your message.
- **Don't type out URLs in your emails.** Features like [click tracking](#) replace the URL to your site with a special link that tracks how many people clicked through to your site. Typing out your URL and then hyperlinking it can make ISPs believe you're intentionally trying to hide your link's destination. Link to words or phrases in your email instead.
- **Stay away from link shorteners.** If you typically shorten links in your emails with services like bit.ly, that can [land you on an ISP's blacklist](#). Link shorteners hide the real address that the link points to and are frequently used by spammers who don't want to reveal their site's real address.

## WHAT IF I STILL HAVE DELIVERY PROBLEMS?

Maybe you've been following this advice for a while. How do you know if it's working? You'll probably notice some trouble signs in your campaign if you start having a problem with your deliverability.

### How To Tell if You're Having Delivery Problems

You might notice a drop in your opens and click rates from time to time throughout the length of your campaign. This is normal in every campaign and usually indicates that your message didn't resonate as effectively with your audience as you had hoped.

But what if you see a huge, sudden drop in opens and clicks? If a large number of your subscribers suddenly stopped opening and responding to your emails, you're likely getting filtered out of their inboxes. You might also start hearing from customers who suddenly stop getting your emails as a result of a delivery issue.

AWeber [monitors much of this for you](#), but if you want to get a more accurate picture of delivery on your own, go ahead and register for a delivery monitoring service. Places like [Return Path](#), [EmailReach](#) and [Delivery Watch](#) will analyze your deliverability and tell you when your messages miss the inbox.

For more delivery monitoring resources, check out the [list of services at Email-Marketing-Reports.com](#).

If you've followed the recommendations in this guide and are still running into problems getting your email delivered, there are still a few more things you can try:

### Check To See if Your Domain Is Blacklisted

Spam complaints or bad links in your emails could accidentally land you on an ISP's blacklist. Check to see if you're on any blacklists by visiting these sites, which are the official lists of email senders and websites that are blocked by ISPs for common spam practices:

- [Uribl](#)
- [Surbl](#)
- [Spamhaus](#)

Each of these blacklists has a form to look up your domain and check if it's blocked. If you're on one of these lists, [follow these instructions](#) to get yourself removed. Some lists have a form to fill out, while others may require you to change some of your email practices.

### Add An Additional Unsubscribe Link In Your Header

If your delivery problems come from spam complaints, try adding an [additional unsubscribe link at the top of your emails](#) to make it easy for customers who no longer wish to receive your emails. Subscribers will often hit the spam button - which is easy to access - when they want to unsubscribe instead of hunting for the link at the bottom of the message. Place an extra link up top to stop those erroneous spam complaints.

### Still Having Problems?

If you've followed the advice in this guide and your email still isn't getting delivered, contact your ESP. [AWeber's Customer Solutions Team](#) is happy to assist our customers to resolve any problems they encounter, delivery related or not!

## KEEP THESE TIPS IN MIND

Don't let email deliverability get you down. Follow these four steps to keep your emails getting to the inbox consistently:

- **Always get permission** before sending promotional emails to people. This helps protect you from spam complaints since you're not sending them emails they didn't ask for.
- **Tell subscribers what to expect from the beginning** so they know exactly what they're getting from you.
- **Be consistent with what you send** and how often you send it. Sending messages sporadically with long gaps in-between can cause subscribers to forget who you are and accidentally report you for spam.
- **Clear your list** of subscribers who never open your messages. Keep the ones who consistently open and click through your emails. Send targeted messages to "win back" subscribers who only open your messages on occasion. The more people engage with your emails, the better your deliverability will be.

Adopting the practices in this guide in your campaign should keep you out of spam filters and get you delivered to the inbox regularly.

# About AWeber

What do leading sites such as Social Media Examiner, Copyblogger, Which Test Won, ProBlogger and Harvard Business Review all have in common?

They rely on AWeber for easy-to-use email and social media tools to cultivate relationships with their readers. Since 1998, AWeber has been the email engine powering the growth of organizations around the world.

Today, more than 120,000 small- and midsize-businesses, entrepreneurs, agencies and nonprofits are making the most of AWeber's sophisticated segmentation and analytical capabilities, social media and testing applications, extensive template libraries, and industry-leading deliverability and live support.

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