

Subject Lines Matter: 4 Rules of Thumb that Work

By Dennis Litchfield and Geoff Linton

Subject Lines Matter

An Inbox Marketer Whitepaper



Introduction

That old maxim, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression” is never more apparent than when applied to email marketing. Recipients, faced with continually growing inboxes, make split second decisions about whether or not to “open” or “delete” email messages based on nothing more than what they see in the “From” and “Subject” lines.

The “From” line is the base of trust and credibility. However, there is little marketers can do about optimizing the “From” line. Ideal “From” lines should be instantly recognizable and include a trusted brand or source. “Subject” lines, on the other hand, offer more opportunity for marketers to influence the recipient’s decision to open an email message. Good subject lines lift open rates and the ripple effect can increase the click-thru rate (CTR) as well.

Over the years, there have been many articles written about the importance of subject lines. Good subject lines compel the recipient to read the message immediately through trigger words or copy that captures the eye. Traditionally, best practices have recommended that subject lines be clear, bold and concise. However, Inbox Marketer wanted to analyze if these best practices would hold true in real-world situations. Specifically, Inbox Marketer decided to test four common rules of thumb and determine if there are other factors that also influence open rates:

1. Subject Line Length
2. Message Presence
3. Power Words
4. Personalization

Research Methodology

Inbox Marketer analyzed a cross-section of North American client data from the business and consumer (B2C) market. A total sample of 5,000 email campaigns were analyzed with a minimum campaign size of more than 100,000 messages. The email campaigns were executed in Q1 2011 and come from a cross section of industries, including retail, manufacturing and services.

Summary Findings:

- Subject lines that are 25-29 characters long receive the highest open rates.
- Maximum “presence” in the inbox occurs when subject lines are 25-29 characters long.
- Front-loading subject lines with “power words” increases open rates.
- When done correctly, personalizing subject lines increase open rates.

The overall average open rate of the sample was 20%, and there was considerable variance in open rates between campaigns.

Below are the latest analytical findings on the impact of: subject line length, message presence, power words and personalization. The analysis did not incorporate day of week or time of day because these variables constantly change.

1. Subject Line Length

Subject line length is the most important factor under a marketer’s control. Marketing Sherpa’s 2010 Email Marketing Benchmark Report (p. 105) recommends keeping the subject line length under 50 characters. Traditionally, Inbox Marketer’s rule of thumb has been to keep the subject line length under 38 characters. Since various email clients truncate the subject line, a subject line that is 38 characters or less ensures the full text will be visible in the inbox. Interestingly, however, our research identifies an even shorter optimal subject line length.

Graph 1 illustrates the results of Inbox Marketer’s analysis on subject line length. The red curve graphs the open rate performance of our research sample. The peak of this curve is at 25-29 characters, demonstrating slightly shorter subject lines achieve higher open rates.

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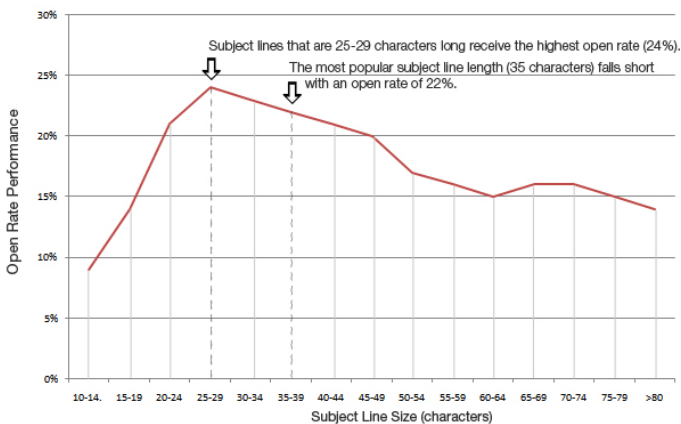
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Although, the performance data indicates that “shorter is better,” subject lines that are too short are also not effective. The graph illustrates that very short subject lines (less than 14 characters) have low open rates — below 10%. The open rate rises rapidly as the subject line lengthens, until it reaches a peak around the 25-29 character mark. At the 25-29 character threshold, the open rate declines at a slow steady rate as the subject lines get longer. This rate of decline is about one percentage point for every six additional characters (or one word) added to the subject line. That means, for every word added to the subject line past 29 characters, you potentially reduce the open rate by one percentage point.

Graph 1: Optimal Subject Line Length for Performance

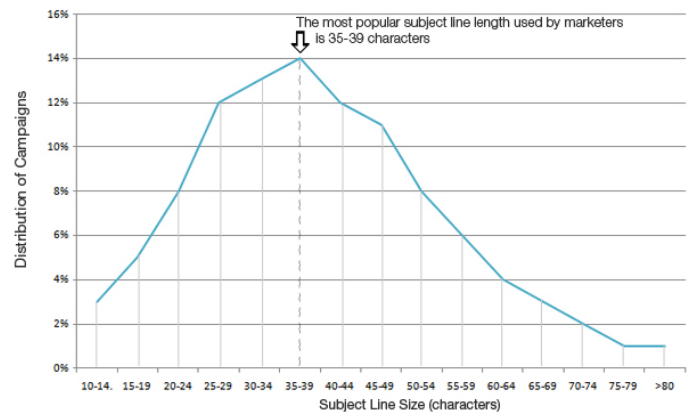
Source: Inbox Marketer B2C Client data 2011



The blue line on Graph 2 represents the distribution rate. This histogram graphs the subject line lengths from the campaigns in Inbox Marketer’s analysis. The peak of the curve indicates that the most popular length used by marketers is 35-39 characters (approximately 14% of all campaigns). The blue distribution line in the graph forms an almost a perfect bell curve, suggesting that there are no major influences on subject line length other than that they are around the 40 character mark. (The fact that this bell curve is wide suggests that the 40 character mark is more of a vague notion of the ideal rather than a strict rule.) Thus, marketers tend to prefer longer subject lines, but this may be at the detriment to open rate performance.

Graph 2: Typical Subject Line Length “Distribution”

Source: Inbox Marketer B2C Client data 2011



It is also important to note that the peculiar shape of the open rate curve (red) in Graph 1 suggests that there are other significant factors at play, other than marketers’ bias, for a particular subject line length. These other factors are: word choice, personalization, message presence/visibility and the way recipients tend to configure their email client/browser.

2. Message “Presence” in the Inbox

Industry research indicates that more than 50% of email recipients view messages in preview panes. Common preview pane configurations limit subject line viewing space. There are two usability related problems with preview panes: character truncation and visibility. Some email clients only show about the first 40 characters. The rest of the copy gets truncated.

The longer the subject line, the more likely it is that keywords will be cut off. This is a significant factor for why open rates tend to decline as subject line length increases. Users may not grasp the potential benefits of opening the email because specific keywords have been truncated.

The next challenge involves increasing the “visibility” of subject lines so they capture readers’ attention. So, what is the optimal subject line length for highest visibility and clarity in the inbox? Some marketers believe the shorter the better. But, subject lines that are too short may omit key words and may be less clear. Inbox Marketer’s usability team examined inboxes in various email clients to examine the

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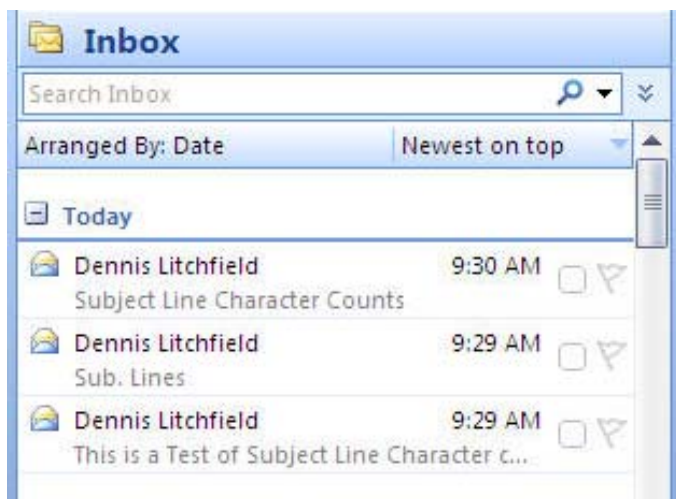
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truncation and visibility impact. The team observed that subject lines that are too long often become “buried” in the inbox, meaning they do not stand out among the vast amount of messages above and below them in the inbox.

Shorter subject lines have more white space after them, which provides contrast in the inbox, improves eye flow and makes the words appear more prominent. However, subject lines that are too short lack both content and visibility due to their size and, therefore, have very low open rates. The right blend of content and visibility is what we refer to as “presence.” Maximum presence seems to occur when subject lines are around the 25-29 character mark.

Below are examples of three subject lines that could be used for the same message. The first is around the optimum 29 character mark. The second is a very short (10 character) subject line. The third subject line is more than 40 characters, but was truncated at around the 40 character mark. Which one is most likely to get opened?



In the above example, the first subject line has “presence.” Its content can be seen easily at a glance. The second subject line lacks presence. Its short length makes the subject line barely noticeable between the first and the third messages. Additionally, this subject line contains insufficient content to stir interest. The third subject line also lacks presence. It is a very busy subject line and not easy to scan. To comprehend

it, recipients need to read it word for word like a sentence.

3. Power Words

Inbox Marketer’s analysis uncovered keywords that seem to consistently draw higher open rates than others (versus the 20% average). These “power words” lift open rates if they are placed properly. The sooner the power word appears in the subject line, the better. The first word is the most important spot to place the power word. It is also important to front-end load subject line copy.

According to our analysis, “**thank you**” is perhaps the most effective word marketers can put in a subject line. When it appears at the beginning of a subject line, the message gets opened 39% of the time. The message receives a slightly lower open rate when “thank you” appears elsewhere on the line. At first, this would seem logical since a “thank you” would be issued at the culmination of the contact, purchase, opt-in, etc. On the other hand, why open the message if you already know what it says? Interestingly, our research shows that confirmations that don’t include the word “thank you” only get open rates in the low teens. For example, the phrase, “Please Confirm Receipt,” only gets a 12% open rate. From this observation, we conclude that recipients simply liked to be thanked and have a high propensity to open such messages. So, it is important for marketers to say, “thank you” when it is appropriate.

The word, “**important**” is also effective, with an open rate average of 36%. It is commonly used as the first word in the subject line.

The word, “**recipe**” is also remarkably effective within subject lines, generating opens 43% of the time. Marketers, who are in a position to offer recipe content, should do so whenever they can.

As one might expect, messages that are obvious sales pitches get lower open rates, but here too, words matter. Words commonly used in the hard sell, such as “buy, save, hurry, now, must, win, free,” typically draw open rates less than 20%. Words that might be considered more of a softer sell,

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such as “coupon, discount, bonus, reward, % off,” actually tended to perform better and have open rates in the 20% to 25% range. Whether a word is perceived as hard (pushy, response language) or soft (related, value-add language) is purely subjective but from this data, it is reasonable to conclude that the harder the sales pitch, the lower the open rate.

4. Personalization

Personalizing messages can improve open rates. While there is some debate in the industry as to its ongoing effectiveness due to overuse by spammers, subject line personalization, when the message comes from a trusted sender as in this analysis, resulted in a positive impact. Personalizing the subject line can be achieved by addressing the recipient by his/her first name, including a corporate name or brand, or by showing empathy towards the recipient.

First Name Personalization

Capturing the recipient’s attention by including his/her first name in the subject line (usually as the first word) produced a 31% open rate in our study. For example, “John, do more in a day with mobile banking.”

Corporate/Brand Personalization

The next type of brand personalization is often debated among marketers. The standard rule of thumb has been to avoid repeating company names in the subject line. However, some organizations with strong brands like to mention their own name in the subject line. While this might seem a redundant waste of space (because it is often included in the “From” line), it seems to work and deliver high open rates. Well-known Inbox Marketer retail, automotive and grocery clients are achieving open rates in the 30% and 40% range (Note: These higher open rates may also be a reflection of the high quality of the companies’ subscriber bases).

When incorporating a company name or brand into a subject line, it is important to use a short name to avoid taking up too much space. Inbox Marketer has also observed that those who are successful with this tactic, place their

company name or brand in the latter part of the subject line, which tends to give it a more personal look. Marketers, who apply this technique, do the other things right too, like placing important keywords first and keeping the subject line length short. Here are some examples of high performing Inbox Marketer client subject lines:

Retail:

Summer has arrived at <Company Name>!

Automotive:

A Golden Opportunity from <Company Name>

Grocery:

Fresher Cheaper Prices At <Company Name> This Week

Automotive:

Thank you for your interest in <Company Name>

Overall, the company name needs to be subtly placed. Like the examples above, the company name should integrate effortlessly with the copy, rather than breaking it up and impeding the flow. Companies get much lower open rates when they use subject lines like this:

<Company Name>: Renew your Membership Today

In the above example, the name takes up the prime position in the subject line and the colon gives it an impersonal look. Also, the whole subject line is phrased as a command, which can be a turn-off to readers.

Conclusion

Writing subject lines is part art and part science. Email is a highly sensitive medium, so marketers need to take time to craft the right subject line to engage recipients. Subject lines should break through and capture a reader’s attention.

If in doubt, quickly pre-test a few subject lines and rollout the winner a day later. Through testing, marketers can typically improve subject line performance by +2% to +8% (incremental). Some copywriters believe that, in the digital world, word choice can have more than double the

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sensitivity of direct mail. This means it is that much more important, when writing digital copy, to choose words carefully and follow the four new rules of thumb (outlined in this report) to increase open rates. It just takes knowing your target audience and applying discipline, creativity and some analysis to improve results.

Contributors



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Geoff Linton is Vice-President and a co-founder of Inbox Marketer Inc. and a direct marketing expert with more than 20 years of applied experience in both client and agency roles. Geoff Linton holds both a P.Eng and MBA from Queens University in Canada.



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Inbox Marketer

Inbox Marketer is a digital direct messaging company that helps organizations use email, mobile, social media and the web to build engaged online communities of customers and prospects.

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