Introduction to
Email Campaigning
for Unions

An E-Book by Alex White

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aleithia
media and communications

Contents

A message from Alex White

Thank you for downloading this free e-book about email campaigning for unions. This is the second e-book that I have written specifically for unions.

This e-book looks at a widely used - and often misused - online campaigning tool: email. While some online campaigners have written the obituary for emails in this age of social networks, the reality remains that email is largest online activity across every demographic.

For unions, email is a powerful campaigning tool that can easily, inexpensively and personally reach 1000s of members at a time. No other communication tool can replicate this. Almost everyone in Industrialised nations (Australia, the US, Europe) has access to email.

Unfortunately, I have seen many unions "do email wrong". Whether it is breaking basic etiquette, not using tracking software, sending bulk email using Outlook, or failing to include a call to action, unions are serial offenders when it comes to email campaigning.

I must confess that much of the advice that I have here comes from my own mistakes. I readily admit to doing the wrong thing when sending emails to members of the union I work for - or allowing bad emails to be sent. But I am trying to change my practices and the culture of email use in my union.

In this e-book, I have put together all of my online articles into a single resource for easy reference.

If you haven't downloaded my **Social Media for Unions** e-book yet, you can get a copy here.

I hope you find this e-book useful. If you do, follow me on Twitter or subscribe to my blog.

In union,

Alex White

Email is the "killer app" for online campaigning

The Massachusetts election has blown open the mainstream media's infatuation with social networking tools, with headlines like "the iphone app that killed Coakley". On the techblogs, there is also detailed examination of new tools that aided the winning Mass. Senate candidate Scott Brown. I am hardly immune to the temptation of writing about the exiting new online tools and their applicability for union campaigns.

The fact remains however that email is the "killer app" for online campaigning, and will remain so for a long time.

Campaign Monitor, a well-respected SAS provider that allows companies to create email campaigns, has crunched the numbers in a very interesting article:

Subscribers, followers and fans

Combined site traffic

Email   Twitter   Facebook
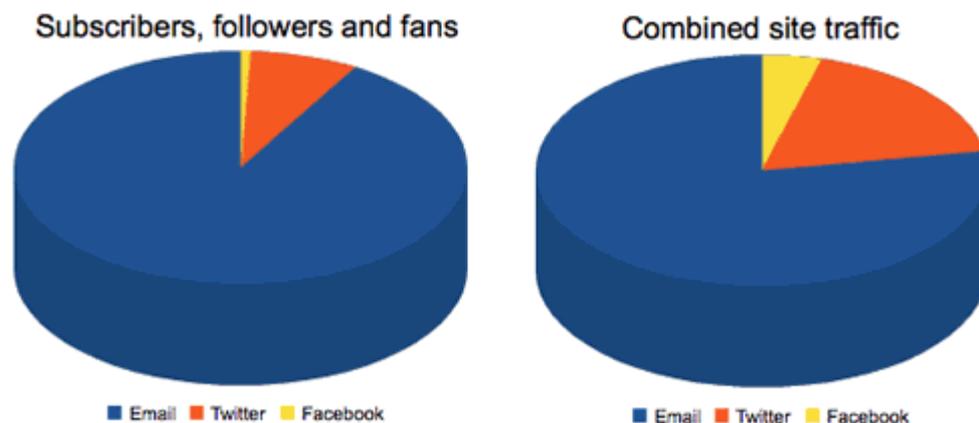
Unlike Twitter and Facebook, email's capacity to drive traffic has a long tail. Whereas the traffic from Twitter and Facebook comes in bursts lasting as long as it takes for the message to fall off the bottom of the feed (2-3 days), email continues to collect clicks and opens for days (if not weeks) to come.

Campaign Monitor points out that email not only provides the bulk of website visits, but that visitors via email are more likely to visit the site days or even months after the original email was sent. This compares to Twitter and Facebook (and anecdotally Digg) which sees a spike in traffic over a day or two, without any "long tail".

I recommend you read the entire post here.

Thomas Gensemer, managing partner of Blue State Digital, who was intimately involved in Obama's campaign, is a big proponent of email as a campaign-winning tool. He makes the point

Despite reports of its demise, e-mail is still the most popular method of sharing.

that building a large email list was key to the victory in 2008. Of course, building the email list took hard work using "old" methods – campaign rallies, street stalls, and so on.

While social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter allow for two-way communication, most people are familiar with email as a means to have a conversation. This is certainly borne out by an article from ShareThis, a large provider of "link sharing" apps that people can add to their websites. ShareThis tools allow readers to share links with friends using a range of social networking tools, like Twitter, Facebook and by email. ShareThis found that:

> Despite reports of its demise, e-mail is still the most popular method of sharing, and despite its meteoric rise of late, Twitter is still not a very popular sharing channel. In our research, we found that 46 percent of shares came via e-mail, 33 percent from Facebook, 14 percent from other channels such as Digg, del.icio.us, LinkedIn, etc., and just 6 percent from Twitter.

Source: ShareThis sharing network, Oct 2009
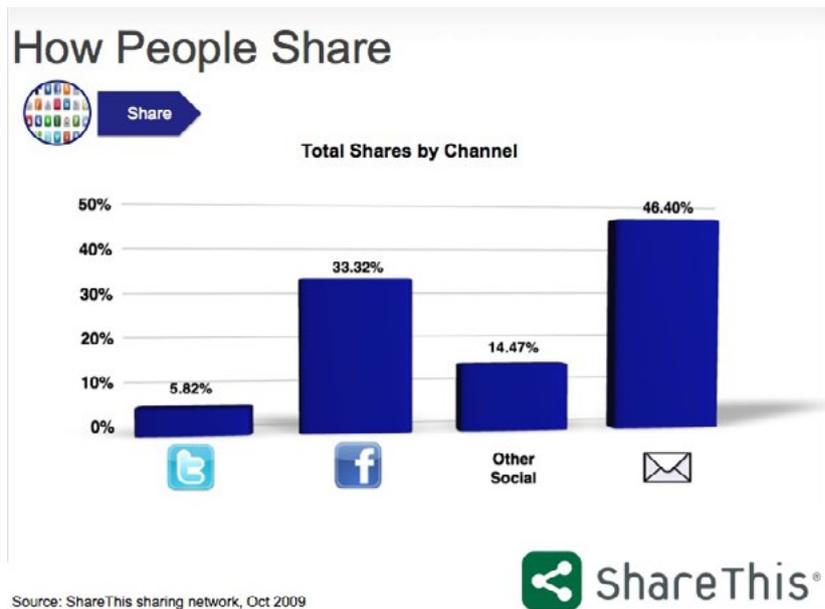
I recommend you read the entire ShareThis article, as it also suggests that while most people share content using email, the click-through rate for Twitter is much higher.

Email also allows you to have a simple, direct call to action. You can engage the reader, then ask them to do something. Having that call to action – join, donate, buy, protest – is essential to effective email campaigns. You can see the success of the email in whether the people who open it do what you ask. An email without a strong call to action is wasted.

Using analytics tools made available by services like Campaign Monitor (and Mailchimp, which is what we use for the NTEU and Creative Unions) allows you to better use email. You can

track things like open rates and clicks; and when used with Google Analytics, you can get a good idea of how people use your website. For unions wanting people to join online or take some kind of online campaign action, this can be invaluable.

The art of writing better union emails

Most unions regularly use emails to communicate with members. This can be responding to emails sent by members, or as email bulletins and newsletters. Many unions do not, however, follow some of the basic email etiquette rules, and often make simple mistakes.

Writing effective emails, whether it is a reply to a concerned member, or a e-newsletter to 10,000 members, is an art that can be easily learned through following a few simple guidelines.

It may surprise you to know that in the not for profit sector, only 13-27% of emails actually get opened. The rest remain unopened or deleted.

1. Keep it short and simple

Like all writing for the internet, writing for emails must be brief, concise and easy to read.

Many unions write long emails that cover multiple topics. This practice may be acceptable for e-newsletters, but not for general bulletins, updates or replies.

Most people get bombarded with emails every day. An office worker may receive 50 or more emails in a day, and irregular users of emails (who may only check their account every few days) could have dozens of emails to read.

Union emails must therefore convey important information in the short time the reader likely has before they move to their next email.

Even e-newsletters should not be overly long. The content in newsletter should be clearly and rationally laid out, so that the reader knows how to find the content they are looking for.

If you must have lots of content, try to put it on your union's website, and link to it in the email, so readers with the time or inclination to read it can do so at their leisure, while those who are uninterested can go to other content

Only 13-27% of emails actually get opened. The rest remain unopened or deleted.

2. Ineffective subject lines or "From" fields

Many union emails have subject lines like "Union Circular 323/09 re Next AREO Training Course", "URGENT: Important Enterprise Bargaining Information Inside" or just "Union Bulletin 21".

Needless to say, these aren't very engaging or easy to understand subject lines. Why would a member open the email?

Union emails must be descriptive, simple and consistent. Email subject lines should describe the content of the email. If it is a newsletter, say it's a newsletter. If it's collective bargaining information, describe the information.

Avoid "spammy" subject lines – anything that looks like it is putting a "hard sell", or is in All-Caps is likely to remain unopened, deleted or picked up by the member's spam filter.

Subject lines should be short. Long subject lines can often by truncated by email programs, so that the reader doesn't see the entire line. Similarly, readers can be turned off by long subject lines and simply decide not to open it.

Another tip is: don't try to get too creative. Most people get lots of emails trying to sell them things. The subject lines for these emails often read like a headline in a newspaper or blog – trying to suck them into reading the email. Believe it or not, boring (but descriptive and concise) email subjects are more effective than "exciting" or "attention grabbing" ones.

3. Don't attach unnecessary files

While the days of people having email accounts with only a few megabytes of storage are largely over, not everyone has broadband internet or unlimited account space.

When sending emails to members, whether a personal reply to an individual member or a large bulk email to all members, make sure you only attach a file if necessary.

Ensure the file sizes are as small as possible. Don't mail large video or sound files, and make sure the image files you're sending have been re-sized to be smaller. Try to avoid sending files that are larger than 1mb in size unless absolutely necessary.

4. Don't write in CAPITALS, use **red text** or <u>underline</u>

These days, using All-Caps indicates that the writer is "shouting". A member reading an email with ALL CAPITAL THROUGHOUT IT may think that the writer is shouting, expressing anger, frustration or being aggressive. Do not all-capitals to emphasise a point. If you must emphasise something, use italicised text.

Similarly, use of red text or <u>underline</u> to emphasise something can be easily misunderstood as aggression, anger or shouting. Many readers can mistake red text as conveying that they (the reader) have done something wrong, or are at risk of a penalty of some kind.

When writing an email, remember that the reader can't hear your tone or see your expression. You want to make sure that what you are writing can't be mistaken as anger or aggression.

5. Watch out for list fatigue

During the height of an industrial action or community campaign, you may be sending emails multiple times per week. Your members may start to grow tired of the constant updates and start not reading or deleting your emails. They know that they can read the next email tomorrow, rather than the one they get today.

This comes back to consistency. You should allow members to opt out of frequent email lists, or opt in to daily, weekly or monthly emails from the union. Activists and delegates for example are more likely to want to receive daily or weekly updates.

6. Check for grammar, spelling, formatting, emoticons, and abbreviations

Just like you would proof-read a hard-copy letter, make sure you read and re-read your emails. Check for grammar and spelling. Use your word processor's or email client's spell check function. Avoid using abbreviations (such as BTW = by the way or IMO = in my opinion).

Emails should convey professionalism from the union. Spelling mistakes, poor grammar and abbreviations can make your union seem amateur. Additionally, some abbreviations and emoticons, such as : -) for a smiley face, may not be understood by every reader. It could be misunderstood or confuse the reader.

Check your formatting. Make sure you have kept it simple, without excess HTML (that is, fancy formatting).

7. Don't use a background colour or fancy fonts

Some email programs allow you to set a background colour for all your emails. Resist the temptation to use non-standard fonts. Stick to Arial, Verdana or Times.

Your emails will rarely appear to your reader as they do to you. Email programs vary quite widely in how they display an

You should allow members to opt out of frequent email lists.

email. Many combinations of background colour and text colour could be unreadable. Similarly, if you use a non-standard font, your reader may not have it installed on their computer.
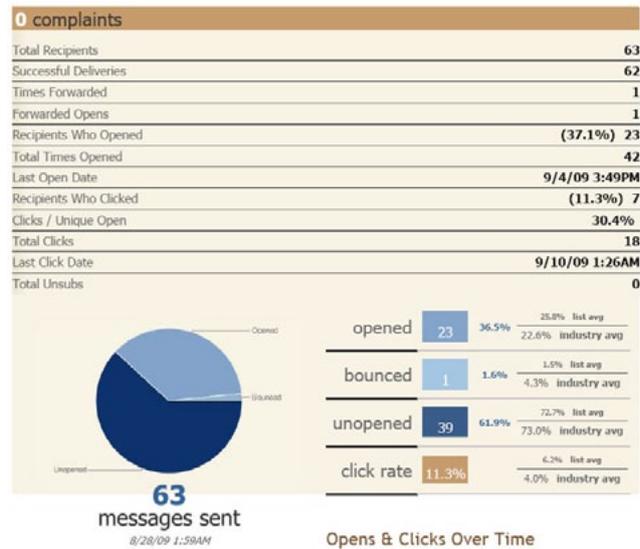
8. Track email open rates and clicks

For emails sent to large numbers of people, use an email program that allows you to track the number of opened emails, bounced emails and click-throughs on links.

The screenshot above shows a report from a recent small-scale email campaign that Creative Unions ran.

As you can see, despite the fact that we had 63 people who had opted in to receive updates from us, only 23% of them opened the email, and only 11% clicked on a link in the email.

As I noted in the introduction to this article, only between 13-27% of emails for the non-profit sector actually get opened. While unions may like to think that every member opens an email from their union, this is unlikely to be the case.

There are lots of programs and service providers that give you this option, and some of them are free. If your website was designed by a professional web design company, it is likely that they can offer you this service.

A Word from Blue State Digital

A while ago, Thomas Gensemer of Blue State Digital, the company responsible for Barack Obama's website, discussed the role of not-for-profit newsletters. His point is that e-newsletters are becoming less useful, and instead, the not-for-profit sector should focus on "short, simple, action-oriented advocacy emails", aimed at getting readers to take a specific action:

> When is the last time you read a nonprofit email newsletter?
>
> Or rather, when is the last time you read a nonprofit email newsletter for an organization you don't work for?
>
> The point of my argument is simple: that for all the effort it takes to produce a high-quality e-newsletter – to write the articles, choose the graphics, format the html coding, ensure that the email is compatible in every email browser- the returns are typically pretty dismal.
>
> But short, simple, action-oriented advocacy emails – like those used by Barack Obama's presidential campaign and so many of our clients – are both easier to produce, and create a larger, stronger and healthier email program. They've worked not only for the Obama campaign, but dozens of successful strategy engagement clients at BSD, including the American Red Cross, Wal-Mart Watch, Sundance Film Festival, and the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network and many, many more.

I'm inclined to agree.

The not-for-profit sector should focus on "short, simple, action-oriented advocacy emails", aimed at getting readers to take a specific action.

Five reasons why unions should care about email

Although email has been around for decades, it is still the cutting edge of campaigning and communication. Even in the age of social media, Twitter, Facebook, and iphone apps, email is by far the most used way that people use to send information – more than 94% of adults send or receive emails regularly, higher than everything else. Almost everyone who uses the Internet uses email.

Emails, unlike websites or social media, allow unions to send our message right into their inbox – and because of this it can feel more important and personal. We're going right into their home, their study, their living room or study to have a conversation. Politicians and businesses have been using email for years – but don't worry, email is more than ebay catalogues or media releases.

Email campaigning is amongst the safest, cheapest form of mass public relations and communication out there. It can be deeply personal, highly engaging, and spur the recipient into doing amazing things for your union campaign.

For all of these reasons, unions should treat email more seriously than just send out an all-member email using Outlook, Lotus Notes or Gmail. Unfortunately, too often I see unions cut and paste their email list into the BCC field of Microsoft Outlook, without a thought about how many people actually read the email. Worse still, I've seen union leaders assume that most, if not all, recipients of their email actually open the email and read it. Unfortunately nothing could be further from the truth.

So, why should unions care about email?

1. Email builds relationships

Emails that you send may be broadcast, but the recipient can email back. This dialog means that you can engage with your members and subscribers in a personal way. While engagement and relationship building is at the core of social media, email has done it for years. Well-written emails can convey enormous information about your union and your campaign – even if they don't write back.

In my experience, email lets union members and supporters reply to broadcasts – and when you start talking back, you're more deeply engaging with them than any other form of communication other than a face-to-face conversation.

If you're doing email properly, with a permission based list, then in most cases, you're in a good starting position as well – your email recipients want to hear what you've got to say.

2. Email is cheap

Email itself is free to send, but if you want to do email properly, you should use an email marketing service, like the excellent Mailchimp (or the service that I offer). While there are costs to sending good quality emails – staff time, design – it is far less expensive than direct mail.

3. Email lets you micro-target and segment

If you are using a good email campaign service, you should be able to vary the content of your email based on what you know about them. Where they live, their workplace, their age and gender, or whatever other information. The more personal you make your email content, the higher the likelihood that the recipient will open your email and take action.

4. Email give you instant feedback

Email statistics and analytics gives you detailed feedback on how well your email campaigns are faring. How many people are opening your email? How many forward it to a friend or colleague? How many unsubscribe? How many click on the link? Good email services should integrate with Google Analytics, so you can follow them from the email you send to your union's campaign website.

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You could get an email campaign up and running, from conception, writing, design and sending in just a few hours.

5. Email is quick

Unlike printed flyers, newsletters or posters, emails can allow for rapid response. You could get an email campaign up and running, from conception, writing, design and sending in just a few hours. You can also decide to send the email at optimal times – good email services let you schedule when the email gets sent.
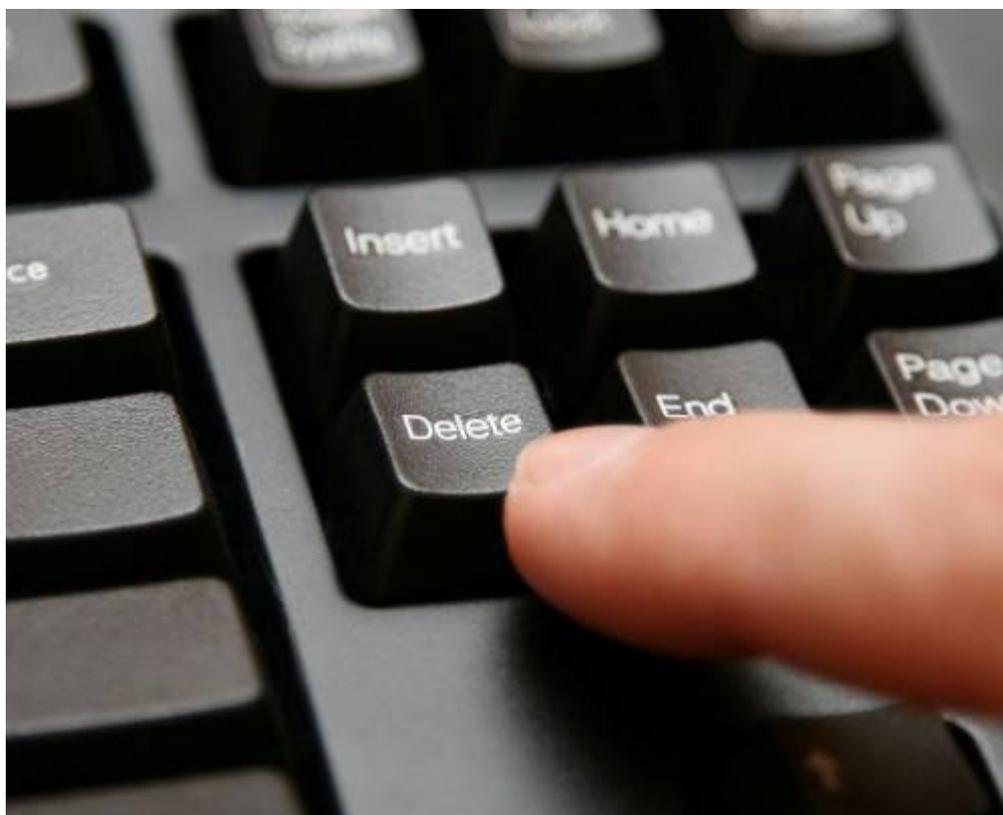
Note: These benefits are not necessarily exclusive to email – other social media tools offer some of these features as well.

Six reasons why no one read your latest union e-bulletin

So, you've signed up for MailChimp, got yourself a new email template design, and started to track emails… and found out that none of your members read it. **Why?**

Here are six reasons why your latest email was rubbish. Perhaps the open-rate was below average, or no one clicked through to the links, or perhaps there were a lot of spam reports. Or, sin of sins, perhaps the email was for one of your union's events and no members turned up.

1. Your subject line was weak

I've written before about the need to ensure your email subject lines are engaging, descriptive and not "spammy".

The subject line is important – most people see the the subject first, before they see the content or design. So your subject needs to make them want to open your email.

Keep it short; Tell them what they are about to open; & Make it relevant and interesting.

Most email services let you do A/B testing for subject lines. This means you send one version of the email with one subject line to a segment of your email list, and another version of the email with another subject line to another segment of your email list. Whichever gets the highest open rate after a set period of time goes to the remainder of your list. This means you're more likely to send emails that are more likely to be opened by your recipients.

A few tips:

* **Keep it short** – Most people don't want to read a lot and long emails can get cut off in window-panes. With the increased use of email on mobile phones, there is an even higher chance that your subject line will be cut off.

* **Tell them what they are about to open** – don't try to fool your recipients into opening something that isn't urgent by saying it is "URGENT". If you use "catchy" or "spammy" language, people are less likely to open emails from you in future.

* **Make it relevant and interesting** – Although I said don't be catchy, you should still be descriptive and interesting. This blog post could have been called "Six Email Tips", but instead is called "Six Reasons No One Opened Your Last Email" – it's more descriptive and interesting. Make sure that the subject accurately describes what's in the content of the email. If it's an e-newsletter, then there's no harm saying it's a newsletter, so long as you also give an idea of the contents – and of course, don't forget to AB test.

There's a great article about writing email subject lines for non-profits here.

2. The design was poor

It's not enough to plonk a logo or a photo in your email. You need to make sure that your design looks good in a variety of different email reading programs, including Outlook, Gmail, Hotmail and Yahoo, among others. What looks good on your computer may look like rubbish on your member's computer.

As far as design goes – don't go overboard. Keep things simple and clean – often a logo and your union's colours are enough. You don't need loads of CSS or other fancy stuff (unless there's a reason and you can do it well).

Also, remember to include a plain-text version of the email. Many email readers block images or default to plain-text. Without a plain-text version of your email, it may not be visible, could get blocked as spam or turn into computer-gibberish.

Most email marketing services create plain text version of your emails automatically.

3. It was too long

I've seen emails that are over 1000 words long. Great, tedious diatribes. I've seen as open-rates to those union members have dwindled to almost nothing as a result.

Today's Internet users are getting more and more used to short communications. Twitter limits you to 140 characters. Facebook focuses on short status updates. People's online attention span is getting shorter.

There is some research that lots of people don't scroll down in emails they get – if they can't read it on the screen all at once, they're unlikely to scroll down. (This is not always the case of course, but worth keeping in mind.)

There are some emails that can be long – e-newsletters and bulletins for example can have a lot of content. However, increasingly non-profits are just including "teasers" in their emails with links to the longer article on their website. This is something that unions could keep in mind.

4. There was no call to action

Every email you send to your members should have a call to action. This could just be a link to your website, but there should be a reason you're sending your email (see next point). I've lost count of the number of times I've received emails from unions (or had to send them myself) that are just "for information" – instead of asking members to DO SOMETHING.

The take-away. Have a call to action in every email – even alerts and updates. Make it clear, bold and up front.

5. There was no reason to send the email

This ties into the "no call to action" problem. Everyone – including your members – gets scores (or even 100s) of emails each day. Your union's emails are just one amongst the many jostling to be opened, read and acted upon. Don't waste your members' time (not to mention yours) by sending emails that don't have a point to them.

Before you hit send, stop and ask yourself: "Why am I sending this message?" Does the message have a clear purpose? If you can't answer these questions adequately, then you are probably doing more harm than good. You are certainly ensuring that the next time you send an email to that member, they are less likely to read it.

6. You didn't follow it up

Nothing beats in person, one to one communication. Emails let you communicate with 100s or even 1000s of members, but

Every email you send to your members should have a call to action.

Giving your email address to someone – or an organisation – is a large act of trust.

without following them up, it's still a waste. This is especially the case if you've asked them to do something like fill out a form, poll or register for an event.

The follow up could be via email or a phone call. It could even be automated. Lots of email marketing services have auto-responder options, which let you set up automatic email responses to specific actions or circumstances.

Don't overload your members

Email is an excellent way to easily and cheaply communicate with your members. A good union email should always include some kind of call to action – an "ask" for the recipient to do something, whether forwarding the email, visiting a website, donating money or registering an event.

The best thing is that most union members not only accept emails from their union, they expect and value them. Similarly, for campaign-specific email lists that include non-members and people from the general community, there is an expectation of regular updates from the campaign.

However, a successful union email strategy relies on balance in many areas. Balance in trying the calls to action in your e-mails and balance in the amount of e-mails you send over a period of time.

Giving your email address to someone – or an organisation – is a large act of trust. Someone's email address can be very private – especially their personal email address. We, as unionists, need to recognise and respect this fact. When they give us their email address, we need to ensure that the emails we send are relevant to them. People get hundreds of emails. If we're not giving them compelling emails, why would they read emails we send them?

How can we solve this problem?

Well, let's start with how many e-mails you send out.

If you are building an email list from your campaign websites using any mainstream autoresponder, you will have access to the statistics for sign-ups and unsubscribers. Keeping a watchful eye on your growth and ratio of unsubscribes you get is essential. The aim of any email campaigning effort is to stay present in your audience's minds without overloading them with an e-mail every single day and simply annoying them.

There are no hard and fast rules for how many e-mails you can send in a week since it largely depends on your target audience

and how you've built your list up to this point. For example, if you send an e-mail out every two days, each e-mail trying to get your list to do something or donate money, you are likely to have a lot of unsubscribers. Obviously, this is detrimental to your future success. In this case it may not be the volume of e-mails you're sending out, but the fact that you're trying too hard to get your subscribers to do something in every single e-mail. In my experience, more than one email in the same day is a definite no-no. Not only does open-rates dramatically drop, but unsubscribes also increase.

Not only that, writing an e-mail every day or two is very time-consuming, with not necessarily a return on that time. As a general rule of thumb, you should only send out emails for genuine news or important issues. More than twice a week can test your subscribers' patience.

Most members and subscribers have expectations about the numbers of emails they receive from their union. Going outside of those bounds can violate the trust they've put in you. Consistency in sending emails is very important. If you send emails sporadically, you don't build up rapport or trust with your members

When you do send out an email with an important call to action, it's a good idea to let your members know exactly what the email is trying to do, tell them why it's important, and why you think it will benefit them. This helps maintain a high level of trust from your members, and helps keep your action rate up.

How much is too much?

There are two ways to check whether you are sending too many emails. Your open rates and your unsubscribe rates. ([You're using an email service that can track these things, right?](#))

If you're losing more than 1% of your email list each week through unsubscribes, then you're definitely sending out to many emails. If you're losing subscribers, then decrease the rate you send emails. Try sending "newsletter" style emails, that are made up of links to your union's website or blog articles. These can replace individual update emails that you've previously been sending on a daily or twice-daily basis.

You may also notice that your email open-rates have dramatically dropped after sending a few emails over one or two days. Average open rates are – in my experience – between 15-25%, but I've seen them drop to less than 4% when three or four emails were sent to members over two days. People just get fatigued, and no matter how many times you put "urgent" in the subject line they aren't going to open your email.

One of the best things you can do to really maximise your e-mail campaigning strategies is to give your members "valuable info", meaningful calls to action, and a reason to return to your

To really maximise your e-mail campaigning strategies is to give your members "valuable info", meaningful calls to action, and a reason to return to your campaign or union website time and again.

campaign or union website time and again. By doing this you are much more likely to have a higher response to your calls to action or increase your traffic to your website.

Getting email stats
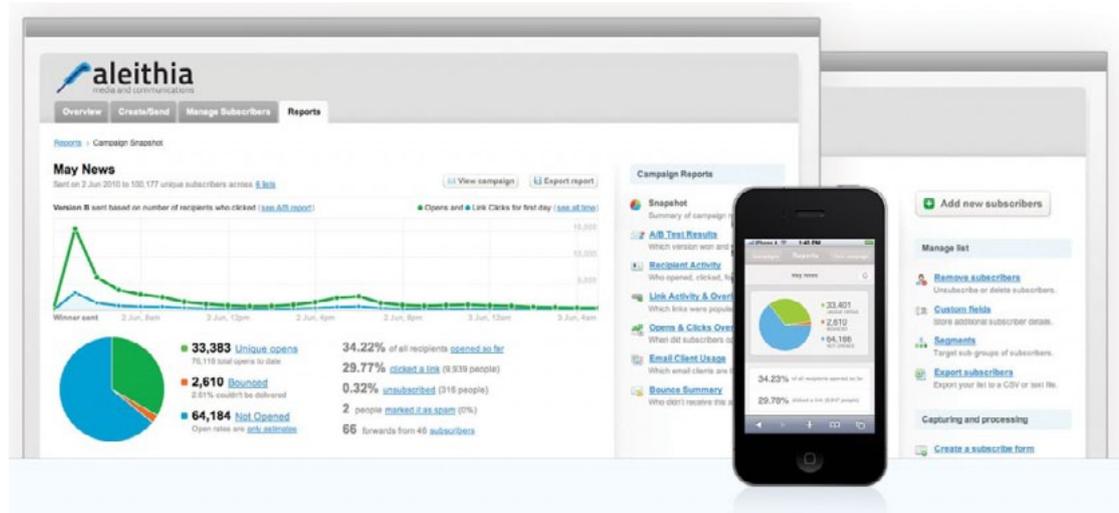
> Using a program like Outlook or another email program denies you important information about whether your members open your emails or click on the links.

I've seen too many times unions sending bulk emails to hundreds or even thousands of emails to their members using Microsoft Outlook. Using a program like Outlook or another email program denies you important information about whether your members open your emails or click on the links. It also makes it difficult to send emails that look good.

That's why I've set up a boutique email campaign service for progressive causes, that provides all of this information, handles lists, and gives you amazing analytics.

There are literally hundreds of email service providers like this – some of them of very high quality, like MailChimp or BSD Tools (which is very expensive). However, your union absolutely should use a service that provides statistics – and can handle unsubscribes (which can be required under Spam Laws).

Campaign Monitor has a fantastic resource for email campaigning. Check it out here.

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Email list etiquette for unions

As membership based organisations, unions regularly send emails to their members. Most members accept – and even expect – regular email updates from their union.

Despite this, unions should still respect the principles of good email etiquette when it comes to unsubscribing and permission-based sending. This is especially the case when your union is running a campaign that sends emails to people who are not members but support the union's campaign.

Most professional email services (such as Mailchimp, or my own Campaign Advantage) have these principles hard-wired into them. So it can be a good idea to review what good email etiquette is.

When someone gives their email address to your union, they are generally entrusting you with a responsibility to not misuse that information.

Get permission

Make sure the people you're sending emails to have given you permission to send them emails.

This may seem obvious – especially since union members "opt in" when they join your union. If you can, you should try to add a note on your membership form that specifically states that they will receive emails from the union – this makes it absolutely clear for the member, and you, that they will receive emails.

If you're running a campaign and are collecting email addresses, make sure you also include a specific opt in tick box or clause on the petition or form you are using.

By not getting permission, you also run the risk of your emails being marked as spam. Most large organisations (where your members likely work) use spam-blocking services. If a significant number of people mark your emails as spam, it can get you, your host or your service black-listed, which means that lots of your emails will never reach their intended recipient (this is the case for using third-party lists below).

Don't use third-party lists

This is the simple exension of the first point. Don't use emails you get from someone else. In most cases, it is against spam laws, and even if it's not, the people whose emails you are being

If you can, you should try to add a note on your membership form that specifically states that they will receive emails from the union.

It is your responsibility as a good email-citizen to remove the email addresses of people who no longer want to receive your emails from your list.

given or (hopefully not) have purchased are not expecting emails from you.

This is even the case if you get emails from another union or peak body. If you are running a campaign in a sector with another union or group, rather than get their list to send emails to, ask that organisation to send an email from them on your behalf.

Also, this almost goes without saying, don't buy lists. I've received emails from businesses offering lists of emails of people associated with the sector my union works in. Bought email lists are bad news – they are rarely accurate, and the people whose emails you are being offered have not opted in to get your emails.

What's more, most professional email services won't allow them.

Remove unsubscribes as soon as possible

Most spam laws require bulk emails to include a "one click" unsubscribe method at the end of the email. It is your responsibility as a good email-citizen to remove the email addresses of people who no longer want to receive your emails from your list.

Professional email services will do this automatically, but some people reply to emails they receive asking to be removed manually. Make sure you check your manual unsubscribe before sending any bulk-emails.

For emails of non-members – gained for a campaign – this is a no-brainer. The person who wants to unsubscribe simply doesn't want to receive your campaign emails any more.

When members want to unsubscribe, it's a bit more complicated. Obviously as a union, you have the right to communicate with your members. You may have an obligation to send them information regarding their rights to attend Annual General Meetings or similar events.

However, a member who wants to unsubscribe from your bulk-emails is basically telling you that they don't read your emails anyway. Is it really worth sending them emails they won't read – and that may annoy them when they keep receiving them?

Stay on topic

This isn't that hard for a union – but it's worth keeping in mind. If someone has subscribed to campaign updates about your issue – such as industrial action or wage case – then all your emails should be about that issue. You shouldn't send them, out of the blue, an offer about cheap homeloans from

Members Equity, or deals from Union Shopper – or updates about an unrelated campaign issue.

Similarly for members, it's a good idea in the first email to a new member, to set out what kind of updates they can expect from you. You may send out periodic e-newsletters, campaign updates, messages from the Secretary or media releases – so you should let your new member know to expect those in their inbox.

If your email service can handle it, you could set up groups or segments – which cover the various types of topics you're likely to send emails about. This can let your members decide what kinds of emails they want to recieve.

The bonus is that if you stay on topic, and give some of this power back to your members, they're far more likely to remain interested and engaged with your emails, rather than just hitting "spam" or "delete".

It's a good idea in the first email to a new member, to set out what kind of updates they can expect from you.

Understanding Email Analytics

At my union, the NTEU, we use email extensively to communicate with members. Branches send out regular email bulletins and news updates and emails individual members; the Division likewise sends out state-wide email communications on an ad hoc basis.

Until recently, we had no empirical way of determining the success or otherwise of the emails we send. We have not known how many members actually open the emails we send, or how many **act** upon the emails. Until recently, there has been no testing of what subject lines, or sender-names are most effective in being opened, or acted upon, by the people we send to. Emails have been sent in the past with little knowledge of the demographics of who opens them, for example: which departments, faculties, campuses, time-fraction or gender. We haven't known who regularly forwards emails - except anecdotally.

In 2009, in the lead up to a series of strikes, I decided to start using a "software as service" (SAS) called MailChimp, that allows detailed analysis of the emails we send. We tracked how many people opened our emails, how many bad (out of date) email addresses there were, the number of times people clicked on our links, whether the email was forwarded and the details of who actually opened the email. We are also able to do things like measure which subject lines of emails are opened more – thus allowing us to increase our open rates. We can see whether more people open email at a certain time of day.

Testing

From September 2009 to January 2010, I sent sent over 69,998 NTEU emails to NTEU members, using a variety of tools like A/B testing of subjects and sender-names.

As a result of this, we learned that our email was opened by an average of 17.68% of members, with the highest open rate 36.36% and the lowest 6.06%.

Open Rates for NTEU (Sept 09-Jan 10)
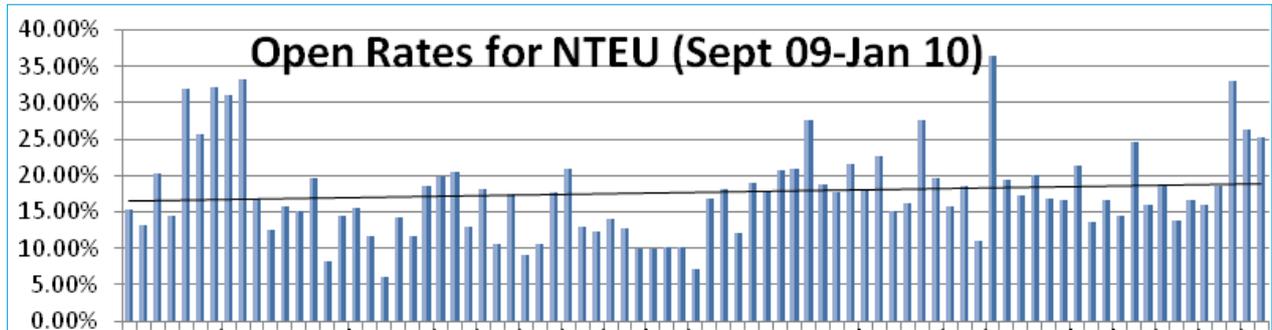
Well less than half of our members actually opened the email we sent. Our open rates, compared to the Education industry open rates (25.86%), were low.

Industry Standards

Open Rates (averages)
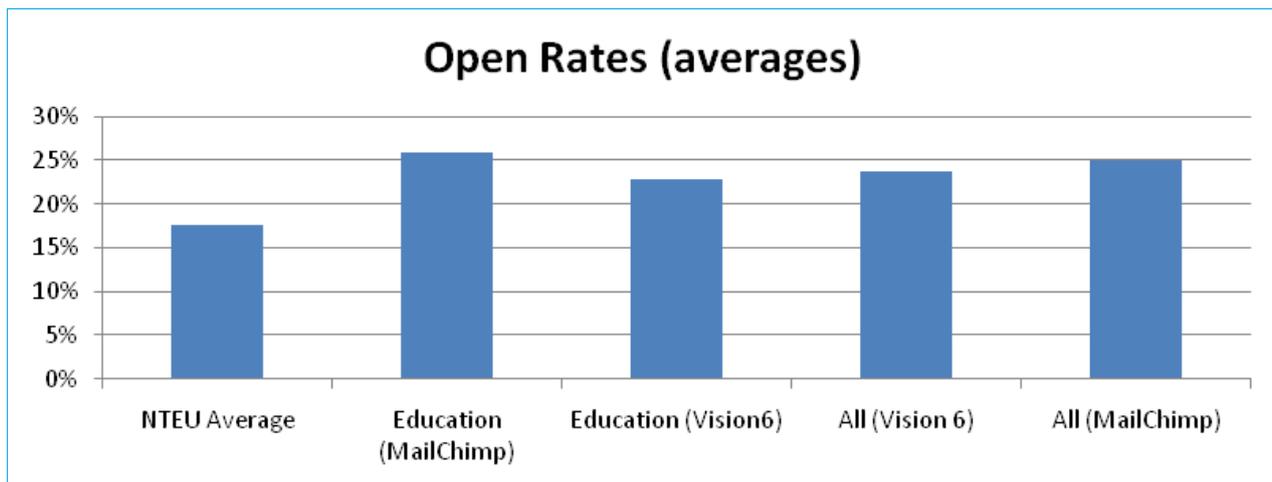
Several email campaign companies provide statistics for email open-rates broken down by industry, and overall. This shows that overall, our open rates were below average, although some email campaigns were considerably above average.

How does tracking work?

MailChimp (and most other similar services), places an invisible HTML graphic at the bottom of each HTML email (called a "web beacon"). Each time the HTML email is displayed in a recipient's inbox, that unique graphic for our campaign gets downloaded from the MailChimp server, which is tracked as an "open."

Email clients that block images prevent us from counting that person as an "open", unless they click on the link. This means that open rates are under-counted as an absolute measure.

Services like MailChimp also track clicks, which are counted as "opens" if for some reason the web beacon doesn't work.

Without thinking about what we want out of our email campaigns, we can't improve.

The email service industry suggests that open rate under-reporting is roughly 5%.

How this is useful: Benchmarking

Even acknowledging that the open-rates reports are not exact, they do allow us to track improvements, trends and to allow us to better use emails. The data we have creates benchmarks for future improvement.

For example, we can observe that open rates were significantly lower for the second email sent in a single day. We can also observe that open rates for the same campaign decline over time. Email campaigns that are A/B split tested have a several percent higher open-rate than non-A/B tested emails.

Over time, we can integrate our campaign analytics, so more accurately track open rates with website usage. This allows us to make email, social media and our website more effective at communicating the union's message.

Of course, we should also be clear about what our success metrics are - that is, what are the criteria for success and improvement. Without thinking about what we want out of our email campaigns, we can't improve.

Other benefits

Email marketing software offers a range of other benefits, in addition to analytics, including easy e-newsletter templates and design, social media integration, simple list/database management and email authentication (for bypassing spam filters).

If your union doesn't currently use email tracking software, you should change as soon as possible.

Download my free e-book:
Social Media for Unions

Download

About Alex White

I am a campaigns and communications coordinator for the
National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), where
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