

## Mailing with Permission

“Permission-based” marketing involves two complimentary and very important aspects. First is the subscription process or how you obtain your recipients’ permission to send them email. There are some very straightforward mechanics for how to gain this permission and how rigorous you can choose to be in doing so.

The other aspect of permission-based marketing, which is often less discussed, has less to do with steps and processes and more to do with your relationship with your customers and how you market yourself to them. It involves the details you give them about your email marketing and the expectations you set—and keep—regarding what they can expect from you if they choose to give you their permission to add them to your email list.

This paper details the different aspects of permission-based marketing. It provides details on the various subscription processes and discusses the pros and cons of each. It also talks about the expectations you should set with your customers *before* you ask them to subscribe to your emails.

### The “Double Opt-In” Subscription Process

One of the primary best practices to which all email marketers should adhere as part of their permission-based marketing is how they create and build their email lists. Permission-based marketing means mailing to recipients only after you’ve gotten their explicit permission to do so. However, there are several different ways to gain this permission, from the very rigorous double opt-in process, to the less favored confirmed and single opt-in. The opt-out process is not recommended at all and does not constitute “permission.”

The highest, most ethical subscription standard is called double opt-in, and it requires prospective subscribers to actively confirm their memberships before receiving your next mailing. In this process, prospective subscribers submit their email addresses and then receive confirmation requests to which they must reply in order to join your list.

Requiring prospective members to confirm their memberships protects them from receiving mail they didn’t sign up for—say, because someone made a typo when entering the email address or because someone thought it was funny to add a “friend” to your list.

Best of all, those who confirm their subscription are most likely to remember it when they receive your email, making it less likely that they’ll report the message as spam.

When you make your list double opt-in, tell your prospective members to expect the confirmation email and the address from which it will come. Explain why you do it this way and why this practice protects them. You might also suggest at this point that the recipient “white list” you by putting your “From” address in their address book to ensure your mail is always received in their main mailbox.

Also be sure that the marketing software or service that handles your email subscriptions delivers the confirmation request to prospective members promptly so that their decision to join your list is still top-of-mind. Recipients who receive confirmation requests within a minute or two of subscribing will be far more likely to complete the confirmation process.

## The double opt-in subscription process offers many benefits:

### Pros

- Builds an audience that truly wants to hear from you: these people have joined your list because they believe you're going to send them something of value.
- Increases mailing delivery rates because double opt-in lists are inherently comprised of valid, deliverable addresses (at least until some addresses are cancelled in the normal course of Internet life).
- Keeps your list clean. Clean lists are delivered faster because the list server doesn't spend time retrying bad addresses. And if you use an Email Service Provider that charges based on your membership, clean lists mean lower hosting bills because you aren't sending messages to recipients who don't exist.
- Helps maintain good ISP relations. By maintaining a list comprised of legitimate addresses, most of your mail will be delivered successfully. If you send large quantities of mail to invalid addresses, ISPs or other email providers may blacklist you and block all of your mail.
- Increases response rates. Double opt-in not only confirms a recipient's email address but also confirms the recipient's interest in what you have to offer.

### Cons

- Some prospective list members will not confirm their subscriptions. (You don't want these people anyway; if they can't be bothered to complete their subscription, how likely is it that they'll buy something from you?)
- Requires more patience to build a large list. If you have 10 thousand addresses and want to grow to one million, the double opt-in process will take some time. It can be very tempting to take a shortcut and rent or purchase a list of addresses, but those are not Best Practices.

## The "Single" Or "Confirmed Opt-In" Subscription Process

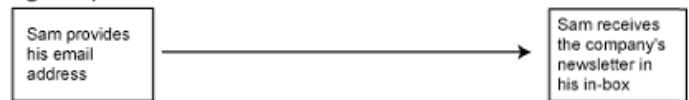
Some email marketers and publishers choose a simpler subscription process. The single opt-in method consists of one basic step: a subscriber provides his email address to you through a Web form, email, or some other channel, and then receives your next mailing with no further administrative steps. If you add

another step—sending the subscriber a one-time confirmation message (e.g., "Thank you for joining...")—then you're using a confirmed opt-in approach.

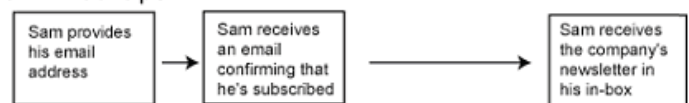
While these two approaches have good intentions, they still allow non-permission-based subscriptions to occur. With either good, humorous, or malicious intentions, a user may sign up her "friend" to your list; that person may then react negatively towards your organization if they don't expect (or if they object to) your mailing.

There are circumstances where single-opt in makes sense, such as for a trade organization that requires a login to access the subscription form. In this case, the opportunity for mistakes or abuse would be remote.

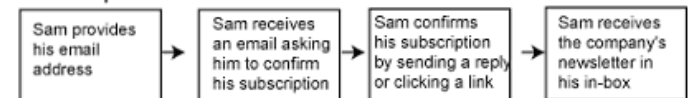
### Single Opt-In



### Confirmed Opt-In



### Double Opt-In



## Include valid, easy-to-use unsubscribe instructions in every message

Permission to send mail is not permanent. Over time, some people in your database will no longer want to hear from you, for any number of reasons. Enabling these members to remove themselves from your list quickly and easily will maintain the trust you previously established and leave a positive feeling, making it more likely that some of them will re-subscribe at a later date. By including a one- or two-click unsubscribe function in the footer of each message, you'll show the public that you're an ethical marketer, differentiate yourself from truly unsolicited email, and comply with the law.

## Don't use an "opt-out" subscription process

Some Web sites include "opt-out" checkboxes or radio buttons on their e-commerce pages, such that shoppers are automatically subscribed to a mailing list upon checkout—unless they notice that part of the form and select the alternative.

This subscription approach may lead to a larger initial number of addresses if you have an active shopping site, but may lead to complaints down the line. If your recipients don't remember asking to receive your email, they may consider the appearance

of your messages in their inboxes as an intrusion and a breach of the trust they placed in you when they placed an order on your Web site.

Sometimes salespeople are tempted to dump their entire list of contacts and prospects into their mailing list, reasoning that anyone on the list must still be interested in their services and can always opt out when they receive the messages. Just because someone has contacted you in the past does not mean they wish to continue that contact in the future!

## Don't rent or buy address lists

It may be tempting to reach out to an interested audience by renting or purchasing a list of addresses. Don't do it.

Is someone who checked off a box saying he's interested in receiving messages about financial services going to connect that action with receiving an email about your offerings? Probably not. And who will be seen as the spammer—the site from which you purchased this “opt-in” address or you? Sending to a rented or purchased list may promise additional leads or sales, but it will certainly generate anger and ill will from recipients who see your message as no different from all of the other junk in their inbox.

That said, if you're intent on trying this approach, we strongly recommend that you audit the address vendor carefully (get references) and consider using a prefix or introductory clause that explains how you obtained the rented addresses and why you are mailing to them.

An alternative to renting or purchasing addresses is to advertise on a Web site or in another email newsletter; if you include a clear call to action, such as “Join our list for special savings,” you may end up with a small net increase in names, but you'll be far more assured that those people actually want to hear from you.

## Set and meet expectations

One of the easiest mistakes list owners make is to send content that their list members don't expect to receive. This happens most often when subscriber expectations aren't well managed from the start; if the sign-up form doesn't describe what they'll receive—or offers a vague promise of “news and special offers”—each subscriber will make his own assumption of what the email announcements will (or won't) include. By not setting expectations clearly or by not meeting those that are set, marketers inadvertently cause people to delete their messages, unsubscribe from their list, or tag their mail as spam. Following this Best Practice is easy enough to start, but it requires good discipline to follow through on.

## Describe the topic, format, and frequency of the mailings you will send

When creating an email sign-up form, publishers have a perfect opportunity to define their email newsletter or promotion to prospective subscribers. We recommend including brief text that describes the topics covered or type of content sent, the email formats offered, and the mailing frequency.

For example, a publisher could indicate that subscribers will receive “a monthly, plain-text newsletter that discusses Issues A, B, and C.” Likewise, a marketer could say that customers will receive “a weekly HTML alert of special, time-limited offers.” To further illustrate their cases, they could both link to previous mailings or samples of the type of content they distribute.

## Reassure prospects about their privacy

As mentioned previously, the sign-up form is a critical place to reassure subscribers that you respect their privacy and the trust they show you by providing their email address.

If you're using a double opt-in process, indicate on the sign-up form that new members should expect to receive a confirmation request; give them the email address from which it will come, and suggest that they “white list” that address or domain.

Next, make your organization's policy about email addresses readily available to prospective list members. Either as stand-alone text or within your larger privacy policy, be crystal clear about how you treat the email addresses and demographic information that list members provide you. Whether you use it internally only, share it with selected affiliates, or offer it to list brokers, let people know what they can expect.

We also recommend that you explain to prospective list members that they may unsubscribe easily from your list—or be removed from your database or otherwise stop receiving communications from you—at any time. The current CAN-SPAM legislation requires such unsubscribe instructions to be included within messages, but you build additional good will and trust by explaining them upfront, before people actually submit their personal information to you.

## Deliver what you say you will—not much more and not much less

If you tell list members that you're going to send them a monthly text email with non-commercial content, don't send them weekly HTML messages with sales offers. Follow through with what you promised. And if you ask for personal information or

preferences—for example, text or HTML email format—make sure you actually use it (in this example, send each group their requested format). If list members get something markedly different from what they expected, they'll likely be surprised, frustrated, or disappointed, and you'll miss your chance to build trust. In fact, you might even move the opposite direction and harm your organization's reputation.

Also note that exceeding expectations isn't the only pitfall. If you've promised anything on a regular basis—certain content, delivery frequency, etc.—and then deliver less than that, you may also jeopardize your customer relationships. Anticipation of and interest in your next mailing may drop, or recipients may forget altogether that they'd heard from you previously. If you intend to send a monthly mailing, and then take a six-month break, be prepared for a surprised audience.

### **Watch out for negative feedback if you bend—or break—your habits**

On occasion, you may find it necessary (or at least very tempting) to send content that doesn't fit your typical practice or subscribers' expectations. In these cases, proceed carefully and watch out for negative reactions; direct complaints will be obvious, but a higher than usual unsubscribe rate or lower than normal click-through rate may be signs that list members did not like your "special" message.

In order to minimize fallout, we recommend that you preface your email with a clear indication of why you're sending the anomalous message; don't apologize for it, just present your rationale succinctly. A simple "We're sending all regular subscribers this one-time, special announcement about..." can preempt negative reactions—as long as you really mean "one time." If you expect to send similar messages to your entire database in the future, the best practice is to let recipients know of your intended permanent change in advance.

### **Ask for topic and frequency preferences—and use them!**

If you have a wide range of topics to discuss or offers to promote, or a very aggressive mailing schedule, consider offering subscribers a choice of what they want to receive and how often. You can then use the segmentation function of your email marketing tool to send specific content to the subscribers who've requested it. This approach helps prevent list burnout, and shows your list members that you recognize their personal interests.

### **Conclusion**

The nature of marketing is to try to get your message out to as many in your target audience as possible. However, this perspective can work against you if you only consider this goal and not your audience's reasons for receiving your emails or their reactions if their interests and preferences are not respected. By building the relationship, setting expectations, and consistently meeting or exceeding those expectations, your message will get through and will likely do so in a way that is far more effective in the long run.

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**LYRIS**

Lyris Technologies, Inc  
5858 Horton Street, Suite 270  
Emeryville, CA 94608

USA and Canada: 800-768-2929  
International: +1-510-844-1600  
Fax: +1-510-844-1598

email: [sales@lyris.com](mailto:sales@lyris.com)  
[www.lyris.com](http://www.lyris.com)