Email Marketing for Hoteliers:
A Step-by-Step Guide

Tactics to Boost your Email Marketing ROI

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Introduction

Email marketing is an easy and affordable way to stay in touch with key customer segments, and can be one of the most effective ways to grow your hotel's occupancy rates and revenue. However, to run a successful email campaign, it's important to carefully plan your email strategy prior to deployment. You'll want to define your business objectives and what you are hoping to achieve through email marketing.

In this guide we will demonstrate how hoteliers can use email to increase revenues by driving higher room bookings, improve guest retention, reach a highly targeted audience, and reinforce other marketing efforts.

The guide outlines seven actionable steps you can take to execute successful email campaigns that get results for your hotel, including how to:

1. Build Your Email List
2. Develop Your Content Strategy
3. Design & Layout Your Template
4. Test Your Mailing
5. Automate Your Marketing
6. Deploy Your Campaign
7. Measure Your Results & Refine Your Strategy

The goal of this comprehensive guide is to help you understand some general best practices and then you can decide on the tactic or tactics that will work best for your hotel. The right email marketing strategy for your hotel will depend on your objectives and your available resources.

The steps in this guide will help you increase awareness of your brand, engage your customers, drive traffic to your website, and increase your revenue!

Step 1
Build Your Email List

The foundation of a successful email marketing campaign comes from organically building a permission-based list and sending relevant messages to a targeted audience. What this means is that the people receiving your emails requested (opted-in) to hear from you. As tempting as it may be to upload addresses from purchased lists, these prospects have yet to engage with your brand. Sending an "email blast" to recipients who have not participated in a permission-based "opt-in" campaign will seem intrusive and they are likely to either unsubscribe or not engage.

Grow Your List Organically

Suggestions for beginning to grow a responsive permission email list:

Include a short sign up form on every page of your website: Convert visitors into subscribers by making it easy for them to sign up for your newsletter.

Make it easy to unsubscribe or change mailing preferences: The easier it is for someone to change preferences or get off your list, the less likely they are to hit the "spam" button when they see your email in their inbox.

Create an incentive for website visitors to opt-in: In exchange for their email address what will they get (e.g., special email offers, vacation packages and promotions, food and beverage coupons, entertainment offers)?

Add "forward to a friend" functionality: Extend your reach by making it easy for subscribers to share your message with their friends, family and colleagues.

Place a link to your sign up form in your email signature (and that of hotel staff): It's a way to subtly suggest that prospects sign up to receive your email newsletter.

Capture email addresses at reception: Have your reception staff ask for email addresses during check-in or check out. Capture them on the web, by phone, reception, bar, spa, etc.

Add "social sharing" functionality: By integrating social share buttons in your email marketing, you'll increase brand awareness and sales.

Invite guests to subscribe: In your post-stay thank you email, invite guests to subscribe to your newsletter if they haven't done so already.

Add a newsletter signup checkbox to your contact form: Consider adding an incentive for visitors to subscribe.

Incorporate opt-in invitations into transactional communications: Dynamically (i.e., offered only to those not already opted in) incorporate a prominent "opt-in" invitation into reservation, cancellation, pre-stay, post-stay and promotional emails.

Incorporate social media: Ask guests to follow you on your social networks by adding a simple line or two to your communications. For example, "Follow us on Twitter" or "Like us on Facebook."

Step 2
Develop Your Content Strategy

To create an effective content strategy, it's critical to strike a balance between promotional messaging and customer value. Develop your content strategy by answering some questions about your customers: What topics and types of content are they interested in? Think about the content from your audience's point of view. When a new or existing customer signs up for your newsletter, they're doing so because they see a benefit. The key is not to disappoint them. Create campaigns that highlight your hotel through interviews, articles, special packages, and other newsworthy information.

Define your goals

Before launching a campaign, it's important to consider your email content strategy and clearly define goals. Are you looking to increase room bookings? Increase repeat business? Find additional revenue streams though upselling and crossing? Engaging guests with informative information prior to their stay and once they have left? Once your goals are in place, you can craft your content around accomplishing them.

Write the subject line first

The subject line creates your recipients' first impression, so don't wait to write the subject line as you're preparing the email for delivery. It needs to make your recipient want to open, read and engage with your message. Write the subject line first and review it once the content has been written and the template designed to ensure it matches the email's content. It should be short and descriptive (no more than 35 characters or between 5-8 words). Recipients should be able to easily determine if they are interested in reading without opening the message.

Balance content with promotions

As you develop your content strategy, strive to find the perfect balance between interesting and relevant content and promotional messages. If you want to maintain the quality of your list, consider sending non-sales content that's of value to the customer. Although this may seem counterintuitive, if you maintain a customer-centric content strategy, the more likely your recipients are to open your emails and the more likely you are to make sales when you do send out your promotions.

Striking the right balance between "informational" content and "promotional" content is one of the most crucial factors to successful email marketing. All you have to do is put yourself in your customers' shoes.

Step 3
Design & Layout Your Template

Good email design is particularly relevant to the hotel and hospitality industry. To really stand out, your template(s) should be specific to your hotel's brand and begin the guest experience before he or she arrives at your property. Designing an HTML email template is a lot different than designing a webpage, in that there can be issues with images and CSS due to different types of email clients. If you don't have an in-house design team to create one, ask your email service provider or marketing agency if they offer design consulting services that can provide just the look you're seeking.

Stick to HTML email guidelines: Keep the width to about 500-600 pixels; and no more than 600 pixels wide. Depending on the audience, you can actually go as wide as 700 or 800 pixels.

Organize the content: Laying out your content in sections will enable recipients to scan the main points, and make it easier for them to quickly find the area of the newsletter they're most interested in.

Use headlines to outline key points: It is easier for recipients to get the main points of your newsletter, if you use headlines to outline key points. Headlines go along with sectioning your newsletter, helping to organize the content.

Have a clear call to action: Make it easy for your recipients to take action and improve your click through rates by giving it a prominent placement and the space it needs.

Don't embed your message into your images: You want to ensure your message can be read even if images are not displaying.

Assume all CSS will break: In addition to images not displaying, you should assume that any and all CSS will break or not display as intended. Instead of completely using CSS, use HTML tables to control the design layout.

Consider the preview pane: Your major points and top content should appear in the top 200 pixels of the message, as many email clients allow the recipient to preview content without opening it via a preview pane.

Test your emails for readability on mobile screens: Since people will be viewing their emails while on the go, they're much more likely to be accessing their emails from a mobile device. Before deploying your campaign, test your emails for readability on mobile screens.

Step 4
Test Your Mailing

The best way to proof your links and other content is to send a preview to yourself or a test group (also known as a seed list) and review the email in the inbox.

Before launching your email campaign, test your emails on a variety of different email clients and devices. Make sure that the message is correct with a clear call to action and all hyperlinks are working properly. Testing your email campaign before sending helps ensure deliverability to the inbox.

Test Your Content

As with most online marketing, success is achieved through continual testing. Tests usually take the form of simple A/B split testing, where you send two variations of an email at the same time to the same list. Whether you're testing subject lines, sent from addresses, time of day or frequency, HTML vs. Plain Text, etc., you'll want to refine your email marketing strategy based on what you learn.

Where to start — Ideas for testing

Instead of guessing what works, test the content to find out what resonates with your audience.

Email creative: Test design and navigation; use a different image or layout to elicit different behaviors from your customers (e.g., text email vs. HTML, columns vs. a single layout, or test graphics and colors).

Subject lines: The best subject line will contain a call-to-action that grabs the reader's attention and compels them to take action.

Format: If you always send one long column of text, try breaking it up using subheads and bullets.

Time of day: The only way to determine the best time of day to send your email campaigns is by sending at different times of day to see how your recipients respond in terms of opens and click through rates.

Days of the week: Test various days to see when you get the highest open rates, click through rates and conversion rates. Through testing, you will get a better idea whether your emails are more effective on a Wednesday afternoon, Saturday morning or Monday evening.

Offer/Pricing: Determine what offers are likely to increase engagement and conversion from your target audience (e.g., special pricing, exclusive discounts, premium amenities, and last minute deals).

Landing Page: To determine which version is more effective in terms of conversions, direct people to different versions of your landing page, if you have one.

Call to Action: Don't distract by having too many links or offers, and use a command that clearly states what action you want them to take—ensuring that recipients know what to expect when they click through (e.g., "Book Four Nights pay Only for Three," "Get a 20% discount on your next hotel stay," "Like us on Facebook.").

Frequency: To determine what contact frequency is appropriate, ask your subscribers via your website through a customer profile form or survey (e.g., "I prefer you email me: Monthly, Bi-monthly, Only with special discounts.").

Step 5
Automate Your Marketing

To improve the relevance and timeliness of your emails, automate your email campaigns to ensure every guest has a positive experience interacting with your hotel. Once configured and automated, your campaigns are executed without effort.

Create intelligent business rules

By creating intelligent business rules within your database, you can filter prospects and customers based on a particular event in time (i.e., a reservation), certain milestones (i.e., a birthday or anniversary), or behavior patterns (i.e., click through action or inaction) and launch automated offers.

Make the most of transactional messaging

Transactional emails get triggered by a specific action your prospect or customer has taken. For example, whenever someone makes a reservation, a confirmation email is triggered.

Allow for topic and frequency preference

Today's consumer wants to be made to feel unique and engaged. These consumers are bringing the same attitude to the hotels they use. So it's important for hotel marketers to understand and deliver exactly what they're looking for, when they're looking for it. Allow your audience to self-select what types of messages they would like to receive and how often they would like to hear from you.

Create relevancy with dynamic content

With dynamic messaging you create a single custom template and combine "content blocks" and if/then statements that dynamically match and assemble the specific email content to the recipient profiles you've identified. Using content blocks, dynamic segments, and merge fields, you can raise relevance with custom offers that address very specific guest needs and interests. Content blocks let you automatically insert personalized text and graphics into your messages with minimal effort. It goes well beyond "Dear First Name."

Communicate throughout the relationship

Timely and relevant marketing messages should begin at the prospect or booking phase and continue through customer loyalty and high-engagement phases. Once you have a clear understanding of where a prospect or customer resides in the lifecycle, you can segment them into smaller groups or communicate to them on a one-on-one basis.

Reconnect with inactive customers

Before removing inactive subscribers, retarget them. The benefit of retargeting guests with automated nurturing ("drip") campaigns, is that even if a past guest doesn't choose to further engage with your hotel upon receipt of your initial reengagement email (i.e., doesn't make a reservation), you can continue to reach out to them with compelling offers.

Step 6
Deploy Your Campaign

Set a deployment schedule

Let subscribers know when to expect emails from you. This will strengthen and enhance your customer relationships. Be mindful of how often you're sending your email messages. While it might be tempting to email your recipients weekly, if you find that a large number of contacts opt-out of your list due to message frequency, you can use this information to set the schedule of future campaigns.

Subscribers that are opening your emails, clicking on links, and converting are the customers and subscribers you can send emails to more frequently, but only if the emails contain relevant information that is expected and/or will be viewed favorably by the recipients. If you normally send twice a month, test sending three times to your most engaged members since they're the most interested in your hotel or inn. Frequency isn't just about how often you want or need to send your messages. It must take into account how often your subscribers want to hear from you. Each hotelier will find that different rules apply for their prospects and customers. As your approach becomes more targeted, and your emails more relevant, you will begin to automatically establish the right frequency for each customer segment.

It's important to find the right balance when it comes to sending email. Although you don't want to abuse the privilege by sending too frequently, it's also possible to send too infrequently. Send communications too often and people will unsubscribe; not frequently enough and they will forget you.

Step 7
Measure Your Results & Refine Your Strategy

After you send out a campaign, you'll get information on who opened, what bounced, when they opened it, what they clicked, who they forwarded it to, and so on. Analyze the data and measure the results against your goals to shape future email promotions to better target your customer segments and increase conversions.

By tracking the ways in which your audience engage with your emails, you can refine your strategy to send out targeted emails, offers, and information.

Analyze the data

Most email marketing solutions support detailed reporting and statistics for your email campaigns. Analyze the results and refine your strategy based on what works and what doesn't.

• Which links/buttons were clicked more?
• What types of promotions were most effective?
• Which subject lines generated more opens?
• What is the exact time of the day readers viewed your message most?
• Were there spikes in social media activity?

Once you analyze the results and draw conclusions regarding the impact of the campaign, you can generate insights into why the campaign performed as it did. Depending on the goals of the campaign and the behavior of subscribers, you might need to tweak different elements for your next campaign to generate the results you want.

Track your ROI

To measure the ROI from each email campaign there are a few metrics you'll want to analyze as part of your tracking method:

• Open rates
• Bounce rates
• Click through rate
• Conversion rate
• Spikes in web traffic
• Spikes in social media activity

In addition to tracking opens, bounces and click throughs, you'll want to measure your conversion rate, which tells you how many of the recipients actually took the action you anticipated. The popularity of content isn't the only type of data you can learn from. Look for patterns in the times and days you send your emails. You might learn that your messages get the most results when sent on Saturday mornings, for example. Perhaps you'll find that Saturdays have lower open rates, but better click throughs and conversions.

After running some split tests and analyzing the results of your first campaign, you're ready to refine your strategy to see what will improve response and elicit the best results. To fully understand the real success of your email marketing campaigns, you need to analyze your open rates, bounce rates and click through rates and use the results as the basis for changing or maintaining a strategy or tactic in your email campaign.

Conclusion

In this guide, we demonstrated how hoteliers can use email marketing to increase revenues by driving higher room bookings, improve guest retention and reach a highly targeted audience. Whether you're brand new to email marketing or are a seasoned veteran, following the steps provided in this guide will help you create and hone your campaigns to more effectively sell your hotel.

In the end, the amount of increased revenue and customer retention you will realize from your email marketing program depends upon how much effort you put into it. There is no need to feel overwhelmed if you have limited resources. Start by implementing the most basic tactics in this guide, and in a short period of time you are likely to see significant results from each email campaign. As you begin to have more resources, you can move your email marketing campaign on to the next phase and tackle more advanced tactics.

As with any marketing channel, a well-executed strategy will result in a better understanding of your target audience. However, no channel can exist in a bubble. There are simply too many channels for any one of them to work in isolation. Brands should engage with consumers through an integrated cross channel strategy, with email marketing at its core. Aligning messages across channels can be made more effective by lining up all messages to reinforce one another.

Email marketing is an effective tool to maximize ROI on two of your most valuable assets—your data and your guests. You gain measurable benefits to your property through long-term customer relationships, brand awareness, increased occupancy rates and repeat business.