

# 12 TIPS FOR AMAZINGLY EFFECTIVE EMAIL SUBJECT LINES

act-on

# Introduction

As an email marketer, you must navigate a number of critical issues before your audience can engage with you – messaging, call to action, design, mobile design, and more – but unless your email is actually opened, those critical issues become non-issues. In this eBook, we'll look at 12 ideas for ensuring your messages make it to the inbox, and once there, capture the attention – and business – of your recipients.

**Send emails only to people with whom you have a current relationship, and who have specifically granted you permission.**

# What to Avoid

It may seem odd to begin with what you shouldn't do, but when it comes to subject lines, we need to first focus on making it to the inbox – this means getting past a spam filter. Though it's impossible to make it past every filter and every possible configuration for every recipient, best practices can go a long way to get you there. Email applications have made identifying spam easier than ever, and now with a single click, recipients can wreak havoc on your list – without being aware of (or caring about) the long-term effects. To greatly reduce spam labeling by either the recipient or the recipient's ISP, you need to remember just one rule:

**Send emails only to people with whom you have a current relationship, and who have specifically granted you permission (opted in).**

“Current relationship” does not include people who have:

- Purchased at your online store, but did not specifically opt-in for further messages.
- Shopped in your brick-and-mortar store, but did not specifically opt-in for further messages.
- Done business with your partners, but did not specifically opt-in for further messages from you or your company.
- Dropped their names into a fishbowl at an event.
- Given you their business cards.

In short, if you need to type, import, or copy/paste an email address into your list, you probably should not be sending marketing messages to that person. Spam filters might block you even if you email only to an opt-in list, simply based upon words and phrases used in your messaging – starting with the subject line. In addition to avoiding formatting faux pas, such as all capital letters, letters with spaces between them (e.g. E X T R A), and excessive punctuation (e.g., E.X.T.R.A), here is a list of symbols, words, and phrases likely to get you blocked:

## PHRASES THAT CAN GET YOUR EMAIL BLOCKED

!!!	\$\$\$	100% Free	Act Now
All Natural	As Seen On	Attention	Bad Credit
Bargain	Best Price	Billion	Certified
Cost	Dear Friend	Decision	Discount
Double Your Income	Eliminate Debt	Extra Income	Fast Cash
Fees	Financial Freedom	FREE	Guarantee
Hot	Increase	Join Millions	Lose Weight
Lowest Price	Make Money Fast	Marketing	Million Dollars
Money	Money Making	No Medical Exams	No Purchase Necessary
Online Pharmacy	Opportunity	Partners	Performance
Rates	Satisfaction Guaranteed	Search Engine Listings	Selling
Success	Trial	Visit Our Website	Work From Home

Remember though, these are simply best practices, and your results with these types of symbols, words, and phrases, or any of the ideas in this eBook, may vary. The best way to know what will work for you is to test.

# Simple Rules for Writing

Now that you have the basics for what not to do, let's focus on what you should do. There are even more best practices here, but again, what works for others might not work for you.

Here are a few techniques sure to help you write better subject lines and improve your open rates:

**Be congruent.** Your subject line and preheader should align in thought, and sometimes also in the same keywords and phrases. Never use your preheader for the unsubscribe or sharing information, or leave it blank. This is the first glimpse many of your recipients will have into your offer, so don't waste the opportunity to extend your message or highlight another benefit as Hydrolze does in this example. Instead, do as Marti Stribling does when she uses the preheader to announce her business course as being No.1.



**Hydrolze**  
 Tired of always looking exhausted?  
Tired of always looking exhausted?

---

**Marti Stribling**  
 **Learn How To Make \$1,000's Selling Products On Amazon**  
ASM - Amazing Selling Machine The #1 business course for selling products on Amazon Have you always

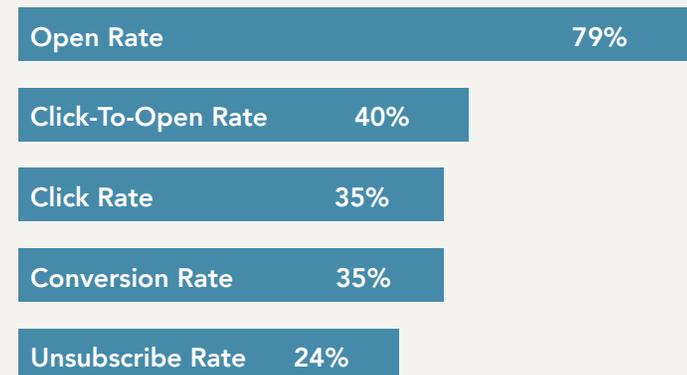
**Write it last.** If you write your subject line before your copy, you may find it difficult to check off the amazing tips you're about to read. Don't struggle with an unformed idea; write your copy and use it to launch your creativity.

**Use a word processor.** Subject lines are prime opportunities for making spelling errors. When you write the preheader, subject line, and all copy in a single document in a program like Word or a Google doc, it will be easier to proofread as a project, check for continuity, and run spelling and grammar checks.

**Test extensively.** Every email you send is an opportunity to learn something about your audience and what drives them to engage, respond, and become customers. Subject lines are one of the easiest elements to test; there's no reason not to take advantage of that and test everything.

## Metrics Used by Marketers Worldwide to Measure the Success of an Email Subject Line, Oct 2014

*% of respondents*



According to eMarketer, open rates are by far the most-used metric for determining the success of an email's subject line, and according to a study conducted by Howling Mad, "The State of Split Testing," only 30 percent of marketers are conducting A/B testing to learn how their audiences respond to their subject lines.

Source: eMarketer

## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

# 1. Focus on the Benefit

Everyone – including your recipients – wants to know “What’s In It For Me?” (WIIFM). So tell them, and do it quickly. Saying, “Get a Free Tire When You Buy 2” is more engaging than “Does Your Car Need Tires?” This email from Petco is another example of several best practices in use: All caps are used sparingly, it uses numerals, short and to the point.

**Petco**

▶ **Take an EXTRA \$10 off (even on food!)**

Last chance for \$10 off + bonus coupons! View as web page. Petco Shop dog Shop cat Shop fish Shop

“The only thing your customer is thinking is, ‘What’s in it for me?’ The only thing your customer cares about is, ‘Will this work for me?’ And just because you are partial to a particular design or style does not mean the market will share your sensibilities.”

- SYDNEY BARROWS

# 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

## 2. Be Accurate

Above all, your subject line should tell your reader what's actually inside. You can send an email that says "SUBJECT LINE GOES HERE" and people may open it out of curiosity. But that's all you'll get – open rates. Your subject line makes a promise; you have to fulfill that promise to look trustworthy. Set an accurate expectation. In the second example, Bed Bath & Beyond follows many of the best practices in this section: The message is short and sweet, uses numerals, has a sense of urgency, honesty, and humor.



mehrabraich

Wow, what a weekend

Whats App You have new messages Message Info: Date: April 5, 2015, 7:40 pm 53 Lenght: 26sec 8 Play

Bed Bath & Beyond

NEW! Your 20% online offer is here. The force is strong within.

Star Wars™. Shop now! View as web page Bed Bath & Beyond® FREE SHIPPING ON ORDERS OVER



**Don't forget that it's a CAN-SPAM requirement that your email subject line accurately reflect the content of the email. Don't be misleading.**



**- DAVID FOWLER**

Head of Privacy and Digital Compliance, Act-On Software

## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

### 3. Make it Short

Most statistics verify that short and sweet is better. If your recipients have narrow preview panes, they may not see your entire message. Limit your subject line to 50 characters or fewer – but even shorter can be just as engaging. If you think preview panes aren't critical to your success, consider this: According to Convince & Convert, 84 percent of people 18 to 34 use an email preview pane.

Petco

▶ **Don't. Miss. Out.**

An additional 15% off your order ends at midnight! [View as web page.](#) Petco Shop dog Shop cat Shop

Petco

▶ **Take an EXTRA \$10 off (even on food!)**

Last chance for \$10 off + bonus coupons! [View as web page.](#) Petco Shop dog Shop cat Shop fish Shop

**Tell the reader what they need, and want, to know, and no more – it sounds simple but far too many people don't follow this rule. You want to tell a consumer, or prospect, everything they need to know, but once you have done this, stop. If your goal is an online transaction, then get them to this point and present them with the option to purchase. If you are producing information, give them all the top line stats they need to get your message across, and leave anything supplementary for those that choose to find it.**

ROB WEATHERHEAD

Source: The Guardian

## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

### 4. Motivate

Use strong action words and phrases – like you do with your calls to action inside the email. Or, for a more memorable experience, use the same words both inside and out.

#### Big Lots

» **Get in on this CLEARANCE!**

View email in your browser Now is the time to snag amazing deals on furniture! Find

#### Petco

» **For pet's sake, don't miss this SALE!**

Last chance to save 20% off or more! View as web page. Petco Shop dog Shop cat &

#### Burlington

» **Help the Red Cross Support Nepal**

BURLINGTON Support Nepal by Donating to the Red Cross at a Store Near You Vie

#### Petco

» **☀ Don't let these savings SPRING by ☀**

Limited time savings of 20% or MORE View as web page. Petco Shop dog Shop cat !



Are your prospects doing what you'd like them to be doing? Are they ordering your eBooks, opting into your website, or clicking on your links? If not, you're missing out on one of the top-secret weapons copywriters have used for years to get their prospects to act accordingly. So, what do master copywriters do to move prospects to action? They ask them to act.



- JESSICA SWANSON

## 5. First Things First

When short isn't possible, be sure to put the most important words first. Here again, if your recipients have narrow preview panes, the most important part of the message could be cut off. As wide as this example is, we still haven't seen the call to action in its entirety. Your recipient might be deciding on whether or not to open your email, without getting the full story.



Ron Pramschufer

SelfPublishing411.com - During these bad economic times, do you still think it's ☆

During these bad economic times, do you still think it's a good time to self publish a bool

12

## 6. Make it Count

People like numerals, numbered lists, and countdowns, but resist being too cutesy or casual – unless preteens are your target audience. While “2 Days Left for 50% Off” is effective, most email recipients balk at “This Offer is 2Gd2BTru.” Fandango has done a good job of using numerals, and front-loading a long subject line with the most-important words of the message.

### Fandango FanMail

➤ **2 New Offers You'll Love + More at Regal SouthGlenn Stadium 14**

Snuggle up at the movies this weekend. And don't forget to add us to your address book. Learn

## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

# 7. Capitalize Your Assets

Use all-caps text sparingly. All caps often triggers spam filters, but also, if everything is all caps, how will the recipient know what is most important? You'll be the little boy who cried wolf. Instead, when using all caps, focus on the main benefit or add a little punch to the message in the way Walgreens and Blue Buffalo do.

### Walgreens Online Deals

▶ **25% OFF Beauty with code OOHLALA**

Save on SheaMoisture, Boots No7 and more View Webpage Walgreens - at the Corner of Happy &

### Blue Buffalo

▶ **Bow WOW: Delicious New BLUE Recipes for your dog!**

Mmmm...get your dog ready for some healthy and flavorful new foods from BLUE! Where To Buy BLUE Nea

“ Many [people] use text in all caps to emphasize their message. However, what they're actually doing is deemphasizing their message because text in all caps reduces the shape contrast for each word. ”

- UX MOVEMENT

Source: <http://sumo.ly/4Cye>

[www.act-on.com](http://www.act-on.com)

Source: UX Movement

12 Tips for Amazingly Effective Email Subject Lines

## 8. Disappearing Symbols

Using symbols in your subject line can sometimes be a fun way to draw attention to your email, but remember not everyone sees what you see – especially when using web-based email applications with older browsers or older versions of Outlook. Wayfair took the risk that the checkbox symbols would display properly in its subject line, but Frontier Airlines' message was loud and clear, with or without the symbol. In the example from 4 Readers & Writers, the ampersand of their group name is replaced with the HTML equivalent, making it confusing enough that the reader might give up.



Wayfair

» Have coffee  Check emails  Shop sales

Entryway looking a little cold? Cheer it up with area rugs and accent furniture

Frontier Airlines

→ More with \$19 Fares

Low Fares Done Right BOOK NOW BOOK NOW BOOK NOW Update



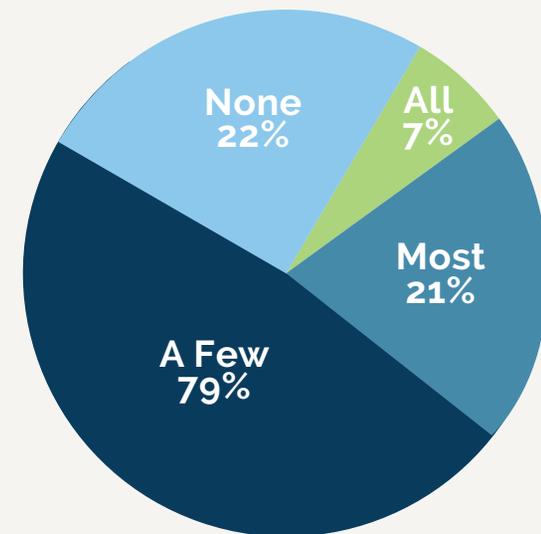
4 Readers & Writers (via.

4 Readers & Writers (@yournewbook) mentioned you in con

@yournewbook: GLYPHS: The people of Peru have no record of wha

### Amount of Email Campaign Subject Lines That Marketers Worldwide Have Split-Tested, Oct 2014

% of respondents



Note: among campaigns sent out in the past month; numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Source: Howling Mad, "The State of Split Testing," Dec 11, 2014

## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

# 9. Time It Right

Timing isn't just about the time of day you'll send your email, it can also be about the day, the season, the timeframe, and so much more. Timing can also contribute to personalization – you're telling your recipient, "I know when you're getting this, so I'm sending a message that will be relevant at that time or on that day."

Be sure you send expiring offers with plenty of time to redeem. If Big Lots had sent this message on March 1, the recipient's initial reaction would have been annoyance, and that's never the right way start – or continue – a relationship. Likewise, if Petco had sent this email 24 hours after the start of the sale, those recipients would have likely been annoyed, as well.

When scheduling, don't forget to factor in the delay between send and open. If you're a B2C business whose subscribers are mostly Gmail users, and 45 percent of them open your emails 10 to 15 days after receipt, this needs to be factored in.

#### Big Lots

▶ **Now Thru Feb. 28!**

View email in your browser Sofas, Loveseats, Recliners and more! Get savings up to \$60 now thru

#### Petco

▶ **72hr sale STARTS NOW!**

3 days of \$30 off your order! View as a web page. Petco Dog Cat Fish Sale The 72-hour sale starts now

#### Rite Aid Weekly Offers

▶ **Stay Healthy This Cough & Cold Season**

Exclusive Savings for You! Add [riteaid@email.riteaid.com](mailto:riteaid@email.riteaid.com) to your address book View this in a browser

[www.Act-On.com](http://www.Act-On.com)

With promotional emails separated out and placed under their own tab in the new Gmail Inbox, marketers sending time-sensitive offers, such as flash sales sites, will feel the biggest impact. As Android's market share continues to grow, marketers looking to reach these users may need to rethink their messaging strategy to ensure that emails are not getting overlooked.

- MOBILE MARKETER

Source: Mobile Marketer

12 Tips for Amazingly Effective Email Subject Lines

## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

# 10. Personalize

Most marketers find personalization will improve open rates, but not always. If you choose to personalize, be sure you have rules for missing-field content and extra long entries. You could also try using “You” and “Your” instead of specific personalization, in the way Pappadeaux does in this example.

### Fast Forward Higher Educ.

 **Karen O'Malley, You have Qualified for a 75% Grant.**

View in your browser Dear Karen O'Malley, The Innovative Degree Excellence in Accelerated Learning

### Pappadeaux Seafood Kitch.

 **You'll Love Our Springtastic Rewards!**

Receive two free \$10 Reward Cards with every \$100 in Pappas Gift Cards purchased! Problem



Consumers today increasingly expect personalized communications and advertising from brands. While the trend will impact all areas of marketing, the panel of experts assembled by Litmus predicted it will have a major impact on email marketing in particular.



- MARKETING DIVE

Source: Marketing DIVE

## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

# 11. Be Genuine

Personalization should make your recipient feel like you – as a business – care about them, but don't overstep this by trying to imply more than that. Using FWD: and RE: to convince recipients they know you will only lead to disappointment – theirs, and then yours – when they delete your deceitful message. As you can see in this example, it is a common practice among spammers, and that's just one more reason not to do it.



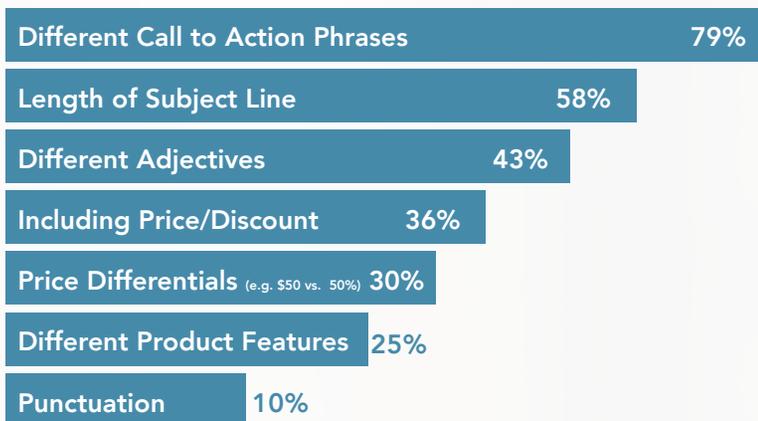
Krystle Tudge

» Fwd: Karen

Karen you got a computer and a few hours daily to spare? In case you have both of these and

## Email Subject Line Elements That Marketers Worldwide Commonly Test Using Split Testing, Oct 2014

*% of respondents*



Source: Howling Mad, "The State of Split Testing," Dec 11, 2014

[www.act-on.com](http://www.act-on.com)

12 Tips for Amazingly Effective Email Subject Lines



## 12 SUBJECT LINE TIPS SURE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION

# 12. Ask A Question

One key to a good subject line is getting your recipients to stop and think for a moment. Questions are an ideal way to gain that moment's pause. If you do ask a question, be sure it's one they can answer, or one you answer in your offer.

### Buckaroo

➤ **Poll: Would you buy a battery for your house?**

[View in browser](#) | [Add to address book](#) Buckaroo Dillcn Local news, events and shopping May 3, 2015

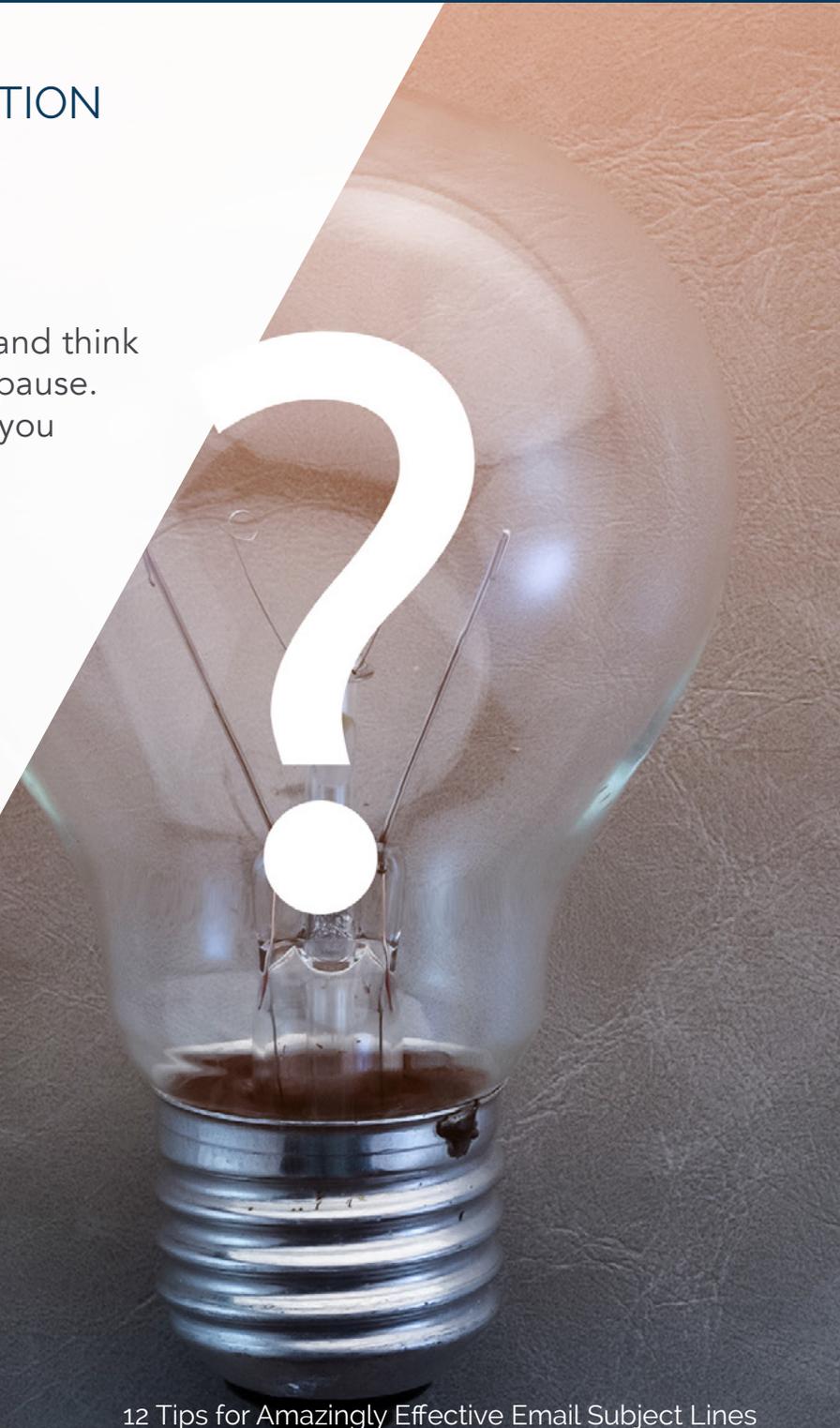
“  
Effective questions are questions that are powerful and thought-provoking. Effective questions are open-ended and not leading questions. They are not 'why' questions, but rather 'what' or 'how' questions.  
”

- IRENE LEONARD

Source: [Coachingforchange.com](http://Coachingforchange.com)

[www.act-on.com](http://www.act-on.com)

12 Tips for Amazingly Effective Email Subject Lines



# Bonus Tips

**1. Be clever, unusual, or different.** It's not appropriate for every type of business, but when it is for yours, get the edge with light humor. This message from Wayfair is a double entendre and the perfect lead-in to their offers on bedding. Petco sent a message that was both timely and cute, putting it in the unusual category.

## Wayfair

▶ **Take cover! Comforter, quilt, and duvet sets under \$99**

Bedding sets under \$99, best-selling bedroom furniture, and more suite deals Wayfair MY ACCOUNT Shop

## Petco

▶ **Don't let these savings SPRING by**

Limited time savings of 20% or MORE View as web page. Petco Shop dog Shop cat Shop fish Shop sale

**The workplace needs laughter. According to research from institutions as serious as Wharton, MIT, and London Business School, every chuckle or guffaw brings with it a host of business benefits. Laughter relieves stress and boredom, boosts engagement and well-being, and spurs not only creativity and collaboration but also analytic precision and productivity. "Why" questions are good for soliciting information, but can make people defensive, so be thoughtful in your use of them.**

**- ALISON BEARD**

Source: Harvard Business Review

# Bonus Tips (continued)

**2. Use reminders.** If your recipients do something to trigger your email, tell them what it was. Did they download an eBook, visit your website, view a demo? Start your subject line or preheader – or both – in the way Amazon, Ron Pramschufer, and LinkedIn have done. Your recipients are far less likely to delete an email from you once they know who you are.

It's also a good idea to remind them of this relationship periodically – you could even make it a permanent feature in the emails you send. Add something along the lines of "You are receiving this email because ..." to your footer area. This is easy personalization with long-lasting benefits.

## Amazon.com E-mail Subscr.

You subscribed to Amazon Kindle Delivers at Amazon.com  
com, Thank you for subscribing to Amazon Kindle Delivers. You will receive this e

## Ron Pramschufer

Do-It-Yourself Book Layout (with Microsoft Word)  
Hi, I saw you downloaded a copy of Do-It-Yourself Book Layout (with Microsoft Word) fro

## LinkedIn Groups (2)

Thank you for your request to join BOOK STORY  
LinkedIn Groups Book Story - The Story of Books: Authoring, Publishing, Marketi



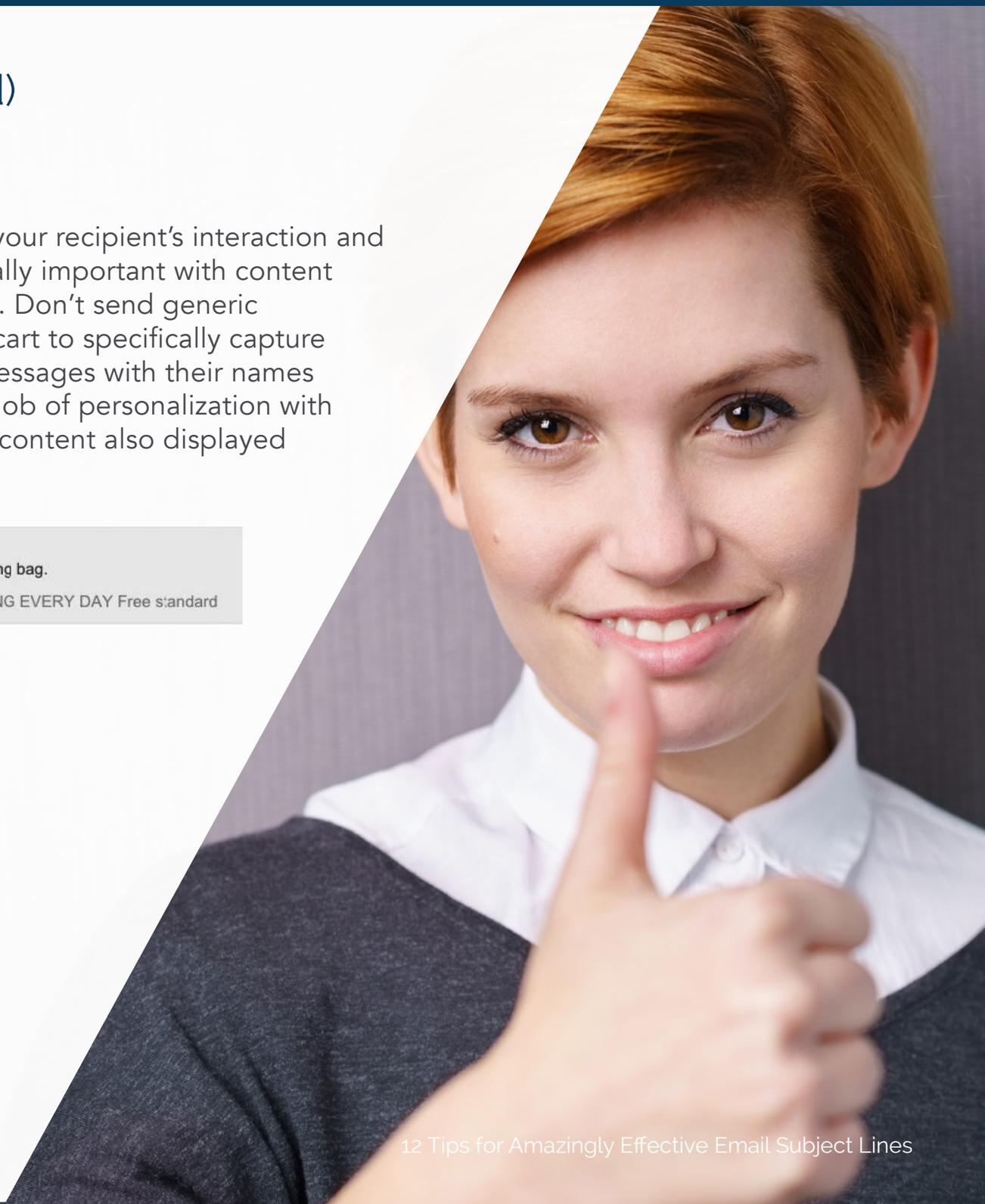
# Bonus Tips (continued)

**3. Include regonition.** Recognizing your recipient's interaction and referencing it in the subject line is especially important with content downloads, demos, and abandoned carts. Don't send generic messages; set up your form or shopping cart to specifically capture information you can use to personalize messages with their names and interactions. Kohl's has done a great job of personalization with both the name and the action. The email content also displayed the items in the cart – a bonus maneuver!

Kohl's

Karen , don't forget! You still have something special in your shopping bag.

We had a hunch. | [View this email in a browser.](#) KOHL'S FREE SHIPPING EVERY DAY Free s:andard



# Bonus Tips (continued)

**4. Make them feel exclusive.** Everyone wants to feel special, and it's easy to make consumers believe they are when you use phrases such as Exclusive Offer, Limited Membership, or – like this one from Office Depot – “Shhhhh, Just For You... Exclusive HP Sale”. This email takes personalization to a new level, because Office Depot also recognized the recipient as a previous purchaser of HP products. With both examples, the experience might have been improved by also using the recipient's name.

## Office Depot

☐ Shhhh, Just For You...Exclusive HP Sale

6 coupons PLUS up to \$150 off select HP printers [View with images](#) [Find a store](#) | [Member Num](#)

## Google Partners

▶ Just for you: Perks to offer your clients this Small Business Week

[Free listings, support and more to help your clients succeed online](#) » [Make it a special Small](#)



# Bonus Tips (continued)

**5. Get your style points.** Some marketers capitalize the subject line as you would a title, beginning everything (except minor words, such as the articles a, the, and, with, etc.) with capital letters. Others use sentence case, in which only the first word is capitalized. It's a stylistic decision. Whatever you do, you should be consistent about it. It's part of your brand's signature style, and people will come to recognize it.

## YOUR RESULTS MAY VARY



These tips are guidelines – ideas – and you are likely to find not all of them work for you, or that certain combinations don't work for you. That's why testing is so important. Set up your emails with two or more subject line variations and measure results. Use these ideas for writing different subject lines ... but use your metrics for making long-term decisions. In the end, your real-world results will show you what your customers expect from you, and how to fulfill those expectations. That, in turn, leads to stronger relationships – and your business success.

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Act-On Software is a marketing automation company delivering innovation that empowers marketers to do the best work of their careers. Act-On is the only integrated workspace to address the needs of the customer experience, from brand awareness and demand generation, to retention and loyalty. With Act-On, marketers can drive better business outcomes and see higher customer lifetime value. The Act-On platform provides marketers with power they can actually use, without the need for a dedicated IT resource.

Connect with us to learn more