

How to Create

A SUCCESSFUL EMAIL NEWSLETTER



Table of Contents

Introduction: Why consider an email newsletter in the first place?	1
1. Who's Using Newsletters, and How Successful are They?	2
2. The One Key Attribute of a Successful Newsletter	3
3. Questions to Ask Before You Launch a Newsletter	4-5
4. How to Find Content for Your Newsletter	6-8
5. Anatomy of a Newsletter	9
6. A Crash Course in Newsletter Design	10
7. When to Send Your Email Newsletter.....	11
8. How to Get Subscribers for Your Newsletter.....	12-14
- How Not to Get Subscribers for Your Newsletter	
- How Much is Each Subscriber Worth to You?	
9. How to Track Your Newsletter's Performance	15
BONUS: A 20-Point Pre-Flight Newsletter Checklist	16

Introduction: Why Consider an Email Newsletter in the First Place?

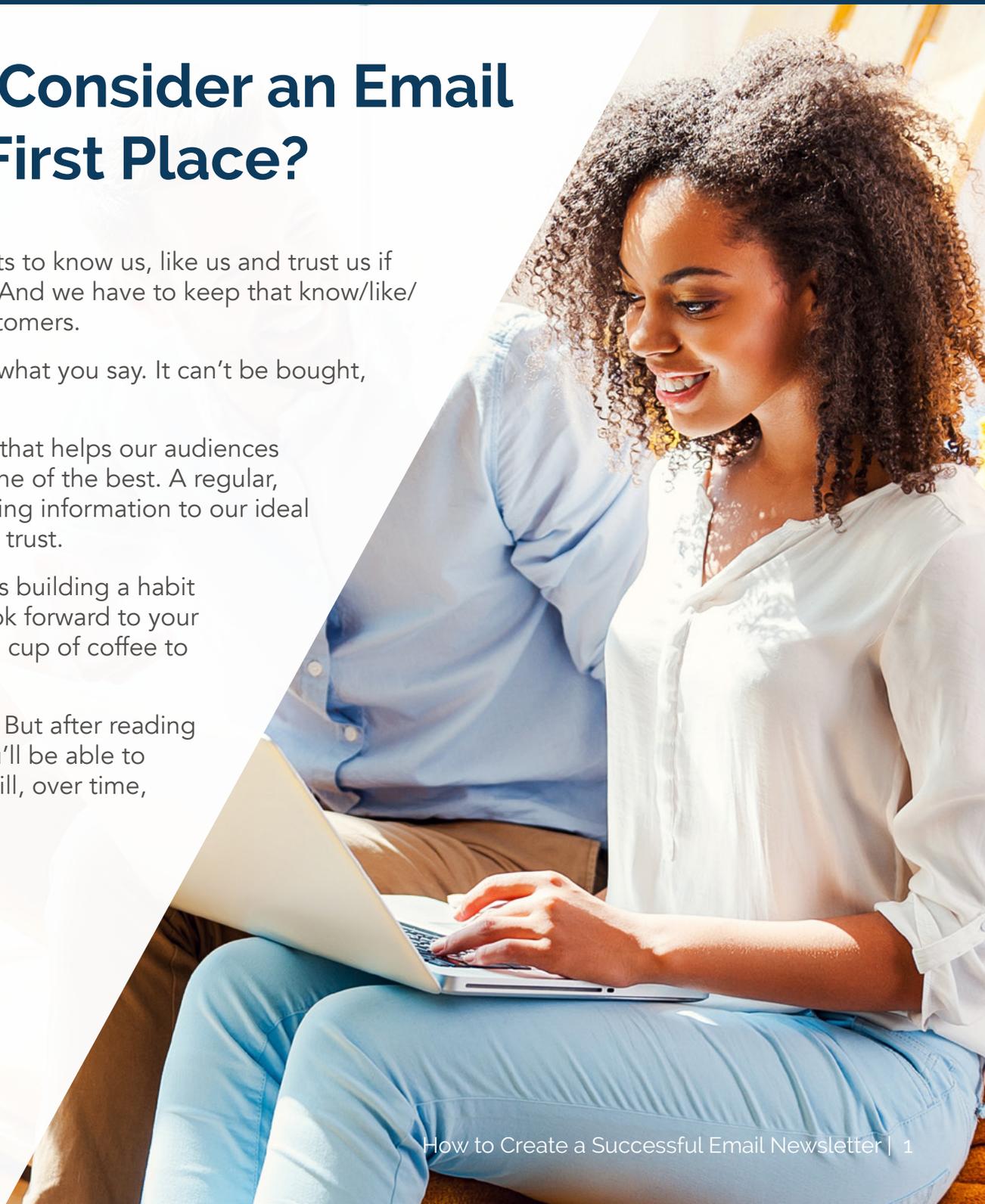
“Know, like and trust.” We need our prospects to know us, like us and trust us if they’re ever going to do any business with us. And we have to keep that know/like/trust level high if we want to keep them as customers.

That’s a precious thing - when someone trusts what you say. It can’t be bought, but it can be nurtured.

Email newsletters certainly aren’t the only tool that helps our audiences come to know, like and trust us. But they are one of the best. A regular, reliable newsletter that delivers useful, interesting information to our ideal customers and our existing customers nurtures trust.

It also builds familiarity –every issue you send is building a habit with your readers. The ideal is that they will look forward to your newsletter, even set aside a few minutes with a cup of coffee to enjoy it.

Sound like a lofty goal? Maybe so, maybe not. But after reading and applying what you learn in this eBook, you’ll be able to deliver a newsletter that’s worth reading and will, over time, build trust and familiarity with your audience.



1. Who's Using Newsletters, and How Successful Are They?

Before we dive into the nuts and bolts of newsletters, let's see how they compare to other marketing tactics.

According to the Content Marketing Institute and Marketing Profs 2016 [Content Marketing Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends – North America](#) reports, >80% of marketers send email newsletters (B2C 83%, B2B 81%).

And 67% of B2C marketers and 60% of B2B marketers say they are effective.

Compare that to what Ascend2 found in their 2016 State of [Content Marketing Survey](#) Their survey group said that 29% of marketers rate email newsletters as "most effective", and that most marketers – 88% – say they're not difficult to execute.

So it looks like we've got a tactic that's widely used, and has pretty good ratings for effectiveness. Most marketers are getting good results with their newsletters ... but some say they're not doing so well.

The question then is – what do you need to do to be in the successful group?

Fortunately, the answer is simple:

Make your newsletter valuable.



2. The One Key Attribute of a Successful Newsletter

There's a long laundry list of ways to have a successful email newsletter, but this one piece of advice trumps all of them. We could have said to make your newsletter useful ... but that word leaves out the entertainment factor of a newsletter. While readers certainly want useful content, they'll also gravitate to entertaining content. That type of content is valuable, too.

Here's how Joe Pulizzi, Founder of the Content Marketing Institute, explained the situation in the [July 22, 2016 Content Marketing Institute's newsletter](#):

I'm an e-newsletter fanatic, as I believe they are critical to any substantial content marketing approach. That's why I discuss them so often in the speeches I deliver to various marketing audiences.

To that point, I've asked the following question at least 20 times in recent memory:

"Is your newsletter really, truly valuable to your target audience?"

Want to know how many people have raised their hands in the affirmative? Six (I keep track because it's such a small number). Just six people out of thousands believe they are delivering a valuable experience to their customers via email.

Yikes. If you want to be part of the solution, here's what Joe recommends:

- 1. Maintain consistency.** Define your publishing schedule and stick to it. Down to the minute.
- 2. Provide something truly valuable.** Not just coupons and discounts. As Joe says, deliver "real insights that are going to help your customers live better lives, or get better jobs."
- 3. Offer exclusivity.** Offer content and benefits that are only available in your newsletter. Joe is practicing what he preaches here - the essay we've excerpted is from exclusive content in the CMI newsletter. You can't read it anywhere else (without Joe's permission).

To sum up: "Just remember CVE: *Consistent, Valuable, and Exclusive*. That's really all it takes to succeed with email. "

3. Questions to Ask Before You Launch a Newsletter

“To fail to plan is to plan to fail.” As it’s so in life, it’s so for email newsletters. On the happier side, a little planning can also dramatically improve your chances for success. It’s not hard, either, and these questions can help.

1. Are you willing to go light on the sales pitches?

Use your newsletters to teach and entertain – not to sell. Why not? Because your audience will rarely perceive a sales pitch as valuable. Pitches serve you, not your audience.

Of course, in the long term, a good newsletter will serve you as well, but to get and keep your audience’s attention, you’ll need to focus on their needs first. That’s how you build trust. It’s also how you build engagement.

2. What content are you going to put into this newsletter?

One of the biggest challenges for creating a great newsletter is coming up with great content. To hit the ground running, try to think up about 30 to 50 content ideas your audience should love. Write them down – you’ll need the inspiration at one point or another.

Need more ideas? Read [“Don’t Bore People: 10 Ideas for B2B Newsletter Content”](#)

3. How often are you going to send it?

Frequency is a big issue with email newsletters. Send too often, and you’ll wear out your welcome, your list, and your email staff. Send too infrequently, and your subscribers will begin to forget who you are, resulting in poor engagement rates.

So what’s the sweet spot? For most companies, it falls somewhere around sending a newsletter every week to every two weeks. If you’re worried about having enough content or maintaining quality with a weekly cadence, start with every two weeks. If you send only monthly, then it’s good to keep to a specific schedule (like the 15th or the first Monday, etc.) so your readers can set their expectations. And if you set firm publication dates, don’t blow them.

4. How will you measure success?

It’s easy to get caught up with tracking clicks and opens. Those are good metrics, for sure, but they don’t necessarily show business results. It might be better to track conversions instead. For instance, to use your CRM or lead nurturing software to track how each email campaign creates the individual conversion actions that move (or don’t move) prospects through the buyer’s journey. For existing customers, you’ll shift a bit and track how well your newsletters prompt existing customers to try new products.

4. How to Find Content for Your Newsletter

So far, we've set our sights pretty high. We want to be among the marketers with effective newsletters, the ones sending emails our readers will find truly valuable. Now... how're we going to do that?

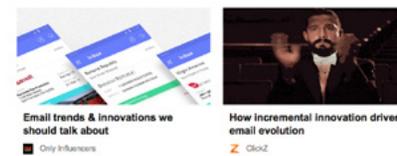
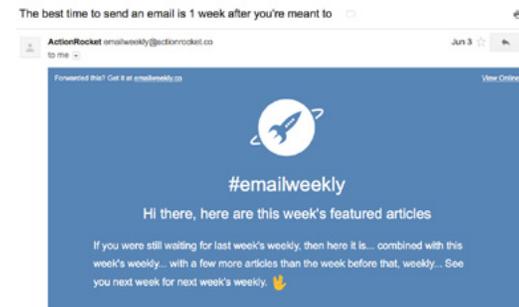
With content, for starters. We'll talk about formatting the content in a moment, but here's a few ideas for how to find the type of content your readers will love.

1. Re-publish your best-performing social media content.

You've already got the social media content, and a quick check of your social media reports will show you which posts have performed best in the last week or so. All those top performers belong in your newsletter, along with links and sharing buttons so people can give them even more exposure.

2. Recent posts from your blog.

This is often the only content in an average newsletter, but we recommend you go further than being average. Still, blog posts are valuable content. Don't just plunk them in whole; take the time to write good, enticing one-paragraph summaries of each piece if you want to get more click-throughs. (And don't forget the social sharing buttons, either!)



The email agency ActionRocket sends out a great curated email newsletter every week. In addition to the featured articles with images, the footer area also gives a shout out to other content they're found worthy

4. How to Find Content for Your Newsletter (continued)

3. Staff profiles.

Feature some of your in-house talent. If not in every newsletter, then at least every few newsletters. Particularly focus on customer-facing staff, like sales and customer service. Go beyond the usual “When he’s not at work, Greg likes hiking and craft beer.”

4. Customer profiles and case studies.

Everybody loves a case study. If you’ve got a new one, include in your newsletter. And, actually – even if you’ve got an old one that’s still relevant, consider giving it some fresh exposure by adding an interesting excerpt of it in your newsletter.

5. Curated content.

This is a big trend in newsletters. Curated content is third-party content that you’re recommending to your readers. It’s a great way to fill in any content gaps, and to appear as an authority in your field – if you add some commentary to frame why you think it’s important to your reader.

6. Best (thing) of the month

This is a way to feature work in your industry that you really loved. For a designer, it might be the best piece of design they’ve seen in the last month. For a school, it might be a star student or a program that’s performing above par. If you dig a little, almost any business can find some shining example of something they loved in the last month.

7. Question of the week/month.

Here’s one for audience participation. Ask a question that you think will get some good responses. Then share the answers from last week’s question in this week’s email. You may need a fairly large audience to make this work, but stay tuned – we’ll talk about growing your list in a moment.

4. How to Find Content for Your Newsletter (continued)

8. Polls and surveys.

These deliver cool content twice – first, because you’ve got an interactive piece of content your readers can contribute to. And then you get more content again later when you share the results of the survey or poll.

For more ideas on what can be done with emailed surveys, see our blog post, [“How to Use Surveys to Create Better Content”](#)

9. Company news.

Okay... I said this is supposed to be all about the customer, but I know you’re going to want to squeeze in just a little of company news now and again. So you get 20% of your newsletter’s space for it. That’s it. And don’t lead with it. Put it near the end.

10. Content that’s not available anywhere else.

This is per Joe’s advice from before. Add something to every newsletter that isn’t available anywhere else. Maybe it’s a two-sentence tip for how to do something better. Maybe it’s a photograph or a short summary of new research. Whatever it is, add something to every newsletter that’s not available anywhere else.

5. The Anatomy of a Newsletter

Now that you know the core goal here (to create a **valuable** newsletter), here are all the smaller elements that make it up. Think of these as the supporting cast, if you'd like. Or maybe the extras on set.

- Sender name: identifiable and consistent
- Subject line compressed images (so the email loads instantly)
- Logo
- Well-written content summaries
- Single-column, mobile-friendly layout
- Body copy that's easy to read on devices of various sizes (responsive design)
- One or more calls to action, with CTA buttons big enough to be easy to click on a mobile device
- Copyright notice
- Physical mailing address
- Unsubscribe link (or link to preference center)

Want a more detailed anatomy lesson? Read ["21 Essential \(And Not So Essential\) Elements of Email"](#)



6. A Crash Course in Newsletter Design

Ever heard how people make a judgment about your website within the first three seconds of seeing it – and that judgment affects how they perceive all your other content? Well, that’s true of email newsletters, too.

The thing to focus on with email design is mobile-friendliness. It’s hard to overstate how important this is. More than half your readers will see your newsletter on their phone or other mobile device. And if your newsletter doesn’t look good, or appears broken, most of them will bail.

Fortunately, it’s not terribly hard to design a mobile-friendly email. Most email service providers have already made all their default email templates mobile-friendly. If yours hasn’t, you can buy a mobile-friendly template, or even have one custom-coded for you.

Here are a few essential elements of a mobile-friendly design:

- The text is big enough to read easily – 12 points at least.
- Any links or calls to action are large enough or have enough space around them so they can be clicked easily.
- The entire message loads fast – instantly. Mobile users are impatient.
- Usually, there’s a single-column design. Two column designs just don’t work well on mobile devices.



There are other best practices, but that’s the gist. **To get the full story, see [“10 Best Practices for Mobile-Friendly Emails”](#). Or watch our on-demand webinar, [“Responsive Design: 10 Dos and Don’ts for Web Pages and Email”](#)**

7. When to Send Your Email Newsletter

This is one of the most common questions about email newsletters, or email messages in general: When's the best time to send it?

I'd love to tell you "Tuesdays at 3pm Eastern" or "Thursdays in the early morning." There are studies that show either of those times as best. Then there are other studies that show different times. And then there are yet more studies that recommend yet different times ...

Honestly, none of those "best times" are probably going to be best for you. The best time to send a newsletter depends on your audience. It's something you just have to test for.

But all things being equal, consider starting your testing with Wednesday or Thursday early afternoons or late mornings. Aim for a time when most of your audience is at their desks (ahem – at their devices), but when they aren't getting deluged by other companies' emails.

Want to learn more about running tests that will tell you the best time to send your newsletter? Read ["3 Steps to Help You Find the Best Time to Send Email Messages"](#)

8. How to Get Subscribers for Your Newsletter

There's one big problem when you first launch an email newsletter: You probably won't have many subscribers. And it's hard in the beginning, when you've only got fifty or so subscribers, to put in the effort required to create a really great newsletter.

While those first days (or even months, to be honest) are tough, you don't have to feel lonely for long. There are a handful of list building tactics that work really well. I've listed some of the best below.

- **Add opt-in forms** to the top and bottom of every page on your site. In other words, add the actual opt-in form (not a link to the form) to the header and footer of your website.
- **Test "pop-ups", also called "overlays" or "interstitials"**. These have a reputation for being annoying, but they're also wildly effective for list-building. They are less offensive if you don't show them too often – or too early. The pop-up that shows up after you've scrolled to the middle of a page feels less pushy.
- **A/B split test your opt-in forms**. Sometimes a single word in the newsletter description or on the subscribe button can make a major difference in opt-in rates.
- **Use landing pages**. If you're driving traffic to your site in order to get sign-ups, don't confuse the process by sending people to a page with a dozen possible options. Landing pages focus the user, so they'll be more likely to do the one thing asked of them on the landing page: Sign up for your newsletter.

Want more list-building ideas? [See these resources:](#)

- **EBook:** [Best Practices for Building a Subscriber List](#)
- **White paper:** [Grow Your Email Marketing List](#)
- **Blog post:** [How to Get Subscribers for Your B2B Email Newsletter \[And How Not To\]](#)
- **Blog post:** [Think Outside the Desktop: How to Build Your Email List Offline](#)
- **Blog post:** [From Scratch: Four \(Free\) List Building Strategies](#)
- **Blog post:** [Agencies: How to Build an Email Campaign – When Your Client Has No List](#)
- **Blog post:** [Build Bigger, Healthier Email Lists with Double Opt-ins and Preference Centers](#)

How Not to Get Subscribers for Your Newsletter

I know how tempting it is to jumpstart your newsletter by buying subscribers. But please: Don't. Purchased lists get terrible results. You'll wish you never spent the money.

Also, most reputable email service providers won't even allow you to use purchased lists. Why? Because they've been around the block – they know purchased lists create too many spam complaints and thus harm deliverability rates.

One other no-no for your list-building: Don't add people to your list that haven't specifically – expressly – signed up for it. For example, just because someone...

- **Gave you their business card** at a conference doesn't mean you should add them to your email list.
- **Connected with you on LinkedIn** doesn't mean you can send them your newsletter.
- **Signed up for a webinar - or any other kind of content** – doesn't mean you can send them your newsletter.

If you want to piggyback your newsletter signup with other forms, great. Just add a checkbox near the end of the form, with copy that says something like "Sign me up for the Company X email newsletter." Leave the box unchecked. If somebody voluntarily checks that box, then you may send them your newsletter.



How Much is Each Subscriber Worth to You?

If you just launched an email newsletter, this may be hard to assess, but keep it in mind for later. Once you've got some data on how your email list is performing in terms of business results, you'll want to do some arithmetic to find out how much each subscriber is worth to you.

It's a fairly basic calculation. **Here's a simplified version of it:**

$$\frac{\text{(MONTHLY REVENUE FROM EMAIL LIST - OVERHEAD COSTS)}}{\text{HOW MANY SUBSCRIBERS YOU HAD THAT MONTH}} = \text{REVENUE PER SUBSCRIBER}$$

It can take some thinking and discussion to figure out exactly how much revenue to attribute to your emails. It can also take some work to accurately assign the creative and other overhead costs for the newsletter.

Admittedly, this is not a perfect formula, but it can give you an idea of what each subscriber is worth. That, in turn, can inform which tactics you use to acquire more subscribers.

Want a deeper, even nerdier dive into how (and why) to calculate email subscriber value? Read "[How to Calculate Email Subscriber Value \(and Why it Matters\)](#)."

Here's an example of how value per subscriber might look in a real-world application:

COST PER MONTH	
Email service provider (or pro-rated portion of marketing automation fees)	\$100
Creative development costs. (Decide what portion of creative costs should be carried by the newsletter)	\$600
25% of marketer's annual gross salary and benefits costs, divided by 12	\$1,875
10% of two other annual employees' gross salaries and benefits costs, divided by 12	\$1,400
Email marketing's business share of office space, computer, electricity and everything else	\$500
TOTAL OVERHEAD COSTS	\$4,475
TOTAL SUBSCRIBERS	40,000
TOTAL ATTRIBUTED REVENUE FROM NEWSLETTER	\$22,500
REVENUE PER SUBSCRIBER	\$0.45
AVERAGE SUBSCRIBER STAYS ON LIST FOR	7 months
VALUE PER SUBSCRIBER	\$3.15

9. How to Track Your Newsletter's Performance

Speaking of revenue... let's talk about tracking where it comes from. Specifically, if it's coming from your newsletters. While a basic tracking system like Google Analytics can tell you how often people are taking individual actions after reading your newsletter, the tool you really need in order to track results over time is a marketing automation system.

For instance, you need to be able to track users from the first time they appear on your site, to when they become a newsletter subscriber, to their first content asset download, their second download, when they sign up for a demo, and all the steps in between.

A good automation platform can do that for you. If you're not ready for that level of investment yet, just setting up some basic goals in Google Analytics (along with careful use of UTM codes) can give you clues about whether your newsletter is actually generating business or not.

Not sure if you are ready for marketing automation? [Take this simple readiness assessment to find out!](#)

The most important thing to remember is that while clicks and opens are a good sign of engagement, they're not the last word. Try your best to tie your newsletters to dollar-driven actions: demos, sales ... and hopefully multiple sales.

And when you use your performance reports to optimize your newsletter content, don't focus just on clicks and opens, or you might cost yourself some business.



Bonus: A Pre-flight Newsletter Checklist

Airplane pilots use checklists to make sure nothing goes wrong during takeoff. You can use a preflight checklist of your own, too – an email marketer’s version.

With this 20-point checklist, you’ll have no reason to stress during that spooky preflight moment we all dread. You know the one: when your finger lingers over the send button, just before you deploy your email newsletter to the thousands of people, and you wonder if you’re about to make a gigantic mistake ... or send out a terrific email.

Not sure if you are ready for marketing automation? Take this simple [readiness assessment](#) to find out!

Want to take your email newsletter even further? Watch two of our on-demand webinars:

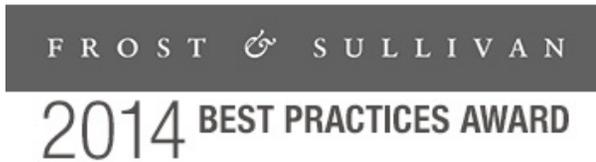
- [“Email Idea Book: 5 Futuristic Tactics You Can Implement Today”](#)
- [“Email Wizardry - 5 Tactics That Will Leave You Spellbound”](#)

NEWSLETTER PRE-FLIGHT

- 1. You’ve shown the email to someone else.
- 2. You sent a test message to yourself and have viewed the message on your computer and your phone.
- 3. You’ll know your email will look all right if people have their images turned off.
- 4. You’ve proofed and edited the copy in your newsletter.
- 5. You’ve clicked every link in your newsletter.
- 6. The total size of your message is less than 50kb.
- 7. You’ve compressed any images you’re using.
- 8. You’re sending your email newsletter to people who have asked for it.
- 9. You’ve included your company’s name and address in the footer area, so you’ve got that part of CANSPAM requirements covered.
- 10. There’s an easy way to unsubscribe from the email.
- 11. You’ve included information that’s genuinely useful for your readers.
- 12. The type size you’re using for the email is large enough (12 points or larger)
- 13. Your newsletter uses a simple, “mobile-friendly” layout.
- 14. You’ve spent at least 15-20 minutes choosing the subject line.
- 15. You’ve included pre-header text.
- 16. You’ve included a call to action.
- 17. You’ve added social media follow buttons and sharing buttons.
- 18. You’ve included a forward button so people can easily share your email.
- 19. You’re sending from a reputable email service provider.
- 20. You’re using a consistent sender name.



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About Act-On Software

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.

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