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Optimizing Your Subject & From Lines for Email Clients

Loren McDonald - Jun 2, 2003

So think you're done after you've perfected your layout and copy, tested your links and written your subject line? If you are hoping to truly optimize your email messages, your work may be far from over.

Among the many challenges of distributing email newsletters and campaigns are the varying ways that email clients render your From and Subject lines. Why is optimizing the From and Subject lines so important? It's simple, really.

- The From line is what recipients use to determine whether to delete an email.

- The Subject line is what motivates people to actually open the email.

So if your recipient doesn't recognize the address in your From line (such as an automated, awkward reply-to address), off to the Deleted Files folder your email goes without a second glance. And if that award-winning, let's-include-everything-but-the-kitchen-sink subject line gets cut off prematurely, it will leave your reader still wondering what's inside. Either way, the chances your email might be opened remain as good as winning the award for most effective subject line - Zero.

What Shows? Email Address Versus Name

The first of your challenges lies in what will actually show depending on the client itself - the Name or the Email Address. The From Name, sometimes referred to as the "friendly from line," creates an instant recognition with the subscriber, whereas an email address may not always be as recognizable. But with some email clients, you don't have a choice in what your subscribers will see. (See the included chart for specifics)

Ⓡ INCREASE FONT SIZE

Email Client Rendering	From Spaces	From Shows	Subject Spaces	Notes
Outlook	User	Name & Email	User	1
Outlook Express	User	Name & Email	User	1
AOL 8	15/16	Email	51	
AOL Anywhere	16	Email	72	
Yahoo	30+	Name	80+	2
Hotmail	20	Name	45	2
MSN/Hotmail	20	Name	45	2
Eudora	User	Name	User	1
Excite	20	Name	40/80+	3
Juno	32+	Name	55+	2

1) User defines the amount of characters for From and Subject lines

2) From line and Subject line space are dependent upon each other. A longer from line reduces the amount of space available for the subject line

3) If From line is greater than 20 characters, Subject line expands to 80+ and on two lines; if From line is 20 characters or less, the Subject line is capped at 40 characters

For example, with the AOL 8.0 email client, AOL users only see an email address in the "From" line. They do not see a name at all. In addition, the From line is limited to only 15 or 16 characters, depending on the actual characters used.

Our newsletter is being sent out with "EmailLabs Newsletter" in the From field. Most email clients will show the From name in the From line. However, AOL 8.0 renders emails only with the email address, often truncated, so their users see something more like this:

Most Email Clients - From Line	AOL 8.0 - From Line
"EmailLabs Newsletter"	marketing@emaill Derived from (marketing@emaillabs.com)

Common sense would suggest that there will be some percent of our AOL readers who might assume an email from "marketing@emaill" belongs in the spam/delete category. You can decide if that matters to your email campaign or not.

From Line Length

The AOL example also illustrates the issues you can have with the length of From lines. In the above example, the From line was turned from a name to an email address and truncated at 15 or 16 characters, rendering the email address virtually unrecognizable.

For most companies, changing or shortening the From email address is usually not even an option (or likely to be helpful). For example, if your company name is Sports Warehouse and your email address is shop@sportswarehouse.com - it can't really be shortened. But you can get creative to overcome your character-challenged From line. Put your company name, newsletter name, or other recognizable name in your subject line (at the beginning or end). For Sports Warehouse, sample subject lines could be:

Sports Warehouse - 15% Off All Backpacks & Hiking Boots

15% Off All Backpacks & Hiking Boots {Sports Warehouse}

15% Off All Backpacks & Hiking Boots From Sports Warehouse

Subject Line Length

This leads into the third issue - Subject Line length. Continuing with the previous AOL 8.0 example, the subject line is truncated to 51 characters in the AOL client preview (though the entire subject line will render once the individual email is open.)

For example, the Subject line for last month's EmailLabs' newsletter was:

The Intevation Report: Why I Don't Read Your Email Newsletter Anymore

In the AOL 8.0 client, it would read as

The Intevation Report: Why I Don't Read Your Email

Our subject line truncated well and still managed to get across the message of the newsletter. But often times, subject line truncating can hurt you if you aren't aware of where your message ends and how much of the message is lost. One of the suggested subject lines for Sports Warehouse (example above) was:

"15% Off All Backpacks & Hiking Boots From Sports Warehouse."

Yet, with the character truncating, AOL would show it as:

"15% Off All Backpacks & Hiking Boots From Sports Wa."

The above sentence truncating may not hurt your open rates much, but it could hurt your branding image if you depend on the Subject Line to deliver your brand name for you.

The following example could actually confusion among subscribers and hurt sales:

Original Subject Line:

{Sports Depot} Delivery By XMAS if Ordered by Dec 21

Truncated Subject Line:

{Sports Depot} Delivery By XMAS if Ordered by Dec 2

How do you deal with it?

With another item to add to the email marketing checklist, how are you supposed to deal with these email client restrictions? Here are some quick guidelines to follow when building your From and Subject lines:

1. Understand the demographics of your list. Do you have a large number of AOL and Hotmail recipients?
2. Once you understand the composition of your list, determine if it is important enough to your organization to treat these different email client recipients differently? Do you have the resources

and time to develop different versions and subject lines? Do you already create separate AOL versions of your email (i.e., in Rich Text Format)?

3. Set up email accounts with all of the major email providers that comprise your list. Regardless of whether you create different versions of your subject lines, always send test emails to these accounts to ensure your subject line isn't cut off at a critical point.

4. If you decide to go with a single subject line for all - keep it short and succinct so that it displays in total for all clients. Or alternatively, write a longer subject line, but make sure the first 45 characters convey your key message.

5. For AOL subscribers, include the name of your company, newsletter message, etc, in the subject line, such as: "{Company X Newsline}."

6. Don't forget the actual copy. Regardless of length, make sure your subject line copy resonates with your recipients, makes them open the email and take the desired action. Once you've solidified the key message of the subject line, then edit as appropriate for the differing amount of available subject line space.

7. Be consistent. Once you've figured out what the optimum From name is and name in the subject line (if used) - stick with it. Over time people will recognize it and will be less likely to delete the message as unwanted email.

8. Lastly, if you have any doubts or concerns, or simply want to test out these theories, conduct A/B split tests of "with or without company name" in the subject line and short versus long subject line copy.

While dealing with all of these variations can seem mind boggling at times, email marketing is really a game of incremental improvement. A little tweak here, a tweak there and pretty soon you've increased open rates from 35% to 40%. Happy tweaking!

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