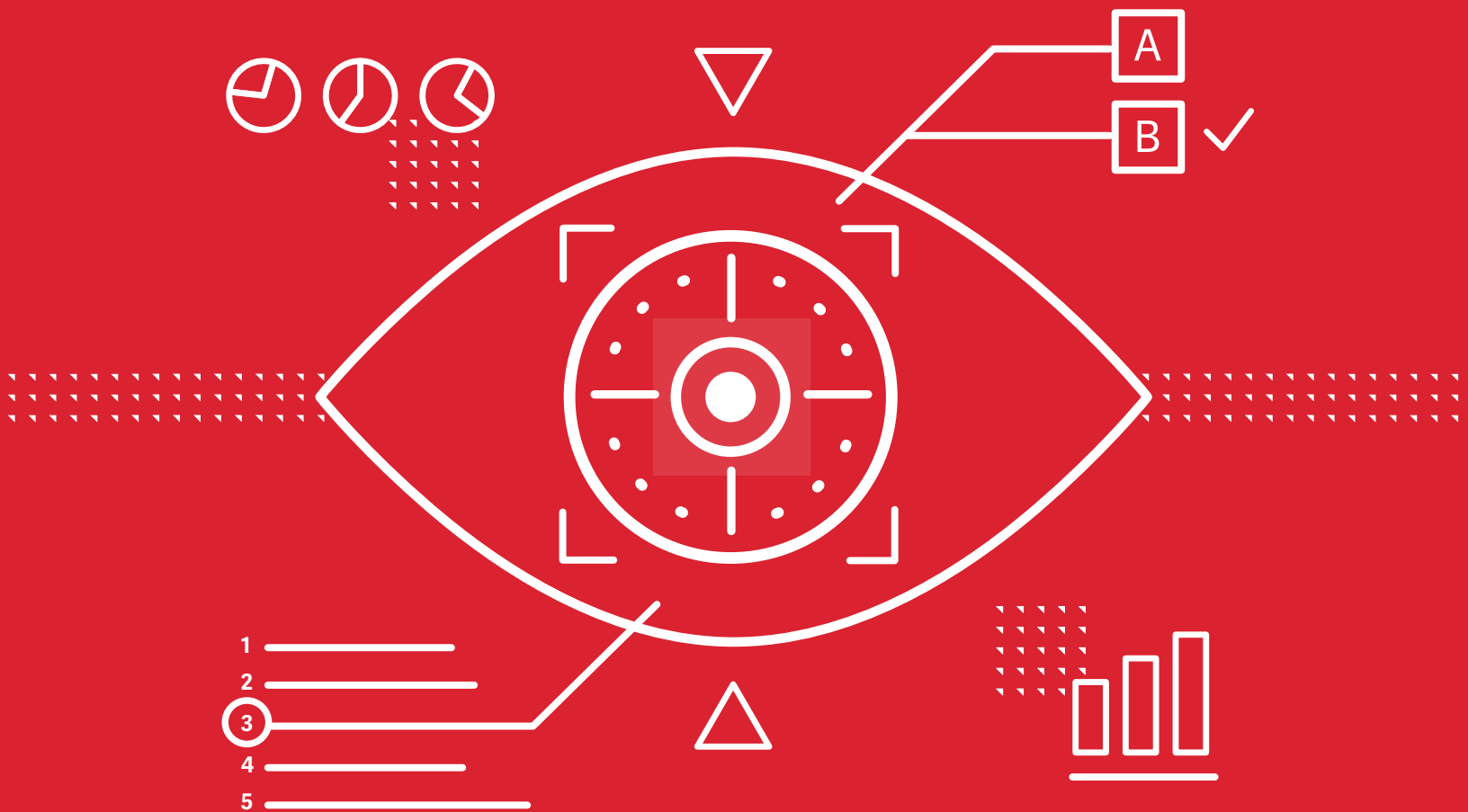To: **The Art and Science of *Effective***

Subject: **Subject Lines**

Return Path

In a world where every inbox suffers from email overload and every brand is fighting for subscribers' precious time, we know that most people spend just a fraction of a second deciding whether to open, ignore, or delete a given message. A well-crafted subject line can grab readers' attention and entice them to engage with your message rather than moving on.

For this very reason, you'll find countless articles and reports providing tips, tricks, and formulas for creating effective subject lines. This is not one of those reports.

The truth is, there's no magic subject line formula that will work for every business and every email. Using specific keywords in a particular format won't guarantee opens. Instead, it's critical to test the effectiveness of various keywords and techniques to see what works with your unique audience—and then continually optimize your email subject lines to account for changing audience preferences.

In this report, we'll explore why it's important to get your subject lines right, including:

1	2	3
Their impact on conversion rates	How they influence brand perception	The insights that can enhance your overall marketing efforts

In addition, we'll provide some data-based analysis of subject line length and keyword effectiveness using our subject line testing solution. Although your results will vary, this data can be used as a jumping-off point for your own campaign testing. Oh—and we'll also share some testing tips to help you get started.

News Flash! Good Subject Lines Drive Conversions

Hopefully this isn't really news. Perhaps the most widely accepted benefit of a strong subject line is the ability to influence conversion rates. The reason is fairly obvious—no matter how compelling your copy or how brilliant your design, it won't be seen unless the subject line entices subscribers to engage.

But a good subject line can actually do more than just affect the instantaneous decision to open, ignore, or delete.

Continued visibility

Bank statements, receipts, personal correspondence, promotions—everything flows into our inboxes. In a recent study by Pew Research Center, email was listed as the most widely used smartphone feature. With the amount of time people spend looking at their mailboxes, having your content in the inbox leaves an impression.

And unlike a fleeting Facebook ad, TV commercial, or billboard, your email will remain in the inbox—visible to your subscriber—until they take action. Subject lines that aren't initially engaged with function like display ads. Their continued presence in the inbox grants visibility and provides a reminder of your brand—and your offer. A strong subject line increases the probability that subscribers will act on your message, either now or later.

Influence on offline purchases

Subject lines have the power to drive conversions even when your subscriber steps away from their inbox. A clear, compelling, and memorable offer in the subject line is likely to stick with the reader and may be recalled later in the "physical world," leading to a point-of-sale purchase—whether or not the original email was opened!

Of course these conversions are much more difficult to track and attribute to your email campaign, but they definitely highlight the importance of making sure your emails land in the inbox.

Everything your company produces contributes to your brand, whether it is a new product, a revolutionary study, an impressive announcement, or an email subject line. Every aspect of your company is used by customers and prospects to determine the value and quality of your brand and compare it against your competitors.

Naturally you have an approval process to ensure that press releases and other "important" communications are on-brand, but are you applying those same standards to your subject lines? Emails—and the subject lines attached to them—are highly visible to your customers and potential customers. Whether they open and engage or simply skim past, the subject line conveys a message not only about the email content but about your brand.

Upscale or bargain hunter?

You invest a great deal of valuable time and resources to create campaigns that showcase the quality and value of your company and your products. Make sure that message is clearly reflected in your subject lines to appeal to your target audience.

For example, this subject line from luxury department store Barney's reinforces their luxury brand appeal by showcasing a luxury brand they carry (Givenchy) and doesn't focus on discounts which may not appeal or matter to their target audience.

Subject:

Givenchy Handbags: Shop the Antigona and More Now

By contrast, discount luxury goods retailer Bluefly appeals to the aspirational consumer looking for discounts on luxury apparel. This subject line example takes a similar approach by using luxury apparel names in their subject line, but pairs it with a discount to appeal to their cost-conscious audience.

Subject:

Too Many Shoes? Never! EXTRA 30% Off Gucci, Prada, Jimmy Choo & More!

Make 'em laugh

Humor can be an effective tool to make everything from speeches to advertisements and subject lines more memorable, but they can easily backfire if humor isn't a part of your brand identity. Take these two examples of brands that use humor effectively based on their audience.

Moosejaw, an outdoor apparel company, uses humor as a key part of its branding to stand out in a competitive field, and more importantly to be remembered. This example promoting their Easter sale is typical of Moosejaw's absurdist style.

Subject:

The Easter Platypus is Here - Up to 50% off one item

ThinkGeek is one brand that has humor embedded in their DNA, and nearly every subject line they write reflects this. Truly a subject line that only a geek would appreciate, this example from ThinkGeek promotes Valentine's Day with a subject line referencing the wedding scene from the movie The Princess Bride ("And wuv, tru wuv, will fowow you foweva...").

Subject:

ThinkGeek is wot bwings us togeder tooday.

Highlight Competitive Advantages

Your subscribers are a combination of loyalists and bargain hunters. Make sure you understand how your program stacks up against your competitors

- Evaluate how much subscriber overlap you have with your competitors.
- Understand how your campaign performance stacks up against your competitors, including the subscribers you share.
- Compare messages to see what is working and what isn't for the audience you share. Do more of what's working, and less of what's not.

What are Your Emails Trying to Tell You?

Your email results tell a story that goes way beyond campaign-specific results—if you're willing to do the work of interpreting them. By looking beyond the obvious metrics like opens and clicks, you'll find a wealth of insights that can help drive improvements across your marketing program.

Actionable insights

All of your email metrics (like read rate, deleted unread rate, and spam complaint rate) tell you something about how your email is being perceived by your subscribers and customers. By tracking these metrics, you can make data-backed changes to your subject lines to increase desirable actions and decrease undesirable actions by your subscribers.

More control

Your email program, and the content you send, is wholly owned by your company. You can quickly alter your subject lines in response to any new insights on how your campaign is performing. You should take advantage of the control you have to not only improve your email program, but as a testing ground for your other marketing platforms.

The Great Debate: Subject Line Length

The optimal length for email subject lines has been hotly debated over the years, with wildly conflicting conclusions. We looked at emails received by over 2 million email subscribers from over 3,000 retail senders in February 2015, and found that:

- Most subject lines were between 41 and 50 characters.
- Subject lines 61 - 70 characters long had the highest read rate (17%).

Overall, our research indicates that there is actually no correlation between the length of a subject line and its read rate. When comparing the number of characters in a subject line to the read rate, the **Pearson's correlation* value was -.03,** which shows us that there's no relationship between the number of characters in a subject line and whether or not the email is opened.

Just because there's no specific correlation between length and read rate doesn't mean you can fully ignore how many characters are in your subject line. Different devices have different display capabilities, so it's important to keep this in mind as you write your subject lines.

A typical desktop inbox displays about 60 characters of an email's subject line, while mobile devices show just 25-30 characters. If your audience is primarily reading your emails on smartphones, place the offer or call to action at the beginning of the subject line where it's more likely to be seen.

Being mindful, too, of how your subject lines may be truncated can also avoid embarrassing brand mistakes, like "license" being truncated to "lice." Shorter subject lines may see higher performance for a mostly mobile audience, too. Look at your existing data for insights like this, or use subject line length as one of your next elements to test.

Characters in subject line	Average read rate	Messages with this subject line length
0-10	14%	1%
11-20	13%	5%
21-30	11%	18%
31-40	14%	19%
41-50	12%	25%
51-60	14%	17%
61-70	17%	6%
71-80	14%	3%
81-90	14%	2%
91-100	15%	1%
>100	9%	3%

*The Pearson's correlation is the most common measure to determine if two sets of data have a relationship. The values for a Pearson correlation can range from -1 to 1, with 0 showing no correlation, a -1 showing a negative correlation, and a +1 showing a positive correlation.

Keyword Effectiveness in 10 Common Subject Line Types

Marketers are a creative group, and it's natural that they would want to write original, clever subject lines rather than following established formulas. However, when writing subject lines and copy, your job is to convince the reader to open your email and purchase your product, or perform some other specific action. And while there's always room for creativity, email subject lines tend to fall into a limited number of predictable categories.

We looked at some of the most common keywords used in 10 basic types of subject lines, to see how they influenced performance.

The selected keywords aren't intended to be comprehensive, but represent some of the most common keywords used in the emails we studied. Performance is reported in relation to other types of subject lines sent from the same brands.

Overall, "Urgency" subject lines performed the best, followed by "Benefit" and "Command" subject lines. Keywords commonly found in "Clickbait" headlines hope to take advantage of the curiosity factor—and while these may work on social networks and news sites, they are far less successful in email subject lines.

Benefit

When it comes to displaying benefits in a subject line, people prefer things fast and pretty—and if it's the "fastest" (+5.30) and "prettiest" (+2.87%), you're more likely to get your email opened.

Top Keywords in "Benefit" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
best	13.84%	-0.41%
cheapest	25.14%	-2.94%
easiest	19.38%	+0.30%
fastest	13.59%	+5.30%
prettiest	32.50%	+2.87%
quickest	11.09%	-2.01%

Clickbait

You won't believe this shocking secret of getting your emails opened: clickbait subject lines didn't perform that well! "Secret(s) of"-type subject lines performed well below average (-8.69%), while "get rid of" (+0.83%) and "what you need to know" (+0.62) performed the best.

Top Keywords in "Clickbait" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
get rid of	4.96%	+0.83%
secret of	5.68%	-8.69%
shocking	9.98%	-1.22%
what you need to know	11.06%	+0.62%
won't believe	12.90%	-0.34%

Keyword Effectiveness in 10 Common Subject Line Types

Command

Command subject lines generate action by telling subscribers what to do. Subject lines with the command keyword of "register" generated read rates nearly 7% higher than the average. Telling subscribers to "open" (+1.73%) and "add" (+1.13%) was also successful.

Top Keywords in "Command" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
add	16.56%	+1.13%
aim	15.05%	-0.86%
buy	13.56%	-1.25%
call	13.47%	-0.41%
click	12.27%	+0.20%
download	25.03%	+0.3%
get	14.92%	-0.87%
open	16.48%	+1.73%
put	11.49%	-1.50%
register	24.19%	+6.70%
try	13.71%	+0.28%

How-To

Headlines educating readers on how to do something may perform well for publishers, but they don't push results in either direction (-0.03%) for email subject lines.

Top Keywords in "How-To" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
how to	11.97%	-0.03%

Discount

Maybe it was a result of Christmas shopping fatigue, but discount-type subject lines performed poorly in our study. Only the keyword "offer" prompted an uplift in email read rate (+0.60%).

Top Keywords in "Discount" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
2 for 1	6.67%	-6.62%
clearance	15.06%	-3.78%
discount	15.90%	-0.10%
half off	10.36%	-0.92%
offer	19.14%	+0.60%
sale	17.77%	-0.06%
save	16.16%	-0.63%

News

News-type subject lines typically convey announcements about your products or promotions, but keywords used in these types of subject lines weren't very successful at getting subscribers to open.

Top Keywords in "News" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
announcing	15.10%	-1.45%
discover	15.09%	-0.09%
find	15.16%	+0.58%
introducing	20.23%	-1.22%
learn	12.63%	-0.49%
new	14.67%	+0.82%
read	14.48%	-1.41%
see	12.61%	-2.01%

Keyword Effectiveness in 10 Common Subject Line Types

Personal

Using pronouns to suggest a more personal touch isn't a very effective subject line strategy, only the use of "you" yielded a (very) slight lift in reads (+0.10%).

Top Keywords in "Personal" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
he	13.07%	-0.05%
I	13.02%	-0.12%
it	13.62%	-0.48%
me	13.77%	-0.20%
mine	8.01%	-1.69%
our	15.29%	-0.26%
you	16.73%	+0.10%

Reason Why

Reason-why headlines are a favorite with publishers, thanks to their ability to draw in readers. (Just look at the front cover of Cosmo next time you're standing in the grocery line.) Using them in subject lines can have much the same effect. Our data suggests that you should test subject lines that include "steps."

Top Keywords in "Reason Why" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
here's how	12.47%	-1.00%
steps	11.94%	+1.23%
ways	13.65%	+0.17%
why	12.11%	-0.83%

Price

Subject lines containing a discount with a percent (%) or dollar ($) discount (or offering something free) were below-average performers. It's hard to imagine eliminating these from your subject lines—and it's likely that the size of the discount or value of the free item influences opens more than the fact that the subject line includes a discount or offer.

| Top Keywords in "Price" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
%	16.71%	-1.03%
$	15.61%	-0.81%
free	16.44%	-0.26%

Urgency

Subject lines that convey a sense of urgency were the top performers among everything we studied. Consider reminding people that there's "still time" (+15.54%) to take advantage of an offer, as opposed to telling them it's been "extended." (-2.95%).

| Top Keywords in "Urgency" Subject Lines	Average Read Rate for Subject Lines Containing this Keyword	Keyword Influence on Read Rate
expire	19.69%	-0.24%
expiring	16.60%	+1.63%
extended	9.20%	-2.95%
hurry	19.01%	-0.47%
last chance	16.71%	+1.05%
limited time	14.93%	+3.05%
now	15.75%	+0.24%
running out	9.92%	-3.30%
still time	33.73%	+15.54%

Now Start Testing!

Hopefully the concepts and data presented in this report have sparked plenty of ideas about how to improve your email subject lines. But as we pointed out in the introduction, there's no magic formula—you're going to have to do some testing to see what works for your brand and your unique audience.

Here are some tips to help you figure out what (and how) to test.
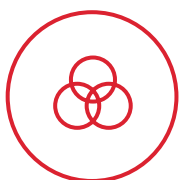
Determine your sample

To ensure your test is valid and valuable, make sure you're using a large enough sample size of your subscriber base. You can either use the standard formula for sample size or check out an online calculator like this one from Survey Monkey.
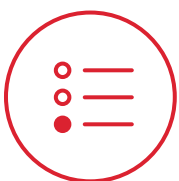
Pick your variable

The most effective tests focus on just one variable. Changing multiple things at once makes it impossible to accurately judge which one moved the needle. When performing a split test, make sure you are comparing apples to apples. Below are some ideas to try out for your next split test.

- Change one or two words (examples from Victoria's Secret)
    The free tote that's beach ready
    The complimentary tote that's beach ready
- Vary the offer (examples from Obama for America)
    Upgrade: Get a free car magnet
    1. Jump on Facebook   2. Get a free bumper sticker
- Rearrange the sentence (examples from Amazon)
    20% off Gluten Free Snacks
    Gluten Free Snacks 20% off
- Alter the length (examples from JetBlue)
    Love is a trip
    Flying solo? Or with a seatmate? #loveisintheair

Don't spend too much time thinking about what to test—the keywords in this report are a great place to start. And if your first test is inconclusive, you can always do more testing.

Methodology

For this study, Return Path analyzed over 9 million subject lines received by more than 2 million subscribers from January 1st through February 28th, 2015 using its Subject Line Optimizer solution.

A Better Way to Use Data

We help the world's leading companies promote and protect their brands.

Email Optimization

The right message, at the right time, to the right inbox means better relationships, greater reach and increased revenue. Email Optimization enables enhanced insights for better deliverability and more meaningful engagements.

Email Fraud Protection

The cost of a cyber attack goes beyond dollars and cents, it damages the integrity of a brand. Email Fraud Protection uses advanced fraud profiling data to respond to, and prevent, cyber attacks with greater speed.

Consumer Insight

The inbox provides a unique real-time view of consumer behavior - from brand affinity to detailed purchase records. Consumer Insight provides in-depth data across millions of global consumers enabling smarter decisions and better business results.

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