

The Five Variables of Scaling Email Volume

A joint study with Azam Marketing, one of Europe's oldest digital agencies



INTRODUCTION

The act of sending a single email is so simple that it often clouds marketers' heads into thinking the act can be scaled with little issue. The processes, technology and skill needed to scale mass email transmissions from hundreds, to thousands, to hundreds of thousands, to millions, to tens of millions, becomes exponentially complex with each step.

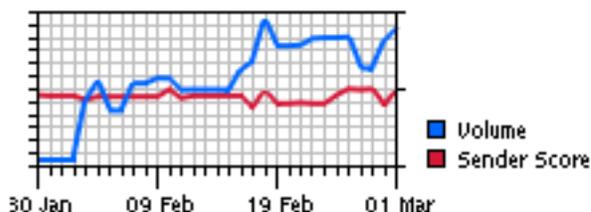
Azam Marketing, one of Europe's oldest established digital marketing agencies with clients such as Unilever, BT, Dell and Hilton has been working with **Gold Lasso** and other Email Service Providers (ESPs) to scale their email operations into one of the largest in the world. Email marketing success is often closely correlated to volume and reach, both of which are extremely difficult to achieve even for agencies like Azam Marketing that strictly embrace permission marketing and best practices.

The science of scaling email volume is not exact because of the multiple variables involved and the fact that system administrators (humans) often change the rules of deliverability. However, five things have remained constant for optimal deliverability for large email volume over the past few years. Azam Marketing and Gold Lasso have uncovered the secrets of the science and we are prepared to share them with you in this report.

VARIABLE 1: SENDER REPUTATION

Believe it or not, many marketers are still unaware that ISPs, such as Yahoo!, Hotmail and Gmail, have a credit scoring like system to determine which email to send to the inbox and which to purge or send to the junk folder. These scores are attributed to the sender reputation of the IP address(es) and domain(s) which marketers send from and they change daily. ReturnPath gives you the ability to lookup the score of your IP address via www.senderscore.org. Like your credit score, your sender score is made up of a number variables including complaints, bounces, the number of spam traps you hit and many others that are not widely promoted. One of the most important variables of your sender score is the percentage of your subscribers that mark your email as spam or junk. **We have learned that the threshold for lowering your sender score precipitously is 0.01% of the volume you sent over the previous 24 hours.**

Once this threshold is surpassed a number of different actions are taken by the ISPs including, but not limited to, throttling, temporary



blocking and permanent blocking. The process of sending millions of email transmissions, even with primary permission, is riddled with sender reputation issues caused by fickle consumers. The more fickle your subscribers that decide to use spam button as an opt-out mechanism, the more IP addresses and sending domains you will need to get your email delivered.

VARIABLE 2: HARD & SOFT BOUNCES

A hard bounce is an indication that an email address does not exist, and when you have many of them, it is an immediate red flag to ISPs that a spammer is trying to reach their servers. The main reasoning for this is that legitimate marketers still have a cost to send to dead or nonexistent email addresses and therefore would not embrace the practice. Spammers on the other hand hijack servers and PCs of unsuspecting owners and have no cost. Therefore, hard bounces must be removed immediately from your list. Failing to do so can result in a permanent block of your IP address and/or sending domain.



Soft bounces such a full inbox indicator will not necessarily hurt your reputation, however it is important to keep track of them. Large amounts of soft bounces can be related to a technical problem at an ISP or corporate server, and sending transmissions should be temporarily suspended to the receiving server.

One type of bounce that is often miscategorized as a hard bounce is a reputation bounce. A reputation bounce is email that was unable to be delivered due to a sender reputation issue. These issues include but are not limited to domain/IP blocks, content-related spam flags, ISP deferrals, blacklistings.

VARIABLE 3: LIST MANAGEMENT & CLEANSING

With so much focus on the message, marketers

often overlook the importance of list cleansing and management. It goes without saying that all emails must be strictly opt-in and you must tag each new record with details such as the opt-in time and date and IP number.



Before an email address is added to your database it should be checked for legitimacy using an SMTP test and compared against known spam traps. Addresses with profanity and generic words such as "info" and "service" should be removed. There are a number of services such as LeadSpend, Fresh Address, Service Objects in North America and Azam Marketing's offering in the UK that can help with the list cleansing process, especially at the point of entry via web forms. **The investment in list cleansing will save you in transmission fees and will result in higher deliverability rates.**

Effective list management starts with subscriber preference and segmentation. If you service multiple markets and demographics, try to collect subscriber preferences upfront and segment appropriately. This means if a subscriber only wants to receive information about product categories A, B and C, make sure you don't send them email about D, E and F. Decide on a preference methodology early and don't change it. If change is inevitable, give plenty of warning and allow your subscribers to easily change their preferences. Once you do implement change, expect higher than average list attrition and complaints. After all, you did change the rules of the game for your subscribers.

VARIABLE 4: CONTENT & ENGAGEMENT

Most marketers think their messages are engaging and effective, yet the sad truth is most email marketing

lacks the relevancy and technical aspects to make it to the inbox. What marketers fail to understand is that with new 'priority inbox' rules, the lack of

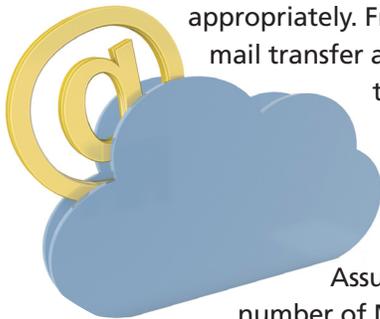


subscriber engagement can affect deliverability. **For instance, Gmail uses an algorithm based on a subscriber's previous engagement with a sender to determine the viability of the sender's future messages and their deliverability.** This puts a tremendous amount of pressure on marketers to ensure continuous engagement since it's now directly linked to deliverability. Therefore, while sending large volumes of messages, engagement rates must be higher to ensure current and future deliverability. Below are simple yet highly effective tactics to increase engagement rates.

1. Content should always be personalized and relevant.
2. Subject lines should be compelling and exciting.
3. Important content and calls to action should be above the preview pane.
4. Use descriptive and exciting ALT tags to overcome blocked images.

VARIABLE 5: TECHNOLOGY

Often a second thought for marketers is the technology needed to scale email volume appropriately. From IP address management to mail transfer agents (MTAs), marketers need to be cognizant of their infrastructure's capabilities and the maintenance it requires.



Assuming you have the proper number of MTAs for your volume requirements, your ability to send large volumes of email is directly dependent on an ISP's desire to accept your mail. **As a general rule, assuming you're sending to multiple ISPs, acceptance rates should hover around 100,000 messages per hour per IP address.** If you need to send

millions of messages in a strict time period you will need to use multiple IP addresses (sometimes even hundreds). Failure to use additional IP addresses will result in your messages sitting in an MTA queue causing them to eventually incur a transient bounce. Aside from the number of IP addresses, marketers need to be aware of the reputation of the IP addresses they are sending from. As mentioned previously, IP address reputation can be monitored at sites such as SenderScore.org.

Another critical factor is to maintain a proper DNS record and naming schema. Sending from a sub-domain of your corporate domain i.e. (messages.yourdomain.com) can cause issues with your corporate email or website if you should encounter a blacklist. It's best to use a derivative of your domain to keep your email marketing separate from your day to day corporate email. A good example of this would be yourdomain-email.com.

Just as it's difficult for someone with no credit to obtain a loan, IP addresses with no reputation will have a difficult time getting email through to ISPs. IP addresses that have not been used to send large volume email need to be "warmed-up." System managers need to take the necessary time to scale email volume, slowly with quality data, via each IP address they intend to use for large volumes. From there, constant monitoring is needed and complaints must be addressed in an expeditious manner by removing IP addresses and domains from blacklists and communicating openly with other system administrators and ISPs. After all, humans are behind the filtering and deliverability rules that determine where your messages end up.

Lastly, but sometimes overlooked, IP address authentication is a must for large volume senders. Authentication is a way to absolutely determine who the sender is. It's simply useless to have a

good sending reputation without attributing it to the right organization. Widely used authentication protocols are Senders Policy Framework (SPF) and Sender ID. There are mixed opinions on their effectiveness since the barriers to using these protocols are low. The most favored authentication protocol is Domain Keys Identified Mail or DKIM however it's really important to include all of the authentication protocols and specifications (DKIM, DK, SPF, Sender ID, and DMARC) because different email receivers use different means of authentication. It's also important to test your records for validity. If your record is not setup correctly it can go unnoticed and hurt your deliverability. Here are a few tools to test with:

SPF Test

<http://www.kitterman.com/spf/validate.html>

Domain Key Test

<http://domainkeys.sourceforge.net/selectorcheck.html>

Vamsoft SPF Check

<http://www.vamsoft.com/spfcheck.asp>

ABOUT AZAM MARKETING ([HTTP://WWW.AZAM.NET](http://www.azam.net))

Azam Marketing has been at the forefront of digital marketing and design since 1997 and specialises in affiliate, email, search and social media marketing, as well as website design and development. The award-winning UK agency carries out the eCRM and email marketing for a number of blue chip companies and currently manages over 16.4 million email records.



ABOUT GOLD LASSO

Gold Lasso is a provider of sophisticated eMarketing solutions and services such as email, mobile, surveys, landing pages and social media, that help you easily interact with your customers in a more relevant and personalized way. Helping you sell more is our mission. Therefore, in addition to superior technology, we provide you with a dedicated and knowledgeable Account Manager who delivers strategic guidance to maximize your technology investment.

As a continuous developer of innovative features, Gold Lasso is greatly attuned to market shifts and client needs. We make multi-channel marketing success cost effective and easy by providing an all-inclusive feature set scalable for clients to grow their marketing without having to migrate to more expensive systems. Some of these features include an intuitive and user-friendly interface, in-depth metrics and reporting, campaign automation and a robust API for easy integration. Gold Lasso is truly a complete system designed for clients to achieve a maximum ROI from their email, mobile and Web marketing efforts.

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CONCLUSION

Remember, broadcasting to large volume email databases is not as simple as clicking the send button. Marketers not only need to have the five mentioned variables aligned, but monitor them consistently as well. If you're undertaking this task in-house, you will have to take into consideration the manpower necessary for success. The email volume scaling and maintaining process is not a one or two person job, nor is it a part-time responsibility. If you are relying on an ESP to help you scale, be upfront with them about your plans. Most ESPs will not allow for massive jumps in volume without prior warning and preparation. Additionally, some ESPs are not in the business of handling huge volumes from one account and therefore other resources will need to be considered. As with any anticipated growth, planning around key variables is the hardline difference between failure and success.

