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YOUR BUSINESS: *James Watson*

## **Making e-mail an effective marketing tool**

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Yogi Berra once said, "Nobody goes there because the place is too crowded." The same might be said about your inbox.

Many firms hesitate to use e-mail as a marketing tool for fear that their message will get lost in a crowd of unsolicited communications.

Despite its misuse by the spam-happy marketers, e-mail continues to be a low-cost method of reaching a high number of potential customers in very little time. When used correctly, e-mail remains a powerful tool toward building valuable customer relationships.

Several times a year, I receive a well-crafted e-mail from the Scotts Lawn Care company. I always read those e-mails because I know that they will tell me something that I need and want to know in order to keep my lawn green.

The e-mail recognizes that my lawn is in a northern New England coastal region, with a shorter growing season, and that I should apply fertilizer treatments appropriate for my lawn's rye grass type.

The message also arrives right around the optimal times for applying treatment during the season. Those e-mails are valuable to me, and I will continue to read them and purchase the products they recommend.

Scotts accomplishes this e-mail success by following four principals. It defines its customers individually through data, creates unique customer segments, crafts a relevant message for each segment and sends the messages at appropriate times.

- Define your customers with data.

Customers want to be treated as individuals, and relevant messages cater to that. Collect data that will define the uniqueness of your customers. Think about what makes your customers different from one another and what specific data you can use to define those differences.

Scotts uses zip code and grass type to define its clientele. Zip code defines geographic location, which defines growing season. Grass type defines the fertilizer and treatments that should be used to keep a particular lawn healthy.

Together, those two data elements enable Scotts to effectively define the uniqueness of its individual customers. If you don't already have the data to define your clientele, you should come up with a plan to collect it.

- Know your customers' behaviors and preferences.

Once you've collected the data that will define your customers, use that data to sort the customers into groups based on their similarities. Segmenting your customers into these target groups will help you to identify your customers' preferences, and understand their behaviors.

My zip code indicates to Scotts that I need to apply the spring lawn treatment a few weeks later in the season than other customers in the south or mid-Atlantic regions.

- Treat different customers differently.

If you've taken the time to define your customers by capturing the right data and identified their preferences by sorting them into unique groups, this next step is where you show them that you care.

Create a message that contains information pertinent to those needs and preferences. Doing this will make your message relevant and more likely to be read and drive a response from the customer. Your message should matter to them. If you segment your customer base into 10 different groups, you should create 10 different messages.

- Remember, timing is everything.

Last but not least, send the e-mail at a time when it will matter most to the recipient, a time when they can take action on it. The e-mail from Scotts always arrives at a week or two before the "ideal" time to apply the lawn treatment, just in time for me to make productive use of the information.

An important element for improving customer relationships is to consistently provide value to your customers. That value need not be limited to the products and services that you deliver; you should also look for ways to incorporate value into every interaction your company has with its customers. Delivering relevant marketing messages in a timely manner is one step toward increasing the overall value of your customer relationships.

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