

Best Practices in Email Marketing

The Ultimate Lifecycle Email Marketing Guide: Event-Triggered Alerts

Proven strategies for implementing, testing and optimizing effective triggered-email programs

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Enabling customers to sign-up for notification emails like in-stock or price-drop alerts is an effective way to engage customers and increase conversions

INTRODUCTION

This handy guide for getting started with an effective email marketing program for event-triggered alerts is the fourth in a series of "Ultimate Email Marketing Guide" whitepapers focused on lifecycle marketing. In the pages that follow, you will learn the insights, strategies and tools that are necessary to implement, test and optimize a compelling event-triggered program for engaging subscribers and driving revenue with real-time alerts based on changing customer data attributes.

WHAT IS IT?

Event-triggered alerts cover a wide range of emails that marketers use to notify their customers and prospects of time-sensitive opportunities. These opportunities most notably focus on purchase opportunities such as temporary price reductions or in-stock notifications, but may also apply to more experiential opportunities such as web broadcasts or offline events. These opportunities tend to share the following characteristics:

Time-sensitive. Limited inventory or temporary availability means that once they're gone, they're gone.

Customer-requested. Enabling customers to sign-up for notification emails like in-stock or price-drop alerts is an effective way to engage customers and increase conversions with a separate mail stream that has a higher frequency than typical broadcast mailings.

Highly targeted. Whether the opportunity is customer-defined (e.g. "tell me when this item is in stock") or parameter defined (e.g. emailing everyone opted-in for live demos who lives within 25 miles of Kansas City), these emails have a specific appeal to a specific group of people.

Marketers who employ event-triggered alerts successfully must deliver what they promise to deliver. Give the consumer ample opportunity to engage with the email beyond the specific offer requested and avoid using it as an opportunity to over-mail.

WHY IT'S A GOOD IDEA

While email marketing offers many opportunities to infer what the customer wants—preference centers, click behavior, web analytics integration—event triggers give customers the ability to tell marketers exactly what they want. While a customer's interest in a specific offer does not guarantee a sale, it certainly gives the marketer a better starting point than the usual offers-of-the-week email.

Moreover, few other emails give marketers the opportunity to provide a memorable customer experience as do trigger-based emails. When a customer receives a well-executed triggered email, she will think "I asked for X, they gave me X. This company listens to me!"

GETTING STARTED

Not every event or offer makes sense as a trigger for an email. Offers or content that do not change on a frequent basis, for instance, do not apply. However, simply because an offer or piece of content changes does not mean that it deserves its own triggered email. Marketers need to use common sense to ensure that triggered email does not cry wolf.

At the same time, triggered emails should also anticipate that customer needs change. A consumer who asked for emails about price drops on skis in January, for instance, may not want to buy them when the price drops in May. Discretion and timing play major roles in making triggered emails succeed.

Five Steps for Launching an Effective Triggered-Email Program

The following five tips will help get you started on the right track.

1. Identify Relevant Events That Can Serve as Triggers

Ideal triggers include events that a.) have a limited window of opportunity and b.) interest a subset of your customers. In that vein, a twice-a-year storewide sale would not qualify, as it likely interests most or all of your customers. On the other hand, a price drop on a specific item meets both criteria. Other events might include:

- Specialized new product announcements (e.g. left-handed golf clubs, B2B software for healthcare providers, etc.)
- Regional availability of offerings (now available in Tucson)
- Actual real-world events (e.g. in-store demos, mall tours)
- Mentions in the press and other third-party media

While we can't possibly offer a complete list, using the above criteria of "limited window of opportunity" and "limited audience" should help identify appropriate triggers.

2. Develop a Sturdy Template for Event-Triggered Email

Templates will improve the deployment process for triggered emails. Because of the fast-paced nature of these kinds of emails, marketers will either employ dynamic, rules-driven emails or accelerated production processes to meet customer demand. In the case of dynamic emails, the marketer can create a frame for the email with business rules that automatically populate offers and content based on set conditions (e.g. changes in in-stock status). In the case of accelerated production, a basic template reduces the chances for error.

In either case, marketers should design the template to include other relevant offers. In the case of the skis-in-May example above, a secondary offer might include more seasonally appropriate products (e.g. swimsuits) or some kind of acknowledgement of the seasonal changes ("best deals come after the season!"). Of course, all the usual email best practices for design, copy and layout apply.

Marketers need to use common sense to ensure that triggered email does not cry wolf

3. Find the Right Places to Ask Customers to Opt-in to Triggered Emails

Perhaps the most important elements of event-triggered emails fall not in the emails themselves, but on the corresponding websites. Marketers have several opportunities to invite customers to opt in for triggered emails:

Preference center/subscription center. While they differ in some ways (preference centers focus on areas of interest, subscription centers ask for specific email opt-ins), these utilities both give marketers the opportunity to ask for an opt-in to a triggered email. The preference/subscription center approach makes sense if the marketer plans triggers that correspond to other questions asked there. For instance, if the marketer asks for location information, such as address or ZIP, then it makes sense to offer an opt-in for local events. While other attributes might have too broad a range to serve as a trigger (gender, for instance), specific interests can drive specific triggers.

Product pages. Products with limited availability or frequent changes such as new colors or sizes, offer a good opportunity to attract opt-ins. Make sure to place the offer conspicuously and to use clear opt-in copy. Customers should know what emails they will receive and when they will receive them. For instance “click here to receive email when the price on this item drops” communicates more clearly than “click here for product updates.”

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Support pages. Analysis of FAQ usage by analytics results should reveal some opportunities to ask for triggered email opt-ins. For example, if “when will the new firmware be released?” ranks as a major question in FAQs, then the marketer might want to offer the opportunity to opt-in for firmware update news.

Perhaps the most important elements of event-triggered emails fall not in the emails themselves, but on the corresponding websites

4. Craft and Test Direct Subject Lines

By direct, we mean subject lines that refer to what the customer requested. Customers have told you what they want; there is no need to beat around the bush. As with all subject lines, triggered email subject lines should undergo testing. Testing will help determine the most direct and effective way to communicate the content of the email based on open rates.

The transient nature of triggered emails may make testing difficult. After all, small volumes relative to regular email newsletters or updates may result in statistically insignificant samples. However, combining several similar triggered emails, such as all local event emails, should allow marketers to determine a winner with relative ease.

5. Keep a Close Eye on Results

Triggered emails deserve as much attention – if not more – as other programs. After all, triggered emails engage a motivated audience. While volumes may seem small in comparison to regular emails, the value of their audiences may take on greater weight. By tracking email and landing page engagement, including conversion, a marketer can determine how well the emails work at capitalizing on customer interest. Pay close attention to any drop-offs in the sales funnel (from open-to-click or from click-to-bounce) to see where potential hazards may lie.

OPTIMIZING THE EFFORT

While setting up trigger-based emails entails a good deal of effort, the effort should not end when the triggers and emails become operational. It takes a keen eye on results and details to maintain a program that performs well. Some key points to keep in mind:

Four Optimization Best Practices for Event-Triggered Alerts

1. Avoid the Creepy Factor

While many if not most trigger-based emails serve as a helpful reminder to customers who have asked for them, these emails have the potential to veer into the creepy. For instance, if a marketer links browsing behavior to a triggered email, he or she could easily create emails with a secondary offer based not on the trigger offer but something else. However, consider the impact of an email with the offer copy "So you like women's underwear?" All kidding aside, marketers can too easily cross the line of helpful to overbearing.

2. Test Area #1: Offer

Just as with any email, the offer represents a powerful level to pull in driving customer behavior. However, too strong an offer might encourage gaming behavior in customers, encouraging them to sign up for a triggered email just to get the deal. Start with a minimal offer (e.g. no discount) and increase incrementally if response does not meet expectations.

3. Test Area #2: Subject Line

As noted above, direct subject lines work well. Consider that significant time may have lapsed in between the time that the customer asked for the email and the time that it launches. As a result, subject lines should, at the bare minimum, refer specifically to the original offer ("The Product Info you Requested"). Using a basic subject line as a starting point, add or subtract detail as needed. For instance, consider adding references to timing, such as "finally here" or "available now" to enhance excitement.

4. Consider a Triggered Series vs. a Single Message

Depending on the nature of the customer's request, a series of two or three emails may work better than a single email. For instance, a big-ticket, high-consideration product such as B2B technology may require several emails that introduce the product, explain its features and benefits and drive the customer to a sales call or demo event. On the other hand, a smaller-ticket item might only need that single email. A low-fare alert, for instance, works better as a "one-and-done" proposition because of the short-cycle nature of the sales decision.

By tracking email and landing page engagement, including conversion, a marketer can determine how well the emails work at capitalizing on customer interest

ANATOMY OF AN EFFECTIVE TRIGGERED EMAIL PROGRAM

The following pre-stay triggered email program from IHG is automatically sent three days prior to a visitor's stay. IHG uses one dynamic template that automatically generates relevant information based on the IHG hotel property (Hotel Indigo for this example), location, confirmation details and rewards information. Individual hotels can also load in their own individual offers.

By converting from a static template to a dynamic one and integrating with Unica and StrongMail, IHG now has a highly customized email with 31,680 versions and 7,000 URLs that are automatically generated and delivered based on each unique customer. Moreover, the program helps build customer loyalty by providing helpful information related to their stay and easy access to customer service information to assist with any questions or changes. This prestay email also enables IHG to raise incremental revenue by promoting cross-sell products and partner offers.

hotel INDIGO
Reservations | Locations | Customer Care | Priority Club® Rewards

Welcome to NEW YORK
We're looking forward to your visit!
Let us know if there's anything we can do to make your time with us more comfortable.

Reservation and Hotel Details
Your Confirmation Number is # 683368888.
Name: JASON WILEY
Check-In: 04/06/2011
Check-Out: 04/08/2011
NEW YORK CITY - CHELSEA
127 WEST 28TH STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10001
Front Desk: 212.973.9000
[View Map and Directions](#)

Priority Club® Rewards
JASON WILEY
Membership #: 494854175
Membership Level: Club
Reward Preference: Points
[Log In](#)

[MODIFY RESERVATION](#)
[CANCEL RESERVATION](#)
[VIEW ALL RESERVATIONS](#)
[CUSTOMER CARE](#)
[MAKE A RESERVATION](#)

Local Information and Attractions
Learn about things to see and do near your hotel. [See What's Nearby](#)
Explore dining options at the hotel and in the nearby area. [See Dining Options](#)
Preview the features and amenities offered at your hotel. [See Hotel Amenities](#)

Discover New Ways to Connect on the Go
Find and book hotels and more using our new mobile options. [Learn More](#)

Save on Your Next Stay
You can save up to 20% on your next reservation when you book using our Advance Purchase Rate. [Learn More](#)

Get a Free Night Every Year, Worldwide
Earn 30,000 points after your first purchase and a 10% rebate on all Priority Club redemptions! [Learn More](#)

Trigger email based on an ideal interval prior to customer visit

Reaffirm reservation details and customer service information

Provide local information to enhance customer visit

Test multiple cross-sell offers to maximize performance

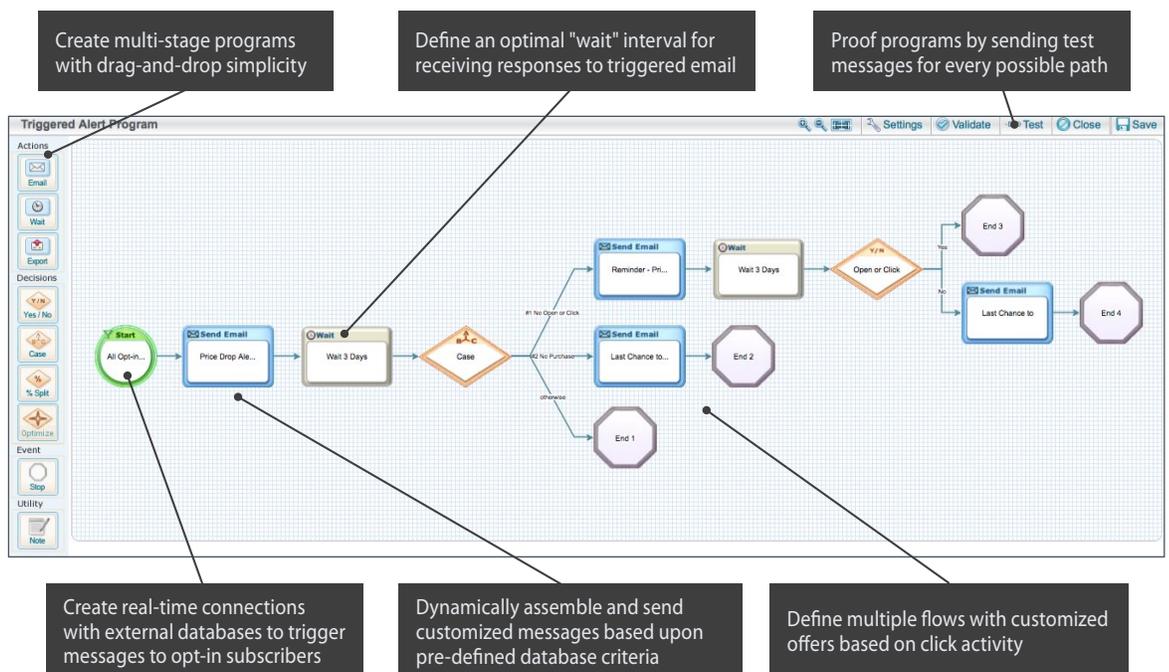
REQUIRED TECHNOLOGY

Unlike traditional outbound batch-and-blast email marketing campaigns, triggered email programs need to be first triggered via integration with customer databases, e-commerce systems, web analytics systems, and/or other external systems. Once that is achieved, it is then important for the messages to be assembled dynamically based on the information available and finally, be delivered in the timeframe you've determined to be most effective. This entire process requires a transactional or triggered email solution that not only ties into your data warehouse and other systems, but that also provides you with in-depth reporting to gauge deliverability and engagement, as well as full HTML customization capabilities to ensure visual consistency with your other email communications.

Sending a triggered email program is most easily accomplished with a lifecycle email marketing solution that allows you to easily set up appropriate triggers, customize wait intervals, test offers and optimize performance in real-time.

If you aren't currently able to dynamically assemble and send event-triggered emails with full tracking capabilities, you should look at upgrading your system to ensure that your customers receive timely and relevant alerts. Marketers should also seriously consider a system with lifecycle marketing capabilities that will allow you to easily create a flow that maximizes engagement and conversions. Below is an example of a simple triggered-email program designed with StrongMail's drag-and-drop lifecycle marketing solution. As illustrated below, a triggered email program can integrate "wait" steps and actions that generate different flows (which can be tested for maximum engagement).

In this scenario, the triggered email program is kicked off by a customer signing up to receive a price drop notification on a brand's website. Once a price-drop is registered for the specified product, the system kicks off an email letting them know of the price difference. The program then waits three days and delivers a reminder email to all non-openers/non-clickers. Once delivered, the program waits three more days and then delivers a "last chance to save" message to all non-openers/non-clickers. Subscribers who previously clicked but did not purchase are given a variation of the message with an offer incentive. The program ends after these two variations.



THE PAY OFF

When executed well, event-triggered emails provide marketers with a list of exceptionally interested customers. Most obviously, these customers will respond more strongly to the information they requested than the typical customer on your list. More subtly, customers who explicitly ask for information comprise an engaged group. Potentially, marketers can test tactics such as advanced cadence against these customers to see if they respond better overall to email. However, such a use of event triggers obscures its most direct and best use: driving specific customers to respond to specific information and offers.

ABOUT STRONGMAIL

We're StrongMail. We cater to forward-thinking enterprises that are looking for more than just a “me-too” email marketing solution. As our name implies, we’re all about helping our clients create **STRONG** email marketing programs – ones that are impactful, effective and efficient.

We believe that email provides the foundation for great interactive marketing, and that social media and mobile marketing serve to strengthen that foundation. While Forrester Research named StrongMail as one of only six ESPs suited for enterprise marketers alongside vendors like ExactTarget, Responsys and Cheetahmail, our solutions and approach are very different (which is why enterprises and high-volume senders like us).

Talk to us. See how StrongMail is different, and how that difference can help your business grow. Learn more at www.strongmail.com or contact us today.

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