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E-BUSINESS STRATEGIES FOR MERCHANTS & CATALOGERS

Omit needless words

The secret to successful e-mail marketing: Be succinct
By Mark Brohan

Talk about being direct. An e-mail from ShoeBuy.com this winter advertised discounts on its inventory of 3,000 styles of winter boots and alerted shoppers to ShoeBuy's standard offers of free shipping, free return shipping and no sales tax—all in 60 words. "We like to say we use a few choice words to deliver a very big message," says Nick Copley, vice president of marketing for ShoeBuy.

ShoeBuy has learned what many other online retailers are still discovering: Less is more. Its winter e-mail campaign produced a 30% open rate, a 35% click-through rate and a 6.5% sales conversion rate. "That campaign worked because we emphasized winter, reminded customers that it's cold outside and used several value propositions to motivate customers to click and buy—in a very short message," Copley says.

With only a second or two to hook the e-mail reader, online retailers can literally win or lose business in the blink of an eye. In catalogs and circulars, retailers and direct marketers have the luxury of using a few extra column inches or lines of text to romance the reader with a new offer or product innovation. But in e-mail, they need copy that's short, to-the-point and compelling.

"Many retailers still treat e-mail as cheap paper and that's why they are getting poor campaign results," says Chris Baggott, co-founder and chief marketing officer of ExactTarget Inc, an e-mail marketing service provider. "They put their weekly circulars or monthly catalog copy into an e-mail and send it out carte blanche."

ShoeBuy, which produces at least two e-mail marketing campaigns each month for an opt-in list of more than 500,000 subscribers, knows the value of writing effective e-mail copy. In its promotional e-mails, ShoeBuy keeps its subject lines to fewer than 10 words, seldom uses more than 100 words in the body and always uses active language to solicit a response. "A good piece of copy doesn't need to use a lot of words to deliver an effective value proposition," Copley says. "A little can go a long way."

The trigger words

Web retailers are committing major time and money to building highly segmented opt-in lists, designing e-mail messages with sophisticated images and using web analytics and click-stream analysis to track their campaigns. But many marketing managers and copy writers are also producing e-mail content that's ineffective, ignored by shoppers and blocked by spam filters. "Taking a traditional print approach to e-mail marketing doesn't produce effective results," Baggott says. "E-mail promotions need to be very interactive and give the readers numerous chances to click on a link for follow-up information or a conduct a transaction."

After several years of e-mail marketing, retailers have the technology down pretty well, and understand the importance—and ease—of segmentation, participants say. And generally, they group their e-mail marketing campaigns into three categories: promotional blasts, online newsletters and customer loyalty program updates.

But in their e-mail copy, most web retailers need to do a better job of personalizing their messages and creating content that provokes a reaction. "Good e-mail marketing copy makes excellent use of 'trigger' words and phrases that are placed strategically throughout even a short message to prompt a response from the reader," says Elaine O'Gorman, vice president of strategy for Silverpop, an e-mail services company. "A good message doesn't overwhelm the reader with too much hype, but it should drive home the point that the best time to act is now."

From a company

Jones Apparel Group, which operates e-commerce sites for three brands—NineWest.com, EasySpirit.com and Bandolino.com—is one of the retailers that has it down, observers say. It uses a database of multi-channel customer information to develop segmented e-mail lists before developing a new campaign. Then it applies certain best practices across the entire list—for instance, clearly identifying itself in the "from" line—then crafts messages pertinent to each list. Finally, it monitors responses and makes changes on the fly.

"Putting an individual brand such as Nine West or Easy Spirit in the 'from' line is important from a copy writing standpoint because it immediately establishes our name in the customer's mind," says Dianne Binford, vice president of multi-channel marketing. "We don't write 'From Dianne@EasySpirit.com' because that could be mistaken for spam."

The next step in the copy process is creating a personalized subject line that conveys an offer or a promotion that prompts a call to action. In a holiday e-mail campaign to a segment of its Nine West opt-in e-mail list, Jones included each recipient's first name and the phrase, "your free shipping is calling." "That e-mail had a pretty good subject line because it was personalized and the use of the word 'your' prompted a call to action," Binford says. "The subject line let our readers and shoppers know at a quick glance at their inbox that we had a special offer just for them."

Tests within hours

Jones, which averages an open rate of 40% and click-through rate of 18% on most of its e-mail campaigns, usually tests a subject line several times over the first hour of an e-mail blast, measures the results, then broadcasts the remaining messages with a rewritten subject line or the subject line that produced the best initial open rate.

Jones also writes its e-mail marketing copy in a highly individualized style that includes multiple offers and reminders that customers can shop Nine West or Easy Spirit across several channels.

In a recent campaign to certain EasySpirit.com shoppers, Jones created language that made the message very timely for customers who have a difficult time finding shoes in a narrow width. The copy included several references to finding hard-to-find, narrow shoes and promotions that reminded EasySpirit.com shoppers they could qualify for free standard shipping with any purchase of athletic footwear, receive a duffel bag with their purchase or enter a sweepstakes.

To promote multi-channel shopping and appeal to customers with other shoe sizes, Jones also included copy on stores near them that carried Easy Spirit shoes and a reminder that EasySpirit.com always carries the largest selection of Easy Spirit. All together, the e-mail content contained fewer than 100 words of copy, but offered nine different actions or promotions. "This particular campaign was very relevant to customers with narrow feet," Binford says. "By adding language such as 'Having trouble finding your size?', we made the message very interactive and provided the type of details that Easy Spirit customers tell us they want to have."

Understand the market

Many retailers and direct marketers fail to produce effective e-mail marketing copy because they don't take enough time and trouble to truly understand the market they are addressing with their latest promotion or new product pitch. A good e-mail marketing message should be personalized, tell a complete story in even a limited number of words and include bullet points or short paragraphs that prompt readers and shoppers to take a specific action, such as clicking on a link that takes them to more product and educational content on, say, selecting and purchasing a big screen television.

Young staffers

"Writing for the web and for e-mail is entirely different than writing a traditional print marketing piece because the web is all about one-on-one marketing and building a very personalized relationship," says Bryan Eisenberg, co-founder of web marketing services firm Future Now Inc. and author of "Persuasive Online Copywriting." "Good e-mail marketing copy, whether it's a newsletter or a promotion, sets up the reader and invites the reader to take action at several points. Good web copy is an interactive dialogue that makes the reader want to follow through and shop online or read more product information that interests them."

Many web retailers combine longer content and frequent offers in their electronic newsletters. Effective electronic newsletter copy is also written in the same style and language as the audience a web retailer is trying to address. For instance, the primary customers who shop Newegg.com, an online retailer of personal computers, accessories and consumer electronics, are younger "do-it-yourself" information technology, web development and computer workers. Each month in its online newsletter, which is written and distributed to an opt-in list of more than 500,000 names, Newegg lists several offers and promotions in conjunction with longer product education articles.

But the content is written by younger staffers who are about the same age as Newegg's core IT customer, hold the same interests and write in a language that younger tech-savvy online shoppers can relate to. A recent newsletter focused on the fact that Newegg.com now carries the latest online games and gaming equipment such as the new Microsoft Xbox. But the newsletter also included more product information on higher-end equipment such as a new PC or server with a pitch for buying the latest hardware to power a just-released game. "It's very important to write in a language that our customers understand," says Howard Tong, vice president of marketing. "By knowing how younger gamers and tech-savvy IT and computer workers converse, we can educate them in ways that convert more sales."

In a typical month, Newegg's e-newsletter creates a click-through rate of more than 20%, which in turn generates sales conversions that average between 7% and 10%, Tong says. "Good copy is a critical part of e-mail marketing that delivers results," Tong says. "If we send out a new promotion on a new central processing unit, we are also going to include direct language and links that tell shoppers what they need to do now to upgrade and accessorize."

Build brand recognition

Good e-mail marketing copy helps instill a sense of urgency that makes shoppers want to take instant action, Tong says. "We get wording such as 'limited time offer' and 'act now' high up in the copy to grab a customer's attention," he says.

In conjunction with delivering a very direct message, good e-mail marketing copy can also be used to help build brand recognition and create longer-term customer relationships. America's Collectibles Network Inc., which operates Jewelry Television and JewelryTelevision.com, sells to an audience that's 90% female and over 50 with annual household income of more than $65,000. In most of its e-mail copy, Jewelry Television tries to combine copy that includes timely promotions, but also content that features the latest line-up of jewelry and gemstones and "how to" articles on topics such as recognizing the color and clarity of diamonds or the history of a gemstone such as Tanzanite.

In a recent Christmas e-mail campaign, Jewelry TV took only about 100 words to convey the offer of free shipping during the holidays and list several new styles of Tanzanite available online as well as cleaning and maintenance tips. "The copy was short and concise, but the wording and phrases talked to our long-time customers who are very knowledgeable about jewelry," says Craig Shields, director of e-commerce for Jewelry Television. "The message conveyed an offer, but it also extended our brand because the wording informed readers in multiple ways on a particular kind of gemstone they are passionate about. They see us as their authority on jewelry and expect to read e-mails with good content that informs and educates them."

Tell the story

With the right combination of offers and educational content, Jewelry Television's average open and click-through rates on its e-mail campaigns are very good, Shields says. Jewelry Television prefers to write its e-mail copy in a conversational tone and balance the text with words and phrases that prompt the reader to take an action.

E-mail copy can also be subtle and produce results that generate more than just sales. ShoeBuy ends each of its e-mail messages with language that reminds readers to "share this great offer with your friends." By adding just one simple sentence to each of its e-mail campaigns, ShoeBuy has expanded its opt-in list with as many as 10,000 new names. "Using the right mix of words and phrases that tell a story and prompt the reader to become a shopper can generate multiple returns," Copley says. "If we keep our messages short, focused and don't waste our customers' precious time, they will give us their business and keep coming back."

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