

# What's wrong with email as a marketing tool?

By [David Baker](#)

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This title spurred either one of two thoughts: "Oh my gosh, there may be some cool tips buried in this column" or "About time someone got on the bandwagon and beat this shameless channel down". Either way, there are some fundamental things wrong with email as a tool today.

I previously used Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a metaphor to illustrate that email is so pervasive in our lives it is used to satisfy some of the most basic needs a human has. No, we won't reach out for email if we are poor and starving on the streets. What stuck with me from last week's comments was that I received such varying responses about where email fits in marketing and its value to people in general. The rest of the arguments about whether email can actually help facilitate a plan to fulfil a primary need are irrelevant.

What makes it so cool to work in email, is the fundamental acceptance of the channel by the masses. It wasn't long ago that I wrote, "We know email has arrived when my mom asks to opt out of my viral jokes." It's become so ingrained in our work culture, personal management and intrudes on even the most personal events in our lives. How many of you are reading this on the way to work? Have you answered email in bed last night, in church, in a restroom - or have you complained about the small screens and type pads on the smart phone because it's hard to control when you're driving a car.

So, let's not argue about the value of email in simply managing our lives day to day. We can argue about tactics, about how much budget should be spent - and we can even argue about whether we think email promotes a purchase or is simply a nuisance to your customer. However, let's move past this and focus on what's wrong with our channel.

The root cause of our problems evangelising the values of the email channel is YOU - yes, YOU, the marketer, the person who makes an excuse for not improving what you do today. I often say this tongue-in-cheek, but it's true. Most people that I meet who ask for help do so apologetically when referencing their own email programs. Email has a disconnect from the mainstream business and can get so buried into a tactical run that it's difficult to make the connection to the rest of the world of marketing that surrounds it. Its voice is small, its impact is sometimes not believable, yet we all embrace it as the No. 1 marketing and communication channel.

## Spin and attribution

Key to gaining share of voice in an organisation is spin and attribution. Attribution is hard to sell internally and externally. It's hard to enforce with your partners and marketers, unless you find a common ground to communicate, and have common measurement frameworks that end at a common point. I still have the hardest time getting very analytically driven media strategists to understand email's value to a business, or even its value to front-end acquisition channels. They know attribution, they know ROI, but they don't make the connection between their media channels, search and Web and email. Vice versa, email marketers don't make the connection to the front-end and back-end of how the other online groups work. Therefore, spin is critical to gain a platform for building momentum in an organisation.

Next is learning to spin what you have to gain in influence and momentum. My greatest challenge in an interactive agency is building momentum, knowing full well that 99% of the people I influence probably won't ever have the desire to understand the email or even eCRM to the extent my team will. Yet that doesn't mean I can't get them to start or include the email discussion earlier in the planning process. Doesn't mean I can't get involved in measurement and program design earlier, and show how results can be amortised cross-channel, cross lifecycle and extend into an infinite number of potential value attributes.

What's wrong with our channel today is not what we write about in these columns week in and week out; instead, it's the lack of movement in one of the most stable, consumer behavioural phenomena that we will ever see if our lifetimes. To me movement is striving to stretch what we do today, looking for innovation amidst the chaos, trying to make the connection with our other channel brothers and sisters in a collective effort and forming actionable opinions. Life and profession is about hit and miss, and if you aren't taking shots every day, you aren't living.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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