Email Tracking 101

DISCOVER HOW EMAIL TRACKING HELPS YOU UNDERSTAND AND TRULY ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCES, TURNING EMAIL INTO RESULTS

Summary

Interested in measuring the results of email marketing campaigns or email communication initiatives to more fully engage your audiences and get better results? Good news! You don't need prior knowledge of email marketing solutions to learn more about email tracking.

Here are some key takeaways:

- Track your email marketing campaigns because it helps you to see your email metrics and **measure results**, **performance and impact**. You get reports to analyze and discuss with colleagues and data to guide your planning, fine-tuning and decision-making.

- Track with explicit subscriber consent or use anonymous tracking in order to comply with the EU GDPR and other data protection requirements. For planning, learn about the different **email tracking level options**.

- When your mailings include personal tracking, ask for recipients' consent during the subscription process. Inform them fully of which data is being collected and how it's being used. Show your recipients "**what's in it for them**".

- Take a close look at your email tracking reports and understand what each data point measures. Know what works and what needs improvement. Use the data to inform your decisions. This helps you engage your recipients better and better with each mailing. **Test and refine.** Email is measurable. Good luck!

Introduction to Email Tracking

"To measure is to know."

"When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it"

– Lord Kelvin

In the digital age, everything is measurable, including email. This paper is designed to provide a broad understanding of the concept of email tracking, which is commonly used in email marketing. For the purposes of this paper, email marketing is loosely defined as your permission-based mass email communication with prospects, customers and stakeholders with whom you build relationships. It does not apply to individually crafted person-to-person email messages that may be exchanged, for example, between a sales representative and a potential customer.

This paper covers what email tracking is and how it can help you with your email marketing initiatives by showing how well your email communication is getting attention and prompting action from recipients.

We are living in an era of big data, and new privacy and data protection regulations are emerging around the world. Email tracking always involves data handling. Different jurisdictions have varying restrictions as to which type of data you can track, with or without the consent of your recipients. Therefore, learning about the different levels of email tracking is important for your organization's compliance with privacy and data protection regulations, such as the EU GDPR.

What is Email Tracking?

When you send your email newsletter or another type of email marketing mailing, measuring your recipients' interactions with your messages is at the core of email tracking. Tracking shows you how many people engaged with your message, including when and how they interacted with your content. This provides a foundation for establishing your own baseline metrics data.

What Can I Measure?

Short answer: Almost everything. Email is highly measurable. You can keep track of all kinds of recipient activities and create reports illustrating when a recipient:

- subscribes to your list
- opens the email you send
- clicks on one or more of the links in your message
- clicks through to your website
- takes other actions after landing on your website
- shares the content on social media
- forwards the message to someone
- unsubscribes from your mailings
- has an undeliverable email address (bounce) – tracking data shows the reason for the non-delivery

You can get aggregate reports showing the total number and the corresponding percentage rates, spotlighting:

- open-ups
- click-through events
- conversions
- recipient demographics based on the data you collect
- comparisons between mailings or campaigns
- bounce rates
- heat map-style presentation of click rate visuals

With email tracking reports, the data is no longer just numbers but also visuals. For many, it is much easier to understand and present data in a visual and colorful format, such as graphs and pie charts.

Action Tracking Helps You Show ROI

Action tracking allows you to monitor your recipients' web page visits after they read an email message and click on links to the target web page. A **code** is inserted into those web pages that you want to track. Through this code, your recipients' activity on your web pages appears in your email reports. This is an important type of tracking because it allows you to see if your recipients followed through all the way to your call-to-action, for example, made a purchase on your website as a result of your email campaign. This enables you to demonstrate your email return on investment, or ROI.

Create **action tags,** assigning names for the pages that you want to track – for example, "Landing Page", "Order Page" and "Order Confirmation". This helps you to easily recognize the tags when you analyze your email tracking reports. You can see how many of your email recipients visited the landing page, how many people clicked through to the order page and how many of them completed a purchase.

Social Media Tracking

Typically, email marketing messages include social media sharing buttons and icons. When you enable the social media sharing feature, you can track how your recipients share content beyond email. You can track how frequently and how widely your recipients share messages, which social media platforms are used, and if those shares result in new subscribers to your mailings. Social media tracking reports illustrate the reach of your mailings on social media. This helps you measure how much social media engagement and sharing your email marketing messages can generate and which platforms are most commonly used.

Why is Email Tracking Important?

Email tracking gives you a snapshot of how recipients responded to your mailings and helps you identify areas needing adjustment and improvement. Email tracking reports enable you to visualize, analyze and share your tracking data. Email tracking also helps you to identify problems quickly and easily so that you can act on them. This way, you can learn from and develop your communication activities over time. For example, data can help you adjust your tactics so you can more fully reach your goals and meet your key performance indicators (KPIs).

Email tracking leads to many opportunities:

Benchmarking

By using email tracking, you have the means to establish your own email metrics benchmarks and learn from them. This enables you to handle both internal and external benchmarking with better results. When you have a good record of your email marketing metrics, it's easier to compare with similar metrics in your industry. When you have email reports available, it is much easier to share and discuss the results with others in your organization. You can answer questions based on your own email tracking data and facts, informed by your email marketing activities and your recipients' actions.

Email Testing

Email tracking is also useful for your testing efforts. Some of the main email testing opportunities include:

A/B-Split Testing

A/B-split testing means that you send two or more different variants of a mailing to randomly assigned segments of your recipients. You can then compare the response rates to see which variant generates better view or click rates and use these insights to optimize future messages as you learn how certain variations in the message content affect the results.

You can test many elements in your email message. You can test virtually anything in your email design, content and content placement. This makes HTML email creative to work with and enables you to learn from your work and your target groups' engagement. To make it easy for you to compare the results, test **a single variant at a time** until you are satisfied with the knowledge your metrics can provide you. Examples include:

Subject Lines

The sender field and subject line are key elements for anyone opening an email message. With a Google search, you can find lots of advice and best practices for email subject lines. Shorter subject lines may work better, emojis could add fun and attention and thus encourage opens, or do they?

Learning best practices is important, but doing your own A/B-split testing will give you the real data you need. The open rate of two or more subject mailing variants will tell you which one prompted more recipients to open the email message. Continue testing until you find the most successful subject line formulation for your recipients.

Placement

Does "above the fold" and "below the fold" matter? Should you place your attention-grabbing headlines and a call-to-action (CTA) button as the topmost element in your newsletter? Usually, but sometimes not – each recipient group is

different. So, it's helpful to use A/B-split testing to gauge two different placements within a message, for example, a newsletter. Then you can compare the impact and results. Which message did your recipients prefer? Which of the versions led to the recipient action you had set as a goal?
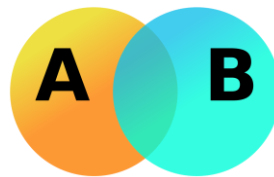
A/B-Split Testing with Sampling

A/B-split testing with sampling is a more advanced version of regular A/B-split testing. First, you randomly select two or more smaller "sample" groups of an equal number of recipients. Then you send each variant of your message (variant A, variant B, etc.) to its respective sample group. The tracking results of the sampling variants show you the performance of each variant. Then you can use the most successful variant for the mailing to the rest of your recipients. Sampling is like testing the waters in advance. You can also set up your A/B-split mailing with sampling to send the best performing sample to all recipients automatically at a certain time point.

Simple but valuable details you can consider testing are:

Subject Line	Sender Name	Call-to-Action (CTA)	Layout
Lead Article	Special Offers	HTML vs Text	Title
Length	Frequency	Timing	Images

The best way to know what your recipients want and what gets their attention is to experiment. Here are some tips to generate the most accurate and illustrative results:

✓ Establish a clear sense of what you want to know and therefore test

✓ Make sure that your sample size is large enough for testing between two or more variants to produce meaningful results

✓ Allow for seasonal, time-of-day and other factors that can confound results by testing simultaneously and repeatedly over a period of weeks

✓ Test factors that you are willing to change if the results show adjustments would be helpful

✓ Make sure to test one important area at a time to avoid confounding the results

Five Reasons to Make A/B-Split Testing a Habit

A/B-split testing gives you:

> **1. Knowledge about your target audience, your campaign performance, and the reasons behind your campaign performance**

A jewelry store can test whether images of items with prices included will generate more clicks and, ultimately, more sales than images without prices.

2. The ability to learn what works and what doesn't work for your campaign

A university can assess the difference in open-ups for a registration deadline reminder message to students by split testing the sender as the university or the university's president.

3. The opportunity to adjust so that you can improve and do better

A local theater can reduce no-shows by using data from a split test of upcoming performance reminders sent to patrons three days versus one day prior to the performance

4. A better understanding of whether differences in recipient response may be related to target audience characteristics, such as demographics, profiles and segments

A disaster relief organization can determine whether customizing a fundraising appeal to mention disasters in local states or region of the recipients is more effective than a general appeal.

5. The opportunity to not only test minor changes but also partial or complete redesigns of your campaign strategy

A toy retailer can determine whether including the customer ratings along with the product details and price in the email is more effective than supplying the recipient with a direct link to the product's customer ratings on the retailer's website.

Follow-Up Communication

Email tracking data enables you to send a follow-up mailing to a certain group of recipients based on previous behavior. A preset criterion of data then works as a trigger for these follow-ups. For example, a few days later, you can send out a follow-up mailing to recipients who viewed the original email and a different follow-up mailing to recipients who did not.

Demographic Analysis

Email tracking data can be used to find out how successful a mailing was among different segments of your recipients, for instance, based on demographic data. This way you can analyze the recipient behavior for more in-depth insights. You can identify differences in engagement when you compare different segments of your recipients. For example, you can assess whether recipients' geographical region, age or gender impacted the results by testing whether your baby boomer recipients are more likely to click the call-to-action link than millennials and

consider its impact on your communication with both groups. Knowing more about your recipients and being able to segment helps you tailor your messages and send targeted follow-up messages

Data Integration

When you integrate your email tracking and web analytics, you can start to track conversion rates stemming from your email marketing activities. This is when you can start to show the impact of email marketing on your organization's sales, membership or participation results and demonstrate return on investment (ROI).
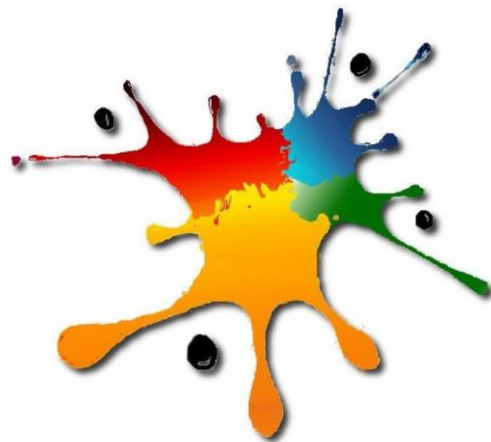
Knowledge Building

The bottom line is that email tracking enables you to focus on finding out what is important for your recipients and your email marketing initiatives. As discussed, this could encompass many things related to the message itself and its content, timing, sender and subject line. Tracking can also inform you as to the devices on which your email messages are opened. Whether your recipients open your messages on a desktop, tablet or mobile device can illuminate how you can develop and improve your content further. In general, knowledge about your recipients' engagement with your communication helps you to adjust and more closely target your communication content to your recipients in future communications. And communication is key to a positive customer experience.

The Levels of Email Tracking

The level of email tracking that you use determines the type of data that is collected and forms the basis for the reports that an email marketing solution can generate for you. This section covers the different email tracking levels. The tracking levels are described in the context of how they work in LISTSERV Maestro email marketing software. You will learn that you can track with or without personal data. The options are many. You can obtain prior consent from your recipients for tracking, or you can choose to turn off email tracking for a segment – or even all – of your subscribers.

Personal Tracking
– Provides the Most Complete Data

Personal tracking is the most comprehensive form of email tracking and can give you a detailed picture of how your recipients interacted with your message. This type of tracking records events that are traceable to the individual who triggered them. This includes data such as which recipients viewed the email, when a certain recipient clicked on a certain link and how many times the person clicked that link.

Personal tracking data also enables demographic analysis and follow-up mailings as it collects personal data of the recipients. Follow-up mailings are used, for example, to re-engage passive and active recipients differently. The analysis of your email metrics reports enables you to send more closely customized follow-up messages. This tracking type can be very productive for you as you can learn more about your recipients and tailor your future messages to better target your segments. However, to make it truly successful and to build trust with your recipients, it is important to obtain explicit prior permission from your recipients for personal email tracking. This is also required under the EU GDPR.

Permission-Based Personal Tracking
– With Prior Consent

The need to obtain permission to send email marketing messages is a well-established **best practice** worldwide. Double opt-in email subscription confirms your recipients' interest to receive your mailings. When you generate personally identifiable tracking data, informed consent from the person being tracked is a necessary action in many jurisdictions, for example, in the European Union. Therefore, to increase trust, transparency and avoid legal problems, be sure to check your governing data privacy and opt-in legislation and seek express consent from recipients for your organization to handle and use their personal tracking data.

In order to obtain permission for personal tracking, you need to communicate with your recipients. You are likely to get their prior consent if they trust you and see the benefits for themselves. Explain why you use tracking. Providing full disclosure and transparency may well result in better engagement because personal tracking allows you to send highly targeted follow-up communications.

L-Soft's email marketing software, LISTSERV Maestro, has a function that supports permission-based tracking. It helps you to get consent for personal email tracking. This enables you to track, with your recipients' prior consent. If a recipient does not give you a permission for personal tracking but wants to join your email programs, then LISTSERV Maestro will only track using unique tracking, which records anonymous data.

Unique Tracking
– Displays Anonymous Data

Unique tracking is **anonymous**. The tracked recipients are identified by **random unique IDs** that cannot be traced back to individuals. This type of tracking records the number of times your recipients open your message and interacts with it after you send your email mailing job. All tracking events are collected. In addition to the aggregate email metrics reports, the unique recipient events can be reported thanks to the random IDs. If an anonymous recipient opens a message 10 times, only the first time is counted in these reports.

Because all collected data is completely anonymous, this type of tracking is usually not considered a violation of privacy or an illegal collection of data. Therefore, it is **a popular tracking type**. Unique tracking does have some limitations on what you can do, as it doesn't connect tracking data with personal data. This means you cannot do follow-up mailings based on recipients' previous actions and you cannot run a demographic analysis.

Anonymous Tracking
– Reports with Anonymous Profiles

Anonymous tracking, if done right, is also anonymous, just like unique tracking. The collected tracking data is only associated with **anonymous profiles** that include no identifying data. Demographic information from these anonymous profiles, such as age, gender or zip code, can be used for reporting without exposing the actual individuals. This tracking type supports view and click event counts as well as demographic analysis for the anonymous profiles. Anonymous tracking does not support the use of follow-up mailings based on previous subscriber activity.

Because collected email tracking data is not associated with identifiable individuals, it is usually not considered a violation of privacy or illegal collection of data. However, to collect the recipients' data in your file or database and use of the data often requires prior consent, like under the GDPR. It is always good to make sure that the recipient is informed on how data is

being collected and used. It adds transparency and can work as a trust factor between you and your recipients whose data you handle for certain purposes.

✓ Take special care so that the anonymous profile field subset constitutes a **proper anonymous profile**. It should include as few profile fields as possible. Include only those profile fields that you want to use during a demographic analysis.

✓ Do not use **any profile fields with identifying data**, such as email address, name, street address, social security number or customer ID.

✓ Test that the final profile field combination results in **generic** anonymous profiles that ensure the recipients' desired anonymity. Do not use anonymous tracking with recipient lists that have a small number of recipients. The generic quality of the profile data is likely to be too low to guarantee anonymity for such small lists.

Blind Tracking
– Aggregated Reports

Blind tracking collects non-specific tracking data, recording only the number of times events occur. This type of tracking does not allow the tracing of tracking events back to an actual recipient. Additionally, with this type of tracking, you will not know if the number of click events was generated by many unique recipients clicking a few times or by a few recipients clicking many times. Because all collected data is completely anonymous, this type of tracking is usually not considered a violation of privacy or illegal collection of data.

Appendix

Email Tracking Levels Overview

Before you start email tracking you need to know what kind of tracking metrics and actions are most valuable to you. This table gives you an overview of email tracking levels and types. Each level collects a different degree of personally identifiable information (PII) about recipients for the tracking reports.

Email Tracking Level	Open/Click Rates	Personal Data	Demographic Analysis	Follow-Up Mailings
Personal	✓ Most complete tracking type, showing which recipients interacted with the message, how, when and how many times	✓ Unique personalized IDs are used	✓	✓
Permission-Based Personal	✓ As above, all data is available	✓ Obtains recipients' prior explicit consent for email tracking Compliant with the EU GDPR	✓	✓

Anonymous	✅	❌ Anonymous profiles are used Compliant with the EU GDPR	✅ Demographic information from the anonymous profiles can be used for reporting	❌
Unique	✅ The rates are presented as unique events	❌ Random unique IDs are used Compliant with the EU GDPR	❌	❌
Blind	✅ The rates are reported as the number of times events occur ❌ Reports do not include rates as percentages	❌ All tracking events have the same ID Compliant with the EU GDPR	❌	❌

Glossary of Key Terms

Here are some email terms that you may find helpful:

A/B-Split Testing: Allows you to send two or more different versions of a mailing to distinct but random splits of your recipients and compare the results

A/B-Split Testing with Sampling: Allows you to send the variations to two or more random samples, analyze the results, and then send the best performing variant to the rest

Action Tracking: Extends the scope of the email tracking, allowing you to monitor recipients' page visits and viral marketing activities occurring after they have read an email message and clicked on links to the target website

Bounce Handling Reports: Allows you to understand the cause of the bounced email messages

Click-Through Tracking: Tracks how many recipients clicked on a link in an email message. This is commonly used to measure the success of email marketing campaigns

Click-Through Rate: In an email marketing campaign, the percentage of recipients who clicked on a link within the email message

Comparison Reports: Enable you to compare the metrics for two or more mailings, allowing you to quickly and easily assess your campaign's success

Conversion Rate: A measure of success for an email marketing campaign, for instance, the number of recipients who completed a purchase

Follow-Up Messaging: Allows you to send follow-up messages to recipients who opened up or clicked on a specific link in a previous email message

Forward-to-a-Friend Tracking: Allows subscribers to easily forward a newsletter to others. These forwards and any resulting subscriptions can be tracked

Open-Up Tracking: Shows how many recipients opened their email messages as part of an email marketing campaign

Open-Up Rate: The percentage of recipients who opened their email messages

Social Media Publishing: Allows you to publish links to your campaign messages on several social media platforms at the time of delivery, making it easier to spread the reach of your campaigns beyond the immediate subscriber base

Social Media Sharing: Enables you to include social media sharing icons in messages, allowing subscribers to share the content with their own followers through their preferred social networks

Social Media Tracking: Allows you to track how many of your recipients shared your message through their social networks and how many new subscribers joined the list as a result

Tracking: In an email marketing campaign, measuring recipient activities such as click-throughs and open-ups

Tracking Permission: A method to obtain permission for personal tracking from recipients. This allows you to send a mailing to a mixed group of recipients and gather personal tracking information from those who have given permission and non-identifiable, unique tracking information from those who haven't. This helps you comply with governing laws and requirements, such as the EU GDPR

Next Steps

Do you need your own email marketing software with tracking and reporting capabilities? L-Soft provides email marketing solutions as software on-premises at your organization or as a hosted cloud service. We are proud to support several email tracking levels to meet your email metrics needs now and in the future.

Contact us for a consultation, product demo or free evaluation software license. For more information on LISTSERV Maestro, visit:

http://www.lsoft.com/products/maestro.asp