



SPECIAL REPORT

EMAIL MARKETING AND THE NEXT NORMAL

Create an Action Plan
for 2021 and Beyond

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INTRODUCTION

There are a lot of ways to describe the year 2020. We've all heard the phrase "challenging and unprecedented times" over and over. In a ***Washington Post* survey**, Americans labeled the year "chaotic," "exhausting," "lost," and "surreal." (Dumpster fire is another term that comes to mind.)

No matter how you describe it, 2020 will go down in history as a year that changed everything.

The global COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lives of nearly everyone, but it wasn't all that 2020 had to offer. There was a presidential impeachment and a divisive election. Many of us had to adapt to new ways of living and working in the midst of lockdowns and economic uncertainty. Natural disasters, including the Australian brushfires, California wildfires, and a record-breaking Atlantic hurricane season reminded us that planet Earth's climate is also changing.

While difficult to face, some of 2020's challenges are bringing about positive change. Protests and unrest around inequality and systemic racism are hopefully leading us toward social justice and reform. The sudden shift to remote

work is opening up opportunities for individuals and businesses alike. Plus, the pandemic has many families and communities growing closer as we do what we can to connect and help each other.

We're facing what's sometimes called a "new normal." Or, to use a forward-facing phrase coined by **McKinsey**, we're moving into the "next normal."

What does the next normal have in store for email marketing? Let's take look back at how 2020 changed the practice. Then, we'll look ahead at what email marketers need to do now and in the future.



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A LOOK BACK: EMAIL MARKETING IN 2020

It seems every year someone tries to make the claim the email is dead or dying and will soon be replaced by a new form of online communication. However, 2020 showed us that email is as important and relevant as ever, both in our everyday lives and in times of crisis.

Email played a role in many major events of 2020. **What can email marketers learn from our experiences as we rebuild our strategies for the next normal?**



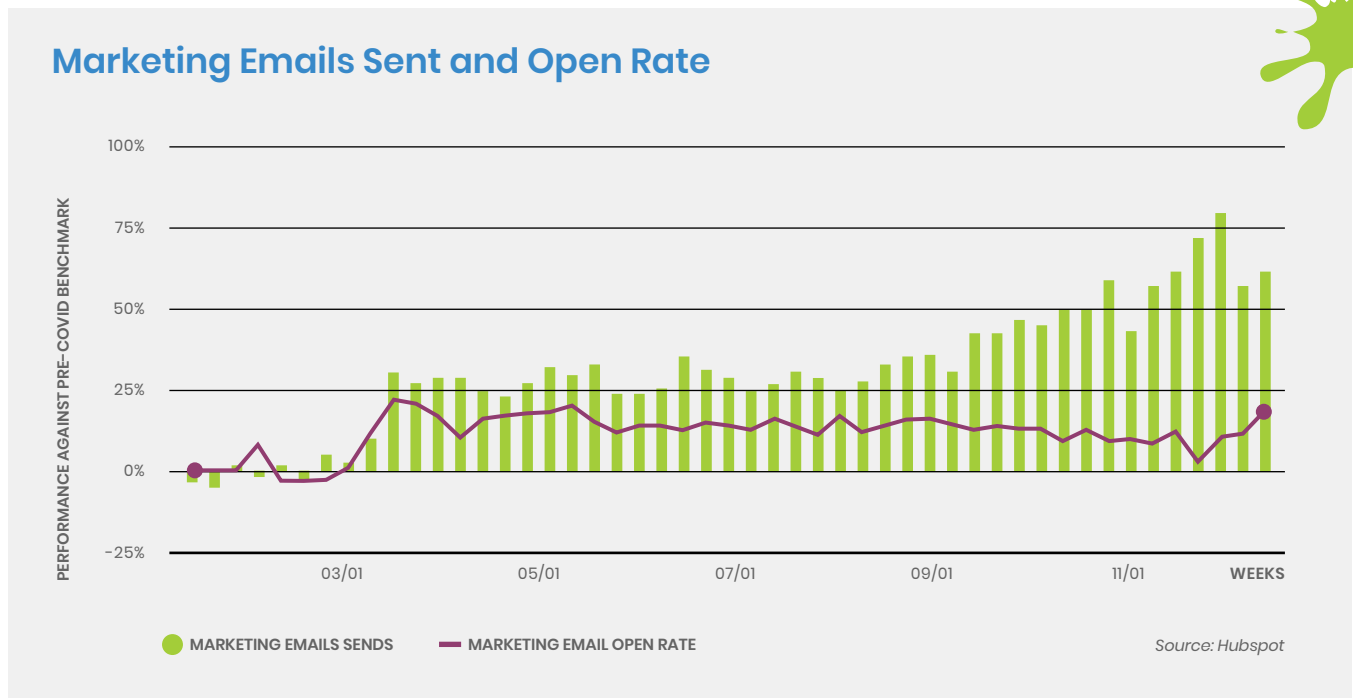


THE BIG PICTURE METRICS

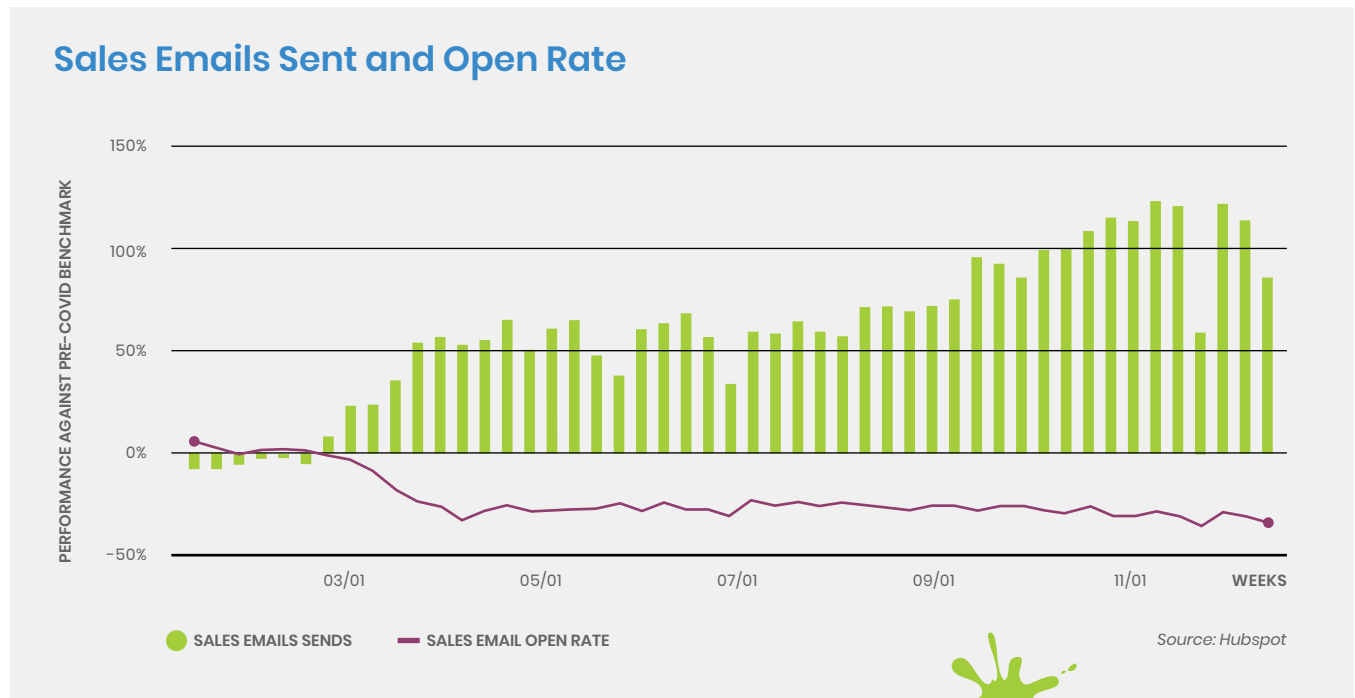
Weaving together data points tells a story, and email marketing metrics from different points of the year often reflect the tale of 2020.

The first anomaly of the year came when email send volumes in many industries briefly fell off a cliff. The world came to a sudden stop as people began to realize the seriousness of the coronavirus threat. Lockdowns, quarantines, and mandatory closures went into effect. In reaction to that, businesses of all types and sizes had to adjust the ways they operated and communicated. Email sends slowed down – but not for long.

Year-over-year (YoY) benchmark data from HubSpot shows marketing email send volume in March 2020 started out fairly flat before rising in mid-March and staying well above 2019 levels through the summer and fall.



HubSpot reports that marketing email volume rose nearly 50% from pre-COVID benchmarks. It also found open rates in 2020 were higher than the previous year's numbers. There was a slightly different story for sales emails, however. While the volume of sales emails increased dramatically, response rates fell significantly.



Takeaways for email marketers

The biggest takeaway from this data is that email remains a reliable marketing and communication channel. People pay attention to email even when their lives may be going through major upheavals. That's because the email inbox is a digital home where we find a personalized experience that includes people and businesses we trust and care about the most.

On the other hand, increasing cold emails from sales representatives during times of uncertainty is unlikely to produce results. When you're unsure about the future of your company, your job, or your personal finances, most purchase decisions are put on hold. In these situations, it's smart to focus on nurturing prospects with automated campaigns containing helpful content that aligns with a subscriber's customer journey.

Marketing email volume rose nearly 50% from pre-COVID benchmarks.





CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Calling the COVID-19 pandemic a “crisis” almost seems like an understatement. It felt like the entire world was suddenly thrown into unpredictable turmoil. Email plays an integral role in any company’s crisis communication plan, and that was extremely evident in the spring of 2020.

In some industries, communicating safety protocols and closures was vital. For example, healthcare organizations needed to connect with patients. Travel, lodging, live entertainment, and hospitality industries had to deal with an onslaught of cancellations, and the education sector needed to let students and parents know what to expect. In those cases, and in many others, email was the go-to communication channel.

Things seemed to change daily at the start of the pandemic. That’s one reason why brands that added clutter to the inbox received critical feedback from customers who were frustrated with what they saw as unnecessary and tone-deaf communication.

Most of these campaigns had positive intentions. But they were also a signal to other marketers that it was okay to start sending emails again, and that opened the floodgates.

There were a lot of batch-and-blast sends from random CEOs that quickly became nothing but noise. Brands felt the need to say something, and they often did so by sending mass emails. Eventually, companies became more thoughtful with their campaigns. Many brands used email to send uplifting messages without actively trying to steal attention, capitalize on the pandemic, or sell anything at all.

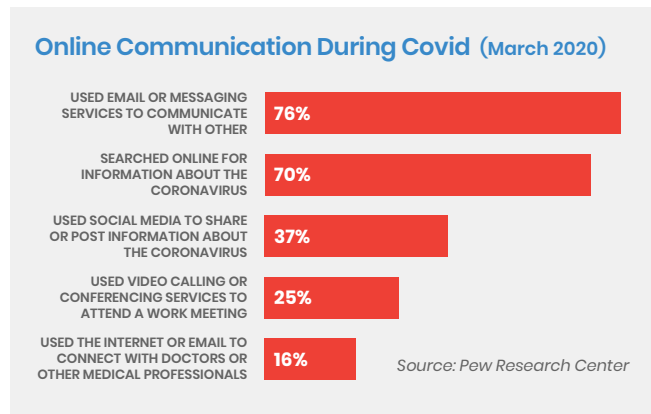


Email plays an integral role in any company’s crisis communication plan.



Takeaways for email marketers

During a crisis, both businesses and individuals turn to email. **Pew Research** found that 76% of Americans used email to communicate with others during the coronavirus outbreak in March. But a separate study on **Statista** found only 25% trusted social media as a source of reliable information at the onset of the pandemic.



Because email is crucial for getting important information to people during a crisis, digital marketers should use it responsibly. Ask yourself “what is the value to my subscriber” before you hit the send button.

In many ways, 2020 drove a final nail in the coffin of batch-and-blast email marketing. Blindly sending campaigns to a massive list without any thoughtful segmentation will leave you with disappointing results. And during a crisis, it could make your brand appear insensitive to the situation as well.

Finally, email readiness through a defined pre-send checklist is imperative in times of crisis. You need to be sure those urgent and important messages render properly across all email clients, and you need to keep those messages out of spam folders. **Pre-deployment email testing** helps with that.



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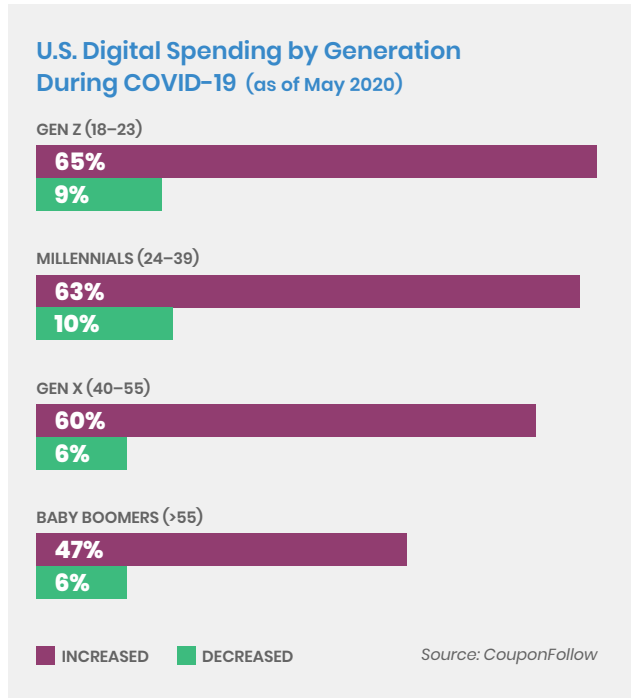
CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Consumer behavior can be a puzzling thing. Take the 2020 rush on toilet paper as the perfect example. It's still not completely clear why people suddenly felt the need to hoard as much bathroom tissue as possible, but it wasn't the only thing that flew off store shelves. Panic buying spread across the country as uncertainty over how long we'd be stuck in our homes began to mount. Doomsday preppers felt their moment to shine had come.

Some manufacturers halted production while others ramped up or changed their productions to accommodate shortages as demand spiked for certain products and tanked for others. This behavior contributed to supply chain challenges in transportation and shipping.

The most noteworthy consumer trend of 2020 has to be the migration to more online shopping, especially for everyday items like groceries and other household products. While the rise of eCommerce was inevitable, necessity and consumer reaction to the pandemic accelerated its adoption.

Older consumers helped drive this trend. The **National Retail Federation** (NRF) found nearly two-thirds of baby boomers tried online ordering with in-store pick-up. According to a survey from **CouponFollow**, as of May 2020, 47% of baby boomers had increased their digital spending. COVID-19 forced them to change their purchasing habits. While younger generations increased digital spending by 60% or more, the change in behavior among seniors is still notable.

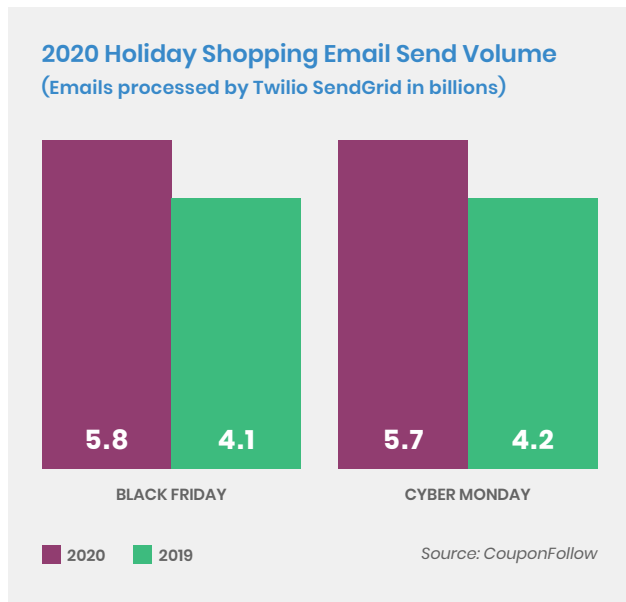


Look no further than the holiday shopping season for further proof of growth in eCommerce. According to **Mastercard SpendingPulse**, while total holiday retail sales beat expectations and

grew 3% from 2019, online sales experienced incredible YoY growth of nearly 50%.

Email marketing drives eCommerce sales. So, it's no surprise that a rise in online shopping coincides with increased send volumes during the 2020 holiday season.

MediaPost reported on statistics from Twilio SendGrid, which show it processed 5.8 billion emails on Black Friday (compared to 4.1 billion in 2019) and 5.7 billion emails on Cyber Monday (compared to 4.2 billion in 2019). That only accounts for the two major days of the online holiday shopping season. Plenty of brands started sending holiday email campaigns in October.



Takeaways for email marketers

2020 made it clear that the global supply chain is a fragile, interconnected web. Both B2B and B2C organizations must use email to keep in touch with customers and update them when shipping plans go awry.

For example, the spike in online holiday shopping led to increased demand for shipping capacity and delivery delays. Plus, low inventory on certain products and reductions in warehouse staffing added to the logistics challenges. Brands that effectively updated customers kept people happy (or at least let them know what to expect). Best-in-class brands often accomplish this with dynamic content in emails that update with new information when the email is opened. To do this, you'll need to integrate marketing automation with inventory and warehouse management systems (WMS) and enterprise resource planning (ERP) software.

As online shopping continues to grow, considering generational differences could give eCommerce emails an advantage. How should you communicate with those who may be unaccustomed to ordering online? Are you investing in abandoned cart emails and personalized recommendations?

Email marketing drives eCommerce sales.



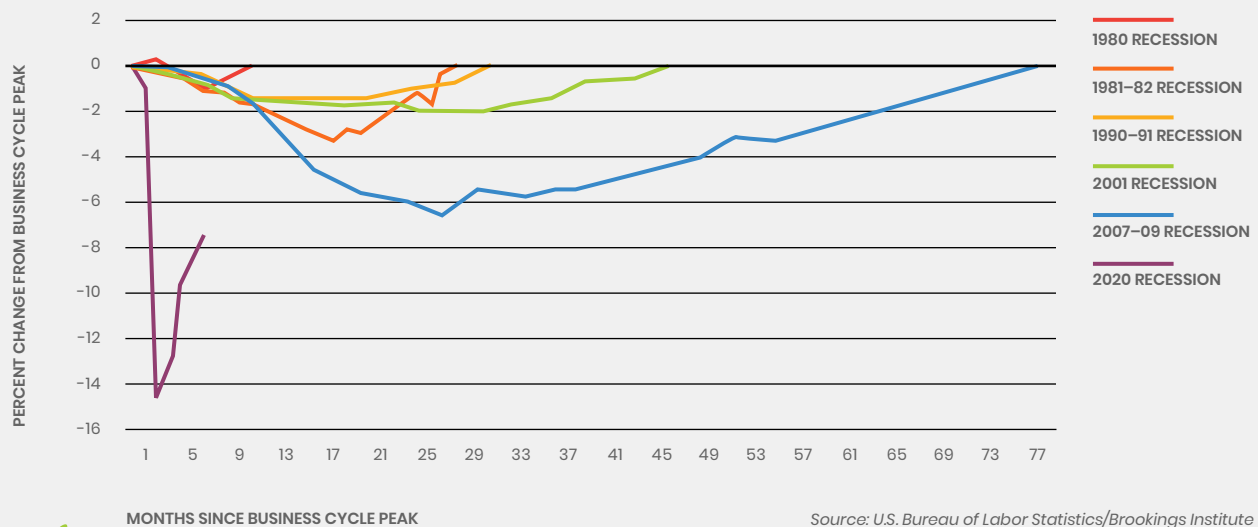
THE ECONOMY

The COVID-19 pandemic rocked economies around the globe. The U.S. economy, for example, experienced a sudden economic downturn that led to a recession. This recession and the subsequent recovery, however, look very different from those of the past.

Researchers from the **Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project** published charts in September comparing key economic measures from 2020 to other points in recent U.S. history when there was a recession.

With both unemployment and retail sales in 2020, there is a sudden plunge followed by an exceptionally fast rebound in the following months. During other U.S. recessions, both the decline and recovery were much more gradual.

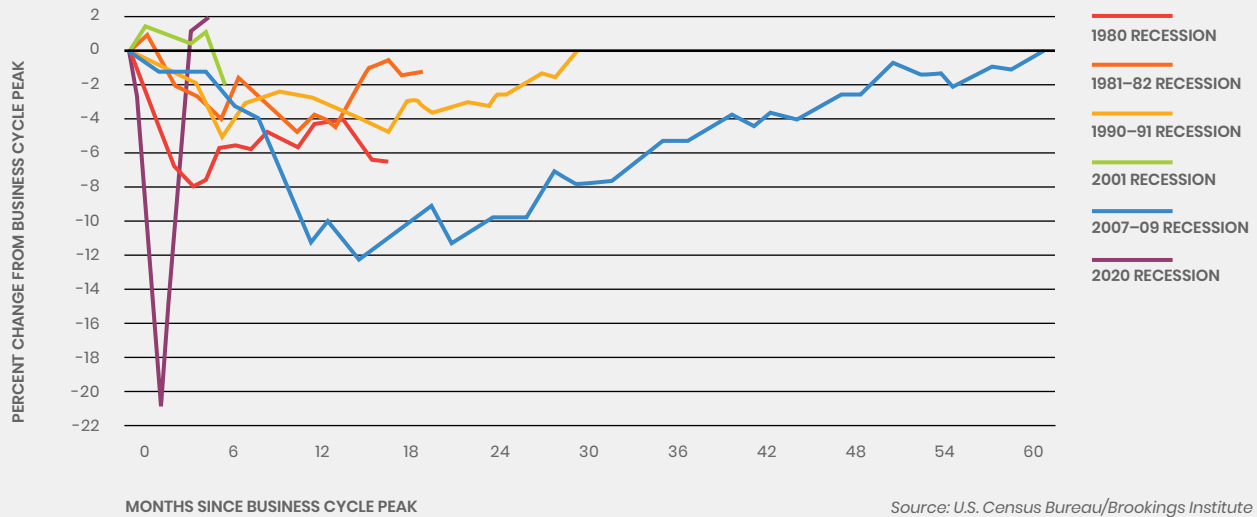
Percent Change in Employment



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics/Brookings Institute

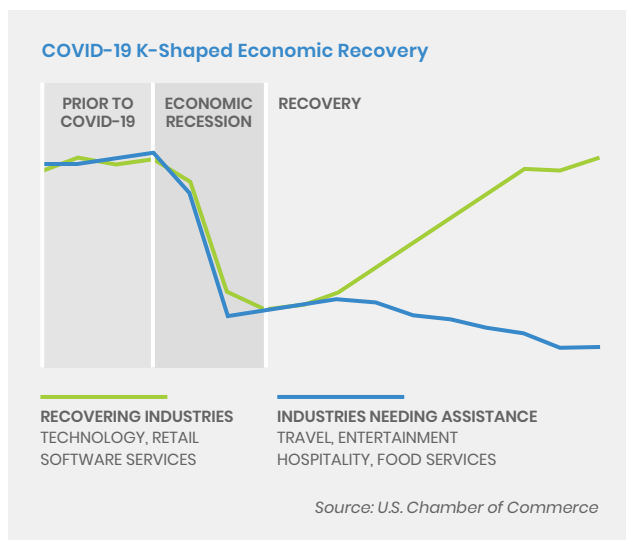


Percent Change in Retail Sales



What these charts don't show is that, when you break things down by industry, the economic recovery doesn't look like the typical V-shape. Many economists say we are in the midst of a K-shaped recovery.

That means certain portions of the population and specific industries are recovering faster than others. Following the 2020 recession, the travel, entertainment, hospitality, and food services industries may continue to struggle. However, those in technology, software as a service (saas), and retail may see a quicker recovery.



Takeaways for email marketers

Email marketers need to consider the economy and how it may be affecting their target audiences. Likewise, your email strategy may need to change based on whether you're in an industry that's bouncing back or continuing to deal with hard times.

B2B marketers in particular should keep in mind that a lot has changed in recent months. So, it's likely that the types of campaigns and messaging your subscribers will respond to need to change as well.

This is another good reason to consider segmenting your lists based on various industries and demographics. It allows you to make email marketing more relevant to people and businesses in different economic situations.



POLITICS

While COVID-19 dominated 2020 headlines, even without the pandemic it would have been an historic year. With political divisiveness running high, one of the biggest stories of the year was the U.S. presidential election.

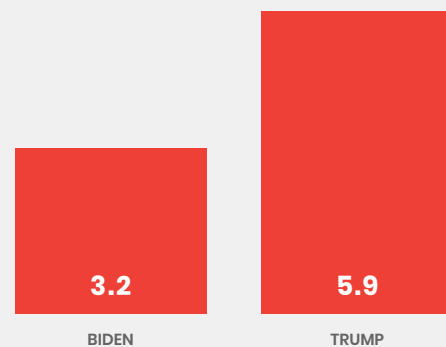
Despite the pandemic putting a damper on many campaign events and the presidential debates, the closely contested 2020 election was a heated one. Both the Democratic and Republican campaigns used email extensively and both appeared to adopt different strategies.

According to PoliticalEmails.org, **Joe Biden's campaign** sent around 1,785 email messages between the summer of 2019 and the end of 2020. On average, that's just over three messages per day. **Donald Trump's campaign** sent around 3,180 email messages over a similar but slightly shorter time period. On average, the Trump campaign sent nearly six messages per day.



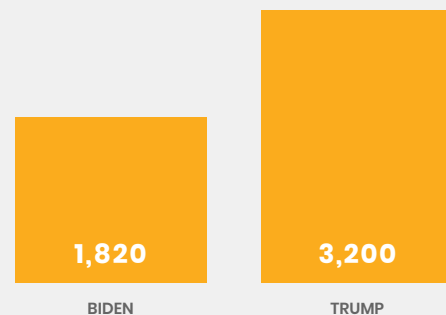
You must be realistic in what you pitch and confident in what returns you can expect.

2020 Presidential Email Campaign Frequency
(Average Number Per Day)



Source: PoliticalEmails.org

2020 Presidential Campaign Email Messages
(Summer 2019 through December 2020)



Source: PoliticalEmails.org

The digital agency, 97th Floor, took a closer look at each campaign's marketing strategy with the microsite [GetThatVote.com](https://www.getthatvote.com). Among the observations was the fact that Trump email campaigns typically used the president or a family member as the sender name. The Biden campaign tended to use a more diverse selection of senders with the candidate's name used about 30% of the time.

97th Floor also found Trump emails were more likely to contain ALL CAPS and emojis in subject lines. Some of those subject lines used a bait-and-switch tactic. For example, the subject line would hint at having a supreme court nominee's name or text of an upcoming speech but wouldn't deliver the suggested content.

Unfortunately, manipulative email marketing is common in politics regardless of the party. 2020 [research from Princeton University](#) found widespread use of tactics such as deceptive subject line formats, potentially illegal fundraising methods like donation matching, and the sharing of email addresses between campaigns.

Before Biden secured the nomination, the [Center for Responsive Politics](#) found Democratic presidential candidates spent thousands of dollars acquiring lists of emails. It's worth noting that only commercial emails are subject to the CAN-SPAM Act, and because political messages are protected by the First Amendment, they aren't required to follow the same rules as others.



Takeaways for email marketers

There are certainly some lessons about what not to do when you look at the way email is used in politics. For starters, you never want to buy a list. The most effective email marketing is made up of subscribers who truly want to hear from your brand. Also, list purchasing and rental may be a violation of your Marketing Automation System's Terms of Service.

The most helpful takeaway from election email campaigns is the importance of understanding what resonates with your audience. What kinds of subject lines encourage opens? What types of CTAs lead to clicks and conversions? What do your subscribers want to hear about, who do they want to hear from, and when's the right time to reach out via email?

Those kinds of questions can only be answered with insights from audience research, [email analytics](#), and ongoing split testing to help you optimize your campaigns. I like to think of this as "Always Be Testing" or the ABT approach.

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ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Two additional topics that mattered in 2020 include the climate of our planet and the quest for racial justice, the latter of which led to nationwide protests demanding change in the U.S.

CNN reports that the World Meteorological Association says 2020 will go down as the third hottest year on record. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, in the first six months of the year, 10-million people around the world were forced from their homes because of natural disasters connected to climate change.

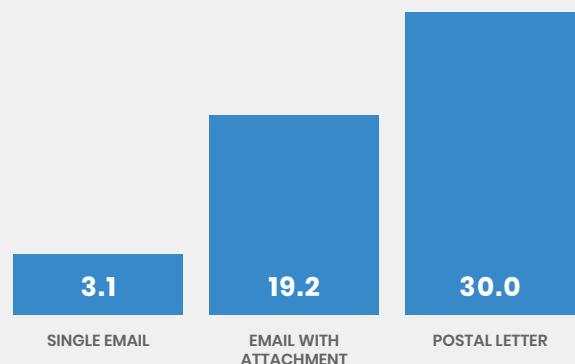
The ongoing environmental wake-up call has many wondering how they can do their part to reduce carbon footprints. But does email marketing even leave a carbon footprint?

In 2020, a report from *The Financial Times* based on research from UK-based **Ovo Energy suggested** that unnecessary emails are contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. The study said if every British person sent one less email per day, it would save 16,433 metric tons of carbon a year, or the equivalent of tens-of-thousands of international flights.

The **BBC partly debunked this research**, noting that the UK generated 435.2 million metric tons of greenhouse gas in 2019. The hypothetical reduction from Britains sending fewer emails would be a tiny 0.0037% of the total. Plus, Ovo Energy's calculations were based on everything used to send an email, including laptops and servers, which would likely still be running whether an email was sent or not.

The bottom line is that, while sending email does have an environmental impact, it's significantly more eco-friendly than its ancestor, snail mail. (Not to mention, email could be more reliable given the issues the USPS had in 2020.) While it depends on the size of the message for both email and direct mail, studies show emails have a smaller carbon footprint.

Carbon Emissions: Email vs. Postal Mail
(Approx. Average Grams of Carbon Emitted)



Source: eco2greetings.com

The social and political movement Black Lives Matter started in 2013, but tragic events in 2020 thrust the issue of racism into the national spotlight. Most notable was the death of

Minneapolis resident George Floyd who was killed while being arrested by a white police officer. The event sparked outrage and civil unrest around the country after a disturbing video circulated on social media. Some described the response as a cultural reckoning for racial injustice.

It was a turning point for Black Lives Matter as more brands and individuals began publicly supporting the movement in 2020. In turn, some organizations took a closer look at inequality and inclusiveness in their everyday operations.

One example from the tech industry was Google and Android's decision to stop using the terms "blacklist" and "whitelist." About one month after the death of George Floyd, **news broke** that the Google Chrome and Android teams began using the terms "blocklist" and "allowlist" instead. It was part of an ongoing effort to use "racially neutral" language in code.

A document for Chrome and Chromium developers explained the move:

"Terms such as "blacklist" and "whitelist" reinforce the notion that black == bad and white == good."

Email on Acid chose to follow Google's lead on this. We are actively removing and updating similar language in our email readiness platform and in our marketing.

Takeaways for email marketers

While email marketing may create less waste than direct mail, it doesn't hurt to examine the impact your program could have on the environment. If you can decrease the amount of email you send, there are benefits beyond reducing the carbon footprint of digital marketing.

Today's consumers take notice when brands stand up for a cause. **Salesforce** found more than half of customers seek out philanthropic businesses, and more than two-thirds think companies are responsible for giving back. In terms of racial inequality, 85% of Americans told PR firm **Porter Novelli** they expect businesses to help address the problem.

If email marketers do engage with the public on social issues, we must make sure the messaging is relevant and helpful, especially during a national tragedy. In many cases, the right move may be to remain silent. You can also review the language used in your industry. Could it be more racially sensitive and inclusive?

Today's consumers take notice when brands stand up for a cause.

CREATE A NEW EMAIL MARKETING ACTION PLAN

By now it should be clear that 2021 calls for an updated email strategy. While every email program is unique, there are some projects and initiatives that make sense for many marketing teams in various industries. This list of 10 action items is a solid place to start. And who doesn't love a good Top 10 list?

1 Action Item: Be prepared to hit pause and revise

Who knows if we'll face another crisis like COVID-19 in our lifetimes? But something is bound to happen, and when it does, the right decision may be to temporarily stop sending email marketing messages. Have a plan for pausing specific campaigns that you can restart when the time is right.

You may need to pause email marketing for the sake of cultural sensitivity. You may also need to stop campaigns because they no longer make sense and update them to more relevant content. If there are sudden travel restrictions, an airline wouldn't want to be sending emails with ticket price promotions. Rather, communications should be centered around current ticket holders, what processes are in place for refunds and/or rebooking. Retailers would want to stop sending messages that drive traffic to their brick-and-mortar stores in the event of local lockdowns.

2 Action Item: Clean up your lists

A shaky 2020 economy led to a shake-up in the job market including layoffs and business closures. For B2B marketers, this means some of your contacts have email addresses that are no longer valid.

If your ESP charges on a cost-per-contact basis, you're wasting money on emails that bounce. Plus, those bounces negatively impact your IP record and sending domain, putting you in danger of getting blocklisted. Data cleanup will help you avoid that risk while improving inbox placement, keeping your program efficient, and eliminating unnecessary emails. Monitor your hard bounces for signs of trouble.

3 Action Item: Test your send times

Because so many people are now working remotely, the lines between life and work are getting blurrier. It's possible that your subscribers' daily email habits have changed. Pay attention to email analytics and watch for these changes in behavior so you can optimize send times.

Are your subscribers opening emails more often on weekends or later in the evening after dinner or after the kids are in bed? We'd recommend avoiding sends before 8 am local time because there's a lot of competition in the inbox first thing in the morning. Try segmenting your lists by time zone. Sunday evening sends are worth testing as people may check emails then to get a jumpstart on their workweek.



4 Action Item: Develop more segmented nurture tracks

Strategically segmenting your lists and creating appropriate nurture tracks for those segments allows your email marketing to be more personalized and relevant. Nurture tracks can also help customers stay engaged and keep the sales pipeline moving during times when the sales team may not be able to make in-person visits.

Nurture tracks can even be created for specific members of the sales team, using their names as the sender while personalizing content for customers and prospects who are at different points in the path to purchase. Just be sure to keep a close eye on the cadence of sales emails and how people respond to your campaigns.

5 Action Item: Be more inclusive and empathetic

Race is only one demographic in which people get marginalized. As marketers, we can't exactly escape the practice of putting people into groups. But we can be sensitive to how we treat different kinds of people. Take a close look at the content and copy you use to target different segments. Put yourself in your subscribers' shoes. How might a campaign make you feel?

One area to consider is email accessibility. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) turned 30 years old in 2020, and the focus is shifting to digital access for all. Ensuring people with vision problems or other impairments can view your emails shows empathy and it improves your reach. That's why Email on Acid provides **Accessibility checks** as part of our pre-deployment platform.



Put yourself in
your subscribers'
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6 Action Item: Strive for 1:1 marketing

Chad White, author of [Email Marketing Rules](#) and head of strategic research at Oracle CX Marketing Solutions, expects different strategic moves depending on where your industry falls in the K-shaped economic recovery. He provided some thoughts to [Smart Insights](#) in November.

White predicts those in grocery, eCommerce, technology, and digital entertainment will invest in improving personalization, segmentation, and automation, which often means investing in new marketing technology. For these email marketers, it's about moving closer to 1:1 marketing strategies.

If you're an e-tailer, explore your options around dynamic content for transactional emails such as package tracking. The rise of super-fast, free shipping means consumer expectations for online shopping are high. But there's always the possibility that unexpected delays, shipping capacity challenges, or inventory issues could affect orders. Dynamic content keeps people up-to-date, and it can also help personalize email campaigns for open times (day vs. evening) or even the weather.

7 Action Item: Focus on email efficiency

Industries such as travel, live entertainment, brick-and-mortar retailers, and others that are struggling in the wake of the pandemic may not have the budget to invest in upgrading technology. White says these companies would do well to improve email marketing efficiency.

If that's your goal, focus on ways to become leaner and more agile by reducing production time and improving collaboration. [Email on Acid's research with Holistic](#) found it takes 45% of teams two weeks or more to launch a new campaign.

You should also be running regular A/B tests to inform you on how to optimize campaigns.

From an overall budget perspective, email is one of the most affordable marketing channels with a high return on investment (ROI). The Direct Marketing Association's [2020 Marketer Email Tracker](#) report says email's ROI is \$35 for every \$1 spent.



The rise of super-fast, free shipping means consumer expectations for online shopping are high.



8

Action Item: Optimize virtual event workflows

As tradeshows and conferences were canceled throughout 2020, virtual events and webinars started popping up everywhere. If your email team is responsible for promoting these events, be sure auto-responses are set up correctly and you're including calendar links.

Marketing teams should also be aware that "webinar fatigue" is a very real thing heading into 2021. Instead of asking people to sign up for an hour-long discussion, consider sending several shorter video clips as part of an email drip campaign.

9

Action Item: Find ways to stand out in the inbox

Of course, standing out is the goal of every email marketer. But the stakes are getting higher.

Forrester Research predicts that in 2021 consumers will receive more emails and other promotional messages than ever before. The research indicates marketing message volume will increase by 40% this year. Not everyone will welcome more emails. A recent study from **SmarterHQ** found 74% of millennials say they're getting too many marketing emails and 70% feel the emails are irrelevant.

The challenge will be finding a way to get your subscribers to look forward to and anticipate your emails because they're just that good. To accomplish that sort of relevancy, segmentation and personalization will be key.

There's a fine line between standing out and being annoying. Sometimes less is more. So, keep an eye on your engagement metrics, including unsubscribes and spam complaints.

10

Action Item: Test everything before you hit send

Finally, while we've already mentioned the importance of split testing email campaigns to learn more about what works with your subscribers, we have to stress the importance of pre-deployment testing. (I mean, it is our business model after all!)

The email world changes almost as quickly as things changed in 2020. Email is always evolving, and various email clients render your campaigns differently. If you're unsure what your subscribers see when they open your emails, you could be losing out on new business or damaging your brand's reputation.

An **email readiness platform** like Email on Acid helps your entire team improve productivity, reduce errors, and stay out of the spam folder. Team management features let you control access with permissions and collect feedback in one location – a handy benefit for large teams or marketing agencies. Plus, our reliable **Email Previews** let you see how templates and campaigns are going to render on more than 90 different clients, devices, and browsers.

While there's no telling exactly what the next normal will bring to the practice of email marketing, Email on Acid will show you why testing every campaign and every email every time is like seeing into the future.

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With a decade of email marketing experience, Betsy Grundy has led email strategy and execution for more than 36 countries (for local brands as well as Fortune 500 companies) all from the comfort of her North Carolina home.



As Email on Acid's Senior Email Marketing Manager, she's enjoying being meta in email marketing and striving for email perfection in every send. When she's not pushing the boundaries as an #emailgeek, you'll find her scouring flea markets with her husband, looking for cool vintage toys and mid-century modern furniture to restore.

READY TO DELIVER
EMAIL PERFECTION?

Email on Acid offers the most comprehensive and flexible email pre-deployment platform of its kind. As the industry leader in email production management, the company's platform helps developers, marketers, and enterprise organizations deliver email perfection. By upending the arduous manual pre-deployment process, Email on Acid achieves efficiencies, improves marketing ROI, and protects brand reputation with patent-pending automation.

From end-to-end content checks, to accessibility, deliverability, analytics, to email previews on over 90+ clients and devices, Email on Acid's flexible pre-deployment platform, takes the guesswork out of email preparation. With click-to-fix tools and automated solutions, you no longer need to be an expert to create email perfection. It's seamlessly fits into any email preparation process, saving users time, money, and resources. Co-Founded by industry thought leader John Thies, Email on Acid was born out of a desire to help make email marketing better for everyone.

Email on Acid is trusted by top companies like Verizon, Coca-Cola, Celebrity Cruises, Publishers Clearinghouse, IBM, Hilton, eBay and Samsung. Established in 2009, Email on Acid is based in Denver Colorado. To learn more, visit emailonacid.com.



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