Is Your Email List

Dirty?

Are You Emailing Dead People?

by Lon Safko

I didn't think mine was dirty.

I have been actively email marketing for more than a decade. I have been systematically building my lists for that same amount of time. When I email market, I follow all of the rules. I am very familiar with all of the requirements of the 2004 Can Spam Act and the 2014 CASL. My list is a double-opt-in list meaning, every name on the list voluntarily signed up and agreed to be on it a second time before being placed on the list.

I begin every email I send with "Mailing information, including how to remove yourself, is located at the end of this message." I show the name of my list such as "The Social Media Bible" or "The Fusion Marketing Bible", which helps the recipient know what our relationship is based on, my personal email address so they could contact me with any questions, an "Unsubscribe" link, my physical address, and a link to my "Privacy Policy" right there in every email!

In addition, I check my subject line and email content with of many online spam checkers. I employ an automated "bounce" handler, which removes hard bounces and even soft bounces after they soft bounce four times. And, I nearly never "sell" in my content and always provide free content. And still... I kept getting complaints from my ISP (Internet Service Provider) and email service providers about my lists being bad.

So. I went on a quest to find out and learn what "cleaning", "scrubbing", and email list "hygiene" all meant. Did you know that Yahoo! emails are impossible to verify? Did you know about the "Dead People's List?" Did you know about "Disposable Emails?" Did you know about "Spam Trap Emails?" Well, neither did I and I have been email marketing for more than 15 years.

I emailed dead people.

Did you know that there are "dead people lists? Yep. There are lists that are maintained by different services and the United States Postal Service (USPS) that contain physical addresses, telephone numbers, and email addresses of dead people. I thought I'd put my brother's information on this list just for fun, but realized it might not be easy to get him back on the "alive" list if there is one.

Here's what the Deceased Lists folks had to say:

Deceased do not contact registration.

"When you register a name with DDNC, the person's name, address, phone number and e-mail address is placed in a special do not contact file. All DMA members are required to eliminate these individuals from their prospecting campaigns. The service is also available to non-members of DMA so that all marketers may take advantage of this service to eliminate names and addresses.

A new, updated file is distributed to our members at least once every three months. Therefore the number of commercial contacts from DMA members should begin to decrease within three months."

Traps and disposable emails.

Also, did you know that there are services that provide spammers "temporary" or "disposable" emails just for spamming? True again! You can get an email, send out a slug of spam messages, and the email disappears immediately after you send your spam message. Sorry... No link to these here.

Also, did you know that there are emails specifically used as "spam traps"? These email addresses are just designed to be used to trap your emails in email spam traps! Why people would sign up for my free information using spam trap emails is beyond me, but they did! All this makes email marketing really difficult. Especially if you are not aware of any of this.

Scrubbing bubbles.

I identified and contacted many different companies that do email scrubbing and decided upon another ESP. I downloaded one of my email lists from my system (DPhP List), in a CSV format (Comma Separated Values), and uploaded it to the system to see what they had to say about it. I was pretty confident that they wouldn't find anything as I have always taken such care in building my email list.

Here's what their initial free report showed for one of my lists:

Result:	Count	Percent
Verified:	6265	73.13%
Unknown:	2006	23.42%
Undeliverable:	135	1.58%
Unreachable:	147	1.72%
Illegitimate:	2	0.02%
Disposable:	12	0.14%
TOTAL:	**8567**	**100.00%**

I was glad that they also provided some definition to the terms in the chart above as I have never heard of them.

Verified – The address appears to be deliverable, and not a trap (as far as we know), disposable account, etc.

Undeliverable – The address is not deliverable – it doesn't exist, it's suspended, or its mailbox is full.

Unknown – The address doesn't appear to be a trap (as far as we know), but we can't determine if it's deliverable or not.

Unreachable – "Invalid domain"; either no DNS records, invalid ones, or there isn't a mail server listening.

Illegitimate – Known trap, monitoring domain, blackhole, etc. A "blackhole" email is one that ends up in a dead letter bin or has been closed.

Disposable – Belongs to a disposable email address provider, like mailinator.com. OK… So here is one example.

Further explanation

Typically, we'll reject anything but verified and unknown addresses. we'll accept unknown addresses, because they're probably good, but we just can't tell for certain. Because the "unknown" addresses will contain some bounces, we recommend that you add them to your mailings slowly, in order to keep the overall bounce rate low for each mailing.

Similar to unknown addresses, you should expect at least a few bounces, mostly at Yahoo!, which cannot be verified. The older your data, the more often you will experience this. To keep the bounce rate as low as possible, we recommend you add Yahoo! verified results to your mailings slowly."

What the...! Where did 135 "undeliverables" and 147 "unreachables" come from? And, 12 disposable email address and 2 email traps! In that one list alone! WTF! (Wow! That's Fantastic)! I had nearly 300 bad emails that were causing my accounts to be shut down and my emails not being delivered!

The fee for scrubbing / cleaning my 6 lists was a very reasonable $50. The fee is based on the size of your lists. It is certainly work $50 to have your list cleaned of all these pitfalls. And, it doesn't have to be done each time you send an email blast. Once a year or even every two years is sufficient.

You would think that after all of this, I would be good to go? Not so fast!

With a cleaned email list in hand, I sent my first perfectly clean email blast! I couldn't wait to see the "tracking" report. It would be the first time with absolutely NO hard bounces, traps, or dead people. When the email blast was complete, there were still 366 hard bounces or emails that could not be delivered for a variety of reasons: typo, deliberately given wrong address, company gone, employee or person gone, etc. OMG!

I contacted this provider and asked them "Huh?!" Here's what they had to say about the 366 hard bounces:

We suggest mailing gradually to 'unknown' addresses because we cannot conclusively determine their deliverability. If all of them were included in your mailing, and a high percentage of them were invalid, that would cause a high bounce rate, which could get you flagged as a spammer.

As far as Yahoo addresses, Yahoo.com and Yahoo! hosted domains are unique in that our standard method of validation, SMTP, does not work, as the mail server says the email is good every time you ask. We have developed a proprietary technique to validate these addresses.

Since the data sources we reference are not designed for validating Yahoo! addresses, they are not 100% accurate. Specifically the method occasionally misidentifies invalid Yahoo! addresses as verified, but when you mail to them they bounce.

The next step in my cleaning process was to take my 366 hard bounces and also remove them from my list.

Lastly, there is another way email spammers are trying to trick the spam blockers including your own filters! Here's a few spam email addresses I caught with my own name in them:

• lonsafko@cetype.me
• lonsafko@zroistecik.me
• lonsafko@bitones.me
• lonsafko@ghdsfg.me.uk
• lonsafko@conteform.me.uk
• lonsafko@kipprsto.me.uk
• lonsafko@keramers.me.uk
• lonsafko@eurner.me
• lonsafko@senamrine.me.uk
• lonsafko@amplow.club
• lonsafko@triirelbl.me.uk,
• lonsafko@herlmoit.me.uk
• lonsafko@businesall.me.uk
• lonsafko@finantical.me.uk
• lonsafko@diamnter.me.uk
• lonsafko@forumate.me.uk
• lonsafko@tiipsig.me.uk

Even: lonsafko@lonsafko.co

Did you know any of this?

Amazing!

So, with a hand-cultivated, double opt-in, personal contact email list of 8,567 emails, nearly 700 of these emails were unknown, undeliverable, illegitimate, or disposable emails. The good news is, that once you have your lists cleaned, they don't usually have to be cleaned again for a while.