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Explicit Marketing: Personalization of Email Subject Line

Wesley Bryan, MBA Candidate

It’s a fairly common experience - that desperate moment when you search the crowd for whoever said your name. We are constantly clued into our names, especially when it’s added to personalized greetings or comments. People use our names as a way of engaging with us and getting our attention. In this age, where myriad interactions take place in the virtual world, does the use of our name have the same effect?

Personalized Marketing

Marketers believe that the use of our name in the virtual world will have the same effect as if someone was calling our name in a crowd. Email account users can attest to a trend that has become more pervasive amongst emails received: You! Emails seem to be pouring in addressing you specifically: by first name, last name, full name, or even nickname. For some emails received, it’s disconcerting an email sender knows your name. For other emails, it’s a reminder that a company is familiar with you and is providing a personalized recommendation. But, all these emails have the common equalizer -- the subject line. Marketers stress over what should go in that small space, which fits only so many characters. The question is: does personalizing the subject line by using a person’s name have an effect on a recipient? Should real estate agents personalize their broadcast emails toward clients by personalizing the subject line by using a person’s name?

Real Estate Perspective

Agent’s methods of communication have changed with advances in technology. Agents send out emails and newsletters, while also keeping some offline business practices such as sending “snail mail“, which is still considered a successful way of communicating with clients. Camille Johnson of Coldwell Bankers Jim Stewart, Realtors says “snail mail helps drive a personal connection between herself and her clients by blanketing an area.” Evelyn Love of Kelly Realtors practices this same principle, sending emails out with her name, picture, and contact information. In addition to the use of paper mail, both reached clients through an emailed newsletter. Agents often use multiple mediums, forming a hybrid of many methods in order to reach their potential clients. Their goal: find a specific combination of what works best. In these real estate practices just mentioned, the use of personalization of names is less common. Personalization is viewed as being potentially beneficial, but is also viewed as being time-consuming and not proven yet as entirely effective by some realtors. The technology is available
and agents believe that personalization can be beneficial, but it is often not included in the combination of tools to reach clients.

What do Researchers Say?

Real estate agents using personalization find it potentially beneficial, and researchers would agree. Researchers found that sending out personalized mail versus sending out non-personalized did not increase the rate at which the participants clicked through an email, but they did find that when further emails of the same type were sent that participants clicked on more personalized emails than non-personalized (Postma & Brokke 2002). Another study looked at the response on surveys sent via email, with some having a name in the greeting and some not. The approaches that included the recipient’s name experienced higher responses (Heerwegh, Vanhove, Matthijs, & Loosveldt 2005). Another study that incorporated personalization into emails found that personalization was negatively construed by most participants, with the thought that the information was obtained through improper methods (Sunil, Telang, Mukhopadhyay, & Boatwright 2012). These three studies, conducted over a period of ten years, shows a general trend from acceptance, to general appreciation, to negative reactions toward the usage of email personalization.

Further Research Findings

Other research clarifies that the context surrounding personalization impacts responses to this tool. Thirumalai, Sriram, and Sinha (2013) stress that the efficacy of personalization is dependent not only upon the industry but also on the establishment and context in which the business uses it. Different levels of personalized marketing emails can be chosen; research suggests that it may be more effective to use lower levels of personalization, as long as the recipient felt validated in being contacted (White, Zahay, Thorbjørnsen, Shavitt 2008). Researchers looked even at specific populations. Baek & Morimoto (2012) found that the use of personalized information was viewed less as an intrusion on privacy by younger versus older recipients. Thus, the effectiveness of personalization is dependent upon many different factors and the circumstances around which you use it.

Recommendations

With this body of research in mind, we recommend that you consider the potential effectiveness of personalization for your particular clients. A more personalized message, such as including a potential client’s name in the subject line, might be effective for a younger population with whom you have already established connection. For other potential clients, using general personalization within the body of a message or email may be more effective. A proper analysis
of your potential clients could determine that the use of personalization should be avoided because it carries negative connotation or that a particular client base won’t respond to this tool. A strong knowledge of your local area and who you are trying to reach ought to help improve your chances of implementing a successful utilization of personalized marketing messages. It would be best to use personalization after having made some level of contact. You could use clients’ names in many different mediums such as direct mail, social media, and emails. Many companies such as MailerMailer and MailChimp can help you in personalizing your emails with client names. Used under the correct scenarios, the personal touch might be what gets you that new listing.

References


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Wesley is a graduate student from Waco, Texas. He earned his Bachelors of Science in Psychology from Baylor University. Before beginning graduate school at Baylor, Wesley worked as a Merchandise Manager at Barnes and Noble. Wesley is currently seeking the MBA degree with a concentration in healthcare and plans to work within the healthcare industry.