





5 Email Marketing Rules to Embrace in 2021

Tech experts share best practices for the current climate.

BY KATIE VINCENT

No doubt, historians will have much to say about the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has now surpassed the one-year mark. Most people, however, will remember this era as a time when toilet paper and hand sanitizer became more precious than gold, schools went virtual, sweat-pants turned into the de facto work uniform, “social distancing” and “maskne” entered the national lexicon, and e-commerce positively exploded.

The latter has been on the up and up for quite some time, growing from a \$165.4 billion industry in 2010 to a \$341.7 billion industry in 2015, according to the U.S. Commerce Department. Last year, though, saw a whopping 40.3 percent leap — from \$393 to \$598 billion. “That’s the highest annual U.S. ecommerce growth in at least two decades,” states a recent research study by Digital Commerce 360. “What’s more, last year’s growth is nearly triple the average 15.2 percent online retail growth since 2010.” The report also found that retail chains ended 2020 with a 76.8 percent growth in e-commerce and that the country’s single most dominant company — to no one’s surprise, Amazon — actually dropped from 43.8 percent of the market share to 32 percent, as competitors big and small, forced to close their physical shops, pushed online sales more than ever.

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Among those experiencing the surge: many Society of American Florists members. Of the 275 respondents to SAF's 2020 Mid-Year Check-In survey, conducted in late August, 68.9 percent saw online sales increase during the pandemic as customers were unable (or too nervous) to buy flowers in person. Roughly half (55 percent) saw a rise between 1 and 20 percent, nearly a fifth (19 percent) saw a 21 to 30 percent increase, 15 percent saw a 31 to 50 percent increase, and 2 percent saw online sales grow by more than 200 percent.

The takeaway? Consumers are definitely comfortable shopping online. But their options for gift giving (or self-purchases) still abound, so you have to stay in touch to encourage their continued support. A great channel for communication is the inbox, said Ryan Freeman, founder and president of Strider Inc., a Toronto-based web design and online marketing company. "Email allows for a uniquely personalized and targeted experience," he said. "You can choose to communicate with people based on their online activity, purchase history, expressed likes/dislikes, and a variety of other data points." When done well, email marketing's return on investment far exceeds Facebook, Instagram or any other social media channel, "though, of course, those have value too!" he added.

Freeman and Lawrence Neale, Strider's email marketing specialist, offered Floral Management a few best practices for email success in the current climate.

Provide Value

"The worst thing you can do is randomly email people with a collection of product images and expect them to buy," Freeman said. "Relationship building requires time, earning of trust, and proving that you offer value. Train people to open your emails by including content (or links to good content) and include some more direct sales requests from time to time."

Value can take many forms. A popular and effective one among florists is the reminder email, particularly for birthdays, anniversaries and holidays. (After all, the general public doesn't think about Valentine's or Mother's Day for weeks — or months — in advance like the floral industry does!) Educational messages also work well. At Scent & Violet in Houston, Texas, owner Amra Kolasinac knows that every customer wants to enjoy plants and flowers as long as possible, so she emails care and handling tips at least once a month. Other smart go-to topics: wedding FAQs, what to send to hospital patients, heartfelt enclosure card sentiments.

Last spring, Jennifer Barnard, owner of Tillie's Flower Shop in Wichita, Kansas, found helpful marketing content by paying close attention to what her friends and customers were experiencing. For instance, when a customer called asking for some eucalyptus to hang in her shower, Barnard realized she could provide an easy solution for the anxious masses stuck at home craving a little self-care. She got a great deal on eucalyptus, marketed the plant's

soothing scent and quickly sold out. When a friend bemoaned celebrating her 9-year-old daughter's birthday in quarantine, Barnard contacted a local bakery and created a party package with cake and flowers. In response to parents struggling to entertain their restless children, she came up with projects to teach them to care for plants and set out curbside "Petal It Forward" bouquets that they could collect and leave on neighbors' doorsteps. "If you listen, people will tell you what they need," Barnard said. "Creating solutions is something we really focus on with our marketing."

Be Straightforward

People despise clickbait and will punish companies they feel misled them. Neale cringes every time he sees "Time is running out!" in his inbox, which occurs frequently. "Yes, it will generate high opens, but once the reader realizes they have been duped, they will either ignore future content or hit unsubscribe," he said. "Too many people obsess about open rates. If your branding and content are on point and your list is managed correctly, the best idea is to use the subject line to inform the reader what's inside." Here are a few upfront examples: "Check Out Our Mother's Day Collection," "Reserve Your Spot Now for Pinot & Petals Workshop," "Desk-Worthy Designs: Admin Professionals Week Starts Monday."

Be Human

Last year, there were two instances when it seemed like every company sent the exact same email in the span of a few days: in mid-March, when COVID protocols were the topic du jour, and early in June, when the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum in the wake of George Floyd's death. While both times represented important, heavy moments in history that business leaders felt compelled to weigh in on, the repetitive, boilerplate emails became tiresome for many. One viral tweet in March sums up consumers' general sentiment: "One lesson I'm learning from this pandemic is that way too many brands have my email." A better way to communicate your company's safety measures (still a critical subject)? Include bullet points of your COVID plan on your Google My

EMAIL MARKETING 101

In 2015, Floral Management did a deep dive on the subject of email marketing, including how to write a short but emotional pitch, format a message for optimal viewing, segment your user list to send finely targeted messages, test and track a campaign's effectiveness and choose a platform that's right for you. For a refresher of the basics, as well as specific examples of successful campaigns from your industry peers, check out, "Stay Out of the Trash!" at safnow.org/moreonline.



Business listing and create a pop up that appears prominently on your website, advised Vonda LaFever, AIFD, PFCI, CEO of Flower Clique, an online community that helps floral professionals streamline their businesses and improve profitability.

The wave of Black Lives Matter emails had a similar effect, largely because so many messages conveyed a “copy and paste” tone. In a June 13 Washington Post editorial, Y-Vonne Hutchinson, chief executive and founder of diversity consulting firm ReadySet, called out the hollowness of this approach: “There’s a lot of performative allyship going around,” she said.

“Insincerity is very offputting. If you don’t have something relevant to say, don’t say anything,” Freeman said. “Unless your company is large enough, influential enough, or positioned in a way that your opinions and actions matter on a large scale, don’t try to make yourself part of the conversation.” A rare example of a company that tied into the Black Lives Matter movement in a meaningful and personal way: Mayesh Wholesale Florist, which launched a series, “Beautiful People of the Flower Industry,” spotlighting a diverse roster of designers.

Neale also recommended staying abreast of current events to avoid sending a marketing message hours after a particularly calamitous or tragic event, such as a terrorist attack, school shooting or attempted siege of the U.S. Capitol. “Put yourself in your readers’ shoes,” he said. “Is your message appropriate, mistimed or just something you don’t feel right sharing? If it feels risky, it probably is.”

Keep Your Message Concise and Sharp

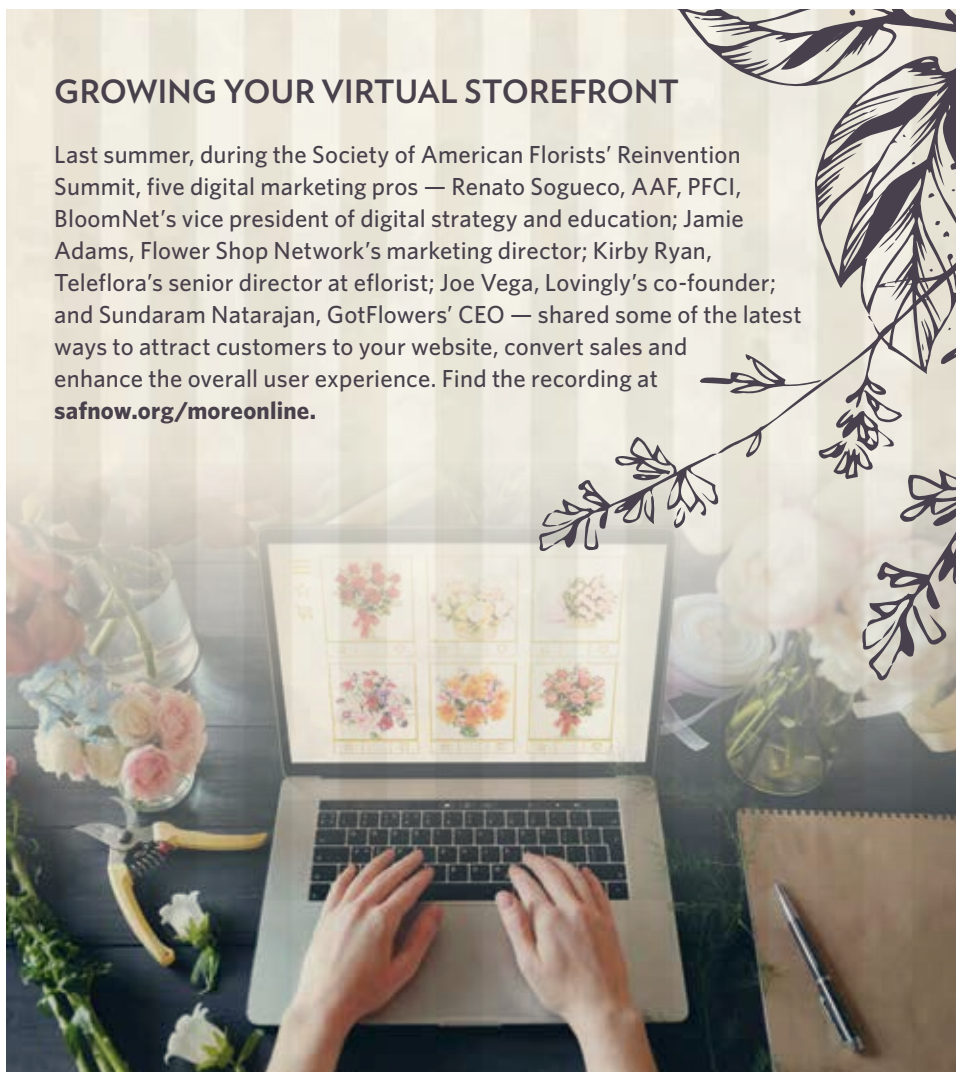
Photos — especially those of gorgeous flowers — can do wonders for reeling in readers.

“Unless you’re trying to deliver an intentionally unusual experience with a truly plain-text email, visual assets are critically important,” Freeman said. “People have a lot to do and not a lot of time to read through each email, so it’s helpful to have something visual that confirms they should invest more energy in reading the email.”

Your content should be “short enough to deliver value to direct people

GROWING YOUR VIRTUAL STOREFRONT

Last summer, during the Society of American Florists’ Reinvention Summit, five digital marketing pros — Renato Sogueco, AAF, PFCI, BloomNet’s vice president of digital strategy and education; Jamie Adams, Flower Shop Network’s marketing director; Kirby Ryan, Teleflora’s senior director at eflorist; Joe Vega, Lovingly’s co-founder; and Sundaram Natarajan, GotFlowers’ CEO — shared some of the latest ways to attract customers to your website, convert sales and enhance the overall user experience. Find the recording at safnow.org/moreonline.



to act with the promise of value,” Freeman said. In practice, this looks like a summary paragraph with a link to an article, blog post, video or product page.

“Links should always open in a new window to help with the readers’ experience,” Neale said. (This allows users to return to the original email with ease.) “Also, email clients don’t tend to render HTML very well, so web pages aren’t always displayed correctly if you don’t link to a browser.”

Keep at It

To reach your marketing potential, don’t just reserve emails for flower-centric holidays. “Your audience is only valuable if they are opening and engaging with your emails,” Freeman said. “If your clients haven’t heard from you in 11 months, the chance of them opening the email goes way down, and the likelihood of being marked a spammer goes up.”

To build brand affinity, you have to nurture the relationship. “Think of [email

marketing] like your brick-and-mortar store,” Neale said. “If you could invite your customers into the store every week for a catchup, to share some news, tips and the occasional offer, when it’s time to sell something, they know and trust you. If you don’t open your doors until Mother’s Day, people won’t even know you sell flowers.”

Along with embracing consistent communication, Neale emphasized the importance of an up-to-date subscriber list. “Just because someone has subscribed doesn’t mean you can forget about them,” he said. “Watch their activities and if they stop opening your emails, reach out to them and ask why.” If they continue to ignore these follow-ups, remove them from your list. “Having 300 active subscribers is better and more useful than 3,000 inactive ones,” he said. 🌸

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