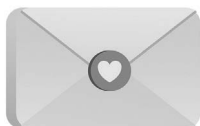**A GUIDE TO CRAFTING EMAILS THAT BUILD
RELATIONSHIPS AND GET RESULTS**

Mailed It!

ASHLEY BUDD and DAYANA KIBILDS

CONTENTS

Chapter 2

WHAT MAKES A GOOD EMAIL?

What is the difference between a good email and a bad email? In a lot of ways, it's subjective. An email could be plain text with terrible formatting, but if it's also a sweet note from your grandmother, you might consider it precious. One way to think about what makes a good email is to consider whether it's an email someone wants to receive.

Marketers and designers use the word *content* as a catch-all for everything we stuff into our emails, websites, and apps. Content can be tested and optimized and can easily fall into the trap of being formulaic instead of creative. As marketers, our creative side often struggles with content development. Marketers want content to fit into perfect boxes. The result is dull creations. To that end, in this book, we do our best to describe our work as an artistic process instead of content creation.

How we label our work is important. You will approach an email suite differently if you are told to provide artwork and creative writing vs. being told to draft email content. Creation of any kind is an artistic expression. It's personal, original, and beautiful. If a reminder to create good content for email dulls your expression, swap the word content for art.

PUT YOUR AUDIENCE FIRST

You get people to read essential emails by having a solid reputation and considering their time. Without these factors, your emails can be easily discarded—like physical junk mail that goes directly from your mailbox to the trash bin. If you want someone to read your whole email, consider how much time they have to spend on it. Good email is about creating a good experience.

Saying things with fewer words respects the reader and enhances their experience. When you need to deliver a lot of information, keep the details hosted elsewhere, like on your website or in a supporting document. **Your email is a conversation vehicle, not the place for a manifesto.** Instead, use an email to set up your manifesto and invite people to visit your website for more.

Good emails always respect the reader. In an environment where email volume is increasing, every moment a reader spends in the email inbox is calculated. Let's say you receive 100 emails daily, and you have two whole hours of your day dedicated to reading and responding to emails. That means you could spend just over one minute on each email correspondence.
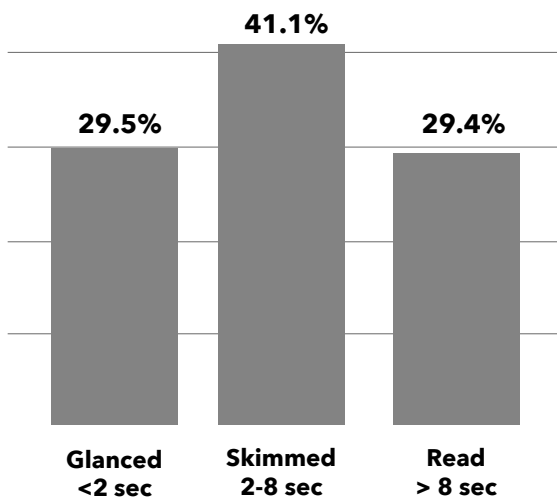
Source: Litmus Email Engagement Report, 2022

That timing is extremely generous. In reality, most readers only dedicate a few seconds to their emails. In 2022, Litmus found that 30% of emails, on average, are looked at for less than 2 seconds, 41% are looked at for between 2–8 seconds, and only 29% are looked at for more than 8 seconds. Keeping your emails concise respects the reader's time and gives you a much higher chance that your message will be received.

CALLS-TO-ACTION

Just like your essential messaging, calls-to-action (CTAs) work when they are clear and brief and have next steps laid out that are easy to complete. When you are asking someone to do something, you need to respect their time and understand the context in which they are receiving your email. For someone to take action, they need to have information about what you are asking them to do and understand why their action matters.

If you don't want to be ignored, invest in the relationship with your reader. Be helpful and considerate and deliver valuable information regularly. By building a program that consistently delivers good emails over time, you will create good reading habits among your subscribers.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CTA

When writing a call-to-action (CTA) message, clearly state what you want the reader to do. Large buttons with clear language help readers understand and focus on your task.

For example, your organization has just released new research that will improve the well-being of the community members it serves. Great news! What's the call-to-action? Spoiler alert: It's not "Learn more."

Asking someone to read or learn more about your program will not drive someone to act. In this example, the sender needs the reader

to read and learn. But what they are really after is a bigger action. The organization wants them to share this important research with more people and implement the findings in their community. This calls for a stronger call-to-action than reading or learning. Clearer calls-to-action are "Share these findings" or "Make lives better."

Sometimes your call-to-action is to gather feedback or ask for advice. If you want people to reply to your message, make sure they know you're looking for a reply. If you want someone to forward your email to friends, tell them, and don't be afraid to be specific. It's easy to get cute about email copy and forget to be clear.

STANDING OUT IN THE INBOX

Capturing attention is a critical skill for email marketers. This book is not about gimmicks. Gimmicks can capture attention once or twice. The organizations that keep our attention are the ones we trust and adore most. Still, to stand out, you need to be there in the first place. Sending quality emails helps you land in the inbox instead of junk.

FROM NAMES AND SUBJECT LINES

Let's start with the landscape of the modern email inbox. Readers follow a simple pattern each time they open their email. The first thing they do is look for From names they recognize. Next, they will scan email subject lines. Based on what is displayed here, decisions about what gets opened and what gets trashed happen in seconds.

Include a recognizable name for your reader to spot when they first glance through their inbox. If the individual sending the email is unknown, clearly display the organization they represent.

"From" names are read first, but subject lines are the next place to stand out. You can draw attention to your email by being clear about what's inside your email and using emojis that add context. Clear doesn't mean you can't be fun. The more you build a relationship with your readers, the more fun you can be.

Remember, communication = message received. If you need to communicate that your next Open House is on March 15, say that in your subject line. Don't hide this message in the body of the email. If most people read the subject line and don't open your email, your message will still be received. Communication success! If they need to take an action, put it in the subject line. You could say, "Register for the March 15 Open House." Clear From names and subject lines will help your reader receive your message in seconds and understand what you are asking them to do next. More on this in chapter 6.
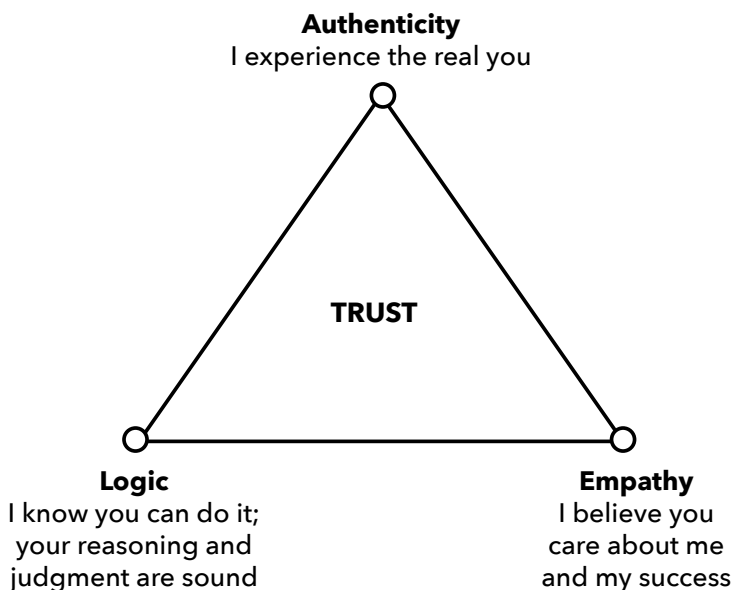
TRUSTWORTHY EMAIL

The key to a good relationship with your readers is trust. If they trust you to send messages they want, they will open and read your emails even if they aren't exactly sure what they are expecting to receive from you. Trust like that takes time to build. You need to prove that you are an authentic, honest communicator. You need to prove that you care about the person on the other side of the communication. And you need to be realistic about what you're asking someone else to do.

This brings us to our favorite trust model—the Trust Triangle. According to leadership experts Frances Frei and Anne Morriss, trust has three core drivers. You can build trust by emphasizing authenticity, empathy, and logic in your communication. In the May–June 2020 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* magazine, Frei and Morriss explain people are more likely to trust you when they believe they are interacting with the real you (authenticity), when they believe you care about them (empathy), and when they can follow your judgment and believe in your ability to make good decisions (logic). They say when trust is lost, the reason can be traced back to a breakdown in one of these core drivers.[4]

---

4   Frei, Frances X. and Morriss, Anne. "Begin with Trust." *Harvard Business Review* May–June (2020). https://hbr.org/2020/05/begin-with-trust.

THE TRUST TRIANGLE

To leverage the Trust Triangle—authenticity, empathy, and logic—as a writer, you need to meet the readers' needs in all these areas. If trust in the email sender is weak, it might be that one point of your triangle is not as strong as the others. Frei and Morriss call this a "wobbly triangle." Understanding where you wobble will help you pick an area to improve.

Authenticity
I experience the real you

TRUST

Logic
I know you can do it;
your reasoning and
judgment are sound

Empathy
I believe you
care about me
and my success

From "Begin with Trust" by Frances Frei and Anne Morriss,
Harvard Business Review May-June 2020

Authenticity

At the top of the triangle is authenticity. Authenticity is an honesty test. Are you telling the truth? Are you keeping it real? Or has your writing become clouded with formalities, bad writing habits, and what you think you should say rather than what you want to say and what your

audience needs to hear? If a reader can poke holes in your messaging, they will.

Being authentic often means being vulnerable. Not all truths are easy to swallow. If you represent an organization, share the reality of the business. Show a little bit of what is happening behind the scenes. Talk about the people who make your organization great. Share your goals. Organizations with a checkered past are more authentic when they recognize where they once were as they grow and move forward.

If you represent yourself, you should lean into the pieces of yourself that make you unique and human. Even if these aspects of yourself seem off-topic, showing a little bit of realness can bring the reader closer to you, and this builds trust.

Remember, authenticity means keeping it real. So, don't describe something as exciting when it's not. Don't say something will be quick if it takes more than a few minutes. Don't lead with how great your organization is without acknowledging the parts of your organization that need improvement.

Empathy

The second point on the triangle is empathy. Organizations learned many lessons about empathy during the pandemic: how to connect with people where they are, be sensitive to the complexity of life and family, and provide value in innovative ways. And it seems they forgot all of them! During the pandemic, we were very concerned about others. We took the time to understand what state of mind people would be in when they received our messages. Our messaging changed as a result. We crafted language more carefully, and we had a genuine concern for our readers.

Empathy builds trust. Empathetic writers are invested in their readers' success. They consider what value they are providing to a reader in every email message. Are you sharing helpful information? Are you making them smile? Are you offering them an experience

that will make them feel good? Oftentimes, organizations are laser-focused on their own success and leave the audience out of it.

If we lay out our goals and simply hope our readers will join in, we're missing a critical piece. We must show them how our goals are connected to their own and where mutual benefit exists. When we're empathic, when our readers know we're invested in their success, we build trust.

There is such a thing as too much information. People, on average, take 2 seconds to skim an email. For those who are more invested, that skim can last up to 8 seconds. If you've captured attention, now you have a reader. Readers can only commit a fixed amount of time to reading and responding to each email they receive. So treat their time as being as precious as your own.

Logic

The last point on the triangle is logic. Your readers need to be able to follow you. They need to know why you're communicating with them and what you are asking them to do, and they need clear steps to follow to complete each action. You can have great authentic and empathetic messaging and then lose your reader to confusing calls-to-action.

When your message is logical and clear, the reader can follow your motives and instructions without questioning them. However, each time we do something that makes a reader question us, we lose them.

In an email, readers are making split-second decisions. Do I need this email? Should I keep reading? Should I click through to see what's next? Many of these decisions are made subconsciously based on prior experiences. When readers have trust in you as the sender, they are more likely to develop consistent reading and click-through habits.

Consistency is an important part of your email marketing strategy. When you deliver quality emails on a reliable schedule you build trust. Support what you're saying with evidence, so the reader has confidence that what you're saying is true. You can do this with data, like facts and figures, stories, or testimonials from others who support what you're

trying to communicate. Combine this consistency with simple language and clear calls-to-action,, and now they can follow your logic.

RELEVANT EMAIL

Creating content that is relevant to your reader is critical to a successful email program. You need to reach people at the right time with the right message. This is what it means to be relevant. Ask yourself, what is happening in their life right now, and how is your message showing up? Is it relevant? If it's not, it's more likely to be discarded.

You can develop relevant email messages by really knowing your audience. But when audiences are large and diverse, it can be difficult to decide what might be relevant to everyone. In these cases, tap into universal truths, seasons, national holidays, and aspects of everyday life that are relatable.

For example, each new year sparks something in us to set goals and start new endeavors. You can meet your audience where they are by inserting your organization into the new year mindset. Offer help with goal setting by sharing a simple meditation or reminder about setting achievable goals. You can share your goals, too, connecting the readers' desire to start something new with your inspiration to move your organization forward. Help them see where they fit in during a time of year that makes sense for this kind of engagement.

PERSONAL VS. PERSONALIZED

We believe personal emails are better than impersonal emails. But personal email doesn't mean every message needs to be personalized with custom language and reader-specific calls-to-action,. Simply striking a personal tone with your reader can be enough to make your message feel personal.

A personal tone is friendly. It reveals your sender personality. Sometimes we focus so much on personalizing for others that we forget to have a personality of our own. Let's pretend for a moment that

you run a cheeky local bookstore. You could start an email to subscribers with Greetings, <insert first name>. Personalized, yes. Or you could start with Greetings, book lover! Personalized? Yes! You know the reader loves books. They are signed up to learn more about them. Repeating the reader's first name back is easy. Calling on part of their identity and one that directly connects to your business is personal and lets you interject your business personality.

Of course, when you can incorporate even more personalized content for individuals, you might see the message performs better. Just remember that it's not always necessary to personalize to be personal. And in this case, personal tone is everything.

DYNAMIC CONTENT

Email programs that leverage dynamic content—messages and images that show up differently depending on who is receiving your email—require a sophisticated infrastructure. Old-school writers might think of this technique like a modern-day mail merge.

A simple form of dynamic content is including someone's name in your subject line or body copy. More complex emails might have whole paragraphs or calls-to-action, that appear dynamically. For example, that email from your favorite retailer that shows you exactly what you were just shopping for. Technically speaking, dynamic content calls on a database and serves individuals with content based on their preferences, behaviors, or other individual traits. This database links to your email content, which is tagged and formatted in a way your email service provider can ingest.

Dynamic content can be used in email newsletters to display stories and offers that people might want based on their profile or past click behavior. For example, a university might show information about the academic program a prospective student has applied to in an email that is sent during decision-making time.

Dynamic content strategies are especially effective for large organizations that have more content to share than they have time

available to share it. These organizations need to prioritize what content will appear in each email, and they know that if given the chance, some readers would choose to prioritize what they see differently. The student who applied to a competitive engineering program might want more information about faculty, while a student who applied to an undecided or exploratory program might prioritize information about academic advising.

Dynamic content allows you to leverage a variety of messages in the same email send to get the most relevant content in front of different readers.

ENGAGING YOUR AUDIENCE

Engagement means connection. Engaging content is a good sign of a strong email program, and key engagement metrics to track in emails include clicks and replies to messages. Sometimes engagement can just be reading. Powerful messages are those that compel people to connect with you, whether that's clicking through, replying to, or just reading the emails you've sent.

Your goal for sustained email engagement is to create a habit with your readers. You want them to see your email in their inbox and know what to do with it instantly. When they see your email, you want them to believe there is good content inside for them. You want to create a habit where every email is opened and clicked on. This is why it's worth investing in clickable content. Some people might call it clickbait. We call it the good stuff.

Being creative means making something new and valuable. Good creative content considers value and relevance and puts a new spin on the message each time. Remember, when you're creating, writing, and designing, you're making art. Treat the process as such, and you'll end up with a unique email that connects with your reader.

Coming up with fresh content regularly is possible with a plan. Set aside time for creative content brainstorming and plan far enough ahead that you have the time to create new things. We know how to

nail down the right pace for even the most complex organizations. More on this in chapter 4.

Key Takeaways

- Good emails prioritize the reader's time and experience. Respect their time by delivering concise and relevant content that can be consumed in 8 seconds or less. Focus on providing value and meeting their needs to build trust and engagement.

- To build trust with readers, emphasize authenticity, empathy, and logic in your communication. Be honest, genuine, and clear in your messaging to create a strong bond with your audience.

- Think of creating emails as an artistic process, aiming to deliver unique content and build connections. Plan ahead. Strive for relevance by understanding your audience and connecting with universal themes.
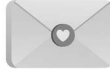
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ASHLEY BUDD and **DAYANA KIBILDS** are serious marketers with a soft spot for email. They first met as colleagues at Cornell University and spent the last decade working with higher education and nonprofit organizations. They share a love for teaching marketing in a practical and inspiring way.

Ashley Budd is senior director of advancement marketing at Cornell University. She lives in upstate New York with her family and two beloved peach trees. Ashley speaks regularly at marketing conferences and on podcasts. She consults with colleges, universities, and other nonprofit organizations. Together with Day, they coach and mentor new professionals. You can find them speaking about email and hosting workshops with teams across all kinds of industries.

Dayana (Day) Kibilds is a strategist at Ologie, a marketing and branding agency built for education. She's been working with higher education institutions worldwide for over a decade, pushing them to use their communications as tools for equity and access. She's an international keynote speaker on enrollment marketing, email strategy, productivity, and stakeholder management, and she's the host of Enrollify's *Talking Tactics* podcast. Day lives in Canada with her son, Romeo, and her husband, Bruno.