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One of the more current developments on the email marketing front is the use of auto responders, or automated emails, that happen in a set sequence after a user's email address is captured. Typically the end goal of an auto responder email series is converting that user to a purchaser or customer. In this section, we'll introduce you to what an auto responder is, how to use them, the pros and cons, and some basic best practices. Auto responders offer unique benefits in that they can produce results with a limited amount of effort on your part after the initial build out of the program. However, auto responders also present some challenges and best practices that should be considered when determining the role of an auto responder in your email marketing mix.

What is an Auto Responder and How Does it Work?

An auto responder is exactly what it sounds like – it is an automated sequence of emails that are triggered when a user signs up for an email list or provides an email address to your company. Typically, the process works like this.

Step One: A user submits an email address and receives a welcome email (most likely after a confirmation opt-in email).

Step Two: Usually one day after the customer signs up for the email list and receives the welcome email, the first of a series of "auto responders" is sent. This first email contains either the information or offer (or both) that the subscriber was interested in.

Step Three: Following that, an average of ten to nineteen emails are then automatically sent to the subscriber, most often with several days between each email send. The further the sequence gets, the longer the space between emails is. For example, within the first three or four emails, there may only be a day or two between each email send. However, as you get into the latter emails, it is common to leave a week between email sends so as not to encourage the subscriber to become frustrated and mark you as spam or unsubscribe from future mailings.

How Do You Develop an Auto Responder Program?

The first thing to do, of course, is consider whether you want to include auto responders in your marketing mix. You'll need to be sure to find an email marketing provider that supports auto-responder functionality (not all of them do, though Comm100 does support auto-responder functionality). Then, when considering developing an auto responder program, you'll want to consider all of the following points:

- How many emails should be sent?
- What should be the time frame between sends?
- How should you balance useful content with solicitations for sales or offers?
- How do you minimize unsubscribe requests and spam complaints?

Of course, all of the other concerns of email marketing, such as template design, spam rating scores and subject lines apply. But the four concerns listed items above are unique to auto responder email programs. Let's briefly cover each in turn.

How many emails should be sent? It is possible that the answer to this question will be determined by the email marketing service provider that you choose. Some email marketing service providers will only allow you to send a maximum of ten auto responder in a sequence. This is typically done to reduce spam complaints and preserve the IP that the email marketing provider is using. Most studies have shown that the ideal number for an auto-responder program will be between 12 and 15 emails. Ten is often not quite enough to convert a user, but more than fifteen increases opt-outs and spam complaints as subscribers who haven't converted then begin to become frustrated. Ultimately, the number of emails that you should send should be based on your content, its engagement level and the amount of time needed to convey it.

What should be the time frame between sends? At the beginning, you want to ensure that you do not take too long between sends. Your subscribers have just signed up and are enthusiastic about receiving your communication, so take advantage of that enthusiasm. While once daily is too frequent, you can begin by spacing your emails out with only a day in between. After that, extend the time between to three days. As you get to the tail end of your auto responder, meaning that you are getting to the least engaged customers who have not converted and may mark you as spam or opt-out of the email, begin to stretch things out by five days or even a week. Many email marketing service providers will allow you to also mark days of the week that you don't want your auto responder to send, so you may want to eliminate weekend email sends of auto responders. Email open rates are lower on weekends.

How should you balance useful content with solicitations for sales or offers? One of the greatest risks of an auto-responder program is having users become frustrated with hard-sales attempts and subsequently marking your email as spam, opting-out, or simply not opening future emails. All of the aforementioned activities can lower your quality score with email service providers and make it harder for your email sends to get into the inbox. Therefore, it's very important that your auto-responders actually contain useful information. While it's acceptable to include a sales offer along with useful information in each email, it is not advisable for you to make a sales-only email any more frequently than every fifth email in the series in order to protect your email sender reputation.

How do you minimize unsubscribe requests and spam complaints? The best way to minimize the risk of unsubscribe requests, spam complaints and non-opened emails with your auto responder program is the same way to minimize those risks with all email marketing. Provide useful, engaging content and good offers that your subscribers will care about. You can also use the best practices for managing unsubscribe requests, opt outs and spam complaints that we'll discuss later in this book and which include: prominent and easy-to-find placement of the unsubscribe link, proper opt-out and opt-in messages and asking users to "white list" you in your initial email.

Auto responders are essentially just like any other form of email marketing, but because they are not as carefully monitored and not personalized to specific list segments, they can pose greater risks and yield lower returns if not properly thought through in the developmental phase.

What is the Typical Content of an Auto Responder?

An auto responder is generally more similar in content to a newsletter than it is to a direct sales email, though it combines many of the elements of both. The content can vary wildly though based on your industry segment and what you've promised subscribers. The most common type of auto responder content will be tips or advice, but you can also do great things with recipes, serial fiction pieces, inspirational quotes and a variety of other topics. Essentially, you are looking for content that will engage users over a period of time while also providing a platform to encourage sales of your product or service or visits to your website.

Auto Responder Pros and Cons

Auto responder email programs often seem as though they may be all upside because they require very little maintenance. However, when determining if you want to invest your resources into an

auto-responder program, there are both pros and cons that you should consider.

Auto Responder Email Pros

The following are the pro-points of sending email auto responder:

• After the initial time and resources required in order to build out your auto responder program, you will have an ongoing communications channel with your customers that can happen with little or no maintenance from you.

• An engaging, compelling auto responder program can generate not only sales but also brand awareness and user referrals

• If your auto responder program is successful at converting subscribers to customers, you can operate at a very high return-on-investment as convincing a user to sign up for a free email program is much easier than acquiring an initial paying customer

• Auto responders are a great solution for small businesses with extremely limited resources for email marketing and content generation

Auto Responder Email Cons

The following are the con-points of sending email auto responder:

• Unlike traditional email marketing, email auto responders cannot easily be segmented to a single portion of your list (such as cat food buyers versus dog food buyers). Auto-responders by nature are generalized and will therefore convert at a lower percentage than will targeted, traditional email marketing campaigns.

• Auto responder campaigns can put the sender reputation of your email program at risk as auto responder programs tend to have higher opt-out, unopened and spam complaint numbers. These user actions can make it more difficult for even your non-auto responder emails to make it into the inbox.

• The initial build out of an auto responder campaign can be labor intensive, requiring content for multiple emails all at once and several weeks of monitoring in order to determine if there are "problem" areas in your timing or content before you are able to allow the program to run automated on its own.

In summary, auto responders present a great opportunity if you have limited time and resources to create email marketing campaigns. However, because they are less targeted, they may also be less effective and can put your email sender reputation at risk if they do not provide subscribers with engaging, useful content.

Auto Responders and the Types of Email Marketing

When thinking about the five types of email marketing described previously, auto responders are almost exclusively used for customer acquisition email marketing. Your existing customers may respond well to an auto-responder campaign, but chances are high that the best place in your marketing mix for auto-responders is when trying to acquire new customers.

Auto Responder Best Practices

In Section 5 of this book, we will cover email best practices in great detail. However, here are five key best practices for auto responders that should be practiced.

1. Always Include the Auto Responder Name in the Subject Line: Because you are sending multiple

emails spaced out over multiple days, you always want to include the name of the auto responder program that your subscriber signed up for in the subject line so that they recognize you in the inbox.

2. Be Sure to Have Subscribers White List You: Because auto responders run a higher risk of unsubscribe requests and spam complaints, be sure to ask users to add you to their contact list or address book in the first welcome email that they receive to help negate the chances that you will end up in their spam or junk folder.

3. Do Not Overdo Offers: While the ultimate goal of your auto-responder program is to generate sales or revenue, too many offers can result in subscribers fleeing from your list early in the auto responder sequence. Present offers contextually and don't create auto-responders that look and feel like repeated direct sales emails.

4. Make Links Clear and Visible & Use Text Links: Make sure that all links to your product purchasing pages are clear and visible. When possible, default to blue, underlined links for easy user recognition. Though in web design it is often unadvisable to use the words "click here" in a link, in email design it typically is more effective to use the words "click here." Make sure that your links are text links and not image-based links as images may not appear in all emails.

5. Use Personalization Fields: While always important in email marketing, because an auto-responder list can not be easily segmented, be sure to use the features of your email marketing program, such as those at Comm100, that allow you to personalize fields within your auto responder email with the subscriber's first name, handle, user name or other submitted information.

Auto responders present an excellent opportunity to create email marketing results with minimal effort after the initial build out. However, the key to success is to think through the process during the build out and to monitor the program carefully for the first several months in order to optimize it. We'll discuss auto responders throughout the remainder of this book when talking about email design, implementation, tracking and optimization.

No matter what email marketing strategy you are taking, the first step to ensure a successful email campaign is to choose a reliable email sending partner. Comm100, who provides this comprehensive email marketing article, offers you powerful Email Marketing Software, which is both a great long-term and short-term solution to improving your email marketing program to a new level.

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