

The Great British Split Test



The history of email marketing

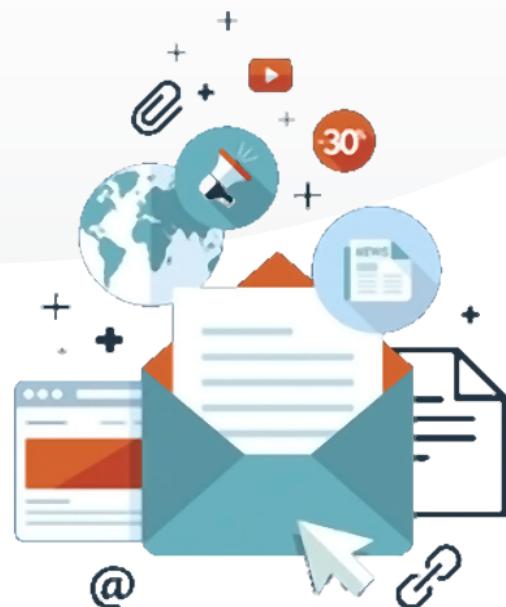
Way back in 1971, Ray Tomlinson sent the first email. The content could be considered anticlimactic, as it quite literally consisted of "QWERTYUIOP". But who cares, on that day, a new technology and means to communicate were born!

It's thought that the first mass email was sent out seven years later, by Gary Thuerk from Digital Equipment Corporation. While the content is unclear, the general gist is that it wasn't a bad plan. We're unable to find concrete evidence, other than the word of Wikipedia (good enough, right?), which suggests he sent to around 400 prospects and generated a cool \$13 million of sales as a result.

Things evolved further when in 1991 Hotmail (originally known as HoTMaiL, get it?) launched the first consumer-targeted, free to use email service. Before this, email addresses were only available to students and companies that supported such comms.

But it was the 1990s where digital marketing became "a thing". Up until then, marketers relied on direct mail (phone and post), which as we know, can be very expensive with little way to track performance.

Email marketing in its infancy was a lawless playground for marketers. There were little to no repercussions for spanking their databases with batch and blast campaigns. But playtime was over in 1998 when the Data Protection Act was updated. From then on, it was the law to include opt-out links in all emails.



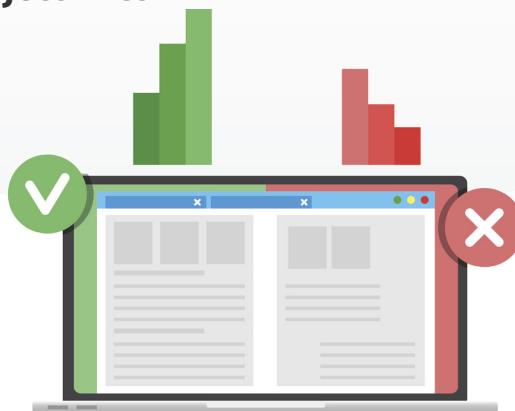
Things progressed in 2003 with the introduction of the Can Spam Law in the US and Canada. This was the first legally binding regulation for email marketing, protecting consumers from spam. The same year the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations (known as PECR) was introduced in Europe.

A year later Sender Policy Framework (SPF) was born. The purpose behind it is to verify the sender's IP address. From being able to track who's sending, it became possible to see complaints against them. This, in turn, prevented more spam from being delivered by known offenders.

Some 40 years later and here we are in the present day. Animated gifs are largely supported (unless you're using Outlook, of course), emojis are commonplace and memes rule the internet.

Despite all the changes, one thing has remained infinitely important to the email marketer: getting into the inbox.

And that all begins with the all-important subject line. But what do we know about subject lines, what makes a good one and what works in our B2B sphere? We're glad you asked...**All about subject lines**



We all know why subject lines are important. They serve as a snippet or summary of the message and what's within.

Size, or rather length, matters!

One of the biggest questions on the lips of marketers is: how long should my subject line be? To be blunt, there's no one answer to this for a variety of reasons.

The average desktop email client (e.g. Outlook) has around 60 characters before it cuts off. But for smartphones, it's much less at around 25 – 30 depending on screen width. According to ReturnPath top performing subject lines have between 50 and 70 characters.

So, how can you find your own top performing subject lines? With split testing, of course!

Split testing 101

For those of you who don't know about split testing, we're going to cover the basics for you now. Whether you're testing content or subject lines, here's split testing in a nutshell.

First, you select the percentage of your campaign's audience to be in the test group.

Let's say you have an audience of 10,000, and you decide to run the test on 10% of the audience. That'll mean 1,000 contacts will receive either of the test versions. If you have an A and a B version, that segment is split equally.

Next, you decide the series of time you want the test to run over.

This could be anything from 1 hour to any number of days. We recommend at least 3 hours to make sure you get as many responses as possible. During this time, the test records how many opens or clicks each version gets, tallying up the winning version at the end of the time.

Once time is up, the winning version will be automatically sent to the rest of your audience.



What you can split test in GatorMail

Of course, subject lines aren't the only thing you can split test. In GatorMail you can also test email design, the content of the email itself or your sender alias.

Let's dive into a little more detail about exactly how to test each of these three elements.

1. Subject lines

It's not just the length you can test when it comes to subject lines. You can also test 'how to's' vs. questions, using different punctuation, including dynamic content in subject lines vs not, or even using capital letters to see if that improves open rates.

2. Email design and content

Whether you want to test plain text emails vs image-based designs or buttons vs links, it is also possible to test larger aspects of your email within GatorMail. The only thing you have to make sure of is you are only testing one thing at a time. Otherwise, you won't know which elements are contributing to your results!

3. Sender alias

Subject lines aren't the only thing email subscribers see when your email lands in their inbox. They also see who the email came from, which makes sender aliases as important to split test.

Should you make your email campaigns come from a company address or make it appear from an individual? Should that individual be a male or a female? Find out which sender your target audience responds best to (because believe us, it's different for every company) by split testing your sender alias in GatorMail.

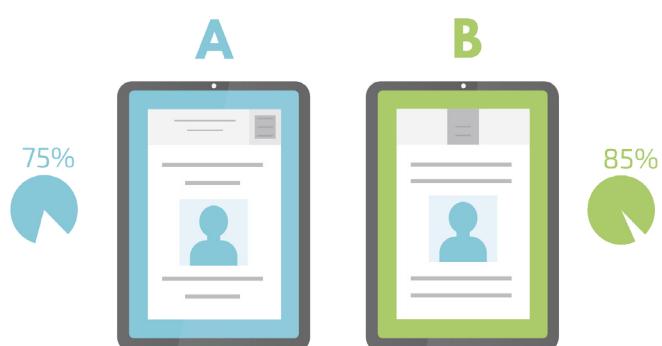
In GatorMail, whatever you're split testing, the results are measured on either clicks or opens. The winning version can then be automatically selected after the test period is over, or you can manually select once you've analysed the results yourself.

Why should you split test?

Our question is, why wouldn't you?!

As the age-old saying goes, if you want to keep getting what you're getting, keep doing what you're doing.

But if you want to improve your email marketing results then you've got to switch it up. As we know from our earlier history lesson on email marketing, subscribers are now used to getting all kinds of email. So we have to keep reinventing what we're doing with our campaigns in order to continuously improve our results.



To reinvent our campaigns and improve them, we need to know what our audience respond to best.

Split testing is the easiest way to clearly learn what is working and what isn't in your emails. The results are right there for you in black and white. Once you know, the winning test can be implemented for the rest of your campaign ensuring the best possible results.

It's low risk and high reward! Plus, aren't you curious to know what makes an email outperform another? Don't you love that feeling of seeing a campaign results spike after you've switched something up?

Then split testing is for you!



The Great British Split Test

Because we were so curious to know what made a good email marketing campaign, we decided to embark on The Great British Split Test.

Using our own email campaigns as well as several clients who opted-in to help us, we spent the whole of 2017 researching everything we possibly could when it came to subject lines, email designs and sender aliases.

Each category had subcategories, and each subcategory was measured by clicks because we believe clicks and conversions are more important than just open rates.

With over 1,000 datasets analysed, here are the results!



Subject line results

Negative vs. positive subject lines

We have all heard about the power of a negative subject line, though it's not always clear why it wins. Perhaps it's the immediate need to fix the negative that drives us to click! What we do know is that negative subject lines certainly produced the better results in our split test.

- Negative subject lines saw an average click-through rate of 9%
- Positive subject lines saw an average click-through rate of 5%

Winner = negative subject lines

Personalisation vs generalisation

Now, here's where we were surprised. Every email marketer has been banging on for years about how important personalisation is. However, it may be that (like mass marketing) our end user has caught on to the personalisation trick and simply isn't buying it anymore. Here's why.

- Subject lines that DIDN'T have any personalisation saw a click-through rate of 14% on average.
- Subject lines that DID have personalisation (such as a first name) only saw a click-through rate of 2% on average.

Winner = non-personalisation (we know, we were shocked too)

Caps vs no caps

Again, with subject lines in all capitals vs all lowercase, we saw what we were expecting too. After all, who likes being yelled at before they've even opened the email?

- Capital subject lines saw a click-through rate of 4%
- Lowercase subject lines saw a click-through rate of 7%

Winner = no caps



Question vs statement

Now, should you ask a question or make a statement in your opening subject line? Well, there wasn't much difference in the click-through rates (both received around a 2% average), so we had to run the test again with open rates as our benchmark.

- Open rates for questions as subject lines only equalled 2.53%
- Open rates for statements as subject lines equalled around 5.06%.

Winner = statement subject lines

Typo's in subject lines

Now, we've heard that some digital marketers like to use typos in their PPC adverts and see a higher conversion because of how niche it is, so we wanted to see if the same was true for subject lines.

Turns out, it's not always the case (though there were some anomalies).

But in general:

- Typos saw a 3% average CTR.
- Correct spelling saw a 4% average CTR.

Winner = correct spelling (phew!)



Email Design Results

Short vs. long copy

For the last couple of years, email marketers have been promoting short email copy due to shortening attention spans. But our results show different! It turns out people actually want MORE information in their emails before they'll commit to the click.

- Short subject lines & email copy: 2% click-through rate
- Long subject lines & email copy: 3% click-through rate

Winner = long email copy

Buttons or no?

It stood to reason that if more links were wanted then surely buttons would win out. However, this turned out NOT to be the case!

- Buttons only saw a 2% click-through rate
- No buttons saw a whopping 9% click-through rate

Winner = no buttons

But why such a difference between links and buttons? Well...our next split test revealed it all!

More or less links?

Surely the more links you provided, the higher the chance that your subscribers would click, right? That was our logic... and it proved true in the split test!

- Emails with MORE links saw a CTR of 2% on average
- While emails with FEWER links saw a CTR of 1% on average

Winner = more links



Outlook vs. design

This one we kind of saw coming. We know because a lot of mail providers have blocked images that designed emails are becoming less and less effective. But - to stay true to the split test - we decided to do an Outlook vs design comparison.

The results speak for themselves:

- Outlook style, plain text emails had a click-through rate of 7% on average
- Designed, graphic-heavy emails had a click-through rate of 4% on average

Winner = Outlook, plain text style emails

Sender alias results

National vs. International

This was an interesting one that we really hadn't considered before 2017. But with more and more global companies jumping on board at CommuniGator, we thought it was worth a test! And the results, while not massively different, were a welcome surprise.

- International names perform at an average click-through rate of 11%
- National names perform at an average click-through rate of 10%

Winner = international names

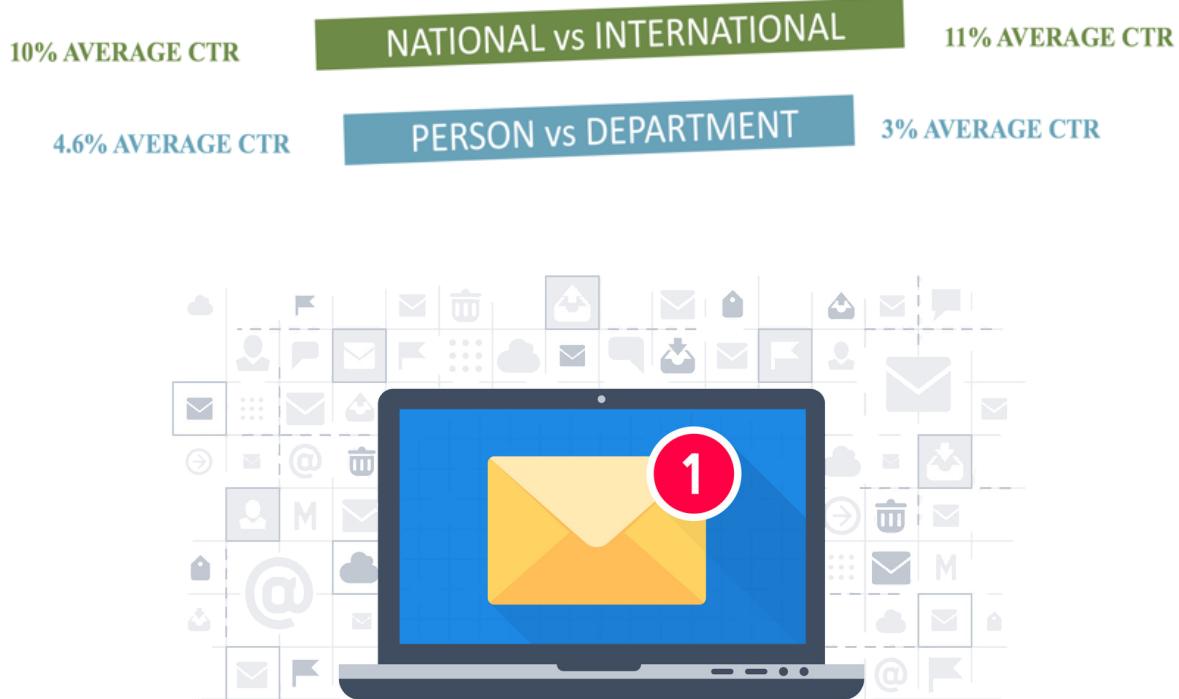
Person vs. department

Ok, this one we predicted. But after we'd done the subject lines and found out personalisation wasn't so popular... we couldn't get cocky. We let the split test decide for us! (Yes, we predicted correctly.)

- Sender alias disguised as people saw an average CTR of 4.6%
- Sender alias as a department saw an average CTR of 3%

So, it turns out people want to email and talk to another person, they're just not buying the whole 'we know your name' marketing approach anymore.

Winner = Personal sender alias



To sum up 'The Great British Split Test'

If we look at all the data we collected in the subcategories we tested, we have found the winning combination for emails moving into 2018.

BEST COMBINATION - MOST TYPE WINS OF SUBCATEGORY		
DESIGN	SENDER ALIAS	SUBJECT LINE
MORE LINKS LONG NO BUTTONS OUTLOOK NO IMAGES	INTERNATIONAL PERSON	NEGATIVE no caps NON PERSONALISATION LONG STATEMENT

What have we learnt?

Not only have we figured out the winning formula for B2B marketers moving forward, but we've learnt we don't always know what our subscribers want.

We could have bet money that personalisation and questions would have won based on the personalised marketing everyone seems to be adopting these days. We had no idea people responded better to international emails than national ones. We also thought short emails were more effective.

All of which The Great British Split Test proved wrong.

It just goes to show how fluid email marketing is. If you want to stay ahead of the curve you have to keep calm and test, test and test again!

One thing we know for certain - these findings won't stay this way forever.

That's why we'll be doing The Great British Split Test again. Would you like to be involved? Get in contact with someone in the CommuniGator team, and they'll be sure to tell you more about it.

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