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Subject Line Testing

Tips for maximizing the value of the most impactful test in a marketers' toolbox

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Testing to Win

When it comes to email, few would argue that the subject line is one of, if not the single most important parts of an email.

Here's why.

We see average open rates range between 15% and 25% depending on the industry, so for the 75% to 85% of recipients who do not open any given email they receive, the Subject line IS the email. Everyone with an email address is exposed to multiple subject lines daily. According to the latest research from Statista, approximately 95 percent of internet users aged between 25 and 44 years in the United States reported using emails.

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The same study reported that as of April 4, 2023, the United States was the country with the highest number of emails sent daily, with almost ten billion. That's a lot of subject lines! No wonder "How do I improve my subject lines?" is one of the leading questions in email marketing.

The answer is deceptively simple: TEST!

Testing works, but more testing works better. Data taken from Subject Line Pro, an AI-enabled test platform for subject lines, shows that when it comes to testing effectively, standard A/B testing is not enough.

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Subject Line Performance Curve – No Test
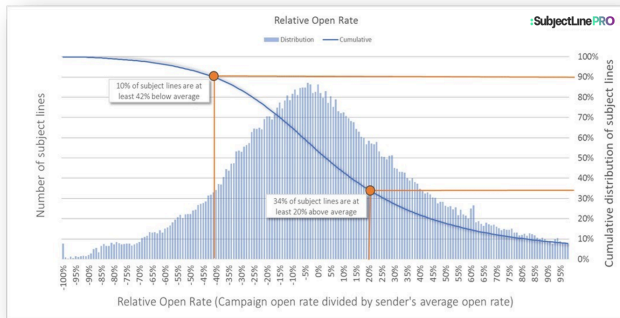
This bell curve taken from the campaign data held within Subject Line Pro shows the distribution of open rates for every subject line in the database. All open rates are calculated relative to the sender's average open rate, so an open rate of +20% here means it performed 20% above average.

Let's start with how many subject lines marketers should test to identify a subject line that would drive significant improvement. The term A/B test would imply that two is ok, but that's not reflected in the curve. The data demonstrates that any given subject line has roughly 1 chance out of 3 of performing at least 20% above average. In other words, to get a 20% line in an open rate, marketers should test at least 3 subject lines on every single campaign. The graph also demonstrates what happens when there are too few tests. With only one subject line, there is a 1 in 3 chance that it will underperform the average by at least 20% and a 1 in 10 chance that it will perform 42% below average. With only two subject lines in a test, each has a 1 in 3 chance of underperforming by greater than 20%. In other words, there is a 1 in 9 chance that both will be 20% or more below average. Subject line "A" is bad, "B" is worse – bad beats worse, but they are both underperforming, as are the results.

*It doesn't matter who or what writes your subject lines, **you must test to guarantee a lift.***

The more subject lines tested, the greater the chance that at least one of them will be one of those great subject lines to the right of this chart and reduce the chances that the test results in sending one of the less effective subject lines on the left.

The following 3 charts demonstrate how every incremental subject line tested improves the chances of getting a lift.
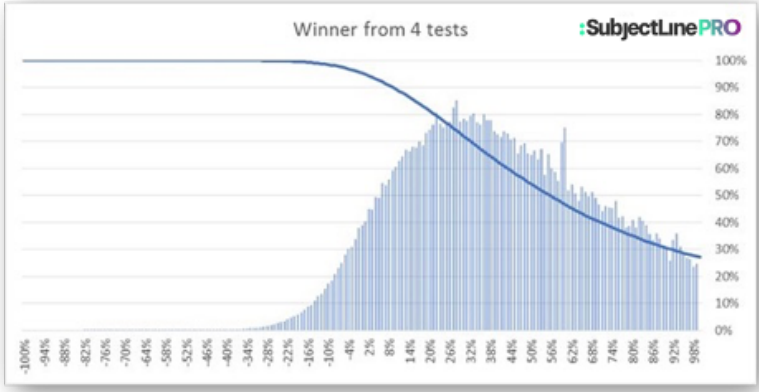
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Predicted Performance from 2 Subject Line (AB) Test
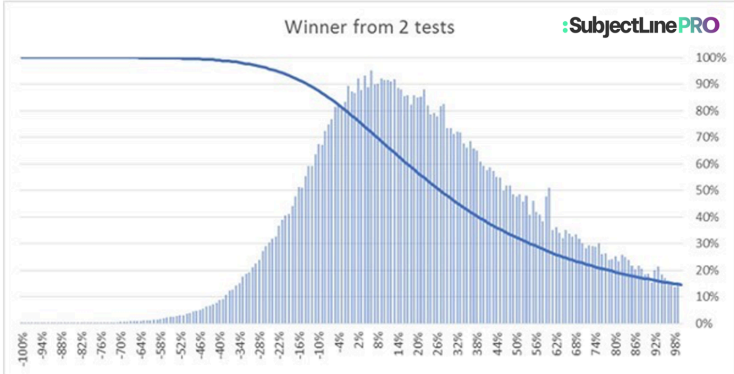
Predicted Performance from 3 Subject Line Test
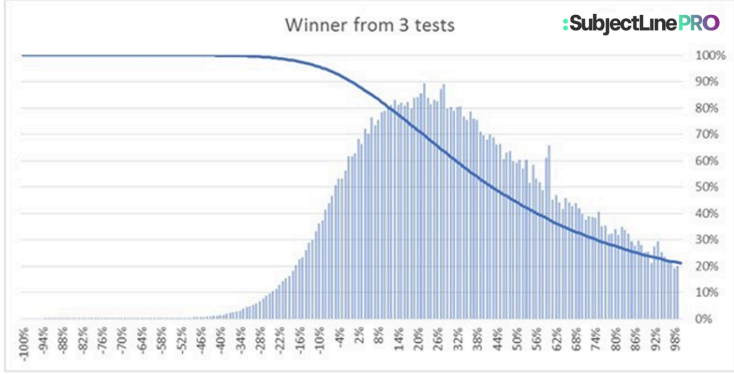
Predicted Performance from 4 Subject Line Test

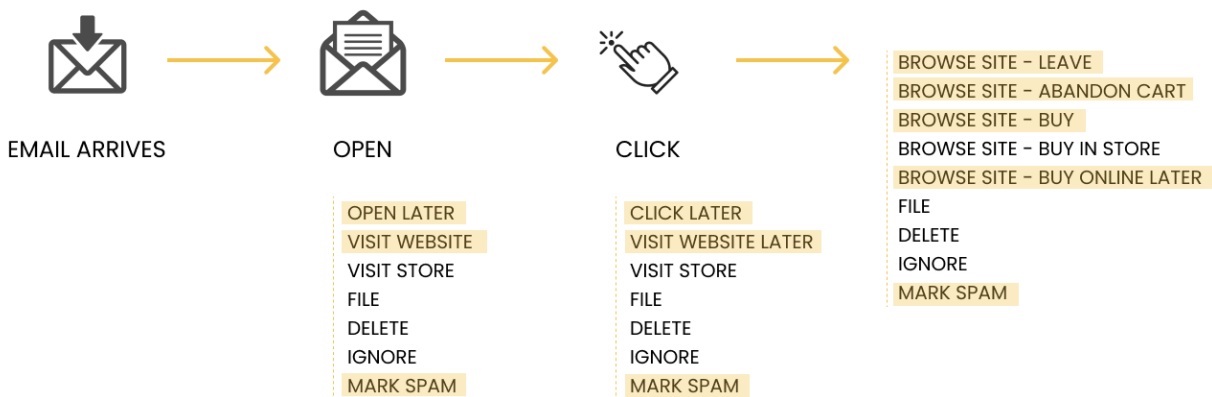# Predicted Performance from Multiple Subject Line Tests

As the graph demonstrates, the predicted gain in open, click, and CTO rates from testing 10 subject lines is 4-6x the predicted gain from testing three subject lines. The need to test is something that even AI language-generating services such as Persado or Phrasee cannot sidestep. Both services promise to deliver an uplift – but require testing between 10 and 20 subject lines. It doesn't matter who or what writes your subject lines, you must test to guarantee a lift.

No. of Subject Lines	Predicted Gain		
	Opens	Clicks	CTO
2	3%	0%	0%
3	21%	42%	25%
4	33%	79%	47%
5	44%	111%	65%
6	53%	141%	80%
7	60%	169%	94%
8	68%	194%	106%
9	74%	220%	117%
10	81%	242%	128%

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What to Optimize

Many email marketing practitioners and marketing leaders treat the subject line as an enabler of a linear path that leads to conversion. Each email open is seen as the first hurdle, the first action marketers want their subscribers to take with every email. This view of the customer journey is overly narrow because it is easily measured.
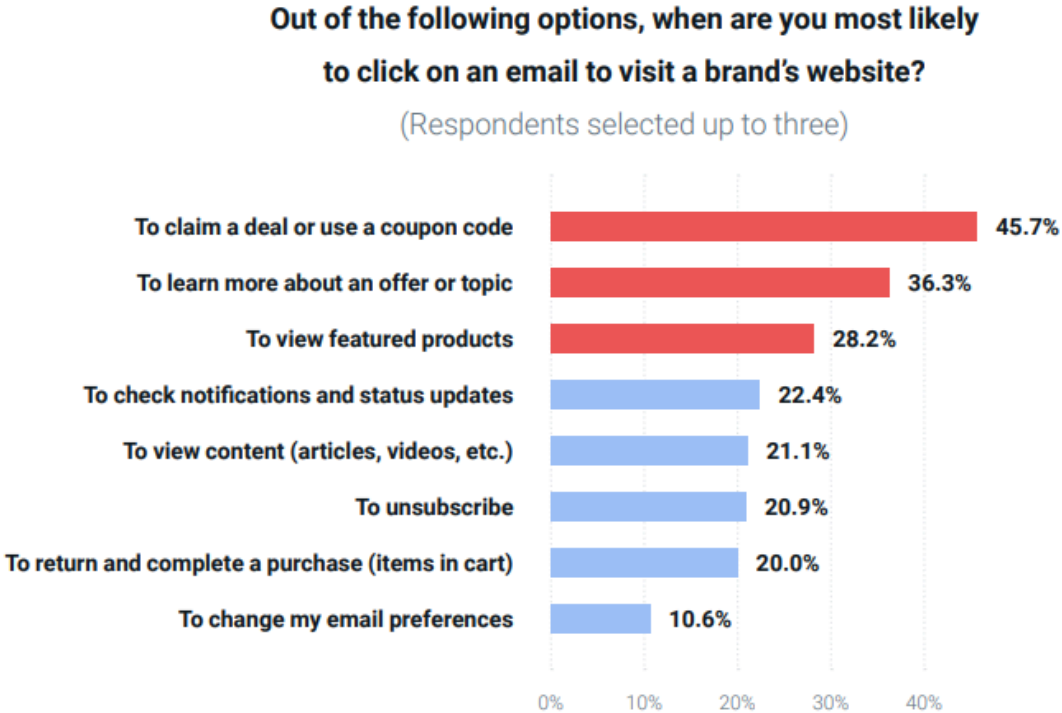
The chart below makes it easy to see how critical attribution is to email measurement. The highlighted actions are measurable but only represent a portion of potential actions. Marketers cannot improve what they cannot measure, so attribution is critical to subject-line testing.

EMAIL ARRIVES   OPEN   CLICK

OPEN
- OPEN LATER
- VISIT WEBSITE
- VISIT STORE
- FILE
- DELETE
- IGNORE
- MARK SPAM

CLICK
- CLICK LATER
- VISIT WEBSITE LATER
- VISIT STORE
- FILE
- DELETE
- IGNORE
- MARK SPAM

- BROWSE SITE – LEAVE
- BROWSE SITE – ABANDON CART
- BROWSE SITE – BUY
- BROWSE SITE – BUY IN STORE
- BROWSE SITE – BUY ONLINE LATER
- FILE
- DELETE
- IGNORE
- MARK SPAM

While this chart is helpful to begin to explore the sphere of influence that subject lines can have on marketing results, it is not the full picture. Consider the following:

- Each of these actions is influenced by emails and subject lines already sent.
- Influence moves in many directions, so a store visit can influence the outcome of an email as much as email influences the store visit.
- "Reading" vs. "skimming," the device preference for opening emails vs. purchasing, and many other factors all come into play.

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It is not only possible but quite likely that an email with a very high open rate will generate fewer sales (if you take other channels into account) than one with a very low open rate that "nudged" thousands of people who did not open into the store or to visit your site. Only about half of the click-throughs on any brand's emails are to make a purchase, as seen in the chart from a recent Sinch Mailgun report below.

Out of the following options, when are you most likely to click on an email to visit a brand's website?

(Respondents selected up to three)

Option	Percentage
To claim a deal or use a coupon code	45.7%
To learn more about an offer or topic	36.3%
To view featured products	28.2%
To check notifications and status updates	22.4%
To view content (articles, videos, etc.)	21.1%
To unsubscribe	20.9%
To return and complete a purchase (items in cart)	20.0%
To change my email preferences	10.6%

If the subject line is informative enough, the email may not even have been opened. To optimize subject lines, marketers need to look beyond the opens and clicks, which requires a hard look at the attribution model.

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Attribution

Timing

Email has a fairly long tail, so marketers should take a look at when they stop counting opens or clicks generated by their emails. One day, one week, or just before the next email is likely too short. Even straight forward and very measurable actions like an open or a click come with a snag in the tail. Customers may Open Later, Click Later, or Buy Later. How late is later?

The chart below was taken from an attribution audit conducted by Alchemy Worx for a large retailer. We analyzed every campaign sent over a 3-month period with no cut off for email attribution and compared it with a 7-day cut off - the existing attribution model being used.

We found under the 7-day model, 95% of the final total for Opens and 96% of total for Clicks had occurred, but crucially only 51% of revenue generated by those emails got accounted for. 49% of the revenue eventually generated by the email sent during the period did not get attributed to email.

To better understand what was going on, we zoomed in on sales. Both lines here represent average daily sales attributed to their campaigns. The darker line represents the average sales per day post-deployment and the lighter line represents the average sales per day from the last click. The difference is startling. While 20.76% of sales happen within a day of the email being deployed, 45.48% of sales happen within a day of the last click. This attribution gap highlighted by the red arrow is caused by people clicking and, in some cases, opening an email a day or more after it was sent. Even more startling, around 25% of sales came 21 days or more after the email was sent. To truly optimize subject lines marketers need to measure and understand their impact even when there is no open or click. This is referred to as the halo effect.

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Measuring the Halo Effect

Firstly, it's important to understand the most common attribution models (that determine how sales and conversion are determined) email marketers are using.

Typically, the following three measurement criteria are considered:

- The type of action – opens, clicks, or conversion.
- The time frame – is the cut off days, weeks, or months from send.
- Touch – first touch, last touch, or any touch.

Most email marketers will choose some combination of the three depending on what works best for their business, typically in relation to its sales cycle, but the popular approach is to focus on tracking conversions via last click.

However, the truth is a click doesn't necessarily tell a marketer anything. Not every one that clicks through from an email will go on and make an immediate purchase. It also doesn't account for the likelihood that the clicker might go on to purchase via another channel at a later date. Clearly, there is value to a subject line that is not considered when the focus is only on clicks or opens. The question then becomes, how can we measure this?

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Alchemy Worx's advice is to run an analysis of revenue from all channels as a starting point. Then deduct the email specific revenue as currently attributed it (opens and clicks, first or last touch) and break down this new number into days when emails to most of the list were and weren't sent out. Alchemy Worx has done this for several clients. The results consistently show that the average daily revenue on days in which email was sent to more than 30% of the list was higher for the non-email channels, too. We then looked at the source of the lift in revenue, where the line was most marked based on the last touch and first touch. Email impacts every other channel search, both natural and paid, affiliate programs, and even social.

So, what does this all mean? Essentially, our main conclusion is that email subject lines are certainly driving sales in other channels and this is one way to prove it. Marketers should avoid defining email and the halo effect too broadly and overstanding the revenue generated by email or defining it too narrowly and underestimating. However, if marketers can find the right balance and look at email as part of the bigger picture, they'll quickly see that it can work in a capacity similar to broadcast and drive additional

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revenue in other channels.This brings us back to the importance of attribution models. If email subject lines are driving sales in other channels on and offline, then marketers need to consider that fact and look for a model that considers this. If marketers can look beyond simple click-based attribution and make sure they are tracking and analyzing sales holistically both online and offline, they will find demonstrating the true value of their email marketing, and getting additional funding for testing will become much easier.

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What to Test

The golden rule is to plan ahead.

Every Subject Line that goes out the door should be tested. Ideally it will be an ABCD (4 subject lines) or more test and never less than ABC (3 subject lines). To do that it is important to have a plan. More variables = Better results. A plan that lays out the variables and timing will make it easier when it comes time to write subject lines – knowing the content will drive better results.

Here are 10 options for testing:

1.   TEST EXTREME LENGTHS

A lot of advice tells you subject lines should aim to be around 35 characters and unfortunately, most people – whether they know it or not - seem to be following that advice. Looking at the data, Alchemy Worx found that 63% of subject lines that are sent are between 20 and 65 characters in length. We also found that subject lines of that length tend to underperform.

2. TEST CTA's

Although one of the key aspects of successful copywriting is telling readers what they need to do, this is often overlooked in subject lines, where the focus is often trying to catch attention rather than drive action. Alchemy Worx found for one client that telling subscribers what to do by including a direct CTA helped to boost engagement. So rather than just saying 'Summer Sale' it became 'Summer Sale – take a look at the latest offers in store and online'.

3. TEST QUESTIONS

Using a question instantly makes your SL look and feel very different in the inbox. It also helps you develop completely new ways of promoting your email content. For example, you might go from 'Save 50% today' to 'New favorite dress? Save 50% today – a jump that would have been hard to make without the framework of a question.

4. TEST ORIGINAL WORDS

Using original words in subject lines can boost the click rate by 34%, yet less than a third of subject lines feature original words. Try using a thesaurus or taking inspiration from the dictionary definition to change some of your most-used words.

5. TEST PERSONALIZATION

While first name personalization is very common now, it can still have an effect if you don't overuse it. Look at available data fields to see what other personalization you can include in the SL – such as surnames, recent purchases or locations, including a city name can perform well, for example.

6. TEST THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL EVENTS AND INFLUENCES

Marketers have seen how referencing the broader world can have an impact on results. Black Friday, Amazon Prime Day, and even social media trends such as "Girl Math" can help capture attention and drive results. While this will be short-lived as other marketers jump on the trend, occasional references to current cultural trends help add variation to your sales callouts.

7. TEST EMOJIS STRATEGICALLY

Emojis can be used in 3 different ways: syntactic (as punctuation), lexical (to replace a word), and illustrative (as a decorative or design element). It's a useful framework that can help you test them effectively and strategically.

8. TEST TONE AND VOICE

Within a brand voice, there is still much room for tone variation – for example, in the difference between a promotional email and a service email. Try mixing them up where appropriate – so rather than 'Hurry - check out our latest events', you might use 'we wanted to let you know'.

9. TEST PRONOUN USE

One of the first things copywriters learn is to use 'you' more than 'we'. But 'we' and 'our' can be effective if your customer trusts your brand and sees you as an authority. Try positioning your subject line from both points of view and see which is more effective. For example, instead of 'Top picks for you,' you might try 'Top picks from our team'.

10. TEST PUNCTUATION & SEPARATORS

Punctuation and separators do make a difference and have a real effect on open and click rates, but the best results come if they are rotated. For example, using an exclamation point (!) for emphasis or a pipe (|) to separate the different propositions within your subject line will only give a lift for a short period of time, after which open and click rates will fall back to or even below average. So, a once-and-done test strategy will end in failure.

Keep Testing and Optimizing

The only way to stop open rate performance from dropping over time is to keep subject lines FRESH! One-and-done testing does not work. Subject Line Pro tests and optimizes hundreds of iterations of subject lines in minutes so marketers can continue to edit and improve before every single email is sent.

Below is a screen grab of 10 VERY different subject lines tested using Subject Line Pro.

The results are shown below. Subject Line Pro results predict which lines will most likely drive a lift in results. The tool can be used with industry-wide, all data, or your data.

Click Rate Comparison - All Data		Test performed on Mar 22, 2024 at 3:46 PM X
Rank	Subject Line 📋	Lift ▲
1	BESTSELLERS ARE BACK {but going FAST)	✓✓✓✓✓
2	Happy Sunday	✓✓✓✓✓
3	A 10% reward could be yours - just for booking!	✓✓✓✓✓
4	Taco cat 🐱	✓✓✓✓✓
5	OMG. 😱 Free shipping plus $10 off.	✓✓✓✓✓
6	Quick! Get These Coupons Some Gear!	✓✓✓✓✓
7	ONLINE EXCLUSIVE - 3 FOR 2 ON EVERYTHING!	✓✓✓✓✓
8	New looks for spring	✓✓✓✓✓
9	FINAL CALL: 40% off EVERYTHING | 50% off DRESSES + BONUS	✓✓✓✓✓
10	we sent you flowers 👗 🌸	✓✓✓✓✓

Marketers who use tools like Subject Line Pro to augment their testing are more likely to drive incremental results, making subject line testing even more powerful.

About Alchemy Worx

Established in 2001, Alchemy Worx is a global agency providing a full-service solution with best-in-class email marketing, paid social, and SMS support, to more than 125 e-commerce and enterprise-level companies. Our team includes more than 100 team members in seven offices spanning three continents.

In addition to strategy, ESP solutions, design, content, HTML coding, deployment services, reporting & analytics, we are the leading implementer of Intelligent Automation. This solution automates message delivery, content, analytics, and optimization, whatever the ESP, allowing our clients to send highly personalized messages to everyone all the time.

We have also developed an industry-leading subject line tool, Subject Line Pro. It uses an ever-expanding database of more than 21 billion emails to instantly predict open, click, and delivery rates before campaigns are sent, which, according to Smart Insights, may eliminate the need to A/B test subject lines.

We can help you realize your revenue potential.

Get your complimentary acceleration plan that includes the following:

- Email/SMS engagement metrics and best practices
- Segmentation/reactivation review and recommendations
- Review of your emails and SMS automation and recommendations

setting you on the path to realizing gains in under 4 months!

Reach out to us at perfectyourprogram@alchemyworx.com for your plan, or visit us at https://alchemyworx.com/lets-talk/.