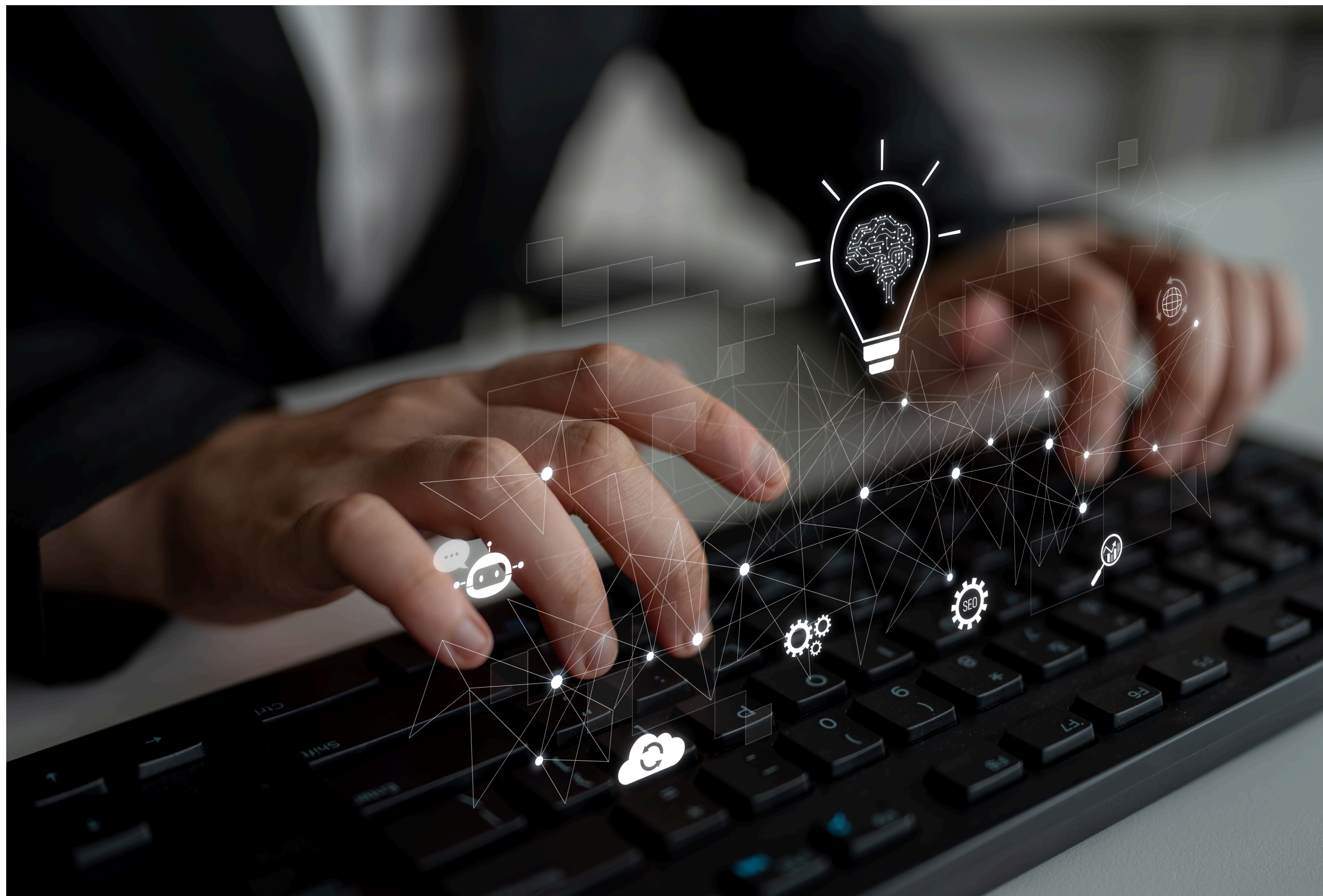


Demystifying Subject Lines



Email subject lines are a crapshoot. Want proof?

Check out the following partial list of subject lines from a baby products retailer sorted from top performer to bottom. No need to read them carefully. Just skim them. Does anything jump out? Do any patterns emerge?

Enter the Ultimate Nursery Giveaway and Win Over \$2600 in Prizes

We're sorry for our delayed response. Sending you a small token of gratitude for your patience

You + \$4,200 in prizes = happy mama

Is your baby fussy or gassy or having trouble sleeping?

You're Invited: Baby Shower Giveaway!

Make A Bottle From Bed (Yep, You Read That Right)

NEW: Distilled Water That Is Hospital And Parent Approved

GIVEAWAY! You Only Have Until 8 PM To Enter...

Pre-Mother's Day Sale

Feeling Lucky? Enter to Win the ULTIMATE Holiday Gifts From Top Baby Gear Brands!

Father's Day Sale

Summer is Here Sale

Happy Mother's Day! Save \$ on Time-Savers For Mom!

Make Feeding a Breeze Sale

Save BIG During St. Patrick's Day Sale!

Baby Brezza Formula Pro Advanced Shipment Update

See What's New (+ COMING SOON)

Make Feeding Your Baby Easier & Save Up To 30%

Preview Hottest Holiday, High-Tech Baby Gear Deals from Baby Brezza, 4Moms, Owlet & Others!

Introducing 2 NEW! revolutionary ways to make sterilizing easier

Feeling Lucky? Enter Our Baby Love Giveaway To Win \$1,600 Worth Of Prizes!

Just Launched: Our Best-Selling Instant Warmer In A NEW Fashionable Color!

Parent's Favorites Sale

Best-Seller's Sale! Up to 30% Off!

INTRODUCING Formula Pro Mini!!! 1st compact formula maker

SAVE UP TO 30% During Our July 4th Sale

No. Nothing jumps out and no patterns emerge. *It's impossible to extrapolate anything meaningful about subject-line performance from this list.*

A unique method for testing subject lines

How pre-rollout testing works

The answer to predicting subject-line performance lies in a specific kind of testing.

Chances are you’re probably not testing subject lines. And even if you are, you’re probably not using a method that will give you the most lift.

It is estimated that from 20–30% of email marketers regularly test subject lines. This percentage tends to be higher among businesses that focus heavily on email marketing (e.g., e-commerce, SaaS, and digital marketing agencies), as they understand the importance of optimizing subject-line performance.

Among those who test subject lines, A/B testing (or split testing) is the most common method. Many email marketing platforms, like Mailchimp, ActiveCampaign and HubSpot, offer easy-to-use A/B testing features. These tests help marketers understand what types of subject lines resonate best with their audiences.

A/B testing certainly has its place in subject line testing. It can be used to set up guidelines, such as whether recipients respond more positively toward “half off” or “50% off,” for example. A/B testing is good for incremental lift.

But there is another type of testing that offers an average of a 30% increase in clicks:
pre-rollout testing.

Even with A/B testing, writing subject lines is a crapshoot. Untested subject lines tend to fall on a bell curve. Some perform exceptionally well. Most are average and some perform relatively poorly.

The trick is identifying the top-performing subject lines before the campaign rolls out. But there is no way to predict how any given subject line will perform without testing.

Also, the timing and length of the test are key.

EXAMPLES

Testing subject lines on the morning of a scheduled campaign generally won’t produce reliable results. The recipients will represent the sliver of the overall audience of people who are active in the morning.

Many email service providers offer automated subject-line testing, but the results come in too fast to be accurate. It can take days for subject-line results to settle down and show the true winner.

The challenging part of pre-rollout testing is it requires having a landing page, offer and any relevant coupons ready for the campaign three days before the rollout occurs.



Alex Yale

VP Analytics & Strategy

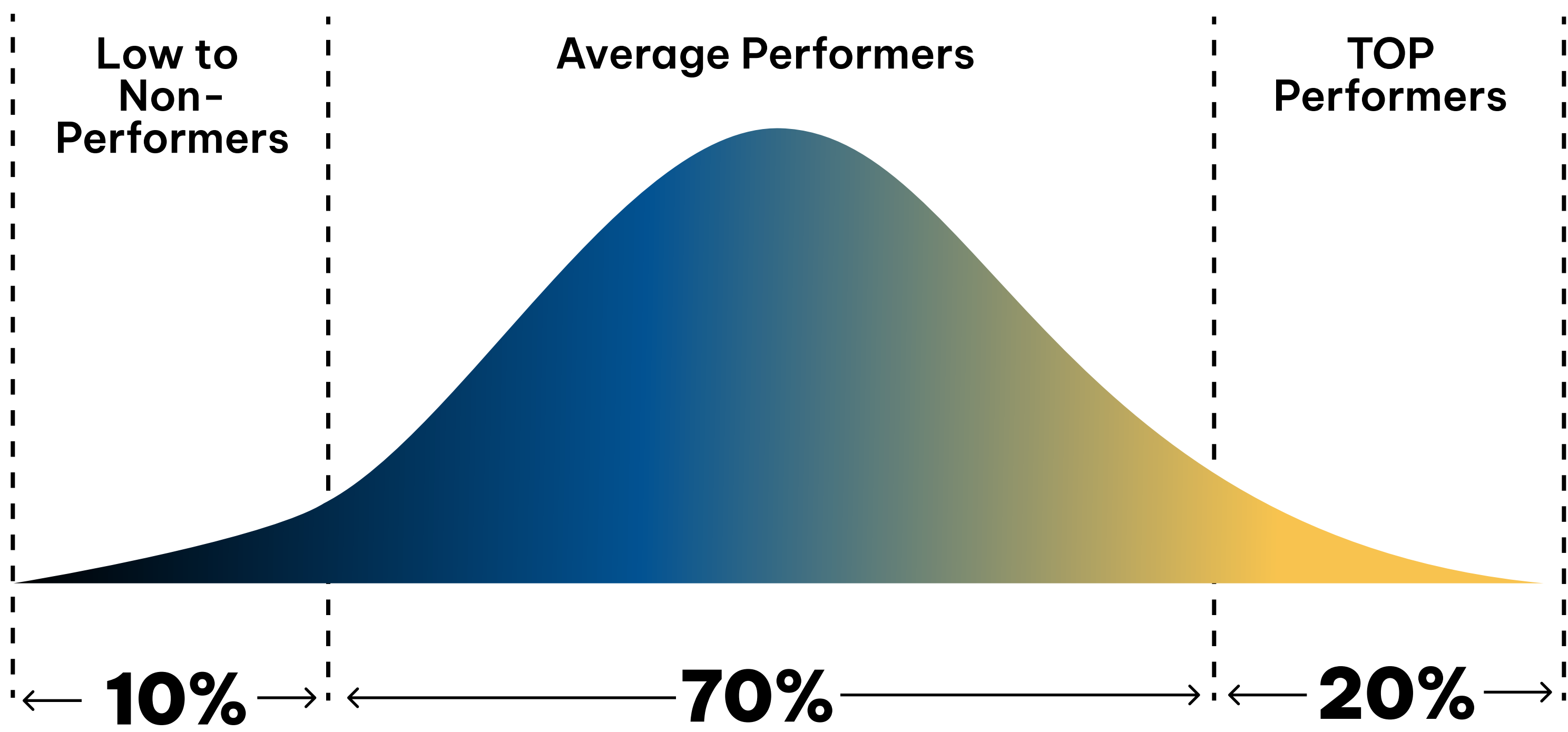
“

It requires some up-front work. But it’s work that would have to be done anyway, and the results are well worth it.

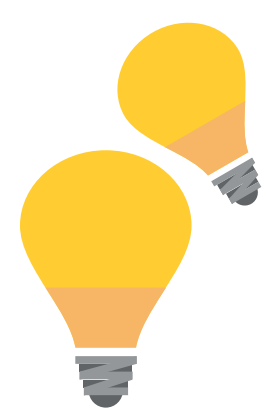
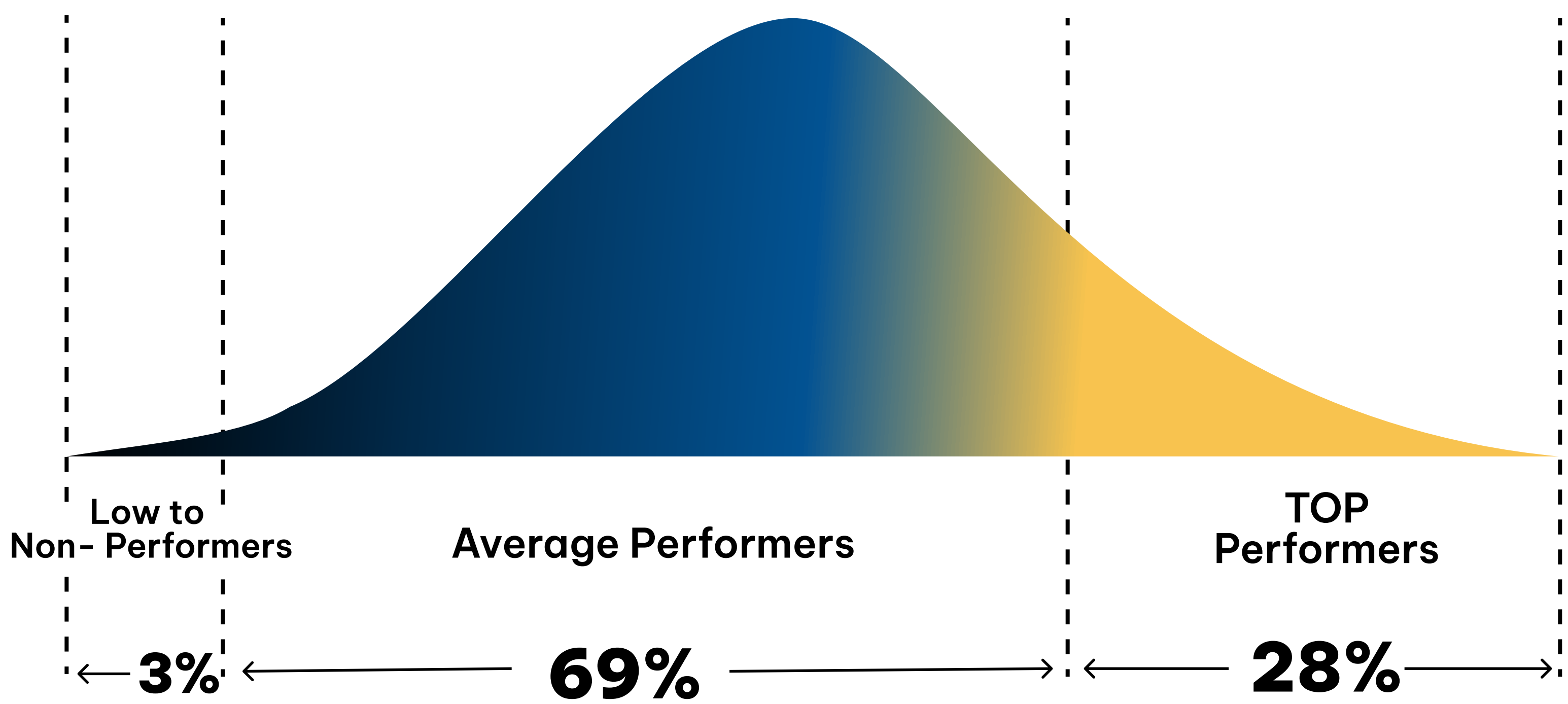
The following two graphics illustrate the effectiveness of pre-rollout testing.

NOTE: A pre-rollout test can involve any number of subject lines, but should involve at least four.

Typical bell-curve performance of subject lines that have not been pre-rollout tested.



Performance of subject lines that have been pre-rollout tested.



Notice how in the graphic **WITH TESTING** shows the lower-performing subject lines or those on the left side of the graph have been vastly diminished. The higher-performing subject lines, or those on the right, have been significantly increased.

Alchemy Worx recently ran 44 pre-rollout subject-line tests for three clients.

Email Client 1: **Average lift of 27%**

Email Client 2: **Average lift of 22%**

Email Client 3: **Average lift of 35%**

SMS Client 1: **Average lift of 31%**

In each pre-rollout test, the winner was a subject line that, without testing, could ONLY have been predicted by a lucky guess.

For example, one test pitted the following five subject lines against each another:

Tested

- “ATTN: Prime Time Offer Enclosed,”
- “You’ve Got Prime Time Savings,”
- “Claim Your Prime Time Savings in a Few Clicks,”
- “[First Name], Your Prime Time Sale Offer is Inside,”
- “This Is It! Prime Time Savings Await.”

The clear winner was:

“ATTN: Prime Time Offer Enclosed,”

INSIGHT:

***Counterintuitively*, the winner was not the personalized subject line, nor was it either of the subject lines that employed versions of the powerful selling word “you.”**



Alex Yale

VP Analytics & Strategy

“No one would have predicted that subject line as the clear winner. But it was, and we were able to roll the campaign out knowing we had the best subject line in play. ”

Pre-rollout subject-line testing is an operational-process change that requires assets to be created and approved days in advance.

“In my mind, **a 30% lift on average is worth the effort**. And if you can achieve those kinds of results on a constant basis, the immediate payoff is gratifying, but the long-term payoff is a significant lift in all key performance indicators. ”

The best metrics to determine the performance of a subject line

The best metrics to determine the success of a subject line are those that directly measure how well the subject line engages recipients and drives desired actions. Here are the key metrics to focus on:

	What it measures:	Why it's important:
Click-Through Rate (CTR)	The percentage of recipients who clicked on a link inside the email after opening it.	A high CTR indicates that not only did the subject line get opened, but the email content was also engaging enough to prompt action.
	How to improve: Ensure that the content inside the email aligns with the promise made in the subject line and offers clear calls to action.	
	What it measures:	Why it's important:
Conversion Rate	The percentage of recipients who took a specific action after clicking (e.g., making a purchase, signing up for a webinar, etc.).	Conversion rate ties directly to the success of the overall email campaign, which can be influenced by how well the subject line sets expectations for the email content.
	How to improve: Ensure that the content inside the email aligns with the promise made in the subject line and offers clear calls to action.	
	What it measures:	Why it's important:
Bounce Rate	The percentage of emails that were not delivered to the recipient's inbox (e.g., due to invalid email addresses or spam filters).	While not directly tied to subject lines, a high bounce rate can indicate deliverability issues, often due to spammy subject lines or problematic email practices.
	How to improve: Maintain a clean email list.	
	What it measures:	Why it's important:
Unsubscribe Rate	The percentage of recipients who unsubscribed after receiving your email.	If a subject line doesn't match the content or feels misleading, it can cause recipients to unsubscribe.
	How to improve: Ensure that the subject line accurately reflects the content inside the email, and test for subject lines that don't feel "too salesy."	
	What it measures:	Why it's important:
Engagement Over Time	How engagement with emails (opens, clicks) varies over the course of an email campaign.	Tracking engagement over time can help identify which subject lines have long-lasting appeal or which ones lose effectiveness quickly.
	How to improve: If a subject line loses relevance after a short time, test for subject lines that maintain interest over a longer period.	

External factors that affect subject line performance

One reason for the unpredictability of subject line performance is the vast number of external factors at play.

These factors go beyond the content and structure of the subject line itself and include elements such as timing, audience behavior and even the technical setup of your email system. Here are some key external factors to consider:

Timing of Sending

- **What it is:** The day of the week and time of day when the email is sent.
- **How it affects performance:** Sending emails at the wrong time can significantly affect open rates. For example, emails sent during busy work hours or on weekends may be overlooked.
- **Best Practice:** Test to find the optimal send time for your audience. B2B emails often perform better during weekdays, especially Tuesday to Thursday, in the morning or early afternoon.

Email List Quality

- **What it is:** The cleanliness and relevance of your email list.
- **How it affects performance:** If your email list contains outdated, invalid, or irrelevant contacts, the subject line might get fewer opens because it’s reaching the wrong people. High bounce rates or frequent unsubscribes can also negatively impact your sender reputation.
- **Best Practice:** Employ data hygiene and segment your list to ensure that your emails are being sent to engaged and relevant contacts.

Sender Reputation

- **What it is:** The reputation of the sender’s domain and email address with email providers.
- **How it affects performance:** A poor sender reputation (due to high spam complaints, low engagement, or being flagged by spam filters) can cause emails to land in the spam folder, no matter how great the subject line is. This drastically reduces performance.
- **Best Practice:** Maintain a good sender reputation by following email best practices, engaging with subscribers, and monitoring deliverability.

Device and Email Client

- **What it is:** The device (desktop, mobile) and email client (Gmail, Outlook, etc.) used by recipients.
- **How it affects performance:** Different devices and email clients display emails in varying formats and sizes. For example, if a subject line is too long, it might get cut off on mobile devices, reducing its effectiveness. Similarly, some email clients might display certain characters or formatting differently.
- **Best Practice:** Optimize your emails for mobile, as many users now check emails on mobile devices. Keep subject lines concise and test them across different email clients.

Seasonality and Holidays

- **What it is:** Time of year, holidays, or major events that might affect how people engage with emails.
- **How it affects performance:** During holidays or special events, people may be distracted or overwhelmed by the sheer volume of emails, leading to lower open rates. On the flip side, certain times of year may present unique opportunities to capture attention (e.g., end-of-year offers, Black Friday).
- **Best Practice:** Be aware of the seasonal trends and how your audience behaves during these periods. Adjust your subject lines to reflect the context (e.g., holiday-themed, year-end promotions).

Competition in the Inbox

- **What it is:** The number and quality of other emails competing for attention in a recipient’s inbox at the same time.
- **How it affects performance:** During high-traffic times (e.g., holidays, sales events), your email might be lost among a sea of other emails. In these cases, an attention-grabbing subject line becomes even more important.
- **Best Practice:** Monitor competitors’ email strategies and adjust your approach to stand out. Testing subject lines and refining them in real-time can help you get noticed.

User Preferences and Behavior

- **What it is:** The specific interests and behaviors of your target audience.
- **How it affects performance:** Subject lines that don’t match the recipient’s preferences or needs won’t perform well. If your subject line doesn’t align with the user’s past actions (e.g., their previous purchases, interests or interactions), they’re less likely to open your email.
- **Best Practice:** Use segmentation and personalization to tailor subject lines to your audience’s specific needs and behaviors.

Reputation of the Domain

- **What it is:** The overall reputation of the sending domain or email address.
- **How it affects performance:** Email providers often prioritize emails from reputable domains and block or filter emails from domains with poor reputations. This can affect your email’s deliverability, regardless of how effective your subject line is.
- **Best Practice:** Ensure your domain has good DNS settings (SPF, DKIM, DMARC) and follows best practices for email security and deliverability.

External Events or Trends

- **What it is:** Major industry events, news or world events that may affect email subject-line performance.
- **How it affects performance:** If there’s a significant event (e.g., a political crisis, major product release, or economic downturn), people may be less likely to engage with marketing emails or could be more attuned to specific types of messaging (e.g., offering crisis management solutions).
- **Best Practice:** Stay current on trends and be flexible in adjusting your campaigns to respond to the context of the moment.

Sender’s Behavior

- **What it is:** Elements such as types of subject lines, their timing and messaging cadence can affect performance.
- **How it affects performance:** Recent subject lines can affect the current one’s performance. For example, a subject line that significantly deviates from previous ones may stand out. Also, massaging sent too soon after a previous one may see lower engagement.
- **Best Practice:** Monitor KPIs. If you see a slump, something probably needs to change.

General guidelines

Even with all the vagueness around subject lines, there are still general guidelines to follow when crafting them. However, these are just general guidelines, not necessarily best practices.

Subject lines range from very broad to very specific and all have their place depending on program and campaign goals. It is best to consider these guidelines all while keeping in mind the only way to know if a subject line is performing is to test.

The best subject lines usually are clear, concise, personalized, and create a sense of value or curiosity without being overly salesy. They resonate with recipients and make them want to open the email.

An example of a good subject line might be:

"John, here's your exclusive 30% off—just for you!"

Why this works:

Personalization:

Using the recipient's name ("John") immediately grabs attention and makes the email feel tailored.

Exclusivity:

The phrase "just for you" makes the recipient feel special, creating a sense of exclusivity.

Clear Value:

The 30% off offer is clear and provides a tangible benefit.

Brevity:

It's short and to the point, making it easy to read, even on mobile devices. This subject line balances relevance, personalization and clarity to make the recipient feel valued and more likely to open the email.

What typically goes into a good subject line?

A good subject line grabs attention, piques curiosity, and clearly communicates the value of opening the email. Here are some key elements that make a subject line effective:

Clarity:

Be clear about the email's purpose. Your audience should instantly understand what the email is about without being too vague or cryptic.

Personalization:

Using the recipient's name or referencing their interests or previous actions can make the subject line feel more tailored and relevant.

Urgency or Exclusivity:

Phrases like "Last chance" or "Limited time offer" can create a sense of urgency that encourages the recipient to open the email sooner rather than later.

Actionable Language:

Use verbs that prompt action, like "Discover," "Get," or "Join." This can make the reader more likely to open the email.

Relevance:

Ensure the subject line aligns with what the recipient values or needs. A subject line that speaks directly to their interests or challenges will perform better.

What makes an effective B2B subject line?

Effective B2B subject lines need to be clear, concise and offer value right away. They should focus on solving a business problem, offering insight or creating an opportunity for collaboration. Here are some key themes that work well for B2B subject lines:

Personalization:

Personalizing the subject line with the recipient's name, company, or industry can significantly improve open rates.

"John, boost your team's productivity with this tool"

"How [Company Name] can reduce costs by 20%"

Clear Value Proposition:

A great B2B subject line addresses a specific pain point and offers a clear solution, so recipients immediately understand the value.

"Increase your ROI with this simple strategy"

"How we helped [Company Name] streamline their operations"

"Cut your marketing costs by 15% in 30 days"

Urgency or Timeliness:

Highlighting a limited-time opportunity or a relevant, timely issue can push recipients to open the email sooner.

"Limited time offer: 25% off our consulting services"

"Time-sensitive: New tax law changes you need to know"

"Register now—only a few spots left for the webinar!"

Question or Curiosity:

Asking a question or prompting curiosity can spark interest, especially if it relates to a pain point or challenge the recipient is facing.

"Is your team ready for the latest compliance changes?"

"How secure is your business's data protection strategy?"

"Want to streamline your sales process in 2025?"

Social Proof/ Testimonials:

Using testimonials or mentioning other companies that use your service can create trust and credibility.

"Why [Industry Leader] trusts us with their data security"

"See why 300+ businesses are switching to [Product Name]"

"Top brands are saving time with our automation tools"

Exclusive Offers or Content:

Offering exclusive access to valuable resources can grab attention in a B2B context.

"Exclusive white paper: The future of cloud security"

"Free e-book: How to optimize your marketing ROI"

"Unlock access to our latest industry insights report"

Highlighting Specific Features or Results:

Demonstrating how your product or service can provide tangible results for the recipient's business can be persuasive.

"Automate your processes and save 10 hours per week"

"New feature: Integrate with [Software] in minutes"

"Achieve 30% more conversions with our updated tool"

FOMO (Fear of Missing Out):

Creating a sense of exclusivity or something too good to miss can compel the recipient to take action.

"Don't miss out on a chance to boost your sales pipeline"

"Last chance to sign up for our exclusive webinar"

"Only a few days left to get your free trial!"

Simple & Direct:

Sometimes, simplicity works best—just a straightforward, no-nonsense subject line that tells the recipient what to expect.

"Your customized growth plan is ready"

"Let's talk about your business's marketing strategy"

"Get the tools to streamline your workflow today"

Benefit-Oriented:

Focus on the outcome the recipient will achieve by reading your email and acting on the offer.

"Save money on your IT infrastructure with our solution"

"Increase your team's efficiency in just 30 days"

"Achieve better customer retention with these tools"

Examples of Effective B2B Subject Lines:

Creating a sense of exclusivity or something too good to miss can compel the recipient to take action.

"Don't miss out on a chance to boost your sales pipeline"

"Last chance to sign up for our exclusive webinar"

"Only a few days left to get your free trial!"

Examples of Effective B2B Subject Lines:

"John, here's a strategy to improve your sales pipeline"

"How [Company Name] cut operational costs by 20%"

"Unlock your team's potential with our software"

"Are you ready to scale your business in 2025?"

"Optimize your marketing in 3 easy steps"

"New case study: How we increased leads by 40% for [Company Name]"

Tips for Writing Effective B2B Subject Lines:

- **Be clear and direct:** B2B professionals are busy and appreciate subject lines that get straight to the point.
- **Focus on solving a problem:** Think about the challenges your audience faces and offer solutions right away.
- **Keep it short and sweet:** A good subject line should be no longer than 6–10 words. It should also be readable on mobile devices.
- **Avoid jargon or fluff:** Keep language simple, professional and focused on the recipient's needs.
- **Test and optimize:** Always test your subject lines to understand what resonates most with your audience.

Elements of a bad subject line:

Once again, these are just general guidelines. Sometimes, so-called bad subject lines perform well because they stand out so much. Hence, the need for constant testing.

In any case, bad subject lines generally combine multiple major mistakes — overly vague, misleading, spammy, and unprofessional. For example:

"URGENT!!! You've won \$10,000!!! Click NOW before it's too late!!!"

Why this is terrible:

Overuse of All Caps & Exclamation Marks:

It screams "spam" and looks aggressive and unprofessional.

Misleading & False Claims:

The subject line makes a promise (winning money) that is almost certainly untrue, which could lead to distrust.

Lack of Personalization or Relevance:

It doesn't give the recipient any reason to believe the message is for them specifically.

No Clear Value or Context:

The recipient has no idea what the email is about — it's just a vague promise of money. It combines everything that would make someone instantly distrust the email and likely mark it as spam or delete it without a second thought.

To avoid creating a bad subject line, here are some common mistakes to steer clear of:

Being Too Vague or Mysterious

"You won't believe this!"

Why it's bad:

While it may intrigue, it can also confuse or feel like clickbait. The recipient may not understand what the email is about and ignore it.

Overloading with Information

"Free Webinar on Marketing Strategies for Small Businesses, Including SEO Tips, Social Media Strategies, and Content Creation – Register Now!"

Why it's bad:

Too much detail can overwhelm the reader. A cluttered subject line is hard to read quickly, especially on mobile devices.

Using ALL CAPS

"EXCLUSIVE OFFER JUST FOR YOU!!!"

Why it's bad:

All caps can look spammy and aggressive, making recipients less likely to open the email. It can also make your message seem insincere or pushy.

Excessive Punctuation

"Don't Miss Out!!! Hurry Up!!!"

Why it's bad:

Multiple exclamation marks can make the subject line appear unprofessional and] scream "spam." It can also feel overly desperate or salesy.

Misleading or False Claims

"You've Won a \$500 Gift Card!"

Why it's bad:

Misleading subject lines (especially ones that don't match the email content) can harm your credibility and lead to unsubscribes or getting marked as spam.

Being too Generic

"Hello" or "Newsletter #22"

Why it's bad:

Subject lines that are too generic don't give the reader a reason to open the email. There's no incentive or indication of value.

Being too Salesy

"Buy Now and Save Big!"

Why it's bad:

A hard-sell subject line might turn people off, especially if the recipient hasn't shown interest yet. It can feel pushy or transactional.

Ignoring the Audience's Needs or Interests

"Special Offer for Our Loyal Customers" (when the recipient is not a loyal customer)

Why it's bad:

A subject line that doesn't align with the recipient's interests or prior actions feels irrelevant and can result in lower open rates.

No Sense of Urgency or Relevance

"This is important"

Why it's bad:

Why it's bad: This can seem too vague and doesn't give the recipient a compelling reason to act quickly.

Overusing Emojis

"🎁 Your Free Gift Inside! 🎁🎁"

Why it's bad:

While emojis can be fun and engaging when used sparingly, overusing them can make your email seem unprofessional or childish, especially for more formal or business-oriented emails.

Using too Many Words or A Run-On Sentence

"We Have An Amazing Offer Just for You But You Have to Act Fast So Open This Email Right Now Or Miss Out Forever"

Why it's bad:

It's hard to read, and often, readers won't even try. Brevity is key for effective subject lines.

Over-Promising

"This Is the Secret to Instant Success"

Why it's bad:

Over-promising in the subject line can cause disappointment if the email doesn't deliver on those claims. It also damages trust with your audience.

Conclusion

Too often, email marketers will expend great time and energy working on every aspect of a campaign but one: the subject line. Typically, once the campaign is ready to roll, someone slaps a subject line on it at the last minute and someone hits the “send” button.

The toss-a-subject-line-on-it-and-send method needlessly leaves serious money on the table long term.

Given all the factors that affect subject-line performance, there is no way to predict how a subject line will perform without testing, specifically re-rollout testing.

**A potential 30% lift
in KPIs should be
impossible to ignore.**