A/B Testing

Best Practices Guide

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Testing, testing, one, two, three…

You've got a hunch that if you make a few tweaks to the copy or design of your email marketing campaign, you'll see a boost in performance – and you're ready to make those changes. But hold on. Before you start making widespread changes to your marketing campaigns, it's important to turn your hunch into a hypothesis and test out your ideas.

It's time to think like a scientist.

> " **BEING A SCIENTIST** is not just a profession. It's a frame of mind… Scientific tools are not reserved for people in white coats and beakers. Hypotheses have as much a place in our lives as they do in the lab. Experiments can inform our daily decisions."
>
> — **Adam Grant,** ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST, BESTSELLING AUTHOR, AND PROFESSOR AT WHARTON SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Adam Grant is right. Experiments help inform our decisions, and they allow us to look at the data objectively – without bias.

A/B testing allows you to compare the content of two different versions of email campaigns to see which one resonates best with its viewers. Marketers can then take everything they learned and begin refining and optimizing their campaign strategies.

However, the question still remains, *why test?*

It's testing itself that actually answers this.

Pre-testing analysis shows what should be tested by raising questions, and provides a systematic and scientific approach to finding answers. When comparing results, it is important to be your own benchmark. It is about *your* brand, not your competitors; *your* customers, not all customers; and *your* best, not always the industry standard.

Testing helps optimize creative, content, frequency and acquisition. The better the test, the better competitive knowledge that surpasses mere gut feeling by delivering cold, hard facts. Through testing, brands can extract actionable learnings, emphasizing the importance of asking and answering questions to refine strategies.

Testing is not always going to give you a magic answer or the secret sauce to your next campaign, but it will provide insights into what does and does not work with a data-driven level of confidence.

Defining Your Objectives

It's easy to skip over the formality of defining your objective during the hustle and bustle of the workday, but don't. This is actually the most important first step in the A/B testing process. You need to define what you're trying to achieve. Your objective is your North Star. It's your direction, it's your guidance, it's the purpose of this entire project.

So, sit down and write out your objectives as a team so you're all on the same page about what to test.

Here are a few of the most popular testing scenarios for email marketers:

Grow my Database

Grow your list by acquiring new subscribers from multiple sources such as contests or one-time discounts for new subscribers.

Improve Engagement

Optimize the performance of communication to increase conversions by adjusting email copy and improving the look of CTAs.

Increase Conversions

Increase desirable actions such as revenue or website visits depending on objectives. This can be done through streamlining your user experience or by ensuring your emails have one CTA per email, eliminating user confusion.

Enhance Cross-Channel Communication

Test which channels your audience is most active on. Whether it is email, SMS, or mobile app push notifications, your audience will bite somewhere.

Improve Customer Experience

Evaluate user experience by comparing variations of design, functionality across mobile, or messaging capabilities to determine the most effective way to communicate with your customer at the right time.

Top 6 Most Tested Campaign Elements

The most common mistake of any A/B test is that you're testing too many elements. It's tempting, we know, but it's vital that when you decide to conduct an A/B test you pick one – and only one – element to test. Otherwise, you don't actually know which of the elements led to a jump in performance, leaving you right back where you started.

**Here's a breakdown of the top 6 campaign elements to test.**

1. TIME OF DAY

Is it best to send emails during the business day when people are sure to be on their computers? Or maybe during lunch when they have a break from their hectic schedules? Perhaps early in the morning when it's quieter? The truth is, the only way to know the optimal time of day to send emails is to send variations of the same email at different times to segmented audiences to analyze response rates. This will allow you to compare important KPIs such as open rates, click-through rates and conversions among the different time slots.

2. DAY OF WEEK

Testing for the ideal time and day is hard – especially if your business caters to customers and subscribers in various time zones. The optimal day of the week to send your email campaign can also vary by industry, demographic and individual recipients. The only way to find out the best day to send an email campaign to your list is to test different days with the same email campaign.
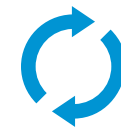
3. FREQUENCY

How often are you sending emails to your subscribers? The frequency of sending email campaigns significantly impacts engagement levels. Overwhelming recipients with too many emails can lead to fatigue and decreased interest, while infrequent emails may result in disengagement. A/B testing helps find the right balance for each individual subscriber to ensure optimal engagement, maintain audience interest and maximize campaign efforts.

4. SUBJECT LINES

Subject lines can make or break your message. An open-worthy subject line captures the attention of your prospects. Testing your subject lines is simple: you send the same email to different audiences in your list and then see which group opens your email more often. Your subject line is the first thing your audience sees when viewing your email – ensuring it resonates with your audience is critical.

5. CONTENT CREATIVE

One of the most important things to consider when testing your campaigns is the way the email looks, how it's laid out and what tactics might ultimately stimulate click engagement. You only have a brief period of time to capture recipient attention. Consider what images you have displayed or what calls to action stick out the most, and adjust font and image sizes. Our 2024 Global Consumer Trends Index found that **36% of consumers bought a product or service because of an email viewed on their mobile device**. Your email content must be readable on mobile. After testing, refine your content elements to optimize engagement.

6. OFFERS AND DISCOUNTS

Consumers love financial incentives. But being such a common strategy used in email marketing, these offers require some refinement to stand out in crowded inboxes. Different audiences may prefer percentage-off codes, while others may prefer dollar-off codes. Inspiring urgency, such as with a live countdown timer, is also worth testing.

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The A/B Testing Process Framework

AUTOMATE

KNOWN KNOWNS

Things we know we know.

TEST

UNKNOWN KNOWNS

Things we think we know, but haven't measured.

PRIORITIZE

KNOWN UNKNOWNS

Things we know we don't know.

EXPLORE

UNKNOWN UNKNOWNS

Things we aren't even aware of that we don't know.

BEFORE YOU JUMP IN – BRAINSTORM. Grab a pen and paper and make four quadrants like the above image. When you fill in the squares with your information, you will start to see a pattern emerge and a clear campaign element you want to test should bubble to the top.

Developing *and* Defining Your Testing Plan

1. Define Your Objective:

The first step in your testing plan is to identify your areas of weakness. Do this by using your average monthly performance and benchmark stats to find where your campaigns are struggling and where they are not.

For most email campaigns, the most important KPIs are your open rates, click-through rates, conversion rates and your average order value (AOV). Use this data to create SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) for your campaigns. For example, you can determine what it takes to increase your CTR by 2% to X audience in the next three months. Or, if you are focused on increasing specific order value from your email campaigns, your goal could be to increase your AOV by $50 before a set date.

Defining your objectives allows you to establish what you are aiming to achieve so you can clearly define future variables throughout the testing plan.

2. Create a Hypothesis

A hypothesis allows you to explore the overarching question of '*What question are we trying to answer?*' Establishing the question that needs to be answered dictates the test design. In most cases, this is the most vital part of testing. Think about what you have noticed across your email campaigns that you are uncertain about. Does sending seven emails a week hurt engagement rates? How would changing the font or adding symbols to my subject lines affect open rates? Does sending an additional email to highly engaged customers increase unsubscribe rates? Or, would an additional email increase engagement?

When creating your hypothesis, consider what you need to improve, what relevant variables need to be tested and what the end goal is.
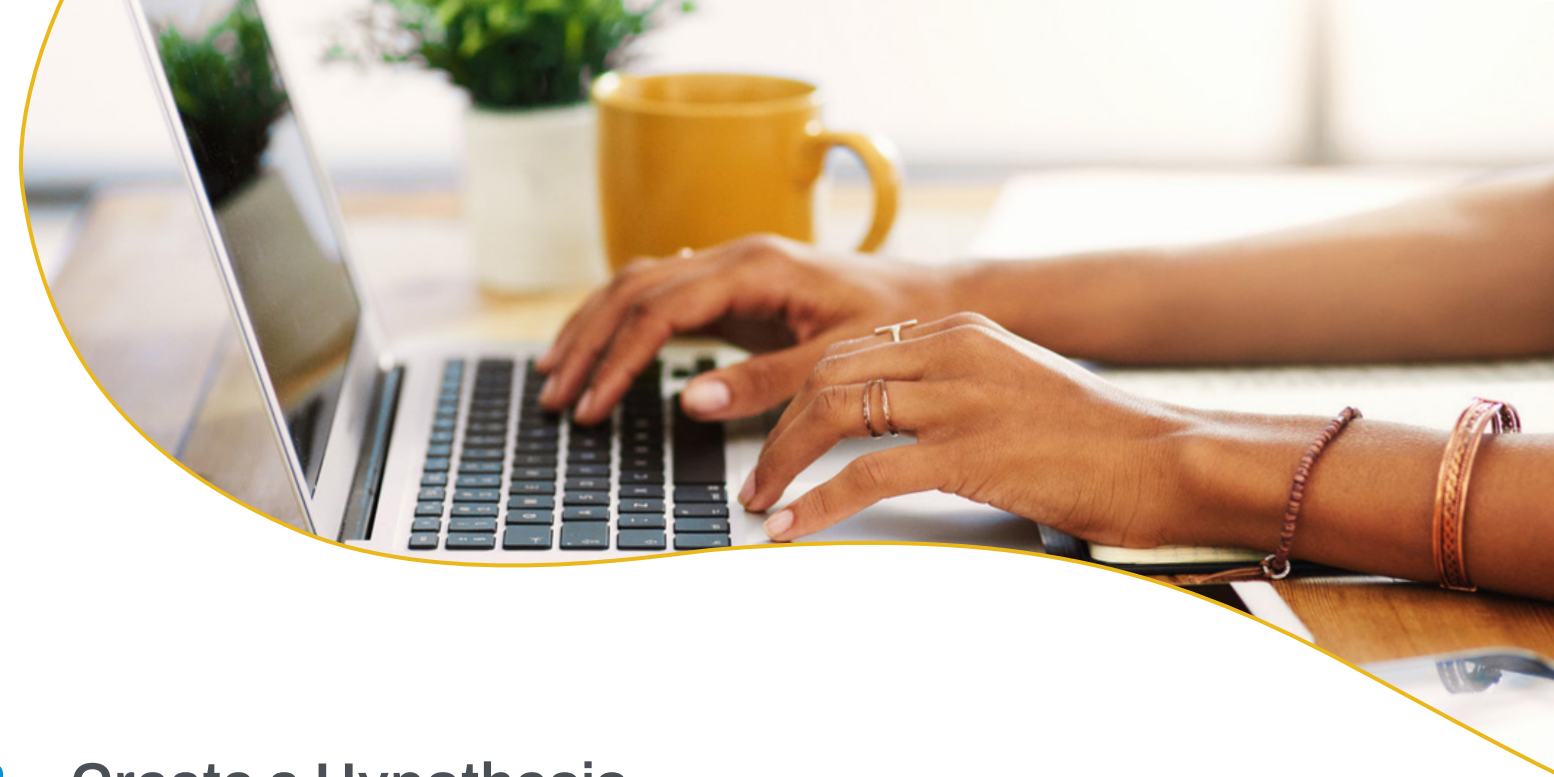
3.   Design The Test

The next step is to design the test. There are two different types of split testing that you may want to consider.

A/B testing tests the variance of one variable while all other variables remain equal. For example, to test how the content of your emails performs, you may change an image or the font of your email copy while keeping all other variables such as the subject line, time of day or offers inside your email the same.

Multivariate testing simultaneously tests combinations of outcomes to determine the appropriate combination of test variables. Multivariate testing uses the same core mechanisms of A/B testing; however, it compares more variables. For example, in this way you can test the text and color of a CTA button in your email campaign together. Although this is typically for experienced testers, multivariate testing is a great way to determine which combination of variations performs the best out of all the possible combinations.

4.   Define the Control Group

A.   Define Control Group

It is crucial to make sure the control group is similar to the group experiencing change in your campaign, especially in size. We recommended a sample size of at least 1,000, but this can change depending on how large or small your email list size is.

Appropriate sample sizes can be collected in two ways. In complete panels, the required sample size is included in every deployment, whereas, in additive panels, multiple deployments are needed to reach the required sample size.

A control group is essential for a successful A/B test because it helps you account for external factors that may affect user behavior such as trends, marketing campaigns or random variations.

B.   Design the duration

A test should achieve the necessary sample size to satisfy the criteria for "statistical significance." Nonetheless, we advocate for conducting multiple deployment tests. Single-instance tests solely offer insights for that specific occasion. By testing across several days, we can minimize the randomness and the influence of singular moments. Engaging in testing over multiple days, or possibly even months for some certain segments, permits diverse test evaluations, affirming results and yielding valuable insights.

C.   Who gets what and why?

To truly gauge the impact of an alteration to an email on response rates, it is essential to compare those rates with a control group. For example, if you are testing subject lines, your first group (A) will have a slightly more personalized subject line than your second group (B) which will remain generic.

- **A/B Test: 50% receive Version A (change)**
- **A/B Test: 50% receive Version B (generic)**

With group A experiencing the changed version, and group B remaining the same, you will be able to fully understand, in this case, if personalizing subject lines actually changes your response rates. This process remains the same for any element you may want to test.

5.   Implement the Test

Let it rip! At this point, you should be ready to implement your test based on the knowledge you have. You know your objective or what you want to test, you have drafted your hypothesis, you know how you're running the test, and you have a control group.

All that's left is to measure your results.

6.   Evaluate the Results

When evaluating your results ask yourself one question: **Did the test answer the hypothesis?**

The confidence level of an A/B test shows the probability that the test results are accurate and are not due to mere chance. Generally, we evaluate at a 95% confidence level, meaning that there is a 95% chance that the observed difference in the test outcomes is because of strategic testing, not random occurrence. The goal when evaluating your A/B results is to ensure that your results hold data-driven value.

8 Rules for Objective Testing

So far you've defined your objective, you've decided which element to test and you've created a testing plan with your A/B group. Now you need to review the results like a scientist would – no bias, no subjective feelings, just facts.

Here are 8 tips to help ensure the decisions you make are based on facts, not opinions:

1. **Mind your bias.** To avoid selection bias in A/B testing, use random assignment to ensure an accurate sample. For example, if testing a CTA change, randomly assign users to control and variant groups.

2. **Keep everything else constant.** In A/B testing, only one variable can change to ensure your results hold strategic value. When testing the personalization of a subject line, do not change the time and day of send or copy of the email!

3. **Test enough times.** Make sure you test at least 4 times to generate accurate results that you can compare against.

4. **Test on a big enough audience.** Ensure that you are testing on a wide enough audience in comparison to your list size. We recommend at least 1,000 contacts.

5. **Consider context.** Consider the context around the time of your testing. What is going on in the world for your consumers? Is it the holiday season, Black Friday, or Valentine's Day? If so, make sure your email content and timing are relevant.

6. **Choose a random sample across all segments.** Always make sure your sample is random! This helps avoid bias and makes sure that your results are due to the strategic elements of your testing, not calculated. The only exception is if you are testing on a segment such as lapsed or "sleepy" subscribers.

7. **Test the same thing again in 12 months.** To compare your results over time, test again in a year. Things will change for your audience!

8. **Implement the winning theme in future campaigns.** Once you know what works, implement these tactics into your future campaigns! Your engagement rates will thank you.

Wrap Up

> 66 **THINKING LIKE A SCIENTIST** involves more than just reacting with an open mind. It means being *actively* open-minded. It requires searching for reasons why we might be wrong — not for reasons why we must be right — and revising our views based on what we learn"
>
> — **Adam Grant,** *THINK AGAIN*

Marketing done well isn't based on instinct, subjective opinions and generalized viewpoints. Marketing done well is backed by data and science. To succeed, you have to be open-minded to what is working and what isn't working. Once you begin to test, you'll start to realize that small changes can have a big, big impact on your bottom line.

Whether you're ready to dive into email testing right now and just need an advanced solution to assist, or you need strategic support from A-Z in your marketing campaigns, Marigold has the technology and teams to match.

Let's talk!

Where *relationships* take root.

Marigold's approach to Relationship Marketing stands alone in a world of one-size-fits-all marketing technology companies. Our solutions are designed for your specific size, industry, and maturity, giving you the technology and expertise you need to grow the relationships that grow your business, from customer acquisition to engagement to loyalty. And, with a team of strategists that provide insights into what's working, what's not, and what's changing in your industry, you're able to maximize ROI every step of the way.

Great marketing isn't just about conversion, but true connection. Learn why 40,000 businesses around the world trust Marigold to be the firm foundation they need to help relationships take root.

Find out more at **MeetMarigold.com**

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