The New Rules of Email Deliverability

Ten Forces Shaping Today's Inbox Landscape

SPARKPOST

The Inbox Has Evolved. So Has Email Deliverability.

Like a classic black dress or a comfortably-worn pair of jeans, some things never go out of style. The same is true of many email deliverability practices that have become second nature to email pros: technical steps such as configuration of email authentication; segmentation, warmup, and reputation management of email streams; and above all, sending only to customers who actually want the email you deliver.

But a field as complex as email deliverability doesn't stand still. Relying on habits of a decade ago means risking your email performance and reputation. Some common practices of the past have become less effective or even outright counterproductive, while new ideas and approaches are creating opportunities for senders to rise above the noise.

SparkPost's team of email experts has put together this guide to help you get up to speed on the rapidly changing state of email deliverability. These ten new rules include updates to old practices as well as emerging techniques that will help you ensure the emails you send arrive just where they will have maximum impact: **your users' inboxes.**

1 Whitelists aren't a silver bullet.

There once was a time when a big sender with a good reputation could request special treatment from email inbox providers and get a virtual pass to the inbox. Whitelists (like blacklists) were a crude solution to the limited sophistication and computing power of receiving email systems. They were one way to ensure legitimate email wasn't inadvertently flagged as spam.

No more—whether you're sending 100 or 100 million messages, your messages will need to pass the same validation and heuristics as every other sender's. And the most important providers, like Gmail, don't offer a whitelist at all. They're justly confident in their system's ability to correctly categorize the mail based on signals like user engagement and behavior.

While a handful of ISP whitelists still remain, their benefits are limited: perhaps a marginal bump up in calculated reputation or increased throughput on connections. The truth is, if you're a good sender of email your users want (and with which they show active engagement), you'll get inbox placement far above any nominal benefit of appearing in a whitelist.

THE NEW RULE

Skip the whitelist and focus on message quality and optimizing for user engagement instead.

2 Blacklists matter far less than they used to.

Blacklists have been powerful cudgels in mailbox providers' war against spam. If a sending mail server appeared on one of these "black holes," it was a near certainty that their emails would not be delivered to most users.

But the simple truth is that most inbox providers pay little attention to blacklists today, although Spamhaus is a notable exception that remains in wide use. As with whitelists, ISPs today more often rely on their own filters and algorithms to identify, flag, and block abusive or unwanted email.

Still, let's be frank: even today, no one wants to land on a blacklist. Although mistakes will happen, appearing in a blacklist suggests that a sender has engaged in some kind of problematic sending behavior. It's always in a sender's best interest to work with the blacklist maintainer to identify the problem and take steps to remedy the issue and ensure removal. Nonetheless, appearance on most blacklists will have minimal impact on legitimate senders' ability to deliver email.

→ **Did you land on an email blacklist?**
   Learn what to do at sparkpo.st/blacklist.

THE NEW RULE

As long as you're sending with permission and good user engagement, don't panic if you land on a blacklist.
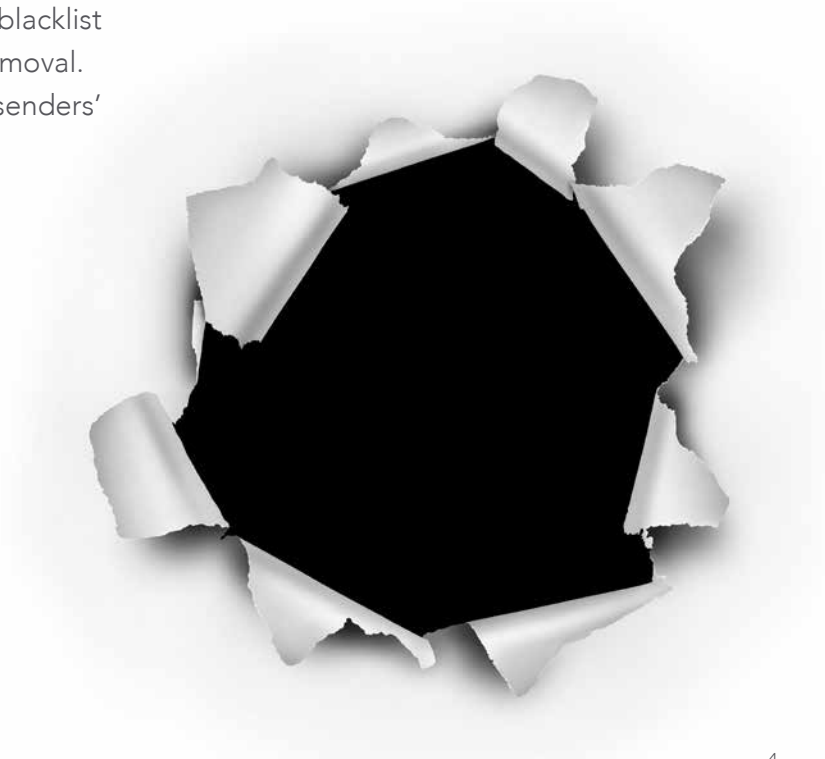
3   IPs are a smaller piece of the reputation puzzle.

Over the past several years, sender reputation mostly has replaced whitelists, blacklists, and brute-force spam filters as a key factor that determines whether email messages are delivered to user inboxes. Sender reputation reflects diverse inputs such as sending history, volume, list quality, and user engagement and complaints.

It used to be that this calculated reputation primarily was tied to network IP addresses. That implementation made sense given the mechanics of SMTP transmission and the technical limitations of the time. But a shift towards the use of email delivery service providers by many senders, the spread of botnets by bad actors, and the dramatically increased computing power available to mailbox providers has changed that equation.

Instead, inbox providers increasingly associate reputation signals with domains. This makes sense: it better matches sender and user behaviors alike and more accurately captures the overall picture. That's not to say that IP-based reputation scoring has disappeared, but it's no longer the primary measure of a sender's status. IP filtering instead is used in more targeted and technically appropriate circumstances such as rate-limiting SMTP connections or blocking high-risk network ranges.

THE NEW RULE

Sending reputation remains fundamental to email deliverability, but it's increasingly tied to domains rather than IP addresses.

4   Warm-up practices must evolve.

IP warm-up—the process of methodically adding email volume week-over-week to a new IP address to establish a positive sending reputation at mailbox providers—has long been an essential deliverability practice. That's because ISPs view email from a new IP address as suspicious until they establish a positive sending reputation.

ISPs' stated guidance, combined with empirical evidence, provides a great template for what a good warm-up looks like. But it's important to remember that, like so much else in the realm of email deliverability, what the ideal warm-up looks like is not static. Quite the opposite in fact; IP warm-up guidelines must reflect the ongoing technical evolution and changing expectations of mailbox providers and their users.

One notable example: Gmail has dialed down the threshold for an initial send. They want to see no more than 200 recipients on day 1. Testing and keeping an eye on how guidelines like these change is an important job for any deliverability team.

More fundamental is the shift towards domain-based (rather than IP-based) sender reputation. It's not enough to warm up (or inherit) an IP address or pool. New sending domains increasingly will require warm-up practices analogous to what's historically been done with IP addresses. More work? Perhaps. But the new-found stickiness of domain reputation may well make it simpler to make technical changes beneath the hood—or even reduce the costs and risk of switching from one sending infrastructure to another.

→ **Get hands-on warm-up advice on the SparkPost web site:** sparkpo.st/warmup.

THE NEW RULE

Sending warm-up for new domains and IP addresses remains a key deliverability practice, but the devil is in the evolving details.

5 Email authentication is a must-have.

Email authentication makes your domain more difficult to forge or spoof by spammers and phishers. That's important for maintaining the integrity of your company's brand. But more than that, it protects a your users and customers from harm.

That's why the role of email authentication in building a trustworthy sending domain has steadily increased in importance over the past several years. Today, the core email authentication standards SPF, DKIM, and DMARC are essential for every email sender, and emerging standards such as BIMI are making email authentication more visible to users. (But forget Sender ID—it's no longer relevant to the discussion today.)

Mailbox providers such as Gmail, Microsoft, and Yahoo are using the presence of email authentication status to help determine delivery, as they want to protect their users from potentially malicious mail. And services like SparkPost make it easy to set up email authentication for your sending domain. What are you waiting for?

→ **Learn more about email authentication at** sparkpo.st/authentication.

THE NEW RULE

No more excuses. Email authentication is a must-have for developing a good sender reputation.

6   There's no hiding from GDPR. But why would you?

Europe's General Data Privacy Regulation (GDPR) took effect in May 2018. GDPR harmonizes the patchwork of existing data privacy laws in EU member states. Its primary goal is to protect the rights and freedoms of EU citizens and residents in relation to the processing of their personal data.

GDPR already is having deep impact on companies around the world, and while it may not affect email deliverability per se, it's certainly an issue for most email teams. That's because GDPR has significant impact on how companies deal with user consent to receive emails—and how data such as email addresses, engagement activity, and more are processed and stored.

Much of the public discussion about GDPR has focused on the costs and risks of compliance, and there's no denying that GDPR is a complex issue with difficult technical requirements. And some companies outside of Europe even are hoping that it's a challenge they can disregard.

But approaching GDPR as if it were just a regulatory liability—or something that can be safely ignored—is a mistake. All legal issues aside (though you should ask your legal team about it), honoring the spirit of the GDPR regulation is in every email team's best interests, regardless of their locale and market. Here's why: securing unambiguous consent from recipients, respecting user preferences, and carefully managing data is precisely what yields email programs with highly engaged users—and the high deliverability that follows from that.

→ **Learn more about GDPR's impact on email at** sparkpo.st/gdpr.

THE NEW RULE

Strict privacy and permission practices now are the law in Europe, but GDPR will affect (and benefit) senders and users everywhere.

7   The inbox landscape has shifted.

A decade ago, the email inbox landscape was extremely fragmented. Myriad services dealt with message filtering and delivery in different ways. Today, the diversity of inboxes for consumers has narrowed significantly.

Gmail is the dominant player, with more than one billion users, while Microsoft's Outlook (Hotmail) retains a strong second place share. Of the remaining providers, the largest of these—AOL and Yahoo—now share a single corporate parent, Verizon. The company has merged these consumer Internet services and mail infrastructure under the "Oath" umbrella brand and combined their deliverability and postmaster services.

This consolidation is driving changes in deliverability practices. For example, while feedback loops (FBLs) remain relevant and an important part of the deliverability toolkit, a number of inbox providers recently have stopped offering FBLs. The list notably includes the Spectrum cable ISP as part of its acquisition of the TimeWarner/Road Runner and Bright House cable networks.

At the same time, mobile devices are now the leading platform on which consumers read and respond to email. One corollary effect of the shift to mobile email consumption is the increasing footprint of Apple's presence as a mailbox provider.

For email senders, these changes paradoxically both simplify and complicate email deliverability. The number of destinations that need to be tested and managed for delivery has narrowed. But the sophisticated heuristics and machine learning with which the remaining providers process message delivery means individual message disposition is more of a black box than ever before.

THE NEW RULE

A short list of dominant inbox providers now shape how users experience email. Senders should focus optimization for delivery and presentation on those platforms.

8 Email delivery is in the cloud.

Let's face it: even for email pros, deliverability is a challenging and time-consuming task. And maintaining email servers and managing queues is something few teams find to be a productive use of scarce resources and time. That's why the clear trend has been for businesses that rely on email to drive user engagement and business growth to shift SMTP transmission and delivery to dedicated service providers. These specialists have the capacity and expertise to not only get great performance and inbox placement, but also to do it reliably, securely, and economically.

Cloud email delivery is a great example of today's overall move to SaaS—consuming software (and infrastructure) as a service. Services like SparkPost are built with safeguards in place to protect against denial-of-service attacks, Internet outages, and other problems that can cause email sending problems. No one wants their email system to fail on a busy day, such as Cyber Monday.

This trend also has allowed in-house email teams to focus on the areas they can deliver the most impact and value: optimizing email for user engagement and other strategic objectives rather than managing deliverability fire drills.

→ **Learn more about cloud email delivery and email APIs at** sparkpo.st/emailapi.

THE NEW RULE

The most successful businesses focus on building strategic, differentiated value with email—not managing the nuts and bolts of deliverability and email queues.

9   Triggered alerts and notifications are redefining email.

Think about your inbox: as a user of modern applications and services, you interact daily with a variety of email notifications. These messages alert you when your post was shared on a social network, remind you to take a key step in activating your account for a productivity tool, or ask you to approve a scheduled bill payment from your bank.

Email notifications like these draw users back into apps and reinforce trust in services. They're an important part of a great user experience and one of the most powerful tools today's digital businesses have to drive conversion, retention, and growth. Moreover, the immediacy and relevance of notifications help these messages stand out from the rest of the inbox—a key part of their high engagement qualities.

Because these messages are triggered by events and user activity in apps and services, they take a dramatically different form than traditional, list-based email marketing messages. They require more real-time performance, complete personalization, and more finely-grained analytics than most email marketing solutions (let alone stand-alone mail servers) deliver. In contrast, email APIs and cloud email delivery services are ideally suited to meet this use case.

→ **Learn more about product emails and notifications at** sparkpo.st/productemail.

THE NEW RULE

Changing user expectations for apps and services mean email has moved from static, list-driven campaigns to personalized, real-time messages.

10 Engagement is everything.

It's not controversial to suggest that user engagement in one form or another is the goal of just about every email sent by apps, services, and e-commerce platforms today. Increasing message engagement and visibility underlies all the work email teams do, from understanding the events and triggers that drive an alert, to crafting and designing the message, to deliverability. After all, what good is an offer or call to action if it's not seen and clicked upon by the recipient?

Today, it's not just senders that worry about engagement. Mailbox providers also care that emails are read. Not because they have a stake in the success of a particular message, but because it's a sign their users want the emails they're receiving. That's why this engagement-driven approach is win-win for everyone: it reinforces good sending habits, it results in higher-value emails for recipients, yields more engagement and results for senders, and creates a better user experience for users of mailbox apps and services.

Measuring engagement as a factor for inbox placement is the single biggest shift in the rules for email deliverability and why blacklists, whitelists, spam filters, and all the other old tools have become less important over time. It's also helped email teams maximize their businesses impact as experts on driving engagement and growth.

THE NEW RULE

User engagement with emails matters more than ever.
It's the key factor in deliverability—and your success.

About SparkPost

Email teams want to drive engagement and results, not manage email servers. SparkPost's email API delivers fast, flexible email and analytics integration for any application or website. And our deliverability expertise means your emails arrive on time and to the inbox.

No wonder our customers—including Zillow, Intercom, Pinterest, Twitter, LinkedIn, Comcast, Oracle, and The New York Times—send over 3 trillion messages a year, more than 25% of the world's non-spam email.

If you'd like more advice from SparkPost's team, we're ready to help. Visit **sparkpo.st/deliverability** for hands-on email resources and to learn more about our expert deliverability and other technical services.

Talk with our team **@SparkPost** or go to **sparkpost.com** to learn more.