

EMAILING UNENGAGED



Adapting to Succeed Today and Tomorrow

By Jay T. Fedje, MA

Enrollment managers have been trained to squeeze everything they can out of their prospective student inquiry list. In the late stages of the recruitment cycle, this is often called “non-responder recruiting.” In other words, you did everything you could with your name purchase/inquiry list, and for a subset of students, recruiting activities didn’t produce any meaningful engagement.

I used to call this group my “freezer list” of cold prospects. Like other enrollment managers, I was trained to think if I squeezed a few more applicants out of that group, I won the battle. As I saw it, the most affordable recruitment strategy was to keep emailing these poor barraged prospects with endless messages. This is how I saw it: Email was practically free, so there was nothing to lose—just keep sending emails, and keep my fingers crossed, and hope one of the ice-cold names on the list would relent and respond.

Times change, and what many enrollment managers don’t fully understand, there is a hidden cost to sending emails to non-responders – it’s called your domain reputation score. This is the score email providers assign to you as they monitor and manage your email activity. The higher the score, the more likely your email will be placed in the appropriate folder in the recipient’s inbox. The lower the score, the more likely your emails will be placed in junk or spam folders. If a score goes too low, your school’s domain could be labeled as a spam sender – commonly referred to as “blacklisted.”

Email service providers use algorithms to calculate your score – but the algorithms are never released to the public. Likewise, the algorithm can change without notice, as it did in the fourth quarter of 2019 when Google (Gmail) changed its email rules.

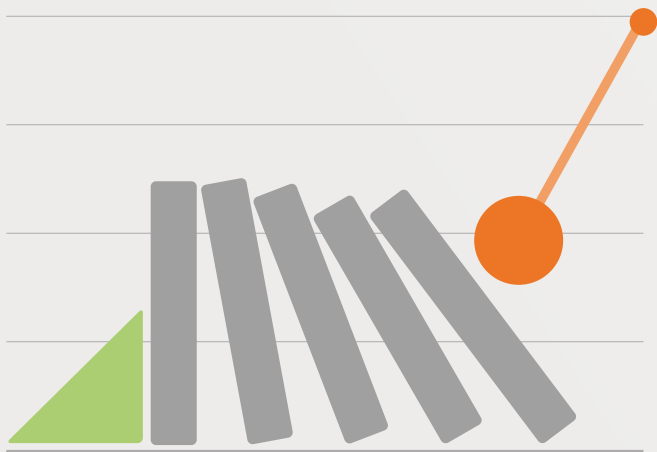
Marketing and tech geeks who are closely monitoring Google’s practices for email deliverability and search engine optimization (SEO) effectiveness have grown accustomed to random “slaps” from Google. Overnight,

algorithms change, rewarding different practices, and keeping everyone on their toes. The fall 2019 *slap* rocked email systems within the college landscape because a large percentage (more than half in many of the campaigns managed by enrollmentFUEL) of all email addresses purchased by colleges had a Gmail email address.

Gmail created a range of messaging folders (primary, social, promotions, and updates) to accompany their junk folder. Like all Google changes, this wasn’t discussed with enrollment officers or business leaders before going into effect – Google just deployed the new rules. For those not paying close attention at the time, email reports seemed to be coming back with exceptionally strong open rates. However, what they didn’t realize was Gmail was opening the email and hitting links to test them for spam characteristics. In other words, Gmail was deciding which folder to put the email in. Each time an email was left dormant or trashed by the recipient, Gmail took note of that inactivity and recalculated the domain’s reputation score, often lowering it in the process. While enrollment managers were thinking they finally cracked the Gmail code to get their emails opened, in truth, they saw false positives. When reputation scores decreased, more and more emails ended up being dumped into junk folders.

Non-responder strategies don’t create online reputation problems, but they do accelerate them. Eventually, enrollment managers became aware that their emails, while appearing to be opened, were not. Students didn’t see what was sent because they went dormant once they landed in folders like promotions, updates, or junk – or worse yet, they were blocked altogether.

The reputation score is a topic we continually study at enrollmentFUEL. One key take-away to bear in mind is that while it is simple and quick to impact your score poorly, it can be difficult and time-consuming to raise it back up. If you want to ensure your reputation score remains healthy, FUEL recommends a mini internal audit, and we are excited to share a rubric to assist you.



Here are seven questions enrollment leaders should be asking if they are interested in managing their school's domain reputation score:

#1 Am I able to monitor real email activity?

Because it is crucial to capture your email activity, it is equally important to distinguish between opens by *real* recipients and clicks from email provider Spambots and filters. It is a challenge to assess data in a world where there are ever-evolving rules, tricks, and techniques used by email providers to filter real versus spam email. This "chess-match" with email providers will never end, so be aware, and plan for the game.

#2 Have I planned for alternative communication channels in my non-responder tactics?

Direct mail, social media banner ads, calling campaigns, and SMS texting (when appropriate) are other methods to consider. When emails don't work as well as you hoped, have you planned (and budgeted) for an alternate method to recruit these suspects?

#3 Am I monitoring and cleaning suspect/inquiry email lists from hard bounces, undeliverables, and opt-outs?

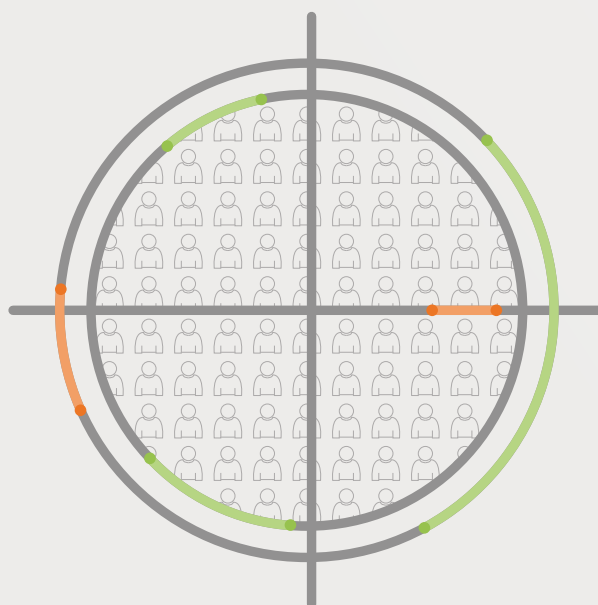
Each email campaign should be analyzed upon completion, and all adverse email outcomes should be assessed and acted upon. Hard-bounces, opt-outs, and undeliverable emails should be removed from the database, and those prospects should be placed in an alternate communication flow.

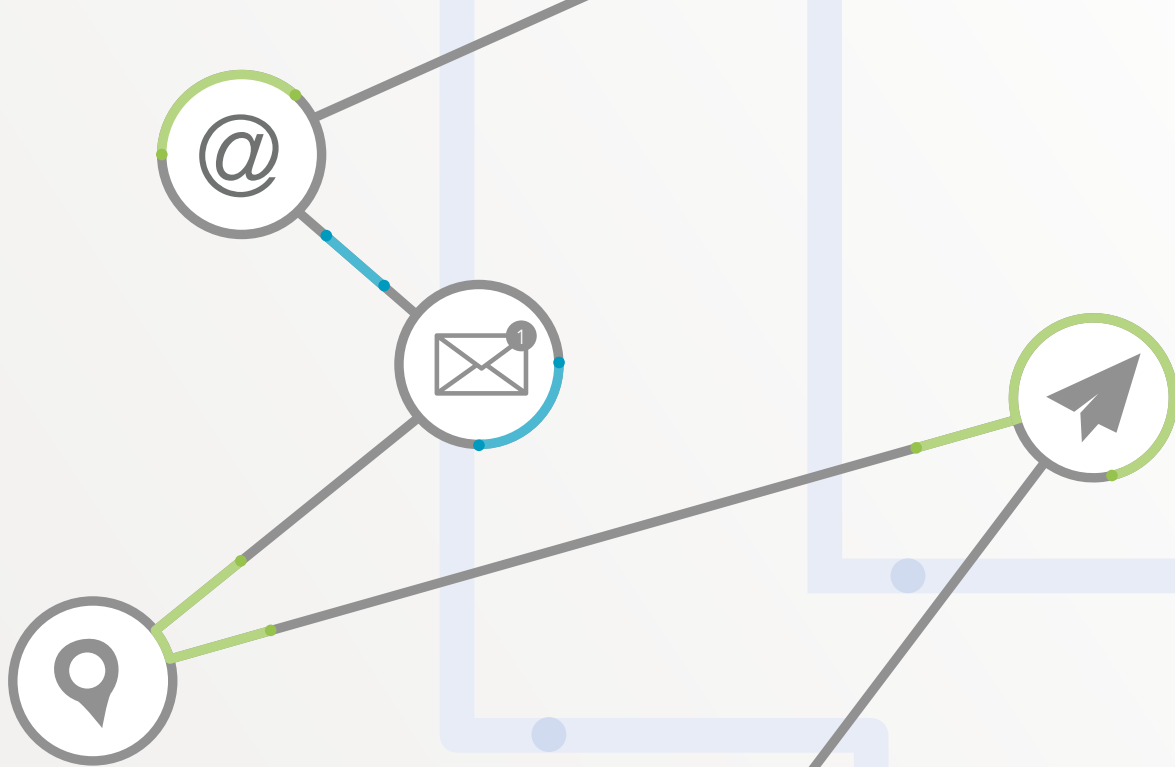
#4 Am I periodically using an email validation/verification software to identify undeliverable emails and potential problems?

Bad emails will invariably creep into your database. Email addresses of today's suspects go stale, quickly. You also might have collected "spam traps" over time. These emails are designed to test if the sender is, in fact, a spammer. Email senders, like you, should occasionally weed out the emails that give you headaches. Blocker software like GlochApps or Email on Acid can help identify undeliverable emails so you can remove them before your next email campaign.

#5 Am I utilizing a reputation scoring software to monitor my domain score?

You can be confident that a high percentage of your recruits are using Gmail. So, it is critical to make sure your reputation score with Gmail is solid so that your emails hitting Gmail addresses get to the right folder. You can continually monitor your school's domain reputation with software like Sender Score, Google Postmaster, or Microsoft Smart Network Data Services of SNDS. Every college or university must have staff members tasked with monitoring their school's reputation score. Be aware that admissions isn't the only department affecting a school's score. When you consider all the departments that send mass email campaigns (Development, Alumni, Athletics, the President's Office), there are countless opportunities to damage your reputation score if it is not regularly monitored and managed.



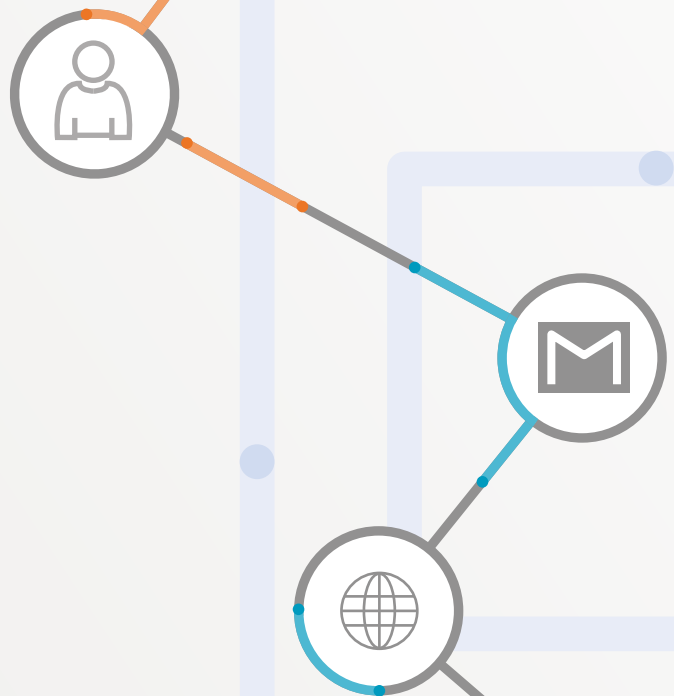


#6 Am I monitoring from where my prospective student names are coming?

How is the prospective student's data being captured and provided to me? Too often, enrollment managers buy lists of prospect names that have been sitting on the "data shelf" for months or years. As a result, email addresses erode and become outdated causing nothing but problems for your campaign. Asking the list provider *when* the names were captured and *how* they were captured is critical (and too often overlooked). Some suspects fill out a survey or complete a college assessment test (SAT or ACT), so you'll know *when* and *how* those names and biographical data were captured. Be aware when you are getting compiled data from old student surveys. Other lists are generated by collecting student data from associations (church denominations or school data files). When you can find out the "when" or "how" information about the data on a list, take extra steps to clean the list after your purchase.

#7 Am I measuring the "shelf-life" of students' email addresses?

While home addresses are relatively stable, students' emails change more regularly. You may have old, outdated, or abandoned email addresses in your system. If you get a street address wrong, you pay a return mail fee, but there are no future negative implications for sending mail. If you get emails wrong too often, it will impact your ability to send future emails to appropriate inboxes of students who are actually viable.



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