



Gmail Deliverability

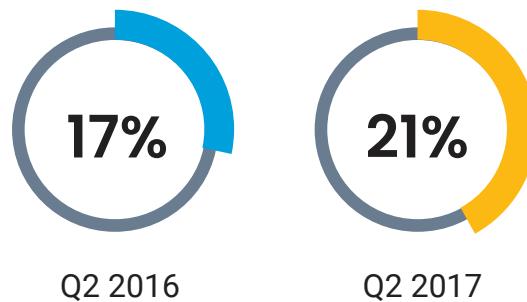
Understanding, benchmarking & improving Gmail reputation

Executive Summary

As the oldest digital marketing channel, email has undergone a number of significant transformations over the last few decades - from its early inception as an ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) email system in the early 70s, through the infancy of email hosting sites in the 80s, to the adoption by the general public in the 90s, onto the creation of Gmail in the 2000s and all subsequent improvements that have allowed email to reach the level of sophistication it boasts today. Brands consistently use email as an essential, reliable and efficient way to communicate with their customers about transactions, promotions and everything in between.

For many companies, the importance of email is growing instead of waning, despite its maturity in the digital space. In a recent survey by The Relevancy Group, marketing executives indicated that email-driven revenue represented 21% of their total revenue in 2017, up from 17% in 2016.¹

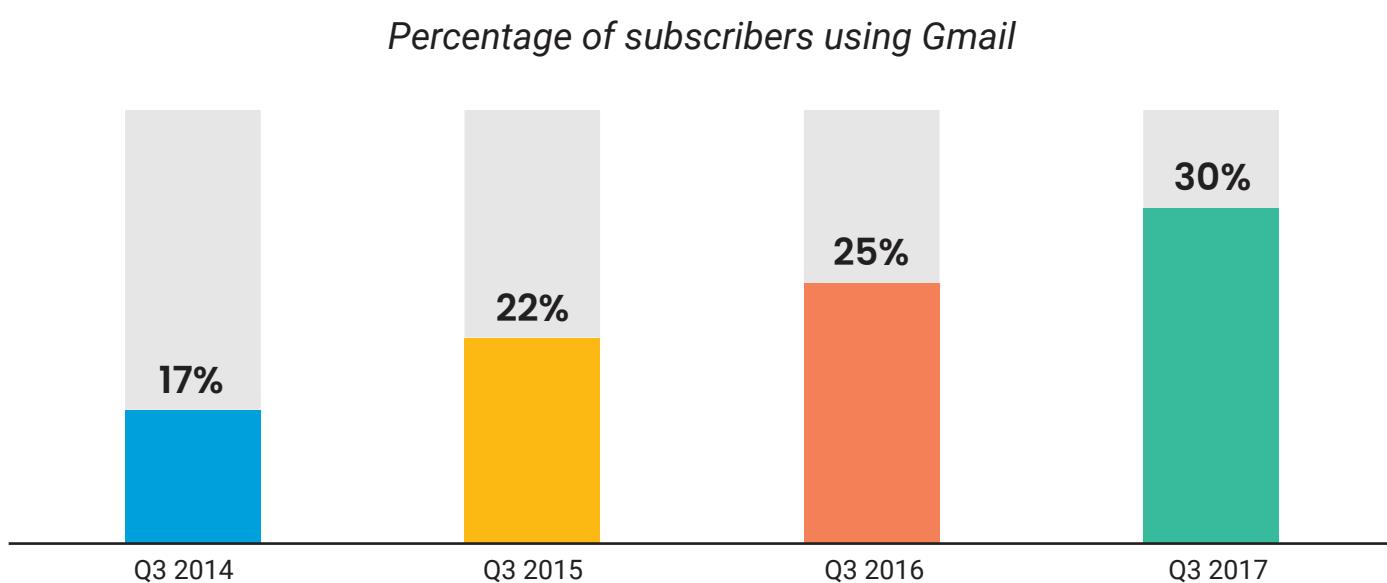
Share of total revenues attributed to email marketing according to U.S. marketing executives, Q2 2016 & Q2 2017 (percent of total)





The growth of Gmail

With email's evolution over the years, one Internet Service Provider's (ISP) growth has outshined the rest. Gmail, which launched in 2004, has become the fastest-growing and most actively used ISP with over 1.2 billion users worldwide.² According to a recent email benchmark report by Data Axle, Gmail accounted for 30% of all brands' email subscribers, nearly doubling its share in 2013, when Gmail users accounted for just 17% of marketers' email audience. Among subscribers who had recently opted into brand communications, Gmail use was even more prevalent - 49% of new subscribers (registered within the past 90 days) had Gmail accounts.



Gmail deliverability & reputation report

With the growth of Gmail as an ISP, a brand's sending reputation at Gmail is increasingly important when it comes to inboxing and, subsequently, campaign ROI. After all, a message that doesn't reach its intended recipients cannot drive opens, clicks and, ultimately, conversions. Data Axle tracked and analyzed Gmail reputation data from over 150 brands to help marketers understand how their reputation compares to that of other brands and what they can do to improve it. In this study, we will share the trends revealed by these metrics as well as concrete examples of the email practices that had the biggest impact on Gmail reputation.

Methodology

From July 2017 to January 2018, Data Axle tracked Gmail reputation metrics and panel inbox placement data for 150 different senders spanning a variety of industries including retail, financial services, consumer goods, entertainment and more. Some senders are Data Axle clients who deployed email through our cross-channel marketing communications platform, while other senders deploy through various other platforms.

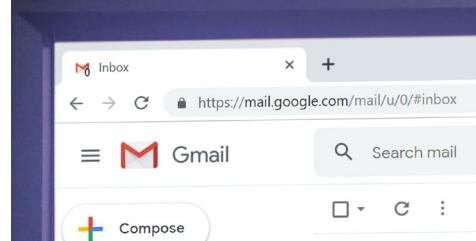


Key Findings



Many marketers in the study experienced a shift from a medium to high Gmail reputation between mid-2017 and early 2018. In this paper, we'll discuss the reasons behind this change.

While changes to Gmail's algorithm can have a significant impact on senders' reputation, the largest improvements in Gmail reputation and inbox placement rates were due to positive changes in marketers' mailing practices.



Certain deliverability best practices are closely tied to Gmail reputation and understanding these practices can help marketers improve their standing with Gmail.

Improvements in Gmail reputation resulted in significant improvements of inbox placement.

For example, senders who moved from having a bad reputation at Gmail to having a high reputation increased their inboxing rate from 2% to 97%.





Gmail deliverability

A brief review

As email has matured, innovations by ISPs have consistently improved user experience. Google's Gmail platform has led the way in making it difficult for scammers and spammers to reach users – earning themselves the reputation for being fiercely protective of users' inboxes and being dedicated to ensuring the best email experience. Here, we will provide a high-level overview of deliverability and inbox placement criteria that are specific to Gmail.



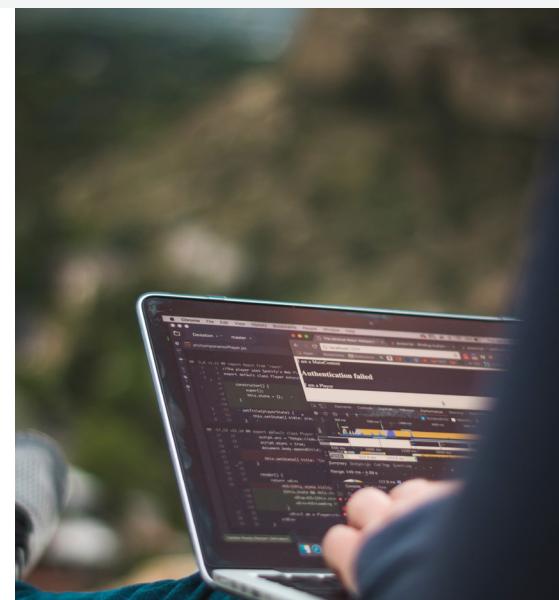
User engagement

Gmail focuses heavily on user engagement to assess sender reputation and gauge whether an email should make it into a user's inbox. To ensure that Gmail users are only exposed to messages they want to receive, Gmail analyzes various customer actions like:

- Opens and clicks
- How long users interact with the message
- How many users mark a message as spam
- How many users delete without opening
- How many users move a message to their spam folder and how many move it from the spam folder into their inbox

Authentication

To protect users from forged messages used for phishing scams, Gmail requires senders to authenticate their emails. Authentication protocols like DKIM (A combination of Yahoo-designed Domain Keys and Cisco's Identified Mail), SPF (Sender Policy Framework) and DMARC (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance) allow Google to properly identify senders and classify messages as safe. Unauthenticated messages are likely to be sent to the spam folder or be rejected, which negatively impacts a brand's deliverability at Gmail. Marketers should confirm their messages are authenticated to ensure they reach customers' inboxes.





Encryption

Google also protects Gmail users by requiring senders to encrypt their emails to ensure that messages sent between a brand and consumers cannot be tampered with and that those private communications cannot be intercepted by another party. Gmail flags any email that is not protected with Transport Layer Security (TLS) encryption, making it unlikely for these messages to make it into consumers' inboxes and be opened. To avoid flags, marketers should use encryption to protect their customers.

Data hygiene

Good data hygiene is essential to making it into Gmail inboxes. Best practices like confirmed opt-in for subscribers, a clear way for them to unsubscribe, and instantly removing bad addresses and bounce-backs all impact a brand's Gmail deliverability.



Gmail innovations and updates

Google's efforts to improve the Gmail user experience often include changes that affect marketers and entail new best practices and new steps for campaign deployment. Some examples of Gmail changes that have impacted brands include:



Mailstreams

Mailstream separation remains a tried-and-true deliverability best practice. It dictates that marketers create separate IP (Internet Protocol) addresses for each category ("stream") of email so that a deliverability issue with one type of email, for example reactivation, will not cause issues with the rest of a brand's mailings – like transactional, promotional or lifecycle.

Tabs

In 2013, Google introduced Gmail tabs which allowed users to filter messages into five categories - with Primary, Social and Promotions tabs enabled by default. This change meant that all promotional messages were filtered into a separate inbox tab by default thus making it more challenging for marketing messages to reach subscribers.

Algorithm changes

Google updates to their reputation algorithm often affect which reputation tier senders fall under and can impact inboxing rates.

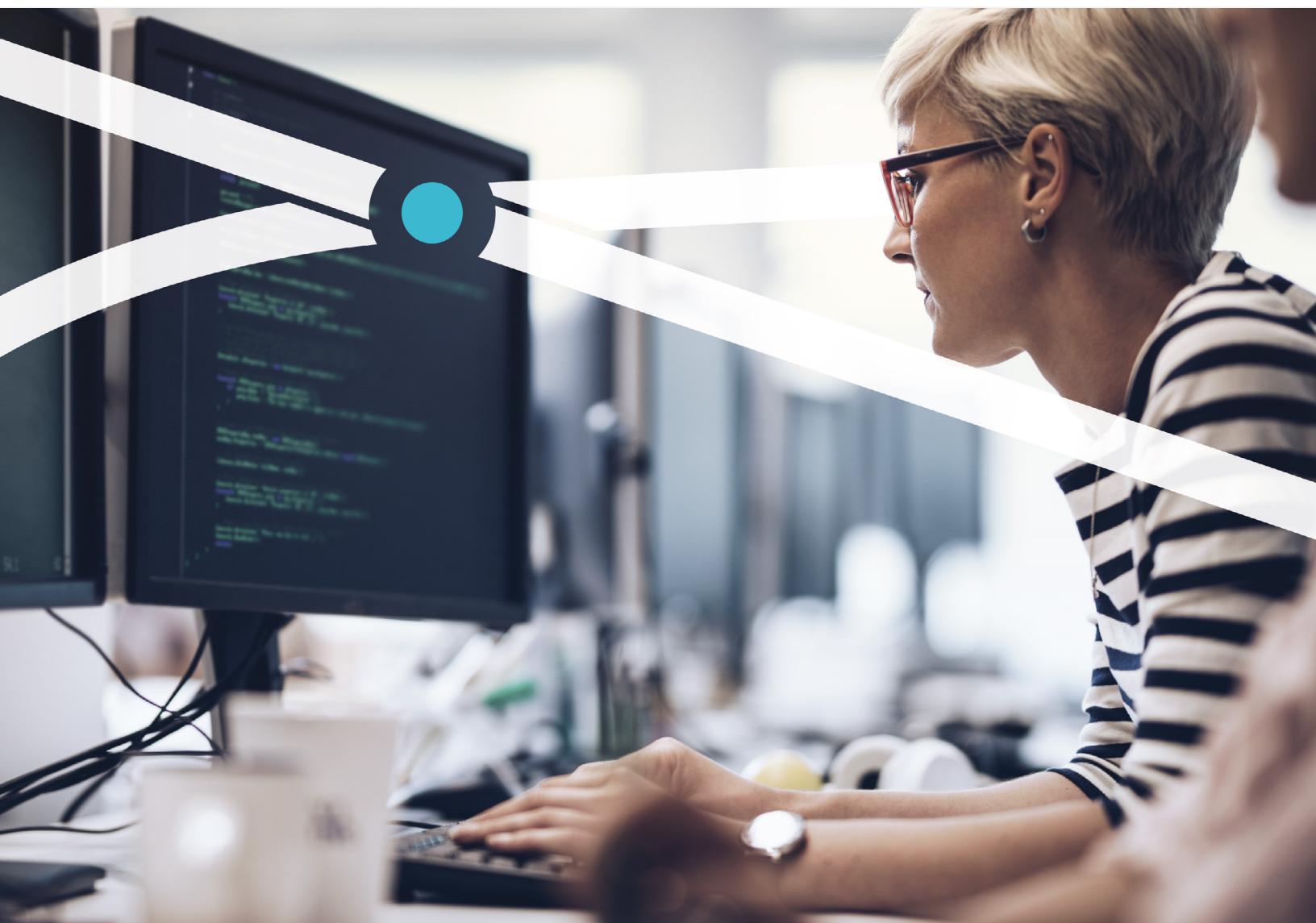


However, over the years, Gmail has implemented changes to its reputation algorithm, which is now tracking reputation at a host company level. This means that marketers can no longer relegate their extremely inactive subscribers to another domain and continue to message them without it affecting their overall reputation.

AMP

Google has recently announced they will enable Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) capabilities to allow senders to build more dynamic, interactive content in Gmail.³ This change may mean that marketers would see a boost in Gmail reputation and deliverability if they create AMP emails. It might also mean their Gmail reputation would decrease if they don't.

Despite the uncertainty, there are opportunities here for marketers. AMP will allow consumers to do more within their email, preventing them from having to leave Gmail while they perform a variety of actions. For example, a new customer could fill out a form to subscribe to a brand's email program from within the confirmation email of their first order. Brands that use these new capabilities to create cutting-edge, smart email content can set themselves apart from their competitors.





Now, to the point: What is Gmail reputation and how can marketers improve it?

Google rates the reputation of a sender's IP and domain and then assigns a reputation tier to that sender. Google defines reputation tiers as:



Bad reputation

A history of sending high volume of spam. Mail coming from this sender will almost always be rejected at SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) or marked as spam.



Low reputation

Known to send a considerable volume of spam regularly. Mail from this sender will likely be marked as spam.



Medium reputation

Known to send good mail, but is prone to sending low volume of spam intermittently. Most of the emails from this entity will have a fair deliverability rate, except when there is a notable increase in spam levels.



High reputation

Has a good track record of very low spam rate, and complies with Gmail's sender guidelines. Mail will rarely be marked as spam.

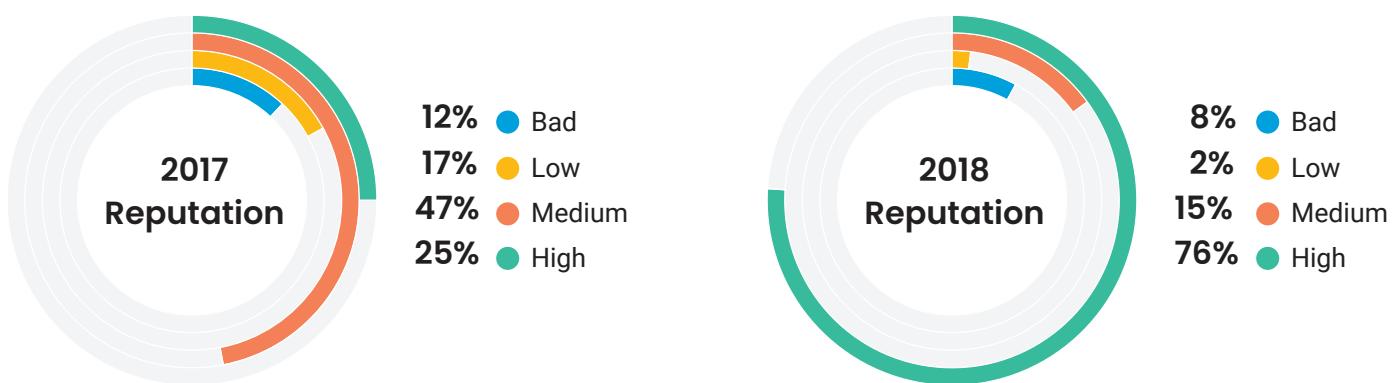


Reputation tiers

Common traits and benchmarks

Data Axle compared reputation data and inbox placement rates from July 2017 to Q1 2018 to identify senders that experienced changes to their reputation and inboxing rates. We examined potential explanations for the changes and considered applicable updates to Gmail's scoring algorithms. We also examined specific changes in sending behavior that resulted in reputation shifts with Gmail.

Sender reputation tiers



Findings



Bad reputation

In mid-2017, 12% of sender domains we evaluated were classified as having bad IP and domain reputation with Gmail. In Q1 2018, 8% of senders were categorized as having bad reputation.



Low reputation

In mid-2017, 17% of sender domains we evaluated had low IP and domain reputation with Gmail, while that number was 2% in 2018.



Medium reputation

In mid-2017, the majority of sender domains we evaluated (47%) were in the medium IP and domain reputation tier with Gmail. In 2018, only 15% were in that tier.



High reputation

25% of all sender domains held a high IP and domain reputation with Gmail in 2017. In 2018, 76% of sender domains were in the high reputation tier.



Common traits



Bad reputation

Sender domains that were categorized as bad typically met one of the following conditions:

- They had migrated to a new Email Service Provider (ESP) within the past 90 days
- They were only mailing highly inactive subscribers
- They were strictly sending affiliate/acquisition emails
- They were sending messages very infrequently

Senders who were mailing highly inactive subscribers were usually trying to reach people who hadn't engaged in over 12 months or were completely inactive without specifying the term of inactivity. Brands with bad reputation that were mailing infrequently sent messages on less than a monthly basis.



Low reputation

Marketers with low domain reputation, like those with bad domain reputation, were sending affiliate/acquisition campaigns and mailing to inactive subscribers. Alternatively, they had new domains or IPs as a result of a recent change of ESP.



Medium reputation

Sender domains with medium reputation generally follow sender best practices but are not in line with all Gmail best practices. For example, messages sent from these domains tend to follow a single opt-in subscription process instead of confirmed opt-in. Medium reputation senders have good email authentication processes and mailing practices (sending almost exclusively to new subscribers and those who have opened within the past 12 months).



High reputation

Sender domains with high reputation typically deployed triggered or transactional emails, targeted a very active subscriber segment or followed Google's best practices very closely. High reputation senders typically had a confirmed opt-in subscription process (vs the single opt-in prevalent with medium reputation), mailed almost exclusively to new subscribers and those who have opened within the past 3-6 months and implemented email authentication best practices. In June 2017, 20% of all sender domains with high reputation were exclusively sending transactional messages.



Inbox placement



Bad reputation



Low reputation



Medium reputation



High reputation

Messages sent from domains that had bad reputation were regularly landing in the Gmail spam folder almost entirely, with very few of them getting through to consumers' inboxes. Sender domains in this category had an average inbox rate of 2.9% in mid-2017 and 0.3% in Q1 2018.

Sender domains with low reputation had an average inboxing rate of 38.4% in mid-2017 and 23.8% in Q1 2018.

Sender domains with medium reputation had average inboxing rates of 65.4% in 2017 and 93.6% in 2018.

Messages sent from high reputation domains drove strong inbox placement for their entire audience. Sender domains in this category had an inboxing rate of 90% in 2017 and an inboxing rate of 97% in Q1 2018.

Improvements & declines

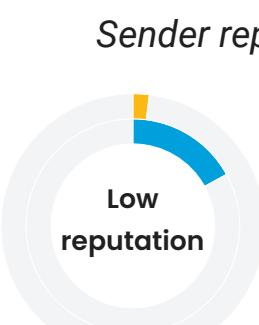
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Tier shifts

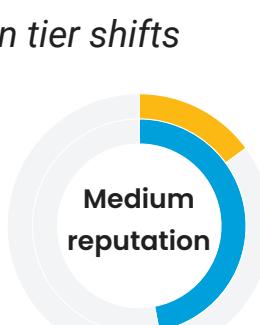
The percent of senders with medium reputation decreased from 47% in July 2017 to 15% in 2018, while the number of senders with high reputation increased 2.7 times. A portion of the senders who moved from medium to high reputation saw no changes to their inboxing rate, indicating that the widespread shift was likely caused by an update to Gmail's algorithm.



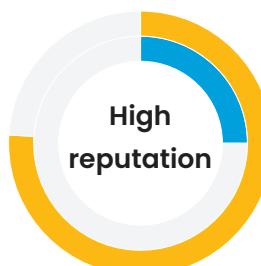
12% ● Mid-2017
8% ○ 2018



17% ● Mid-2017
2% ○ 2018



47% ● Mid-2017
15% ○ 2018



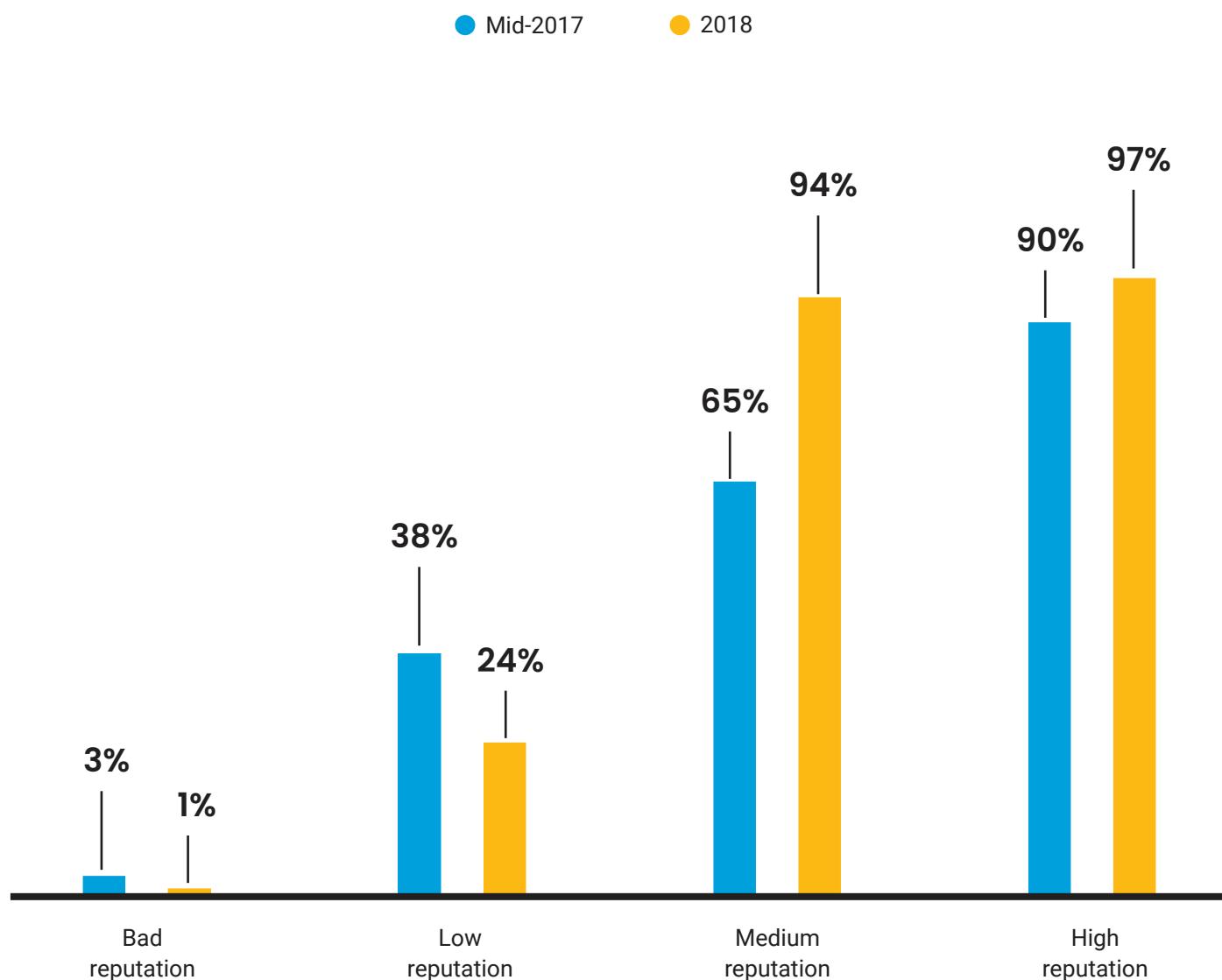
25% ● Mid-2017
76% ○ 2018



Changes in inboxing rates

When comparing the average inboxing rates from mid-2017 to those from Q1 2018, senders whose domain reputation was rated at medium or high saw an increase in their inboxing rates, while brands who held a low or bad reputation, saw their inbox placement decrease. The medium reputation tier saw the largest improvement with average inboxing rates increasing from 65% to 94%. Senders with high reputation saw their inboxing rates improve from 90% in mid-2017 to 97% in 2018. By contrast, senders with low reputation experienced a decrease in inboxing rates – from 38.4% in mid-2017 to 23.8% in 2018. Finally, marketers with bad reputation witnessed a decline in average inboxing rate – from 2.9% in mid-2017 to just 0.3% in 2018.

Average *inboxing rates*



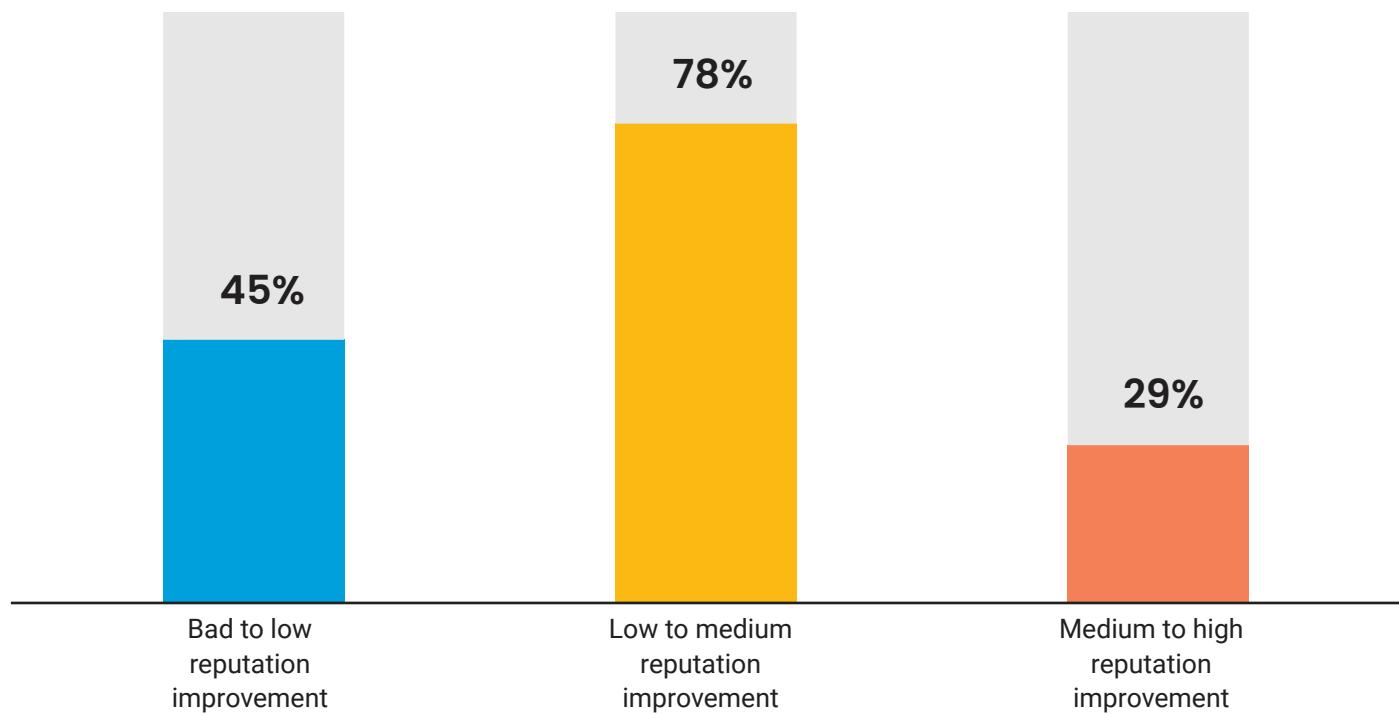


Moving the needle

Improving reputation by one tier

When identifying the brands that were able to improve their Gmail reputation, we divided them into two groups: those that improved their domain reputation by one tier and those that improved by two or more tiers. The former category included senders that improved from bad to low, low to medium, or medium to high.

Inbox rates increase for senders who improved domain reputation by one tier



When examined as a group, senders who improved their reputation by one tier experienced a 55% improvement in inboxing rates at Gmail. Those who moved from low to medium reputation saw the largest increase in inboxing – improving by 78%. Senders who registered a shift from medium to high improved inboxing by 29% and those who moved from bad to low reputation improved inboxing by 45%.

How did brands improve their reputation by a tier?

Some senders improved by one tier because of Gmail algorithm changes, particularly those who moved from medium to high reputation. However, the biggest shifts were a result of implementing deliverability best practices and following [Gmail bulk sender guidelines](#).



Brand example

Decreasing the number of emails that target inactive subscribers improved Gmail reputation

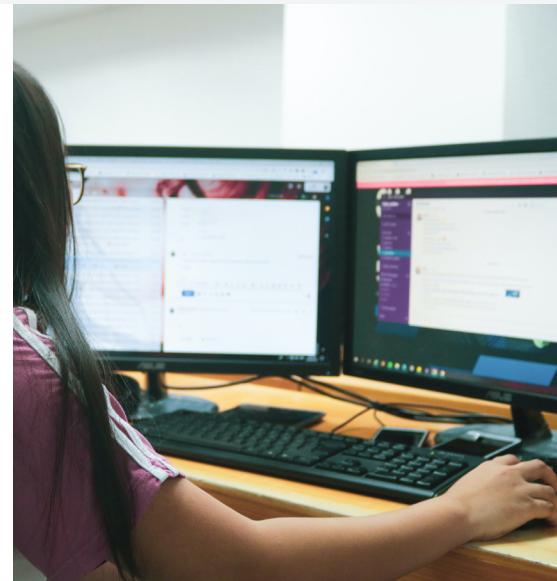
A sender mailed its active subscribers along with its inactive audience (users who had last engaged 1-3 years ago) 25 times during a 5-month period between November 2016 and March 2017. This brand had medium domain reputation and drove an average inbox placement rate of 67.3%.

Within a 5-month period after those campaigns (between August and December 2017), the sender mailed its inactive audience half as frequently (12 times). As a result, the sender's domain reputation improved to high and inboxing rates jumped to 97.9%.

Brand Example

Aggressive targeting yields fewer spam traps, leading to an increase in reputation

One of the brands in the sample was hitting an average of 50 spam traps per day in mid-2017. The sender made some changes by implementing aggressive targeting in their email program; they started suppressing users who had not opened in over 30 days. After making these changes, the number of spam traps the brand was hitting daily decreased by almost 96%. As a result, the brand's domain reputation improved from medium to high and its average inboxing rate increased from 87.2% to 94%.



Key takeaways: moving the needle by one tier

- Marketers improved their Gmail reputation and inboxing rates by ensuring that inactive subscribers were mailed less frequently.
- Implementing data hygiene best practices which reduced the chance of sending to bad addresses – particularly if the sender did not have confirmed opt-in - improved Gmail reputation.
- Targeting only the most active subscriber segments can reduce spam traps and boost sender reputation.



Reputation revival

Improving reputation by two tiers or more

Marketers who were able to improve their Gmail domain reputation by two tiers or more included senders that moved from bad to high or low to high reputation. During the course of the study, no senders moved from a bad to medium reputation.

Inboxing rates increase for senders who improved domain reputation by two tiers or more



2% ● 2017 inboxing
97% ○ 2018 inboxing



41% ● 2017 inboxing
97% ○ 2018 inboxing

As expected, senders who were able to increase their reputation by two tiers or more saw the biggest bumps in performance. All senders who moved up by two tiers or more had a bad or low domain reputation in mid-2017 and an average inboxing rate of 34.5%. By 2018, this same group of senders had improved their average inboxing rate to 97.4%.

Senders who moved by two tiers – from low to high Gmail reputation – improved inbox placement by 138% - from an average of 41% in 2017 to 97% in 2018. Senders who improved by more than two tiers – from bad to high reputation – saw their inbox placement jump from 2% to a whopping 97%.

How did brands improve their reputation by two tiers or more?

Some brands that improved their reputation by two or more tiers were new mailers. These senders were able to improve their reputation with an effective ramp-up strategy. Others were able to make the jump by improving their mailing practices and halting some of the activities that were damaging their reputation.



Brand example

Effective ramp-up strategy for new mailers leads to reputation improvements

Brands with new domains and IPs that followed a personalized ramp-up strategy including a mix of targeting, mailing frequency and metering (controlling the rate at which they deploy messages) were able to establish and significantly improve their IP and domain reputation from their initial sends. A good ramp-up strategy means considering how Gmail and other ISPs protect their users from unwanted messages.

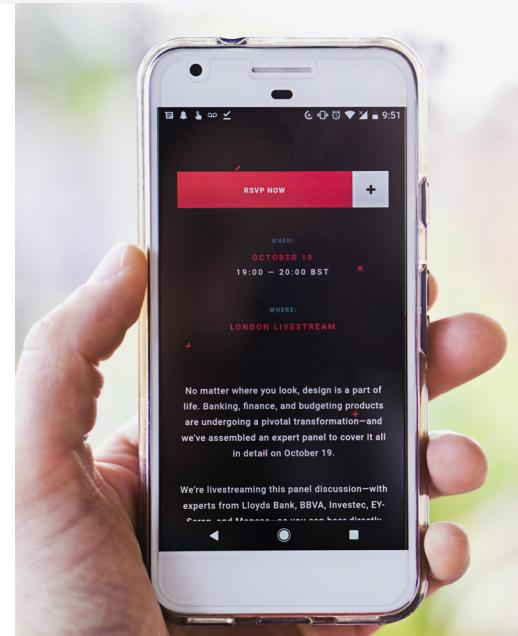
New senders who are mailing off an IP for the first time should initially control the rate (metering/throttling) at which they deploy messages. If a new sender with a large campaign audience deploys its message all at once and without controlling the number of emails it sends per hour, Gmail may view this unestablished high-volume sender as a spammer and subsequently block its messages.

New senders should take extra steps to ensure they are only mailing their most engaged subscribers, especially in the initial phases of establishing their new IPs. By targeting their most engaged audience first, these marketers can build positive reputation and expedite the ramp-up process with Gmail. Finally, new senders are also encouraged to employ consistent monitoring and ISP remediation support from dedicated analysts to ensure a smooth ramp-up period.

Brand Example

Halting affiliate marketing messages vastly improves Gmail reputation

One of the senders in our 150+ set was experiencing low reputation despite only mailing subscribers who had been active within the past 6 months. After further review of additional mailing streams within their program, we discovered that a co-registration program from another division and some affiliate marketing messages were being sent off of the same domain. Because these affiliate and co-registration messages were targeting users who had not opted to receive them, their engagement was very low and was hurting the sender's overall Gmail reputation. After halting these message streams, the sender's reputation improved from low to high and inboxing rate improved from 38% to 100%.





Key takeaways: improving by two tiers or more

- While ISP algorithms are constantly changing, sending messages that users want to receive is always a best practice for achieving good reputation, especially for marketers' primary mailing domain.
- With the help of an effective and personalized ramp-up strategy, senders who are warming up new domains and IPs can experience rapid improvement in reputation.
- Consistent monitoring is important for both new and established senders, so marketers should closely watch the activity on all mail streams to ensure they are adhering to best practices and are not damaging their sending reputation.

Declining reputation

Some senders saw a decrease in their Gmail reputation over the course of the report. Some of these senders experienced declines even though they hadn't made any changes to their mailing practices; others saw their reputation deteriorate due to mailing practices that caused a loss of status with Gmail.



Brand example

Sender who routinely mailed to inactive subscribers experienced a decline in reputation

A sender who routinely mailed to inactive subscribers (those with no activity in over 12 months) off of its primary domain saw consistently low subscriber engagement. This resulted in a decline in sending reputation from low to bad and a drop in inboxing rates from 26% to 0%. The sender experienced a decline despite making no changes to its mailing practices, which indicated that the decline was due to a change in Gmail's algorithm.

Brand Example

Inconsistent mailing leads to a decline in reputation

In mid-2017, a sender who mailed at a consistent frequency (one to three deployments per week) had medium Gmail reputation and generated an average inboxing rate of 78.2%. When this sender halted mailings for a period of two months, its reputation declined to bad and its inboxing rate dropped to an average of 35.6%.





Key takeaways: declining reputation

- The old adage “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it” does not apply to deliverability because Gmail (and other ISPs) are continually making adjustments to their algorithms to increase user protection. Senders who routinely engage in suboptimal mailing practices may find that their reputations decrease even when they have made no changes to their program.
- As Gmail continues to make adjustments to the way they assign reputation scores, brands need to meticulously monitor and improve their mailing practices.
- Mailing frequency is an important factor in Gmail reputation. If a marketer lets email traffic fall off for an extended period and then suddenly pick back up, Gmail will view this as potentially spammy activity and reputation will decline.





Conclusion

Though email has been around for quite a while, it remains a key marketing tool for most brands. As Gmail's user base and influence as an ISP leader continue to grow, marketers must work to understand the levers they can pull to influence their reputation at this ISP. Over the course of this report, we learned that certain deliverability best practices like mailing the most engaged audience segments, improving data hygiene and implementing smart ramp-up strategies correlate with improvements to Gmail reputation.

Sources

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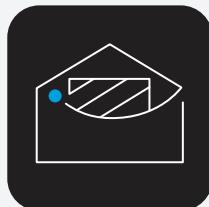
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Wondering how to improve your Gmail reputation?
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