



data
axle

Agencies

Optimize email campaigns for savvy inboxing

Introduction

With the pandemic driving an accelerated shift to digital communication, many agencies' success is tied to their ability to deliver high-performing digital campaigns for their clients. For example, Kyle Shurtz, VP of performance at Avalauch Media, reported an increase in business during the pandemic. "Because we focus strictly on online advertising, we had more business come through as people shifted from offline to online. We anticipate 2021 to be much more of the same. Our goal is to grow by about 20% year-over-year."

Email is consistently one of the most popular and cost-effective digital channels for brand clients. With email generating around \$40 for every dollar spent (an ROI of about 4,000%), email is your clients' bread and butter; for email agencies, it's YOUR bread and butter. Yet deliverability challenges are a common struggle that prevent your clients' emails from reaching the inbox, negatively impacting their conversion rates and decreasing revenue on a crucial digital communications channel.

While there is no "one size fits all" solution to deliverability, agencies can help their clients improve their digital communication programs by offering deliverability reporting, monitoring, and services. Most clients entrusting their email deployment to an agency do not have deliverability experts on their team – and if they do, they need their agency to help deliver the metrics needed to affect change.

In this whitepaper, we'll outline why agencies should expand their deliverability offerings and how to get started.



Part #1

8 reasons agencies should boost their deliverability capabilities through technology and partnerships:

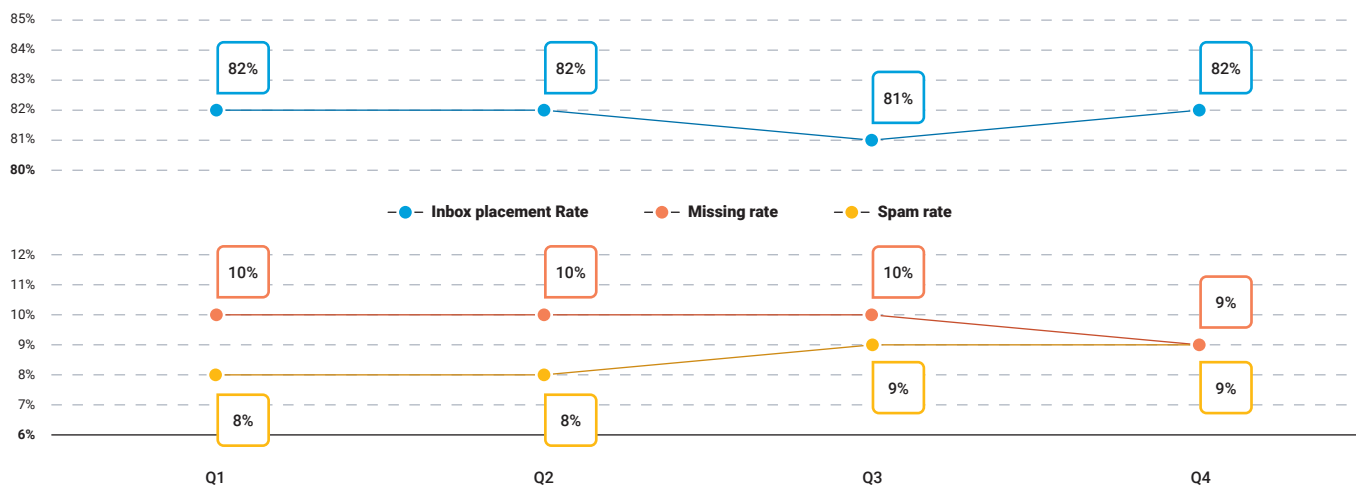


#1

Deliverability is vital to your clients

Deliverability challenges plague agency clients and prevent emails from reaching subscribers' inboxes. In fact, a 2020 email deliverability report demonstrated that nearly 1 in 5 emails from U.S. senders failed to reach the inbox.¹

U.S. senders' email deliverability rates



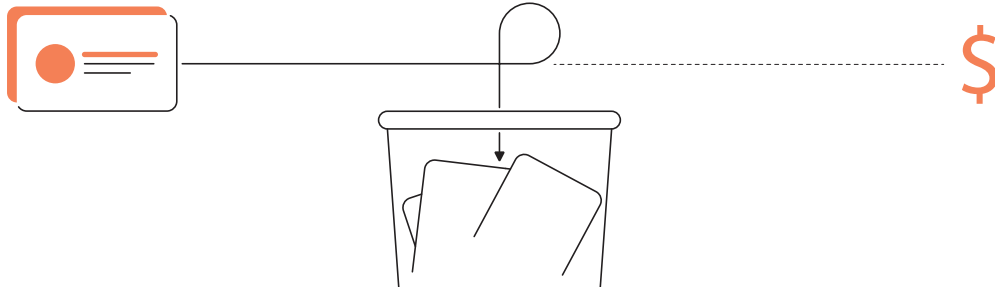
Published on MarketingCharts.com

With email deliverability challenges such a common struggle for marketers, brand clients consistently need support in this department. Agencies, large and small, with expertise in multiple areas – from creative, to content, to marketing campaign execution – can expand their capabilities and support their clients' efforts to reach the inbox (and ultimately increase email program ROI).



#2

Deliverability issues hurt your campaign performance

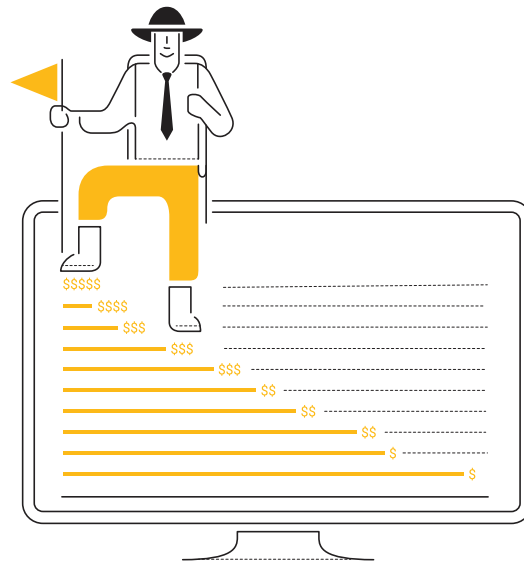


You can create the most brilliant campaign strategy, design the most beautiful creative, and the most carefully crafted messaging, but if no one sees it, how can it drive engagement? It's impossible to generate results for clients if their emails are not reaching the inbox. With email's high ROI you can quickly increase your clients' campaign success by improving the number of emails that make it to their intended audience. Too frequently, agencies can be unfairly blamed for lackluster campaign performance when the culprit is really deliverability issues. Without deliverability capabilities, your agency gives up the ability to recognize and control inboxing troubles that may negatively impact your KPIs (key performance indicators).

#3

Easy upsell

A recent survey found that, on average, **27% of agency revenue** comes from the largest client.²



Successful agencies know that effectively upselling top clients with new services can be the difference between growth and stagnation. Yet, in a recent survey, agencies reported that generating more revenue from existing clients is one of their top challenges.³

Many agencies do not recognize that offering deliverability services is within reach, even if they do not have deliverability experts on staff. [Building partnerships](#) and adopting [deliverability technology](#) can give agencies the resources to offer complementary services to drive growth for both the agency and its clients. If your agency is already involved in creating and planning digital campaigns and email, deliverability services can be a natural fit.

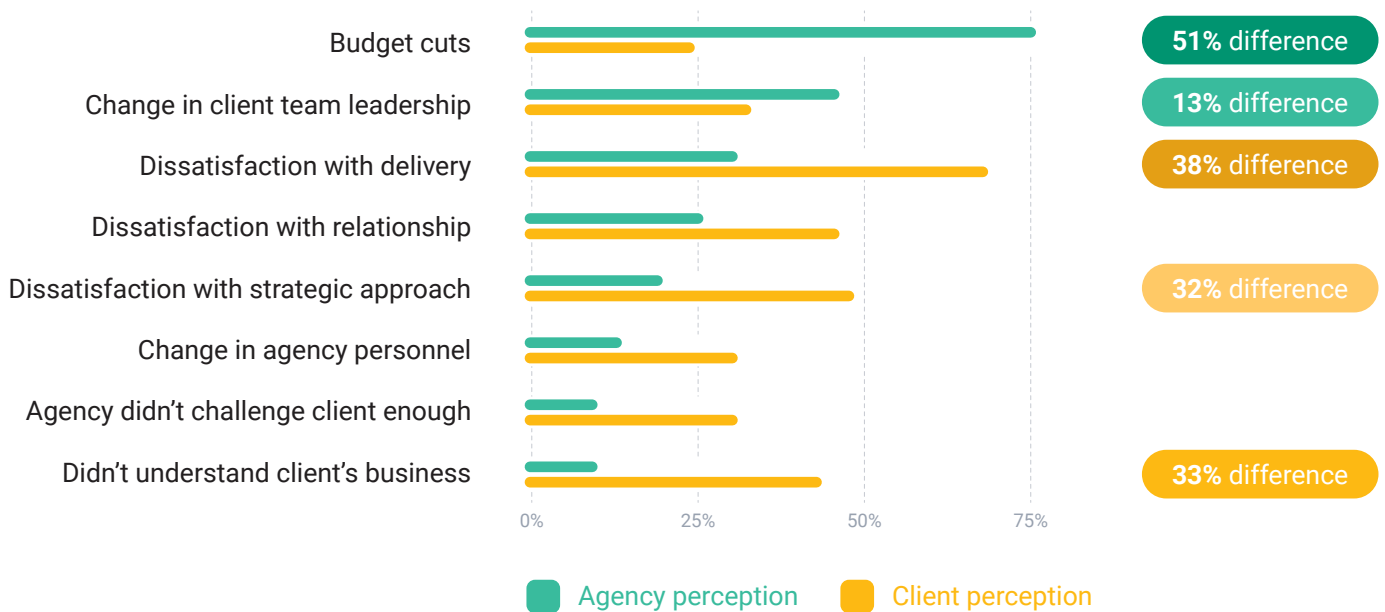


#4

Improve client retention/reduce client turnover

In a recent report, 75% of agencies said that the number one reason their agency-client partnerships end is budget cuts, but only 24% of clients say that budget cuts were the reason they cut ties. In fact, client-side marketers **selected budget cuts least frequently** as a reason for ending a partnership.⁴ In the clients' view, they simply expected more from their agency than they could deliver.

Agency perception vs. client perception of why partnerships end



Source: setup.us/marketing-relationship-survey-results-2019

Deliverability issues can be complicated to navigate (and extremely stressful for brand clients), but with the right resources, agencies can be the hero their clients need. Proving your worth in times of trouble can go a long way towards making your agency indispensable to your clients and help you meet their expectations.

#5

Deepen the client-agency relationship

The average client-agency relationship in 1984 was 7.2 years. Recent estimates indicate the average tenure is now less than three years.⁵ Agencies with high client tenure tend to work with multiple departments and teams within the company. Expanding your service capabilities can help you become more deeply embedded into your client's ecosystem and extend your current relationship across business units, making it more likely that your relationship will continue.



#6

Become a full-service marketing partner

There are over 120,000 agencies in the U.S. alone (from tiny to behemoth).⁶ To stand out, agencies need to provide the services their clients consistently need to generate growth. In the digital marketing world, this includes capabilities with email, and email success requires deliverability best practices. Offering a breadth and depth of service can help drive [new wins for your agency](#) and improve client retention. Adding deliverability services can help you become a one-stop solution for your clients and proactively tackle deliverability problems before they know it, before they lose money, and before they look for help elsewhere.

#7

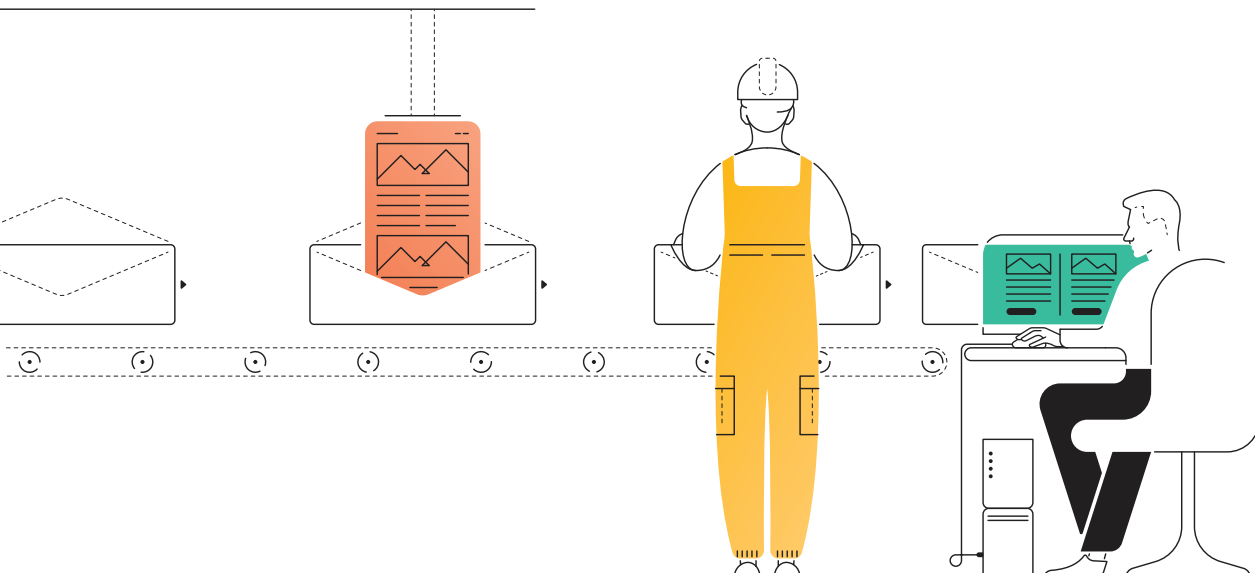
Protect your own brand

Considering the fact that 86% of business professionals prefer to use email when communicating for business purposes, your agency is likely using some form of email marketing to grow your business. This means it isn't just your clients who can benefit from deliverability expertise. Agencies can lead by example with deliverability best practices and protecting your own reputation (and campaign results) in the process.

#8

Strong engagement and deliverability go hand-in-hand

Email deliverability and engagement are inextricably linked. Improving engagement with deliverability best practices in mind (for example, a targeted reactivation campaign to lapsed subscribers) can boost inboxing rates. While taking steps to improve your clients' inboxing rates will positively impact their engagement metrics and KPIs – and, in turn, your agency's standing with your client.





Part #2

Deliverability resources for agencies

How does an agency looking to offer deliverability capabilities get started?

Even if you plan to work with a deliverability partner, like [Data Axle's Inboxable team](#), it's a good idea to get to know some of the basics terms and understand what impacts your clients' ability to reach their audiences' inboxes and why their messages may be blocked.

Know the building blocks of deliverability

The glossary below defines some of the key deliverability terms that agencies need to know to get started.

SPAM

An email sent to someone who has not given permission to be contacted (i.e., hasn't opted into your subscriber list) is spam. As a form of "checks and balances" and to ensure that users do not receive unauthorized emails, ISPs have set up spam traps as a way to identify senders who email without permission.

There are three types of [spam traps](#) used to identify spammers:

- **Inactive recipients** - Email addresses that have not been active in the last 12 months or more.
- **Honey pots** - Email addresses that have never been released to the world nor subscribed to any mailing program.
- **Typo traps** - Email addresses with a purposely misspelled domain name that help ISPs identify senders who do not have a confirmed opt-in process.

When marketers send emails to spam traps, their campaigns are flagged and potentially blocked.



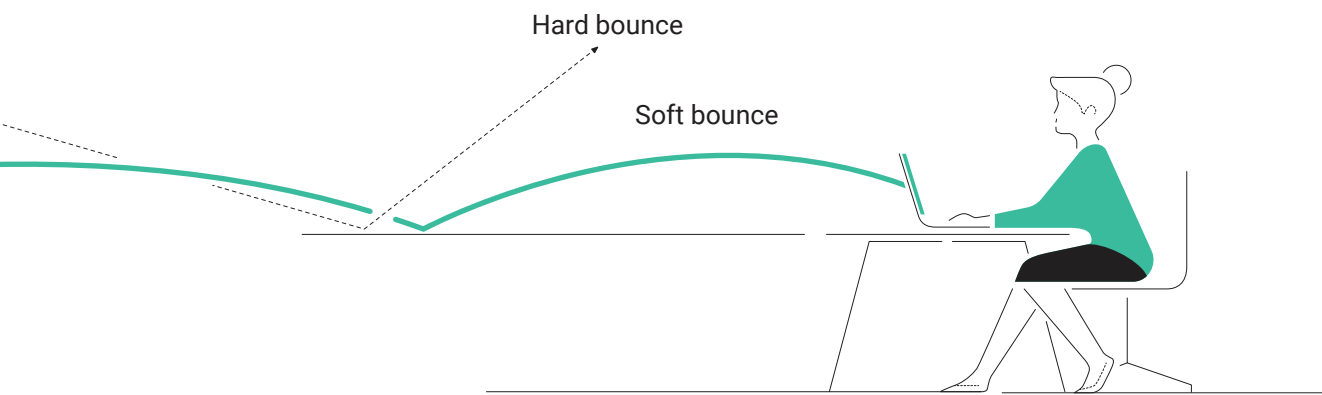
BULKING

The process of an email message being trapped by spam filters and sent to the junk folder.

BOUNCE

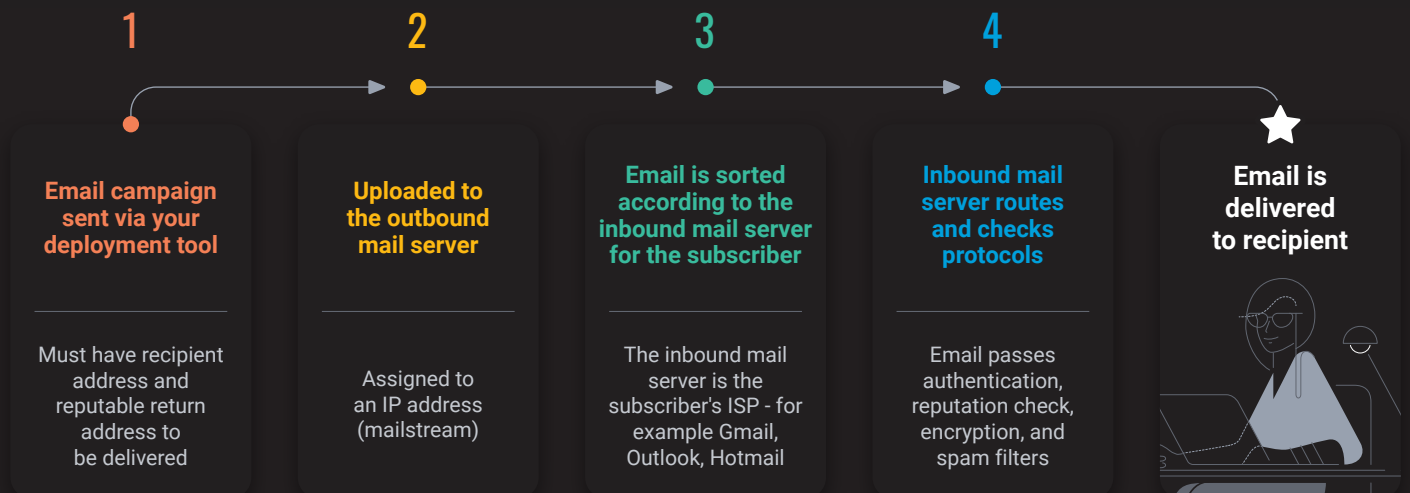
An email that can't be delivered is said to have bounced (as in, bounced back to the sender).

- A **soft bounce** most commonly occurs when the address is valid, but the email couldn't be delivered because the mailbox was full, the message was too large, or the ISP server was down. These are short-term deliverability issues that can be resolved relatively easily. Soft bounces also occur when there are typos with the domain, which prevent a sender from connecting with the correct address.
- A **hard bounce** results from an email address that is either invalid or doesn't exist as recorded and shared by the ISP. These invalid email addresses should be removed from the subscriber list since they will never get delivered.



What happens when you send an email?

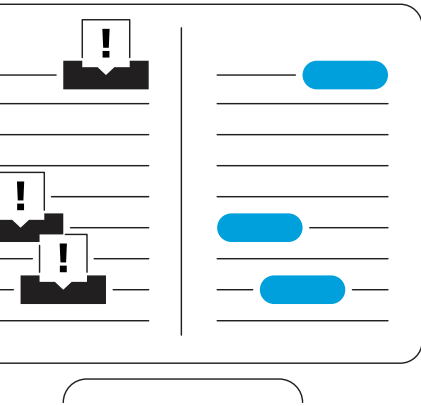
Individuals and businesses sent and received 306.4 billion emails each day in 2020.³ How did those emails make it to the inbox? To put it simply, the process looks like this:





How do ISPs decide which emails reach the inbox?

The four largest ISPs (Gmail, Hotmail, AOL, and Yahoo) use the following methods to evaluate marketing emails and decide whether they make it to the inbox:

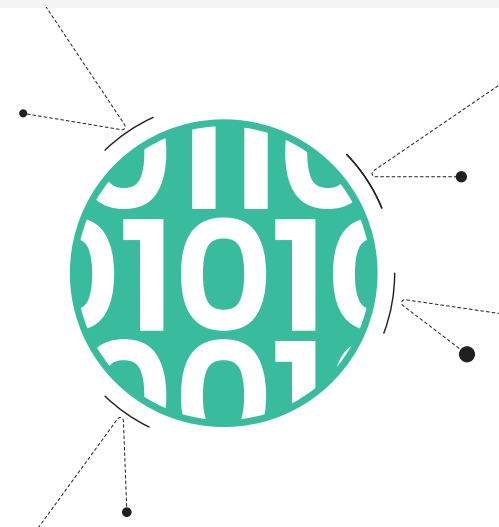


Authentication

Authentication protocols like SPF (Sender Policy Framework), DKIM (a combination of Yahoo-designed DomainKeys and Cisco's Identified Mail), and [DMARC](#) (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance), and [BIMI](#) allow ISPs to identify legitimate senders and classify messages as safe. To protect users from forged or "spoofed" messages used for [phishing scams](#), ISPs will likely send unauthenticated messages to the spam folder or reject them.

Blocklist

A blocklist (f.k.a., blacklist) is a publicly available, real-time database of IP addresses that send spam. If your client lands on a blocklist, major ISPs will likely block their campaigns. Blocklisting generally results from a sender's poor list quality, an unexpected spike in sending volume, or end-user complaints. ISPs may maintain their own list or consult public lists when determining whether to block emails from a particular sender. Spamhaus and Barracuda are both examples of large public blocklist databases.



Encryption

Encryption protects users by ensuring that messages sent between the company and a subscriber cannot be tampered with and that another party cannot intercept those private communications. Any email that is not protected with [Transport Layer Security \(TLS\) encryption](#) is flagged by the ISP, making it unlikely for these messages to make it to the inbox. Even if it lands in the inbox, the email is flagged with an icon of a red open padlock, indicating that it could be malicious and decreasing the likelihood for a subscriber to engage.



Sender reputation

ISPs employ algorithms to give your clients' IPs and domains a "sender score." Your client's reputation is determined by how well they engage the ISPs' users and follow email best practices regarding sending volumes, authentication, encryption, etc. If their sender score falls below a certain threshold, ISPs may send their emails to the spam folder instead of the inbox.



How many subscribers click the "spam" button



How many subscribers ignore the message



How long do subscribers view/read a particular message



How many subscribers move a message from the inbox to the spam folder



How many subscribers move a message from the spam to the inbox

These metrics inform ISPs how their users interact with message from specific senders and, in turn, determine the rate at which a message will inbox

Enhance your clients' content & creative to increase inboxing

To determine whether to deliver a message to the inbox, ISPs rely on engagement data. As a result, [email design and content](#) have a significant impact on deliverability. Agencies can use some of the following design and content strategies to improve engagement and, ultimately, their clients' inboxing rates:

Optimize subject lines & content for deliverability

When it comes to hitting the inbox, words matter. Many agencies know that using [subject line best practices](#) and carefully choosing copy in the body of their email can improve their inboxing rates.

For example:

Avoid language that might trigger spam filters

Using certain terms that are common in spam emails can cause your legitimate communication to be flagged by ISPs. Examples include:

- Overusing exclamation points or special characters, particularly in your subject lines
- All-caps in the subject line
- Words like "free," "winner," "guarantee," "check or money order," "free trial," etc.

Use care with your links

When linking within your clients' emails:

- Don't include an excessive number of links in the body of your email. While there is no test-to-link ratio that is going to guarantee delivery, agencies can improve deliverability by carefully balancing meaningful, engaging content and useful links.
- Avoid publishing full URL links or links that are very long.
- Don't use generic link shorteners.
- Make sure you are not linking to websites that are problematic or compromised.



Create compelling CTAs

A call-to-action that drives engagement can boost your client's inboxing rate because their sender reputation is partially based on how ISPs interact with their emails. ISPs use metrics like unique click-through-rate and click-to-open rate to help determine sender scores. Some CTA best practices include:

- Don't be afraid to use some out-of-the-box copy on your clients' CTAs.
- Use action words like "book now."
- Use design to guide subscribers' eyes towards your CTAs.
- Avoid using too many CTAs, which can overwhelm your subscribers.

Leverage templates to create the right blend of text and images

A study from Litmus revealed that 43% of Gmail users read their emails without images,⁷ and Outlook's desktop application has images turned off by default. Yet many brands and their agency partners continue to create image-only emails in photoshop. These emails may be good-looking in the Photoshop platform, but when a large portion of your client's audience has images turned off (or is waiting for the email to load) and can't see your copy or CTAs, they ultimately disengage, which hurts inboxing rates and revenue per email.

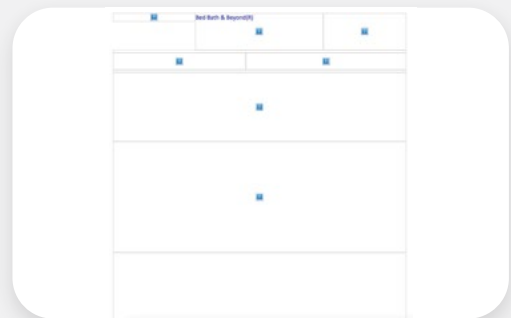
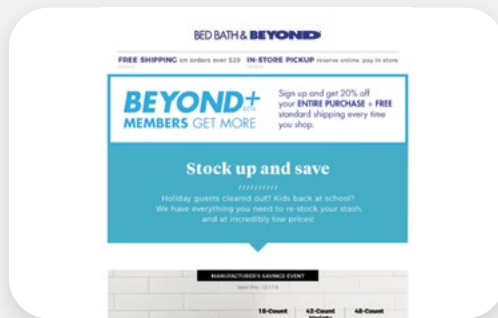


BRAND EXAMPLE

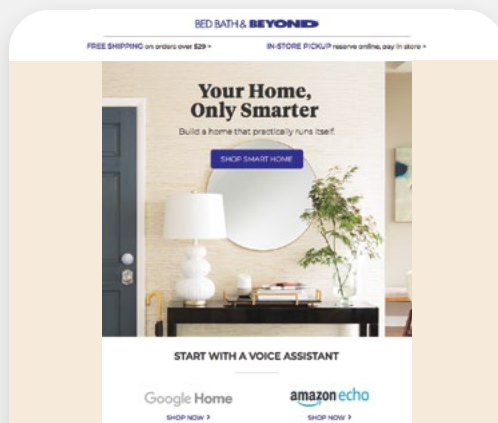
Bed Bath & Beyond

When [Bed Bath & Beyond](#) worked with Data Axle to update their templates, they incorporated an images-off ready design with "bulletproof" buttons (buttons that are visible when images are off) to improve email engagement rates and user experience.

Image only design



"Images-off ready" design





Enhance the mobile experience with responsive design

Mobile opens account for 46% of all email opens.⁸ Yet a study from Econsultancy indicated that 40% of companies said their strategy for optimizing email on different devices is “basic,” with a further 10% describing it as non-existent.⁹ This poses a problem for brands; if your client’s mobile email design is weak, nearly half of their email opens are likely not to convert into a click and, ultimately, a purchase. This, in turn, translates into declining engagement and rising unsubscribes, leading to deliverability issues.

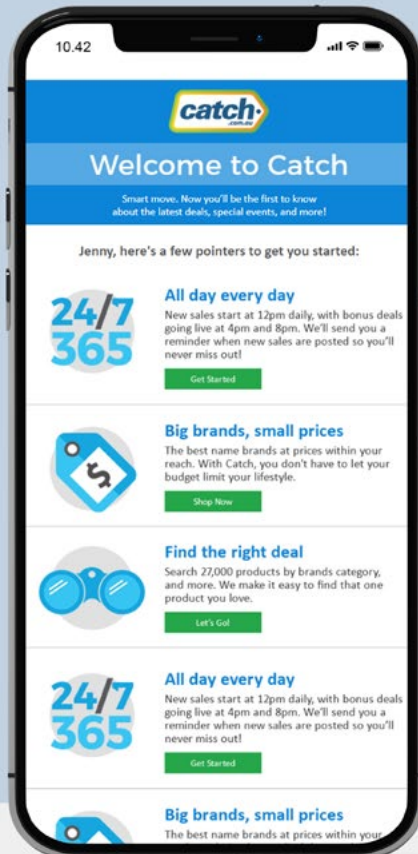
You can mitigate these issues for clients by ensuring you have staff or tools that can implement responsive design. For example, Inboxable’s [email builder tool](#) has a drag-and-drop interface that automatically creates mobile-responsive templates. You can also instantly see how your messages will render across web, desktop, and mobile clients before deployment, which allows you to identify any issues and remedy them pre-flight to ensure emails and CTAs are readable and clickable in all environments.



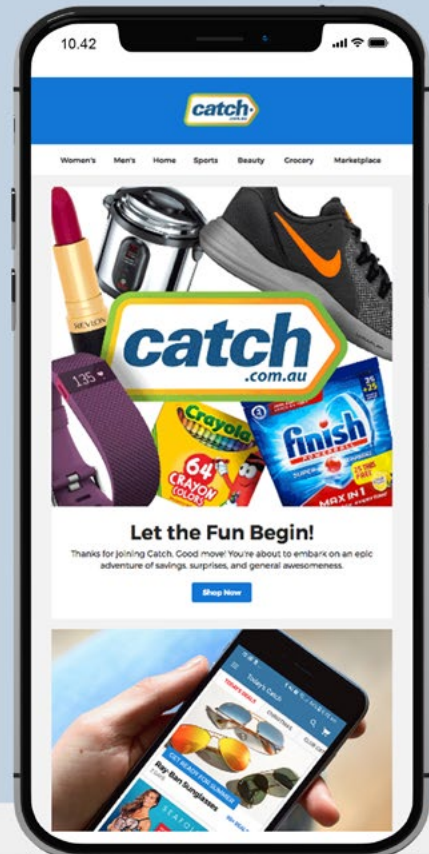
BRAND EXAMPLE Catch Group

Australian ecommerce powerhouse Catch Group worked with Data Axle to create a responsive email template with a mobile-first design that would optimize the use of space while encouraging readers to scroll all the way through the content. The new template vastly improved the mobile user experience and engagement, with initial tests showing a 143% increase in mobile unique click rate. [Read the full case study.](#)

Welcome email:
Old template



Welcome email:
New template





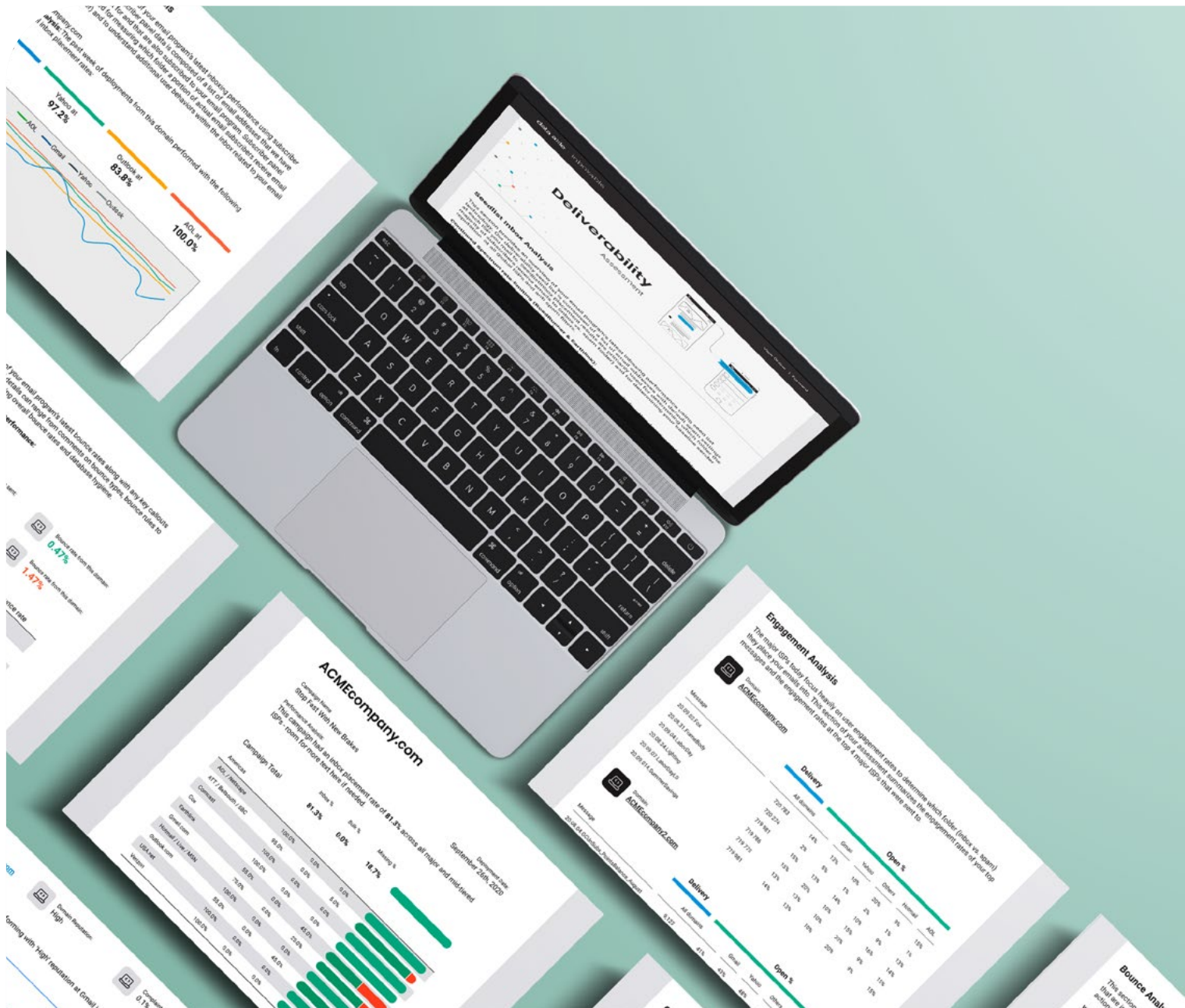
Give clients advanced insights to support their email initiatives

Twenty-three percent of clients in a Forbes survey said seeing more consumer insights from their agency partners was a top priority (the second highest category behind business strategy).¹⁰ Agencies can help their clients move beyond basic email engagement metrics like open rates, which provide only a rudimentary understanding of a recipient's interaction with an email.

For example, Inboxable's analytics capabilities can provide further insight into a subscriber's interests and engagement, including:

- How long a subscriber engages with a message
- Which platform and devices are used by subscribers to interact with emails
- Geo-tagging to learn where subscribers are opening your emails

These additional data points give agencies a greater opportunity to help brand clients connect with their subscribers resulting in stronger campaign results.





Implement robust deliverability tools

Agencies have unique needs that need to be considered when researching deliverability platforms. Your deliverability solution should include:

Competitive pricing

A flexible platform

For example, Data Axle's Inboxable platform gives agencies the power to deliver a deliverability platform to their clients in multiple ways – offering self-service and full-service options to both the agency and their end-user clients.

Agencies can:

- Have a direct data feed via API to their existing platform
- Resell the platform to clients, and Data Axle can manage the onboarding and ongoing services.
- Whitelabel the tool, and clients can use it directly
- Rely on Data Axle's deliverability experts to monitor clients' deliverability and build reports and data that the agency presents to their clients

Ease of use

Agencies should look for a user-friendly platform that gives both clients and deliverability experts quick insights into inboxing. For example, Inboxable is marketer-friendly with a simplistic user interface focused on measuring each campaign's performance. While there are a wide variety of deliverability KPIs to measure, Inboxable answers the simple question "did my client's campaign reach the inbox?" within a single view.

Complete Deliverability monitoring

Agencies can use deliverability monitoring to quickly see opportunities to improve client results. For example, the Inboxable platform includes the following functionality:

- Inbox placement reporting at major ISPs in all regions of the world
- Subfolder inbox placement measurement
- Creative rendering reporting on Desktop, Mobile, and Webmail clients
- Domain and IP blocklist scanning
- Spam trap detection and reporting
- Authentication reporting with DMARC data reporting
- Subscriber engagement analytics
- Google reputation and complaint data reporting



AGENCY EXAMPLE Acme Marketing

Acme Marketing's client is not tracking deliverability metrics. Their open rates and click rates are underperforming, but since the brand is not monitoring their inboxing rates, they misinterpret the cause of the low engagement to be the agency's fault and do not attribute it to their emails getting blocked. Acme Marketing could help their client improve inboxing and email performance by offering deliverability insights and recommendations using a deliverability platform. The agency could whitelabel an existing platform, like Data Axle Inboxable, and allow their client to use it directly. Alternatively, Acme could use the deliverability platform themselves, either through a self-service contract or utilizing their deliverability provider's experts to monitor on their behalf.



Find the right partner

Agencies can quickly ramp up their deliverability offerings by finding the right partner. When vetting a deliverability partner, agencies should look for the following:

Flexible contracts

Agencies and their clients have quickly changing needs. For this reason, it's important to find a reliable partner who offers flexible contracts. Some deliverability providers require their clients to commit to extended, multi-year contracts – a requirement that forces agencies to take unnecessary risks if their clients change course. Data Axle Inboxable clients have pointed to the fact that they don't need to be tied down with multi-year contracts or be surprised by hidden fees as a reason they chose us as a partner.

Whitelabeled services

The right deliverability partner will have the capabilities to build out your agency's deliverability services. Finding a partner that will allow your agency to whitenelabel deliverability services can rapidly expand your offerings. This is especially important considering that talent acquisition (particularly specialized talent) is a top challenge for many agencies.

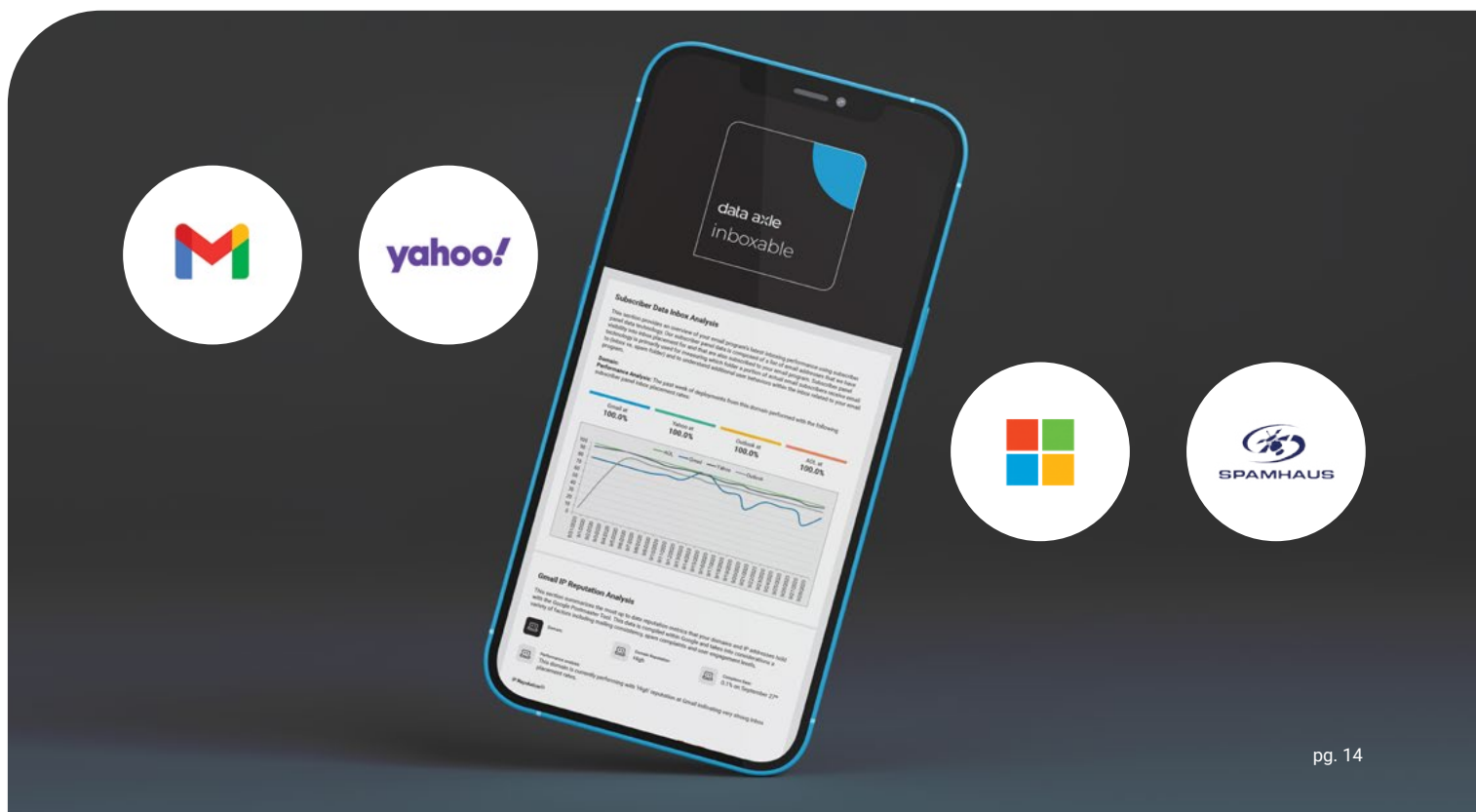
Works as an extension of your team

Even if your agency currently has deliverability experts on staff, having additional support and proactive guidance can provide another set of eyes if your clients run into deliverability issues.

Experience working with ISPs to remediate blocks

The right deliverability partner will have expertise in working with ISPs to optimize send rates and clear blocks. Experienced deliverability experts will know how to proactively reach out to ISPs to avoid issues before they happen and quickly clear them up if they do.


For example, Data Axle's Inboxable team has industry-leading relationships with direct communication across all major ISPs and blocklists including: Gmail, Yahoo, AOL, Microsoft, Spamhaus and a repository of ISP contacts for all major international ISPs and spam filters as well as expertise utilizing all relevant ISP reputation metrics on behalf of our partners and their clients.



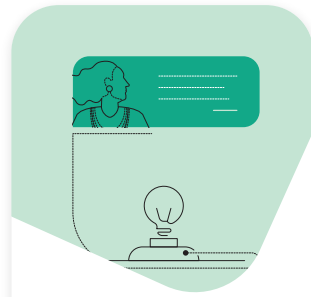


Depth and breadth of services

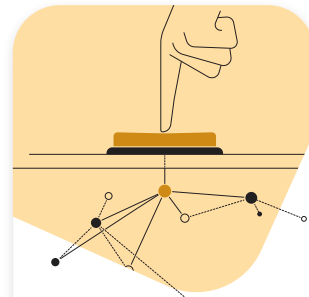
For example, Inboxable deliverability clients are partnered with a designated deliverability expert who tracks and analyzes deliverability metrics on their behalf:



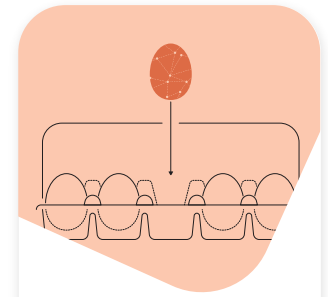
ISP remediation



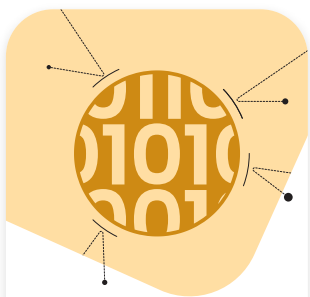
Deliverability strategy




Blacklisting alerts




Inbox placement monitoring




Bounce metrics monitoring



Spam trap hit scanning



Sender reputation assessment



Authentication expertise

Data Axle's extended service options cover a wide range of related competencies, including data hygiene, creative reviews, creative design, and strategic consulting that can identify broader issues related to deliverability and campaign engagement.



BRAND EXAMPLE **UCLA Health**

Data Axle client UCLA Health needed to send critical communications regarding COVID-19 to patients in the pandemic's early days. These crucial emails would require deploying to a volume that was significantly higher than their typical sends. Data Axle's deliverability team worked directly with ISPs to negotiate temporary IP and domain protection and coordinate delivery to ensure UCLA Health's communication reached patients.



Conclusion

Agencies work hard to create effective campaigns for their clients. For many, deliverability insights and services may be the key to increasing campaign performance and client satisfaction, and incremental revenue for the agency.

Want to learn how you can build your capabilities?

Partner with one of the longest-running email agencies in the business with an expert team of deliverability analysts.

SOURCES

- 1 marketingcharts.com
- 2 setup.us/blog
- 3 martechtoday.com
- 4 setup.us/blog
- 5 marketing.sfgate.com
- 6 forbes.com
- 7 campaignmonitor.com
- 8 blog.hubspot.com
- 9 econsultancy.com
- 10 whatagraph.com



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