phrasee
say it better

Email subject line optimization tips to boost your bottom line

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We help global brands *say it better.*

You've already experienced our
AI in action

ebay™

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virgin atlantic

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SAMSUNG

"Phrasee makes you money, so you're more likely to get your bonus."

- *Gareth Jones,*
former CMO, eBay UK

Ah, the humble email subject line...

It's the last element of an email campaign most brands think about, and often the one upon which email marketing teams expend the least amount of time and effort. It's the single line of text that appears beside your brand's sender name in a subscriber's inbox. It tempts subscribers to open your emails, hinting at the treasures contained within. This single line of copy can (and often does) mean the difference between email campaign success and email campaign failure.

So, it'd better be good.

But what, exactly, differentiates a "good" email subject line from a "bad" email subject line? How will you know a good one when you see it? And, most importantly, how can you optimize this crucial line of email marketing copy to increase open rates and revenue in the future?

Let's take a look...
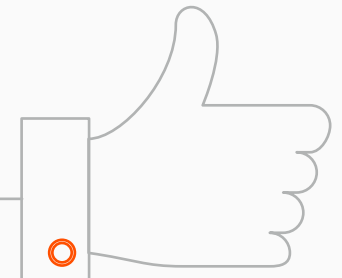
What makes an email subject line good or bad?

Short-term thinking and the misguided quest for instant KPI improvement have proven a fertile ground for bad email subject line language strategies to take root.

These strategies include (but are not limited to):

- The use of misleading language (e.g. beginning a subject line with "Regarding your order", "Urgent", "Action required" or the egregious false "RE:"s and "FW:"s.).

- Using language that sounds similar to that of other brands (blending into a subscriber's crowded inbox will get you nowhere).

- "Spammy" language (reminder: nobody likes spam).

- Using off-brand language (your brand's voice matters!).

While such tactics can sometimes lead to a short-term uplift in performance, audiences wise up quickly, and their impact over the long haul invariably proves to be negative. This negative impact manifests itself most acutely in three specific ways:

1. It damages subscriber perceptions of your brand.
2. Open rates drop over time.
3. It leads to higher unsubscribe rates.

What makes an email subject line good or bad?

When it comes to writing good email subject lines, there are a few general rules that every brand and email marketer should be following as a matter of course.

Avoid using misleading language.
A marketing email's subject line should always match what is actually in the email's body copy. If your subject line promises a 50% discount, your email had better not contain a 25% discount. In the brand-subscriber relationship, honesty matters.

Use your brand's voice.
Your customers have invited you into their inbox because they like your brand. Respect the terms of that invitation by maintaining the brand voice that got you there. Fill their inboxes with spammy, off-brand subject lines, and not only will they quickly tune your voice out, but you may also be asked to leave and never get invited back again.

Offer value.
The adage "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" holds true in the inbox. Successful email marketing offers the subscriber something in return for their attention and engagement. The value your emails offer can take many forms, from enticing discounts and entertaining content to stunning visuals, but it'd better be there. If it isn't, you'll lose the attention of your subscribers pretty quickly.

Be different.
Guess what? There is a 99.99999% chance that you aren't the only brand with access to a subscriber's inbox. In fact, there is a high probability that your marketing emails will appear sandwiched between those of several other brands. An effective email subject line is your best chance to stand out from the crowd and garner enough attention to get that all important email open. That's why it's crucial that you use subject line language that doesn't look like everyone else's. Get creative.

What makes an email subject line good or bad?

While following these rules can sometimes mean foregoing short-term gains in email marketing performance, it will positively impact overall email marketing performance in the long run in several important ways:

1. It protects subscriber perceptions of your brand and its emails.

2. It builds and maintains robust relationships with your subscribers.

3. It results in lower unsubscribe rates.

4. It leads to higher open rates over time.

5. More email marketing revenue is generated over time.

Of course, these are just the basics of an effective email subject line optimization strategy. True email subject line optimization requires a deeper look at all the elements that make up an email subject line, and how they combine in the wild to impact email marketing performance.

Let's take a look at some of these...

Six linguistic elements that affect subject line performance

1. Sentiments

It's not what you say, it's how you say it...

As we at Phrasee have said many times, the words a brand chooses are important. But the sentiment those words convey is even more important when it comes to email subject lines. When all the individual words you have chosen to use in your subject line are combined, they form the message you are sending out to the world.

The big question is: how will your subscribers interpret that message? How your subject line will be received and interpreted by your audience will determine how effective it is in the end. Is that message on-brand? Does it convey the sentiment you hoped it would?

2. Length

Does subject line length matter? No. Well, sort of...

Sometimes the message you want to get across in a subject line will require more words and sometimes it will require fewer words. The important aspect to consider here is the message and not the number of words you use to convey it.

Plenty of bad statisticians will tell you that subject line length matters. Well, it does, insofar as it's a proxy metric. But most say it matters for the wrong reasons (and with bad stats). To focus on the length of an email subject line is to miss the point of optimization entirely.

3. Emojis

Do emojis work on your audience?

They just might. Many brands have found them to be extremely effective in driving email open rates and click rates. Having analyzed the performance of millions of email subject lines, Phrasee's data tells us that an emoji can make a good subject line better and a bad subject line worse.

If your audience responds well to subject lines with emojis in them, use emojis. The thing to remember with emojis is that they are a visual tool which help in amplifying a message. Just make sure that message is a good message to begin with.

Six linguistic elements that affect subject line performance

4. Language diversity

Your audience is diverse, so your subject lines should be too…

Different words, phrases and sentiments will resonate with different subscribers on your mailing list. This is why it's important to measure the language diversity within the subject lines your brand is using. Keeping as much variation as possible in your subject lines will ensure that they connect with more of your subscribers more regularly, which is a good thing.

In addition, our data shows that the effectiveness of individual words and phrases in an email subject line — its basic elements — decays over time. What works today may not work tomorrow. Keeping content fresh, diverse, and on-point is essential to success.

5. Individual word choice

Choose wisely…

While underlying sentiment is a big factor in email subject line success, individual words (and groups of words) can also have an impact. Bigrams (word pairings) and trigrams (groups of three words) can often provide more benefits to subject line performance than individual words (unigrams).

Understanding which unigrams, bigrams, and trigrams work on your audience can help your brand build better subject lines, which will drive more opens, clicks, and conversions.

## 6. Language sophistication

How sophisticated should your subject line language be?

Are you using complicated sentence structures and polysyllabic words, or simpler language?

Every audience is different, and each will respond positively to slightly different levels of language sophistication. Try testing subject lines which present your message in simpler language. You might be amazed how your audience responds.
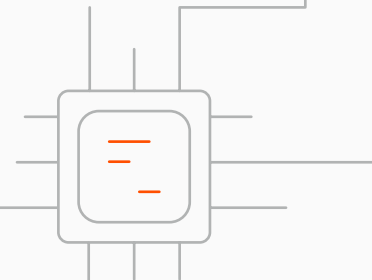
Understanding your audience
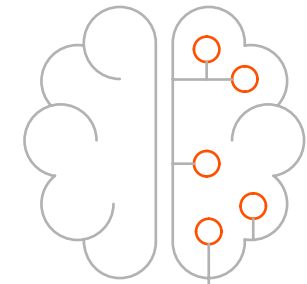
As of this writing, there are roughly 7.7 billion people living on our planet, each and every one of them a beautiful and unique snowflake. Each one has their own unique set of values, principles, needs, wants, hopes, and dreams. Only a tiny portion of that roiling mass of humanity makes up your brand's audience.

The people on your brand's subscriber list have many differences, but they probably also share some similarities. One important example is that each of them engaged with your brand and wound up on your subscriber list at some point.

While it is (almost) a statistical impossibility that any email subject line will ever effectively engage all of your subscribers and entice them to open your next email, optimization can maximize the number of subscribers who do. Increasing the probability that a subscriber will open your emails lies at the very heart of email subject line optimization.

Learning the words, phrases, sentiments, and styles that work on your brand's unique audience (and those that don't) is a crucial step in the journey towards better email marketing performance.

Subject line optimization is not a "set-it-and-forget-it" proposition.
It involves adjusting the language you use in your subject lines over time to keep pace with your audience and how they are engaging with your emails.
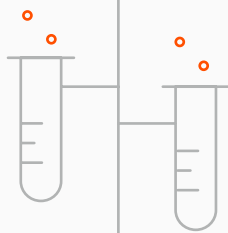
Testing email subject lines

With all the linguistic and audience variables at play, maximizing the performance of your brand's subject line copy is a complex problem, and one which demands a scientifically sound solution.

One path to effective email subject line optimization is multivariate testing your brand's email subject line language at scale. This requires having a robust testing methodology in place and a system for analyzing and learning from the results that testing generates.

With these two elements in place, it is indeed possible to optimize your brand's email subject line language for the unique tastes and preferences of your brand's audience. The rigorous and ongoing multivariate testing is no simple task, but the rewards can be enormous for those who do it.

Here are a few important points to consider about email subject line multivariate testing:

1. Vary the language in your subject lines as much as possible. This is a crucial factor in effective testing, and our data indicates that the combination of testing and linguistic variance ➡️ can lead to an average open rate uptick of 5%-10%.

2. ➡️ Make sure that the test groups you use are of a statistically significant size to reduce the occurrence of random variance in your test data.

3. ➡️ Always optimize towards opens as the key performance metric. Testing for further-down-the-funnel metrics like conversions or clicks will offer much less reliable data because the numbers are invariably lower than open rates and there is therefore more uncertainty associated with the results of the test experiment.

The Language Effect
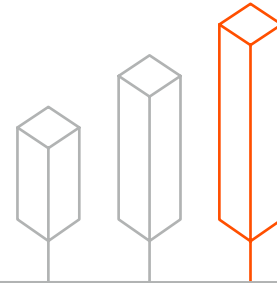
If this all sounds like a lot of work, that's because it is. Email subject line optimization is challenging because language is complex. Yet language is the crux of all your marketing efforts.

The old way of using intuition and gut feel to choose a winning subject line just doesn't cut it anymore. There is a better way, a new data-driven, technological approach to marketing language optimization brought to you by Phrasee.

Marketers can now feel empowered with the world's most advanced AI-powered copywriter that generates and optimizes language at scale and always in your brand's voice. On top of that, Phrasee's machine learning engine tracks the performance of each campaign, learning more about what subject line language works and what doesn't with every campaign send.

The digital world runs on language. To truly benefit from the language effect, the future of marketing lies with Brand Language Optimization. Many of the world's most recognizable brands like eBay, Virgin Holidays and Domino's Pizza are already using this AI-powered approach to drive more opens, clicks, conversions and revenue. It's time your brand did too.

Wish your brand had results like these?

Well, this one belongs to JOANN:

↑ **10%**
email open uplift

Phrasee helped Domino's achieve this:

↑ **57%**
email click uplift

And this impressive result belongs to Virgin Holidays:

$Millions
in incremental revenue

...and your results can be awesome too!

Discover how Phrasee is empowering customers with Brand Language Optimization:
➡ phrasee.co/customers

Empower your marketing with Brand Language Optimization

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