

# Spring Cleaning:

## *Time to Tend to Your Email Database*



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*With a new year come resolutions and the acknowledgement that we often accumulate more than we need or want. So, you may have intentions to clean out those closets, basements, garage, and file drawers -- but how about your email address lists?*

To find out if it's time to spring clean your email lists, ask yourself these questions:

- Do you have a consistently low response rate?
- Have you been seeing an increase in bounce rates or spam complaints?
- Is your organization at risk of being blacklisted by major ISP's?

If you answered yes to any of the above, it may indeed be time for some spring cleaning.

### *The Problem: Bad Data*

What happens when you have problematic email addresses in your database? For one, much of your marketing budget and creative efforts will have been for naught – for your emails will never make it into your members' or donors' inboxes. A once-loyal constituent won't receive your message. They may, however, hear from other organizations -- especially now in an election year, when so many additional appeals are vying for everyone's attention.

Second, if you reach an ISP's threshold of bounces, spam complaints, or questionable spam addresses, you risk the possibility of being blacklisted without even knowing it. If this happens, many ISP's will bury your emails without delivering them or providing bouncebacks, which can leave you completely in the dark.

And how did those problematic emails get into your database in the first place? Well, if you have a Web site, you may have inadvertently accepted registrations with unintentional typos or intentional malicious errors: studies show that problematic emails are entered on Web sites up to 20% of the time. Or perhaps, at some point, you swapped, rented, or purchased supplemental lists, which had not been properly cleaned in advance. Or your house list is simply getting older, and your members' or donors' email addresses have changed.

### *The Solution: Clean & Purge*

There are several ways you can clean and purge an email address database, including list hygiene, email change of address, and email validation.

In much the same way we regularly change the oil in our cars, remove the debris from our gutters, and attend to other maintenance tasks, a periodic cleaning and updating of your email database is a basic precaution you

must take to ensure your future e-fundraising campaigns reach their potential.

Cleaning and updating your email list can help you avoid being blacklisted by major ISP's -- by minimizing bounce rates, decreasing spam complaint rates, and removing possible spamtrap and honeypot addresses.

The net result? Improved email deliverability, higher response rates, and increased donations.

### *Reconnect with Lost Donors*

To reconnect with donors lost to bouncing or inactive email addresses, you may want to use an Email Change of Address (ECOA) service. Doing so keeps your email list up-to-date by analyzing invalid or non-performing email addresses, and updating them with guaranteed deliverable new email addresses.

### *Back to Square One*

Now that you've cleaned and updated your email address database, you will want to do everything possible to keep problematic addresses out of your database going forward.

Be sure to carefully inspect any lists you swap, rent, or purchase. If these lists haven't been cleaned by an independent third party, adding these email addresses to your database could subject you to all of the problems you've been trying to solve: low response rates, high bounce and spam complaint rates, and possible blacklisting.

There are also many effective ways to catch Web site input errors.

First, input fields should be well-designed: the text box and your database fields should be large enough to avoid truncating errors (ie, [williamalexandersmith@yahoo.c](mailto:williamalexandersmith@yahoo.c)), and error messages should be coded appropriately.

Second, marketers should take basic steps to confirm entries, such as adding a double-entry requirement or a confirmation page or email. Unfortunately, double-entry often doesn't solve the problem, as many people either cut and paste the second email address, or use an auto-fill process that duplicates the original error.

Third, marketers can use interactive technology. You

could utilize a double opt-in process, where the user would need to confirm via email that they opted in. This solution, however, comes with its own set of is-

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sues - deliverability hurdles, junkbox filters, and user frustration, to name a few.

Another more sophisticated, user-friendly technological solution is real-time email validation, where problematic email entries are automatically flagged and corrected for the user at the point of registration on the Web site. This solution is extremely effective: it's user-friendly, cost-efficient, and catches errors and problems at the time your customer is most interested in you -- not hours or days later.

### *There's No Better Time than Now*

Time to roll up your sleeves and get your email records cleaned, purged, and brought up-to-date! Consider the ramifications of a file infected with problematic addresses that could jeopardize your entire campaign. Maintain an up-to-date, clean file so that new opportunities can grow in a nurtured environment. Choose a professional vendor who will tailor a service to match your particular needs. Once you have cleared out accumulated problematic data, keep it clean in real time, validating email addresses at the point of registration.

You'll reduce your stress, breathe easier, and be able to focus your time on building relationships and value by reaching your members and donors on a consistent basis.

After all, it is spring! ■

*Rita Allen is responsible for managing the Nonprofit Group at FreshAddress, Inc. She is an active member of the DMA Nonprofit Federation. FreshAddress provides a comprehensive suite of industry-leading services to help companies and nonprofits build, clean, and update their email address lists. You can contact Rita at [rallen@freshaddress.com](mailto:rallen@freshaddress.com)*