

'Tipping' subscribers through the 'power of context'

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Malcolm Gladwell coined the phrase, 'power of context' in his book, *The Tipping Point, How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.

There are subscribers and subscribers.

Subscribers who register for online communications to keep up-to-date will open, assess and probably click through on most emails.

For example, football supporters thirsting for every tiny piece of news about their team and their players, or the Australian doctors who recorded an 80%+ click through rate on a medical newsletter.

In both cases, the WIN-WIN balance tips strongly in favour of the subscribers for whom the email offers an expected value proposition.

For most e-marketing, the WIN-WIN balance tips in the opposite direction, towards the organisation sending the email or newsletter. The email invites the subscribers to respond to and engage with content created and pushed by the business.

In the few seconds that the subscriber takes to evaluate the content of the email, the email has to 'tip' the subscriber into engaging. How? One option is to analyse likely subscriber contexts and create copy that sets up 'tipping points' for those contexts.

Context? Tipping point? Here's a concrete example of how it works for us.

One email moved CTR from 1% to 7% for airfare deals in October 2001

In October 2001, Susan, Renée and their colleague, Jasper, sat down as a team to find a way to increase the click through rate of a particular subscriber segment receiving weekly emails about hot airfare deals.

The problem subscribers were members of the airline's executive club and were recording click through rates of approximately 1%, much lower than rates other segments were recording.

Other circumstances were effecting interest in air travel. Post September 11 was not a good time to promote air travel and the airline offering the hot deals was in administration (Section 11) - a fact that did not help traveller confidence.

The team made the following agenda guesses.

- The subscribers were unlikely to have holidays and fun on their minds - the nature of the subscriber segment and the opening times for the mails suggested that they were opening the mails at work.
- They wouldn't be interested in hot deals for business travel - others booked flights on their behalf and flights frequently needed to be rescheduled so the restrictions associated with discounts were unacceptable.
- They were probably under pressure to take leave but kept putting it off because of work commitments.
- They wouldn't be able to drop what they were doing and 'escape' so the validity period for a hot deal would be an important consideration.

In the emails that were eliciting the 1% response, the only trigger elements were the hot deal price and the flight destinations. The validity period was buried in the fine print of the Terms and Conditions for the hot deal.

While price and destination might have been enough to draw the subscriber's attention, something else was needed to trigger the click through response that implied "this might be relevant to me".

In the next email the team applied all four insights to the email copy.

Just 2½ lines of copy

- invited the subscriber to take a short break away at <the hot deal destination>
- suggested they use up some of their leave
- proposed one appealing 'leisure' activity associated with the destination
- stated the validity period for the hot deal

Just a few different lines of copy but the click through rate went to more than 7%. Only the copy approach had changed. Not the layout or length of the email, not the font size, not the design elements.

In summary

All marketing seeks to trigger responses but our approach analysed and found triggers in the subscriber context. We customised the triggers in the copy to the time-pressured, work-focused subscribers who were opening the emails.

In other situations, the same people would almost certainly be susceptible to different triggers. Our trial and error learnings are very much in tune with what Malcolm Gladwell infers about the "power of context" in *The Tipping Point*.

For us, contextual analysis is another approach for increasing subscriber engagement with emails and e-newsletters.