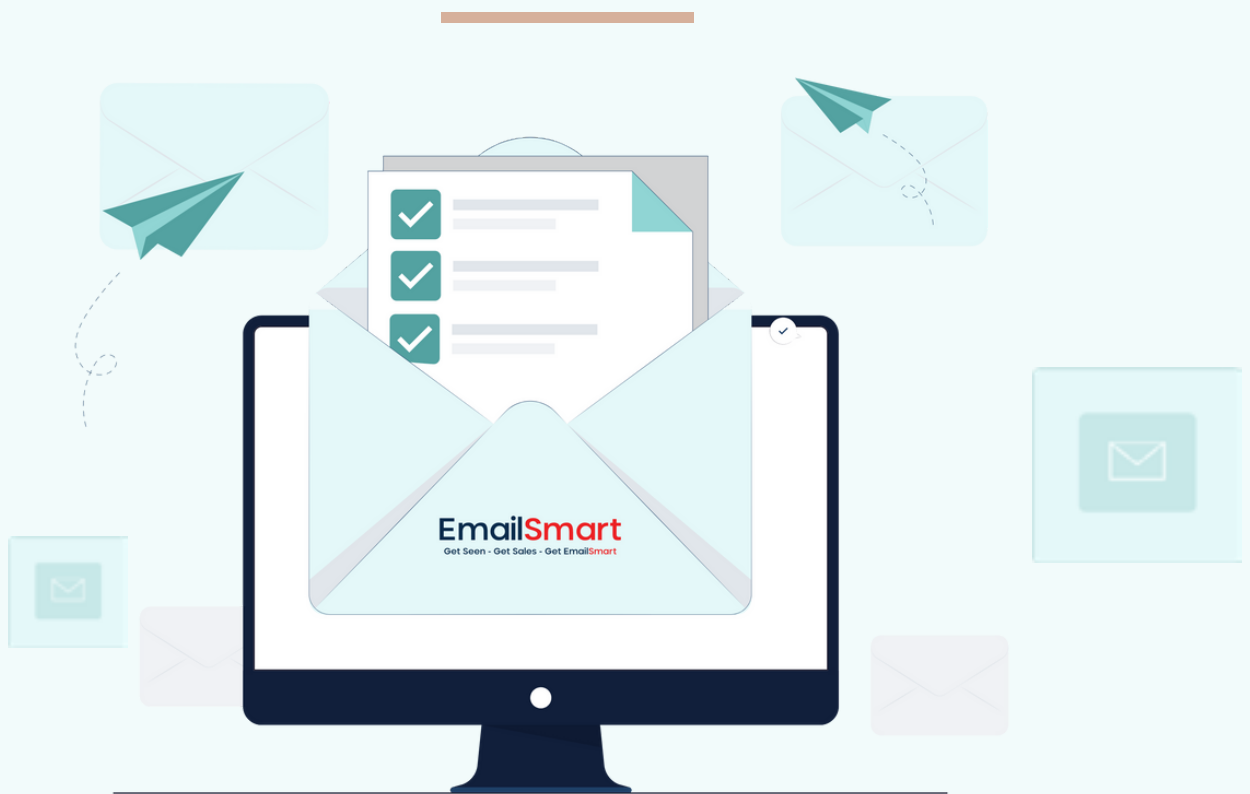# EmailSmart

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The
SMART Method
Checklist

How To Avoid the Spam Folder, Get More
Emails Seen and Make More Sales from Email

Authors: Adrian Savage and Evan Samurin

How To Avoid the Spam Folder, Get More Emails Seen and Make More Sales from Email

If you've seen us introduce any of our presentations on email deliverability, you might have heard us say it doesn't matter how big your list is or how good your emails are if people aren't seeing them. It doesn't matter if you have the best offer in the world with the best possible email copy, if people don't even get the chance to open your emails.

People have a good reason to worry that their emails are ending up in the spam folder. We don't know a single person who hasn't been told by someone "I found your email in my spam folder" at some time or another.

The good news is that, just because the email goes to one person's spam folder doesn't mean it's going to spam for everyone else. And there are plenty of things you can do to stack the odds in your favour and make sure that as many of your emails as possible will be delivered to the inbox.

We've often been asked for a checklist that summarises the most important points of the SMART method that we introduce in our presentations. So this article is exactly that.
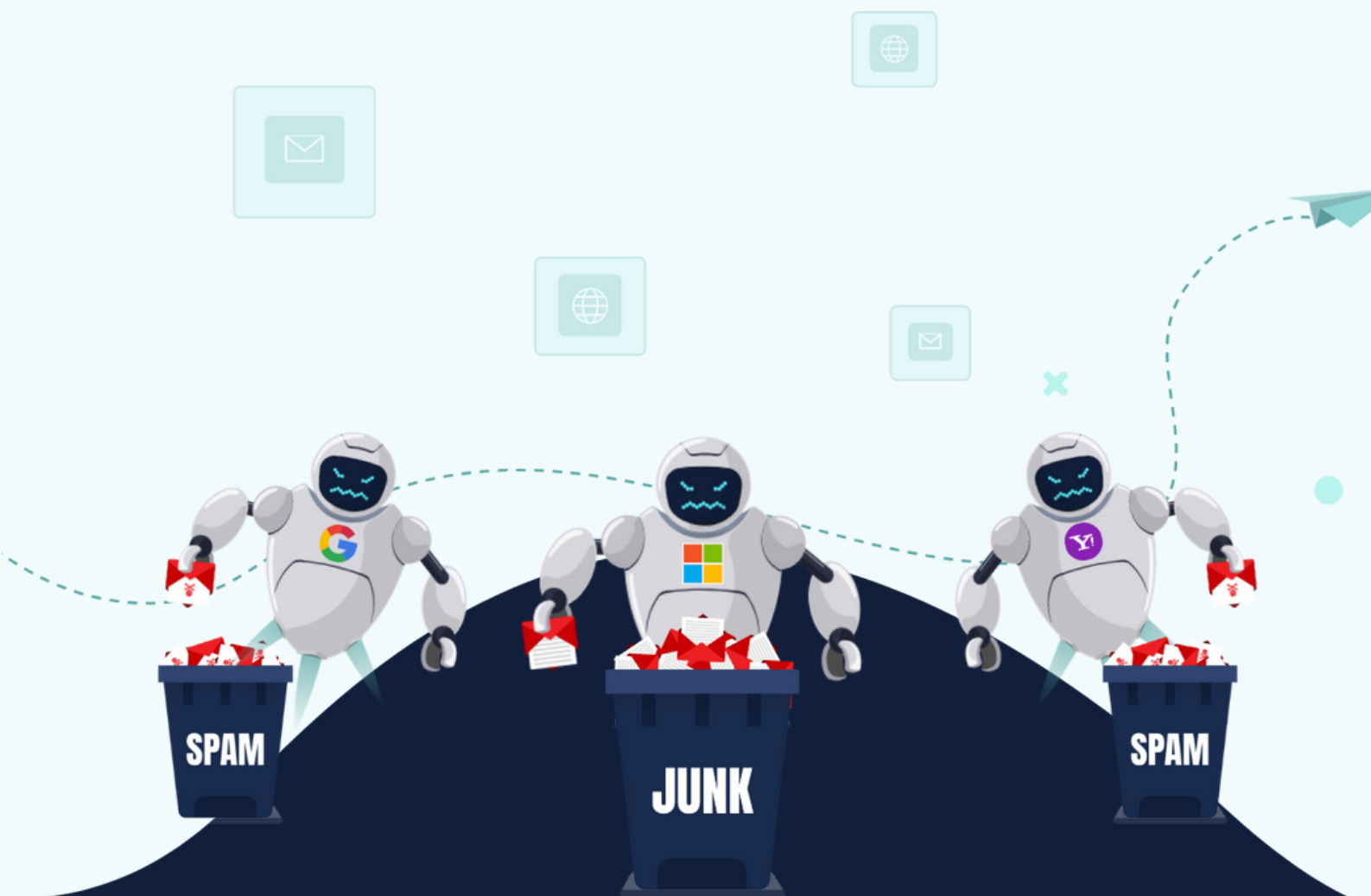
The SMART Method

Firstly, let's look at the five most important factors that will help you get more of your emails seen. They all have a major impact on whether or not the emails you send will reach the inbox, or whether they'll be confined to the spam folder.

They spell out the word SMART, which stands for:

S   Start Smart and Shift Your Thinking

M   Manage Your Engagement

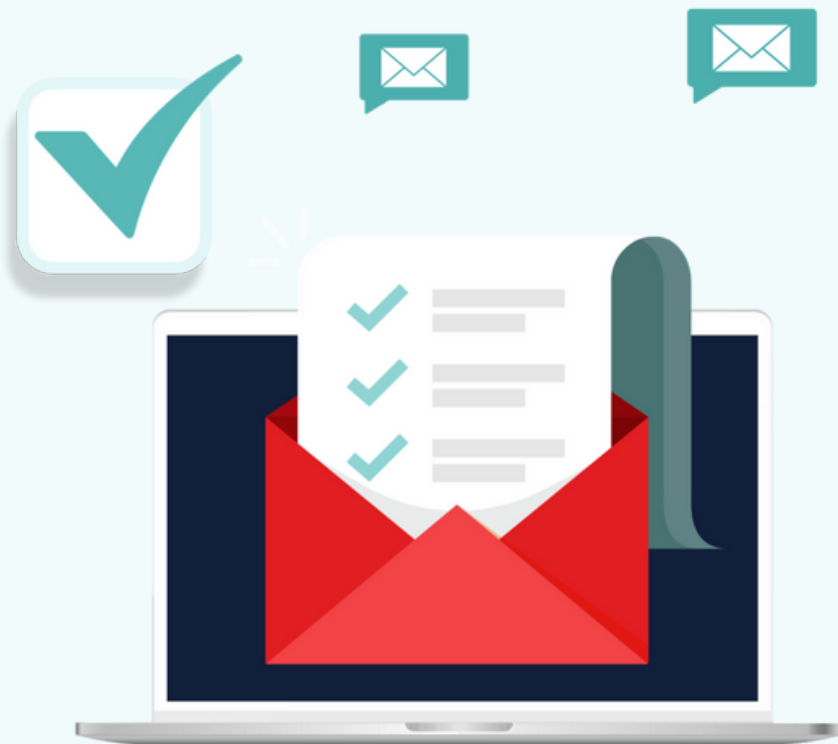**A**   Authenticate Your Emails

R   Raise Your Reputation

T   Transform Your Content

The Checklist

In this checklist, we'll cover the most important aspects of the SMART Method that'll help you maximise the chances of your emails arriving in your audience's inboxes. If you follow everything covered by this checklist, you'll have more people opening more of your emails, getting your message, and taking up more of your offers.

In short, follow this checklist and you'll get **more emails seen, so you'll make more sales.**

Don't have time to read the whole checklist? Each point is summarised on the next two pages, but make sure you don't miss the details in the Start Smart section immediately after the summary - that's where the most important tips are.

Start Smart and Shift Your Thinking

- ☐ Shift Your Thinking: Take responsibility for your sending and remember, your email performance is totally under your control.
- ☐ Check Your EmailSmart Score: It's free, go to https://emailsmartscore.com.
- ☐ Identify Your Assets and Liabilities: Make sure you stop mailing your liabilities, as they will hurt your reputation.
- ☐ Send Emails Consistently: Make sure you send at least one email a week (to your assets).
- ☐ Get More Leads: Your list will shrink through natural disengagement, so always focus on generating new leads.

Manage Your Engagement

- ☐ Be Ruthless: Only send emails to contacts who have engaged in the last 30-90 days.
- ☐ Let Them Go: Have contacts older than 30 days who have never opened anything? Ditch 'em now!
- ☐ Manage Those New Contacts: Get rid of new contacts that haven't opened anything in the first 14 days.
- ☐ Encourage Replies: Where appropriate, ask your audience to reply to you.
- ☐ Re-engage: When contacts reach 30 and then 90 days unengaged, put them through a re-engagement campaign.

Authenticate Your Emails

- ☐ Signing Your Emails: Are you using DKIM to digitally sign emails from every platform you use?
- ☐ Who You Trust: Are you using SPF to list all the email providers you trust to send your emails?
- ☐ When Authentication Fails: Are you using DMARC to protect from spoofed emails?

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Raise your Reputation

- ☐ Audience Quality: Has everyone on your list given explicit permission for you to email them?
- ☐ Domain Reputation: Are you listed on any block lists?
- ☐ Spam Traps: Have you made sure you've eliminated all spam traps from your mailing list?
- ☐ Unauthorised Opt-Ins: Are you protecting against spam-bots?

Transform Your Content

- ☐ Words: It's not just what you say, it's the way you say it.
- ☐ Images: Are you using too many images?
- ☐ Links: The fewer the better! And, be careful what you link to.
- ☐ Formatting: Plain and Simple works best.

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Start Smart and Shift Your Thinking

Let's start as we mean to go on. There are some fundamentals that you need to be clear on before we dive into the details. Think of this section as the foundations: if you don't get clear on the basics we explain here, everything will come crashing down.

Shift Your Thinking

It's vital that you think about your email list in the right way.

Although your email list is normally considered an asset, you need to understand that your email list contains both assets and liabilities (see below for more detail).

Remember that your email performance is solely your responsibility. It's under your control and is based almost entirely on your behaviour.

Check Your EmailSmart Score

Go to https://emailsmart.com/score

The EmailSmart Score will tell you how well you have been mailing your audience in the last 30 days. The lower the score, the more improvements you need to make.

Identify Your Assets and Liabilities

The people on your email list who have recently opened an email from you are **Assets.** Mailing those people will improve your reputation and your email performance.

The people who have not recently opened an email are **Liabilities.** Continuing to send emails to those people will damage your reputation and harm your email performance.

The most dangerous liabilities are those people who haven't opened emails for more than 90 days or longer.

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Send Emails Consistently

Mailbox providers reward consistency, so it's vital to email your **assets** (your engaged contacts) as often as possible - at least once a week.

The more frequently you send emails, the greater chance you have of people opening something.

Remember, your job is to entertain, educate and inform your audience. And it's ok to make offers as well.

If you intend to send emails more frequently, be sure to inform your audience of your intentions and then gradually increase the frequency. By doing this, you will minimise complaints and unsubscribes.

Get More Leads

Your email list will naturally shrink in size if you're regularly identifying and removing your liabilities. You can also expect to lose around 10% of your list every month simply due to people losing interest or unsubscribing.

This is why it's vital that you consistently replace lost contacts with new leads, otherwise your list will dwindle down to nothing over time.

Manage Your Engagement

Although mailbox providers look for lots of different signs of engagement, the only metrics we normally have visibility of in our email marketing platforms are whether an email was opened, or clicked.

Most email platforms let you search for how recently a contact has engaged with you, but it can be a cumbersome process to do this on a regular basis. Our EmailSmart software make it super easy to monitor how well you're managing your engagement, with our Smart Defender software making it easy for you to you quickly and reliably identify your engaged and unengaged contacts on a daily basis so you'll always send the right emails to the right people.

Here are the most important things that will help you improve your Engagement and hence improve your Domain Reputation.

> **Be Ruthless: Only send emails to contacts who have engaged in the last 30-90 days.**

To maximise your domain reputation, don't send **any** emails to people in your audience who haven't opened anything from you in the last 90 days.

The majority of your emails should only be sent to contacts who have opened something in the **last 30 days,** plus anyone who has recently opted in to your email list. Then, occasionally, you should send an email to the contacts that have opened something **between 30 and 90 days ago.**

Let's say you send out content emails twice a week. Our suggestion would be to restrict most of your content emails only to the people who have opened something in the last 30 days; then send two emails per month to the people who have opened something between 30 and 90 days ago.

It goes without saying that there's little point sending "sales" or "offer" emails to people who haven't engaged in the last month - the chances of them opening one of your emails is much lower and, if they've not read your content recently, they'll be less likely to take your offer up even if they do open the email.

Let Them Go: Have contacts older than 30 days who have never opened anything? Ditch 'em now!

This should be a no-brainer. One definition of insanity is "doing the same thing and expecting different results". If they didn't open anything from you in the first 30 days, they almost certainly won't open anything in the future either. Watch the Frozen movie and "Let it Go"...

Manage Those New Contacts: Get rid of new contacts that haven't opened anything in the first 14 days.

Think about this for a second... the time when someone is most likely to open one of your emails is immediately after they've signed up to your email list. If they don't open anything in those first 14 days, here's what you need to do.

Firstly, make sure your initial messages are appropriate to what they've signed up for and are compelling enough that they'll want to open them. If you haven't already got a process in place to send a series of welcome messages to new contacts, now is the time to do so.

Secondly, make sure the follow-up you do have in place is effective and that you're chasing them if they don't open those first couple of emails.

Finally, once your initial emails are as good as they can be and you're following up as well as you can, consider removing anyone from your database who hasn't engaged in the first 14 days, and certainly no later than the first 30 days.

Encourage Replies: Where appropriate, ask your audience to reply to you.

Replying to an email is one of the best signs of engagement that mailbox providers are looking for. From time to time, it's worth encouraging your audience to reply to you - but be careful! If you ask for replies, make sure you acknowledge the people who reply and have a process in place to follow up with them. Otherwise your reputation could be hurt when people feel ignored.

Re-engage: When contacts reach 30 and then 90 days unengaged, put them through a re-engagement campaign.

This one can make all the difference. When it gets to 30 days since a contact last opened an email from you, send them a short series of "tickle" emails to wake them back up. Make sure it's your best content - something that's really compelling that they're more likely to open.

Then, when they get to 90 days of no engagement, send them some "last chance" re-engagement emails. Start with your best content, then maybe follow up with a quick question you can ask (either get them to reply, or to click a link to answer a multiple-choice question) and finally, send a "goodbye" email saying you're going to unsubscribe them unless they click on the link in the email.

Authenticate Your Emails

Getting your authentication right is **vital.** If you don't, you're risking many of your emails going to spam, even if you're doing everything else right.

All three authentication methods listed below can only be set up if you have access to your DNS Control Panel, which you normally find in your Web Hosting or your Domain Hosting control panels. If you need help setting your authentication up, we offer a **Done For You Authentication** service that will take care of everything for a one-off cost.

☐ **Signing Your Emails: Are you using DKIM to digitally sign emails from every platform you use?**

It's very easy to send emails from any address you like, even if you don't own the domain. Signing your emails using DKIM (Domain Keys Identified Mail) proves that you are a legitimate sender and that the email really came from you.

DKIM has to be set up inside each email platform that you use, so we can't go into too much detail here. Just search for "Email Authentication" or "DKIM" in the help instructions for each system you use.

Bonus Tip: Don't just set up DKIM on your email marketing platform; make sure that emails sent from your day-to-day mailbox provider, such as GSuite or Microsoft 365 are also signed using DKIM, as well as any other platform you send email from.

☐ **Who You Trust: Are you using SPF to list all the email providers you trust to send your emails?**

If you don't have SPF (Sender Policy Framework) set up correctly, there's a strong risk your emails could be rejected completely or end up in the spam folder because they don't recognise your email marketing platform as a trusted sender.

If you're getting particularly low open rates with Microsoft (Office365, hotmail etc.), this could be why.

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Again, make sure that every email platform you use is listed, and only ever have one SPF record set up! Having two SPF records is as bad as not having anything set up at all.

If you need to know how to set up SPF, check out this guide: https://dmarcian.com/create-spf-record/ and note that you probably won't need to include any IP addresses; focus on the "include" statements that you'll need to add, normally one "include" statement for each email platform you send from.

Once you've set up your SPF record, check it by going to https://dmarcian.com/spf-survey/

When Authentication Fails: Are you using DMARC to protect from spoofed emails?

DMARC (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance) specifies what mailbox providers should do when they receive an email from you that hasn't passed any other form of authentication.

Be careful - get DMARC wrong and all your emails might end up going to spam. But set it up correctly and it'll reinforce that you're a legitimate sender and make sure that other people can't send emails from you.

If you need help setting up your DMARC record, use the wizard at https://dmarcian.com/dmarc-record-wizard/ and, as a minimum, accept all the defaults you're offered and leave the "Aggregate Reports" option empty.

Once you've set up your DMARC record, check it by going to https://dmarcian.com/dmarc-inspector/

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Raise Your Reputation

Now, let's look at reputation. If your sending reputation is damaged, the chances are that most of your emails will end up in the spam folder.

Audience Quality: Has everyone on your list given explicit permission for you to email them?

If not, stop mailing them right now! Buying lists or, worse, scraping email addresses from the Internet, is a huge no-no. Don't do it. You'll end up in Google Jail before you can say "spam trap" (and see below about that...)

Domain Reputation: Are you listed on any block lists?

If you've not been 100% following best practices, your sending domain could be on a block list. Check out Hetrix Tools (https://hetrixtools.com) and MX Toolbox (https://mxtoolbox.com/blacklists.aspx) to make sure your domain isn't listed.

Spam Traps: Have you made sure you've eliminated all spam traps from your mailing list?

Sending emails to spam trap addresses is the quickest way to trash your domain reputation. Use Klean13 to scrub your list and remove all toxic email addresses. We have a free integration in Deliverability Dashboard to make this quick and easy.

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Unauthorised Opt-Ins: Are you protecting against spam-bots?

From time to time, your website may be targeted by malicious spam-bots (often based in Russia, but it's a global menace) intending to damage your reputation. They automatically fill out your web forms using real email addresses of people who have never heard of you and don't want your emails. When they receive your emails, they'll probably report you for spam. Luckily, you can kill this problem using SpamKill, the best perimeter defence solution we've seen. (https://spamkill.co)

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Check your EmailSmart Score for FREE at https://emailsmartscore.com/

Transform Your Content

The look and feel of your emails still plays a very important part in whether your email will land in the spam folder rather than the inbox. We have a nice handy acronym to help you remember what's important with content: it spells out the name WILF.

Words: It's not just what you say, it's the way you say it.

"Spammy" words in emails isn't as much of an issue as it once was, but you should still avoid words that are blatant red flags typically used in spam or phishing messages - extreme examples include "viagra" or, in the current pandemic, "covid" or "coronavirus".

Rather than worrying about individual words, we'd recommend that you just focus on writing authentic emails that sound like you and are well-written. "Direct response" types of mails with poor grammar etc. won't help your cause though (if you don't know what this means, you probably don't need to worry about this). And don't send War and Peace type messages when you can convey the same message briefly and concisely. You can always link through to a web page with more content.

An extra bonus - choose your subject lines carefully and make sure you use the "Preview Text" option that most email platforms offer to build curiosity and get people more likely to want to open your emails.

Images: Are you using too many images?

The more images in your email, the more likely it is to be seen as a promotion, or even spam. It's best to limit your emails to just one or two images - ideally just a "feature" image in the body of your email, plus a signature image. Definitely ditch all those images with social media icons and similar… they really won't be doing you any favours.

Links: The fewer the better! And, be careful what you link to.

First of all, anything more than three links in an email will massively increase your chances of ending up in the Promotions tab, if not the spam folder. So keep the number of links down. Remember the "Unsubscribe" link counts as one of those links, and if you repeat the same link more than once, each one counts as a unique link.

Secondly, only link to domains that aren't on a block list somewhere. Use the tools shown in "Reputation" above to make sure you're not linking to a site with a bad reputation. One hint: social media sites and YouTube often appear (temporarily) on block lists. Never use link shorteners such as bit.ly, because spammers use them too!

Thirdly, remember that any text containing a domain name is treated similarly to a link. If your email content mentions any domain or website that's on a block list, you could well still end up in the spam folder.

Formatting: Don't send emails that look like ads!

Making your email look and feel like it has been personally written gives you a much greater chance of landing in the primary inbox as opposed to the promotions or spam folder.

Keep your email formatting clean and easy to read by using short paragraphs, bullet points and headers to break up your content.

Sticking to a simple, consistent font and colour scheme will also give you the optimum chance of your emails landing where you want- in the inbox!

Finally, remember to make sure your emails don't look like or sound like ads. If they do, mailbox providers are likely to filter you directly into spam or promotions.

NEXT STEPS

There's plenty of advice in this checklist. You should be able to put most of it into practice without much help, but we offer lots of help and support if you need.

How We Can Help

The best starting point for most businesses is our comprehensive **EmailSmart Audit,** where we'll look at your sending statistics and email performance in a great level of detail.

The Audit includes:

- A concise report showing what's working and what's not working with your email deliverability

- Personalised feedback and recommendations that will help you improve your email results

- A 60-minute, 1-on-1 Smart Insights follow-up call with one of our email deliverability experts

You can find out more about it here.

If you'd prefer us to just wave our magic wand and make everything better for you, you might be interested in our **VIP Services.** We can take the lead and implement our proven strategies and best practices to optimise your email deliverability. This means you won't have to figure it all out alone – we'll be there working with you and supporting you every step of the way.

If you'd prefer to talk to someone about our Audit or VIP Services, you're welcome to book a brief introductory call using this link.
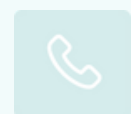
The Benefits of Solving Your Email Challenges

Improving the performance of your emails doesn't just save time and money – it has so many benefits. By getting more of your emails seen by more of your audience, you'll enjoy vastly improved engagement, which will lead to improved sender reputation, higher conversion rates and, ultimately, more sales and greater profits.

Remember, every email that lands in the inbox is an opportunity to connect, build trust, and grow your business. And every email that lands in promotions or spam is a missed opportunity to make a sale.

So let us help you get the very most out of every single email you send.

Ready to turn the tide on your email performance?

Don't hesitate – sign up for our EmailSmart Audit or book a call with us today. It's time to unlock the true potential of your email marketing.

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Adrian "Email Savvy" Savage is a dad, a geek, an entrepreneur and co-founder of EmailSmart.

He specialises in helping businesses get more emails seen by more of their audience.

He's helped many well-known names including Frank Kern, Stu McLaren, Neil Patel, Ryan Levesque, Shark Group and Glazer-Kennedy improve their email performance.

He's also the creator of the unique EmailSmart software, which shows how well your emails are performing and how you can get even more people seeing and opening your emails.

Evan "Email Samurai" Samurin is an email delivery expert and co-founder of EmailSmart.

He's an expert at helping his clients increase their revenues by getting their email out of spam and into the inbox and increase conversions.

Evan spends his days speaking and consulting on email deliverability. He loves helping his private clients improve their ROI by getting more of their emails seen, increasing their open and click rates and hence increasing their sales.