

# Get Your Message Across

## How to improve email delivery and avoid spam filters

Email is an important part of many organizations' communication strategy. Unfortunately, not all emails sent by a nonprofit can be delivered. Read on to find out why this happens, how thedatabank maximizes delivery of our clients' messages, and what more you can do to increase delivery.

### Why are some emails not delivered?

There are a number of things that might interfere. Here are a few of the chief culprits:

- spam filters
- bad addresses
- "flooding" an ISP with too many messages - ISP blocks you
- excessive spam complaints against your email address, domain or server
- engagement filtering (email providers using engagement statistics to find emails users are not opening and routing them directly to the spam folder)

### How do I know if my message was delivered?

Your Databank tracks delivery problems and other message results in the Contact History for each member. A contact note is generated when a message is sent using PowerMail or our Action Alert system. An additional contact note is generated if the message is opened, or if it bounces. By looking at the results of a PowerMail message or Action Alert message, you can easily see how many messages were sent, opened, and bounced.

Our BounceCheck system catches and records thousands of types of bounces. If a message does bounce, you will see "BounceChk" in the contact record under "Contacted By."

### The Databank's contact types defined:

- **Hard Bounce (HB):** The email server was unable to deliver your message. (example: 550 Mailbox not found) After one hard bounce, the system marks the address as a "bad email."
- **Soft Bounce (SB):** The email server cannot deliver your message, but the address isn't necessarily bad. (example: Mailbox size exceeds quota, Temporary network issues) After three consecutive non-content block related soft bounces, the system marks the address as a "bad email."

- **Content Block (CB):** A type of soft bounce; the content of the message is what caused it to be rejected.

Automatic responses from the recipient such as "Out of Office" or "On Vacation" are ignored by the system.

Keep in mind there may still be messages that are never viewed, yet a bounce is not recorded. That may be because the recipient never opened the message, or because at some point, the message was determined to be spam.

### How does a message get marked as spam?

Anti-spam software may exist at several levels, such as your ISP, mail server, and individual mail program.

Most spam filters examine an email message and assign points based on the content of the message and how closely the message matches other spam. The more points the message has, the more likely it is to be blocked.

#### Examples of what will rack up points:

- Words like free, diet, sex, etc.
- Subject lines with excessive punctuation (!!!) or words in ALL CAPS
- Lots of colored text
- Email addresses in the "from" field that do not actually exist
- Large messages (over 40K in size)
- Messages that are mostly images with little or no text

This point system was devised based on characteristics that spam messages tend to have. Unfortunately, many non-spam messages - including yours - can have these same characteristics. Anti-spam devices do produce false positives.

#### Other cases that can trigger a spam filter:

- Message sent to a large distribution list (not allowed in the Databank; individual message is sent to each recipient)
- Attachments (not allowed in the Databank)
- There are literally thousands of other rules that can be used to accumulate points for the spam score.

Different email administrators apply rules based on their own experiences, the needs of their organizations, and industry standards.

## How does thedatabank maximize delivery?

At thedatabank, we take our reputation as an email service provider very seriously. We regularly scan over 100 different blacklists to be sure our servers are not listed as senders of spam. We aggressively follow up on any spam complaints with customers and ISPs.

### How the Databank works to make sure your emails get past the spam filters:

- We prevent spam from being sent through our systems, by having a no tolerance spam policy for customers and by providing tools to keep our customers in compliance with the CAN-SPAM law (Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography And Marketing Act of 2003). You may read our policy here: [http://www.thedatabank.com/anti\\_spam\\_policy.aspx](http://www.thedatabank.com/anti_spam_policy.aspx).
- The templates that are available with PowerMail are designed to earn a minimum number of points. Although they look sophisticated, the HTML code is kept as simple as possible.
- Attachments are not allowed, and our email system handles images in a way that minimizes the size of each message.
- The number of messages per minute we send to major ISPs are limited, to reduce the chance that they will think we are flooding them.
- Our email servers are secure and have no open relays.
- We take our email reputation very seriously and monitor deliverability on a daily basis.
- Several providers send thedatabank an email every time one of their members marks an email as spam. These people are automatically unsubscribed in the Databank.
- All our emails include the List-Unsubscribe header. This is a "good guy" feature that makes it easy for email programs to provide an Unsubscribe button in their program.

## What can I do?

You work hard to formulate your message and send it to a carefully selected group of supporters. Here are some tips for getting your emails through:

- **Ask your recipients to add your sending address to their address book.** You may also request that they add your domain (e.g., mydomain.com) to their list of approved senders (whitelist).
- **Write subject lines that make it obvious you are sending a legitimate, opt-in email.** For example, use the word "newsletter" in the subject line - it may reduce your spam score!
- **Get to the point.** Concise messages are less likely to get blocked. Plus, short messages go out faster, because they take less time for the server to process. Instead

of rambling on, include a link where readers can see the full story, take action, or fill out a form. and you will have an opportunity to engage them more fully through your web site.

- **Use restraint with colored text.** Using a limited palette - black and one or two accent colors - will not only reduce your number of points, it will also make your emails look more professional. A limited number of fonts (I suggest 1 or 2) is also helpful.
- **Include your organization's name and physical address in every bulk email message,** as required under the CAN-SPAM Act. P.O. Box addresses are acceptable, if that is what your organization uses.
- **Test your emails for spam indicators before publishing them.** This can now be done on the Analyze tab in PowerMail and Advocacy.

Following these guidelines doesn't guarantee you'll pass every ISP's spam filters, or every recipient's spam filters, but the service should do a good job of alerting you to messages that have a high potential for being flagged as spam.