

# DEBUNK'D



Email Marketing Debunk'd:

## **Find the Truth Behind Top Email Marketing Myths**



## Fact or Fiction?

Email marketing has its share of accepted rules. Here at Act-On, we like to break rules...so long as we have the data to back it up. So we decided to test some of the conventional wisdom of email marketing. Bust some myths if you will (we won't, because it's copyrighted).

Come along as we find out what holds up to scrutiny ... and what's Debunk'd!





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# Methodology: How (and Why) We Did It

You can consider this entire project a very complicated commercial for A/B testing your emails. We *love* A/B testing. It's a simple way to learn what works best for your audience, continuously improve your content, and drive more actionable results from your campaigns.

## Here's how we did it:

1. Picked a single segment that we wanted to test—in this case, our engaged prospecting audience.
2. Created a list of everything we wanted to learn. We came up with 30 ideas for tests.
3. To make it easier to track, sort, and plan, we separated our 30 tests into three categories: Language, Design, and Timing.
4. Mapped out our email calendar, including win criteria and which test went with which email.
5. Made a hypothesis for each test, based on “best practice” bias.
6. Created A/B test segments in our marketing automation platform, Act-On (ahem, maybe you've heard of it?). We split each test 50/50. For some tests we even did secondary splits.

### Example:

#### A - Engaged (50%)

Split A (25%)  
Split B (25%)

#### B - Engaged (50%)

Split A (25%)  
Split B (25%)

7. Waited for the emails to send. Made popcorn.
8. Recorded all the results and dug into the findings.



Findings and Insights

# **Part 1:**

# **Design Tests**



# Color Temperature Test

## The test:

CTA Color (Cool vs. Warm, Cool vs. Neutral)

## The hypothesis:

There won't be a big impact here. The quality of the graphic is more important than the color family.

## The results:

Recipients preferred warm colors in our first test. In subsequent tests, neutral colors (we used black) won the day.

## Our reaction:

It's not surprising that people preferred warmer tones, but the margins surprised us. Our dark pink CTAs produced 39% click thru rates. But we were quite surprised by the results of our neutral v. cool test.

"I would have thought teal would win in this showdown," Kelsey Yen, our demand generation manager opined. "But surprisingly black won with a shocking 67% improvement in CTOR."

The moral of the story? Cool colors don't get clicks!

## The Data

### Test 1

Warm

vs.

Cool

Warm CTAs had a

**32% better CTR**

over Cool CTAs

### Test 2

Neutral

vs.

Cool

Neutral CTAs had a

**21% better CTR**

over Cool CTAs

### Test 3

Neutral

vs.

Warm

Warm CTAs had a

**4% better CTOR**

over Neutral CTAs



# Design vs. Plain Text Test

## The test:

Emails with designed elements vs. emails with only text elements

## The hypothesis:

Designs are more engaging, so we'll see better results with that option than with plain text.

## The results:

Our audience preferred the plain text version!

## Our reaction:

\*Double take\* Wha-wha-whaat?! We did not see that one coming, and we're not sure why. One idea: a less designed option looked more like a written email from an actual person than a corporate email with lots of design bells and whistles.



## The Data

### Design vs. Plain Text

#### Designed:

CTR: 1.35%

CTOR: 3.35%

Conversion Rate 7.2%

#### Plain Text:

CTR: 1.56%

CTOR: 3.65%

Conversion Rate 11.37%



Plain text had a

**45% better**

conversion rate!



# Links vs. Buttons Test

## The test:

Comparing CTAs and external links delivered as buttons, and delivered as text links

## The hypothesis:

Everyone loves hitting a button! Buttons will win, 100%

## The results:

A major upset as hyperlinks won the day.

## The Data

### Links vs. Buttons Test

#### A: Links

CTR: 1.14%  
CTOR: 2.9%



#### B: Buttons

CTR: .84%  
CTOR: 2.1%

#### FINAL:

CTR: .93%  
CTOR: 2.3%







Findings and Insights

# Part 2:

# Timing Tests



# Which Days Have the Highest Engagement?

## The test:

What's actually the best day to send your emails for maximum engagement?

## The hypothesis:

"I've always been told that Tuesday through Thursday are the best days to send emails, I was curious if that held up," said Kelsey Yen, our Demand Generation Manager. The reasoning goes: on Monday people are too busy kicking off the work week, and on Friday people have their minds on the weekend (not work matters).

## The results:

We had a tie for the best day to send based on opens: every day of the week performed reasonably well. But when we look at which emails drove the most clicks through to our content, Friday becomes the clear winner.

## Our reaction:

We were really surprised to see Friday win the day here. Maybe as people are gearing up for the weekend, their to-do list clears up enough to spend some time opening emails?

## The Data

### Monday

Opens: 37.40%  
CTR: 0.93%  
CTOR: 2.50%

### Tuesday

Opens: 40.15%  
CTR: 0.88%  
CTOR: 2.20%

### Wednesday

Opens: 39.90%  
CTR: 0.98%  
CTOR: 2.45%

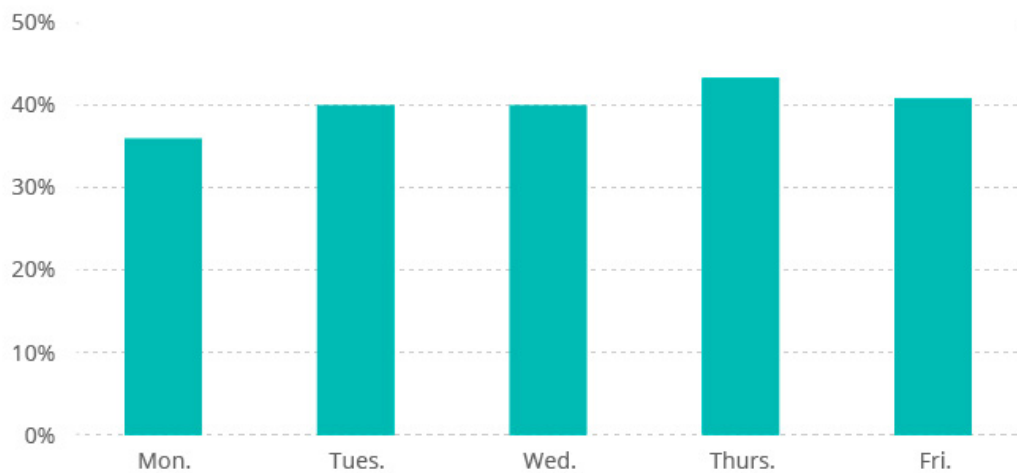
### Thursday

Opens: 42.20%  
CTR: 0.70%  
CTOR: 1.67%

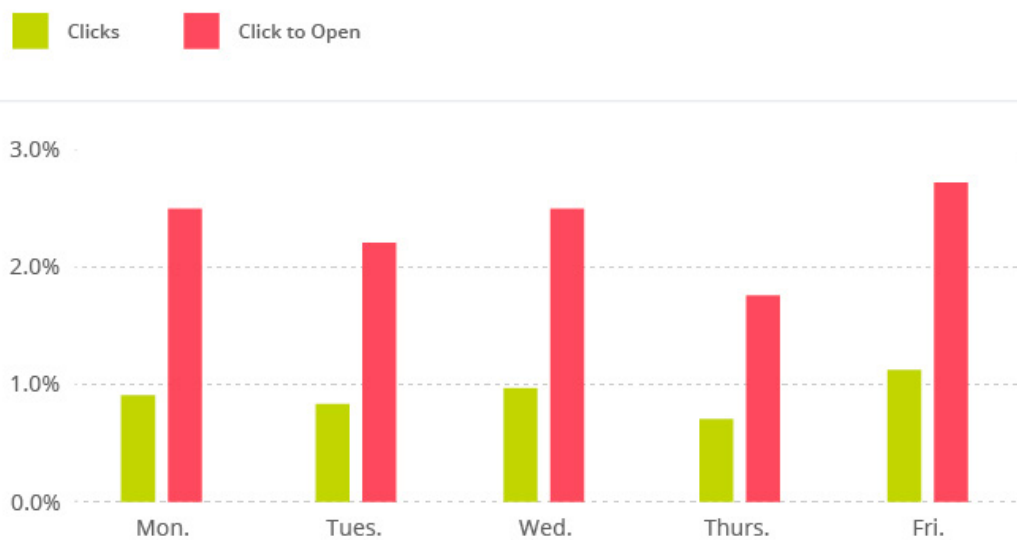
### Friday

Opens: 40.35%  
CTR: 1.11%  
CTOR: 2.75%

## Opens by Day of the Week



## Clicks & Click to Open





# When to send: morning or afternoon?

## The test:

When are people more likely to open your emails? Early in the morning or in the afternoon?

## The hypothesis:

We expected better results in the mornings. Most email marketers seem to agree that morning sends are best.

## The results:

This is one where the accepted standard held up in our testing. People really do open more in the morning.

## Our reaction:

Not surprising, although the contrarian in us feels slightly disappointed.

## The Data

### AM vs PM (8-9:30 vs 2-2:35) Test

#### AM Average

Opens: 40.09%

CTR: 0.92%

CTOR: 2.31%



#### PM Average

Opens: 40.36%

CTR: 0.81%

CTOR: 2.04%

### Time of Day Bonus Tip:

Send outside the top of the hour. As the most common time to send, the top of the hour makes for lots of noise in the inbox. Sending at half past, increased CTR by 6% on average and a 79% lift in conversions when sent in the morning.



Findings and Insights

# Part 3: Language Tests



# Do audiences prefer a conversational or more professional tone?

## The test:

In B2B especially, we err on the side of using professional language. At Act-On, we really like using more conversational language, so this test was particularly interesting to us.

## The hypothesis:

We're all human! We want to have a conversation, not open an email full of jargon and industry-insider terms.

## The results:

Our more conversational email led to a 44% higher CTR and a 47% higher CTOR.

## Our reaction:

We're spiking the football over here! This one is a big win for more approachable B2B marketing.

## The Data

### Casual vs. Business Language Test

#### A: Biz Tone

Open 36.9%  
CTR: .63%  
CTOR 1.7%

#### B: Casual Tone

Open 36.8%  
CTR: .91%  
CTOR 2.5%





# What's better, longer email copy or shorter messages?

## The test:

Do recipients prefer short, to-the-point copy or longer, detailed email messages?

## The hypothesis:

Our inboxes are bombarded with emails daily. We need to get in and out in a matter of seconds. Shorter is better.

## The results:

Longer messaging resulted in a 26% CTR increase and a 29% CTOR lift.

## Our reaction:

When Kelsey, our demand generation manager, saw this result, she got a far away look in her eyes and stared out the window for hours.

"Everything I know is a lie," she mumbled to herself as one single solitary tear rolled down her cheek.

## The Data

### Long vs. Short Copy Test

#### A: Long

CTR: 1.78%  
CTOR: 5.4%



#### B: Short

CTR: 1.23%  
CTOR: 3.7%

**26% increase in CTR  
on longer messages  
compared to shorter**



# Subject Line-Focused Tests

## The test:

You could almost do an entire e-book and webinar just on subject lines. We tested a range of possibilities here, including emoji, and personal vs. company personalization.

## The hypothesis:

We expected wins for emoji subject lines and personalization based on company.

## The results:

We saw some inconclusive results for these tests. The only clear winner was using personalization in the subject line. As for emoji and fun/creative subject lines, we didn't have conclusive results.

## Our reaction:

Emoji didn't seem to move the needle, which didn't surprise us. We did hope to see a clearer result for the fun vs. straightforward subject lines. We'll definitely be running more tests in that area soon.

The real surprise was how much click-thrus improved when we personalized the subject lines. We saw an average improvement of 83% in click-to-open rate by including personalization compared to messages without personalization.

## The Data

### Company or Personal Test

#### A: Company

O 57.9%  
CTR 7.66%  
CTOR 13.2%



#### B: First Name

O 49.3%  
CTR 4.48%  
CTOR 9.1%

#### PREVIOUS NP:

O 53.2%  
CTR 2.43%  
CTOR 4.6%





# Subject Line-Focused Tests (and From Lines)

## The Data (continued)

### Emoji or Not Test

#### Emoji - Same day

42.4% Open rate

#### Emoji - 1 day before

43.8% Open rate

#### No Emoji - Same day

41.6% Open rate

#### No Emoji - 1 day before

43.9% Open rate

### Fun vs. Straightforward SL Test

#### A: Fun SL

O 41.5%

CTR .54%

CTOR 1.3%

#### A: Straightforward SL

O 41.7%

CTR .58%

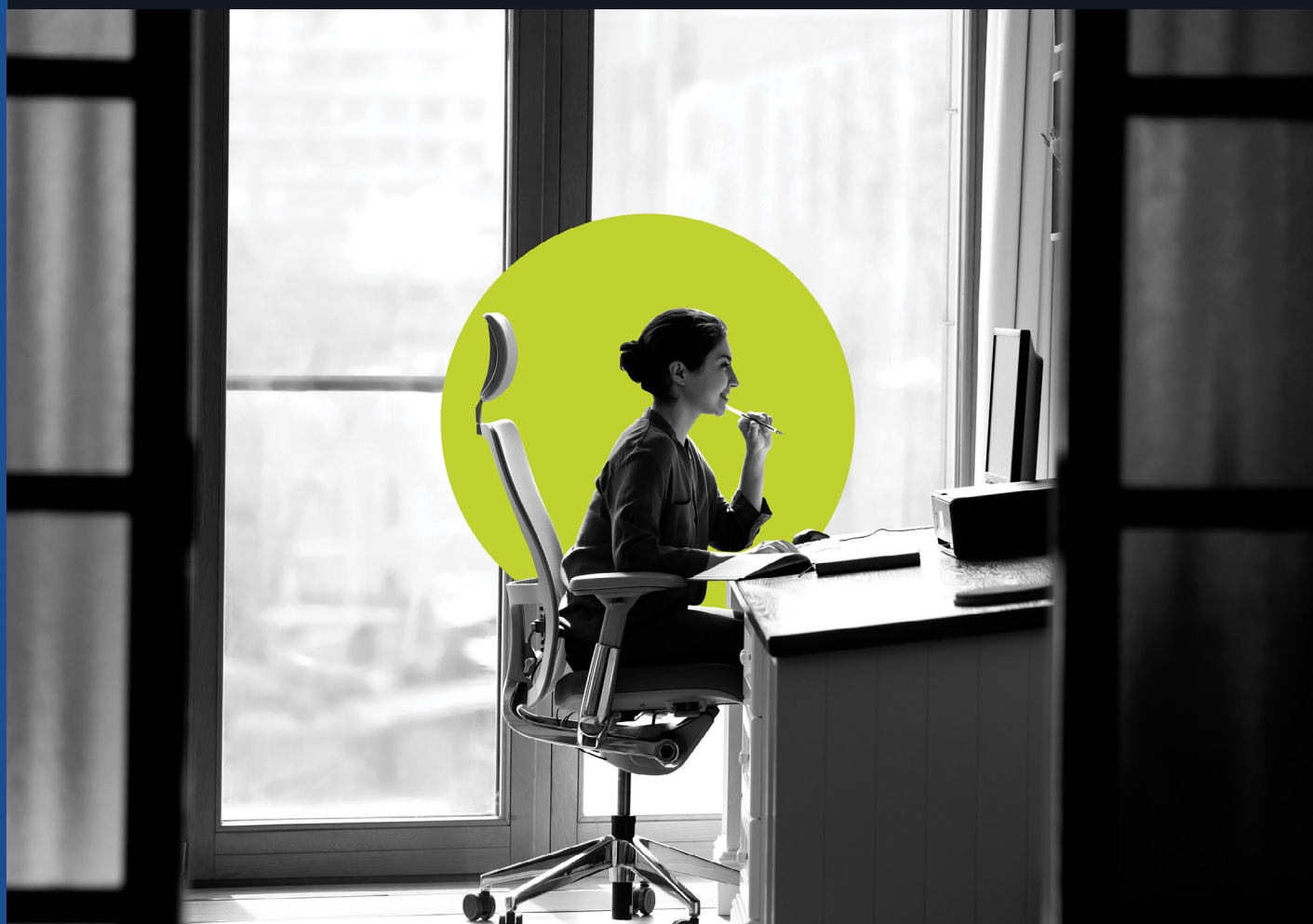
CTOR 1.4%





## The moral: Test, test, test!

If we gave you one takeaway from this exercise in Debunking, it's that you shouldn't let the conventional wisdom stop you from trying new things. No one knows your audience better than you. So don't be afraid to A/B test some new approaches and controversial ideas. You never know what might succeed!



## Get a Demo

and we'll talk about how these use cases (and others!) apply to your business.

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