

When Marketing E-Mail becomes SPAM

So you want to send a newsletter to your patient base, perhaps you'd like to tell them about a new member of staff joining your team, maybe a new technique, promotion or just to wish them a happy Christmas. Whatever the reason the technology to send e-mail seems like a cheap and easy medium to contact many people with the click of a mouse, there are however pitfalls to watch out for, some legal, some to ensure the message gets to where it's going and some of e-mail etiquette.

In 2003 it became illegal to send SPAM in the UK, spammers could be fined £5,000 in a magistrates court or an unlimited penalty from a jury, no jail thankfully.

So what is SPAM

The Oxford dictionary defines spam as "irrelevant or inappropriate messages sent on the Internet to a large number of users".

The word SPAM was coined after the Monty Python 'Spam skit' in which a couple try to order off a menu, as the waitress describes what's on the menu a group of Vikings in the corner start to sing 'Spam, spam lovely spam' over and over again. Thus the meaning of the term: something that keeps repeating and repeating to great annoyance, if you've ever seen the sketch you'll see how the two got connected.

The internet generally defines spam as Unsolicited Bulk Email (UBE). That is to say a large amount of mail that is sent without the users' permission. It is important to note that Unsolicited email is NOT SPAM, neither is bulk email.

It should therefore be easy to ensure that marketing e-mails are not legally SPAM. All patients will normally fill in some sort of paperwork and it should be easy enough to add a tick box to allow patients to opt out (or in if you prefer) to any marketing emails you wish to send. Alternatively you could send a few e-mails at a time (ie Unsolicited but not bulk), it is however generally accepted this is rude and should only be used in the minority of cases.

Bulk marketing e-mails whilst well intended may get blocked by the many mechanisms designed to stop real spam from getting in to the recipients inboxes. Each e-mail is given a score (Spam Confidence Level - SCL) from 1-10 of how confident the email server is that the mail is spam once your score goes over an editable limit it will be rejected. There are a few things you can do to ensure that your e-mail gets to where it supposed to.

- **Quality of the distribution list** - Many big email companies (Hotmail, yahoo etc) will reject email if it attempts to be delivered to too many incorrect addresses. If you had 5 or six incorrect Hotmail addresses in your e-mail list then all your other Hotmail lists may get incorrectly dropped into the junk e-mail folder.
- **Generalisation** - SPAM mails normally start with Dear Sir, or similar generic introduction, use the patients name, it looks nicer and will lower your SCL score

- **Senders IP** - if the sender is using the same machine that will receive e-mails then you stand a higher chance of getting the e-mail through – if you use a 3rd party supplier you need to ensure at least one of your mx records points at them.
- **Previous SPAMing** - If the senders machine (or ISP in some cases) has been used to send SPAM then you may find mail gets rejected. Keep you machines patched (using windows update) and ensure that you use an ISP who keeps their servers patched too.
- **Wording** - some e-mail providers will reject an e-mail if it contains certain keywords, whilst you might not be communicating about enhancing drugs or money to be transferred from a Nigerian bank account you may find some of your wording increases your score 'FREE' in capitals is one of the less obvious ones.

So now you have your accurate patient base all signed up, the mail you are going to send is relevant, well worded and not unsolicited – how do you go about sending it?

There are many ways to do this; some clinic management software has this functionality built in. You can filter the patients by age, sex, the last time they visited even frequency of appointments.

Some programs will allow you to export your patient details as a CSV file and import that into word for a mail merger to email. Microsoft word is a good program to use as it will allow you to personalise your email with names. It also sends through outlook. It is always worthwhile doing a test run to some friends to ensure you like the way the email looks.

It is generally considered bad e-mail etiquette to send attachments unless people have asked for a specific piece of information, especially if the attachment is big. Consider placing the attachment on your website and placing a link to the attachment in the email.

Finally measure the response to your marketing campaign. You can do this with an excel spread sheet. If you are running a clinic management package then this should do it for you. This way you can see if your hard work has been worth it.

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