Hit “Send”. Where Does It Go

How long has “emailing” been around? In 2016, email turns 45 and shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, it’s one of the most widely used and trusted channels for people to communicate today. It’s helped elect world leaders and has been the secret ingredient for many startups to grow into multi-billion dollar companies.

But the dark side of email is spam. While today’s spam filters do a good job of keeping junk out of our inboxes, many organizations also get caught in the crossfire of the war on spam when their emails end up in the spam folder. If your subscribers don’t see your emails, then they can’t open, click, and convert.

While the importance of reaching customers’ inboxes is undeniable, the reality is that many messages are missing the mark. According to the 2016 Deliverability Benchmark Report recently published by Return Path “this year, on average, one in five messages failed to reach the inbox. Global deliverability also experienced a slight but steady decline quarter over quarter, with 24 percent of messages missing the inbox in the last quarter studied.”

With deliverability declining, marketers are missing out on building valuable relationships and achieving the highest possible ROI. In this year’s annual benchmark report, Return Path takes a look at how email is delivered and how to measure inbox placement, followed by global and regional benchmarks broken out by quarter.

The path for an email to hit your targeted inbox is filled with complexity. Getting to the inbox entails more than hitting the send button. Emails that are able to make it past both gateway and spam filters are delivered to the inbox. Emails that are deemed malicious or untrustworthy are often blocked at the gateway, never reaching the inbox or the spam folder. For messages that make it past the gateway, spam filters look at the reputation of the sender, subscriber engagement, and content to decide if it should be placed in the inbox or the spam folder.

So how do the email experts measure email placement? There are many different ways to measure deliverability. The Return Path study focused on one important source: seed data. Seed addresses were one of the first ways Return Path and email marketers measured inbox placement rates. Have you ever tested an email campaign’s deliverability rate by sending it to your personal email address? That’s similar to how seed addresses work. But at Return Path, they have seed addresses at hundreds of mailbox providers and filters around the world, and they provide multiple addresses per mailbox provider. When marketers send email to the seed addresses, their software checks to see if it was delivered, and if so, reports whether it went to the inbox or the spam folder.
This study reported that globally, the average inbox placement rate stood at 79 percent, but declined from 82 percent in the third quarter of 2015 to 76 percent in Q2 of 2016.

Their summary says that “Marketers in the United States struggled to reach the inbox compared to the global average, seeing only 73 percent of messages delivered to the inbox. This low number is the result of senders’ difficulties in the beginning of 2016, when inbox placement dropped below 70 percent.”

So what can a company do to increase their email deliverability? This report suggested a few items:

- **Building and maintaining reputation**: If you send email, whether you know it or not, you have a sender reputation. Your sender reputation is a rating that helps mailbox providers and spam filters determine whether your emails are trustworthy, safe, and wanted.

- **Acquiring and maintaining quality subscriber data**: An unclean list has severe consequences on your deliverability. Every spam trap, unknown user, and inactive account on your list can damage your reputation, your deliverability, and potentially can land you on a blacklist.

- **Generating subscriber engagement**: Mailbox providers like Microsoft, Yahoo, AOL, and Gmail, are focusing more and more on subscriber engagement in their filtering decision process. Marketers who frequently generate high positive engagement from their subscribers are more likely to reach the inbox, while marketers that generate low or negative engagement from their subscribers find their emails landing in the spam folder.

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Dean L. Swanson  
Southeast Minnesota SCORE  
c/o Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce  
220 South Broadway, Suite 100  
Rochester, MN 55904  
[www.seminnesota.score.org/](http://www.seminnesota.score.org/)  
*Dean is a volunteer SCORE Mentor and Regional Vice President for the North West Region*