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Email marketing that delivers results

And the best subject line ever is…

Adestra email subject line analysis reveals the secret to maximising your results

Subject lines are the crux of an email marketing campaign. If it's good, your response rates will skyrocket… and if it's bad, well, we all know what that means. And yet, subject lines are often an afterthought in email marketing.

With so many glamorous and advanced email marketing techniques being used like campaign automation, triggered campaigns and automated content population, subject lines are no longer "sexy." And yet, the effect that a subject line has on a campaign shouldn't be underestimated. The old adage "content is king" remains true, but with subject lines, you need to get across the entire content of an email in fewer characters than a Tweet.

For the first time ever, Adestra have undertaken extensive research to provide industry-specific advice on what works and just as importantly, what doesn't.

Half price   Short   Report   Discount   Announcement
Breaking news   £ off   Newsletter   Video   Appeal
Attend   Optimise   Donate   Latest
Free stuff   Agenda   Alert
Long   offer   Last chance
Sale   10% off
Personalised   Exclusive

Executive Summary

Subject lines are often overlooked and yet can have a massive effect (both positive and negative!) on response rates for your campaigns – something marketers should be testing regularly. Adestra has analysed nearly one billion emails to establish what works for your sector, with some fascinating results...

Ecommerce

With the ecommerce sector, character and word count results are paradoxical. The choice is clear – shorter subject lines drive clicks, and longer subject lines drive opens. You need to consider what your objectives are and then construct your subject lines accordingly. Subject lines with 70 characters also appear to provide a huge uplift in click throughs. 'Coupon' and 'voucher' are out and '% off' and 'Summer sale' are in – if you want to drive both opens and clicks.

Events

The best click through rate comes from 15 words/120 characters upwards. Focusing on the benefits of attending a given event – be it the exhibitors, speakers, show features or whatever makes your show special. The words 'conference', 'seminar' and 'webinar' have much less impact than selling the benefits in the subject line. Mentioning price, discounts or using currency symbols can create a big uplift. Personalisation is also important here.

Publishing

For publishers, the results are quite clear – a higher word count delivers more opens and click through rates. Similar to the events sector, sell the benefits and give more information about what your email contains, and your responses will increase. "Newsletter" or "Forecast" or "Intelligence" are to be avoided, while "Bulletin" or "Alert" will see your rates increase. Use cutting edge content - "Exclusive", "Video" and "Interview" are all good.

Charity

Short subject lines drive both opens and response. If it's a donation campaign then this is critical! However, if it's an awareness campaign then longer subject lines will drastically improve open rates.
The words 'appeal' and 'donate' have lost their, well, appeal with recipients. Going back to basics with 'give' can increase results dramatically. If you want to increase your opens by 41% mention 'kittens', but it will drop 28% if you mention 'children' – strange, but true!

B2B vs B2C

Quite simply, the more words the better for the B2B sector - anything over 16 words however can deliver on both opens and clicks. For B2C, a 20 word subject line appears to be clear winner, delivering a massive 115% uplift in open rates and 85% uplift in clicks! Be clear about what your email is about and the trust of your recipients will follow. Money talks in the B2B sector, with subject lines containing monetary symbols, monetary phrases such as "turnover", "revenue" and "profit" achieving fantastic results, but avoid "B2B", "Business" and "industry". Video content rules in the B2C sector, with the word "video" boosting open and click through rates dramatically. Avoid "free and "half price", opt for "% off" instead and see the positive impact this makes.

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Methodology

We took a random sample of email campaigns, each of which were delivered to more than 5000 recipients, giving a total volume of 932 million emails sent over a six month period. The data from all of these was initially analysed in the aggregate, but what is average to one industry may not be to another! So for this reason, we have split the data down into 6 key industry groups – Publishing, Events, Ecommerce, Charities, B2B and B2C – so you can see what works for your sector.

One of the challenges we faced was what criteria to investigate! With so much data and so many potentially causal factors, we decided to focus on a few key areas: character count, word count, and keywords. This gives a broad overview of what works, as well as industry-specific advice on how you can amplify your results by focusing on your subject lines.

This is the first time we have carried out research of this type and some of the results surprised even us – so we're sure that within this document you will be able to find a few tips and tricks on how you can improve your results. We'll be producing updated reports looking at other criteria in the future, so if you have any ideas on what else we should look at then please let us know by emailing **moreinfo@adestra.com.**

932 MILLION EMAILS
MORE THAN
40,000 CAMPAIGNS
MORE THAN
5000 RECIPIENTS
PER CAMPAIGN
ACROSS 6 SECTORS

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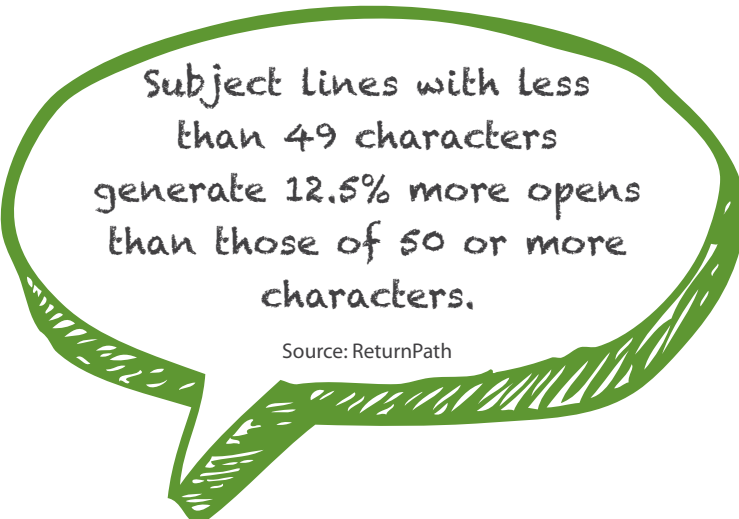
Setting the scene - Email marketing industry research overview

There is much advice about subject lines out there - the key is to know what the trends are... and to see how they match up to your email marketing intuition.
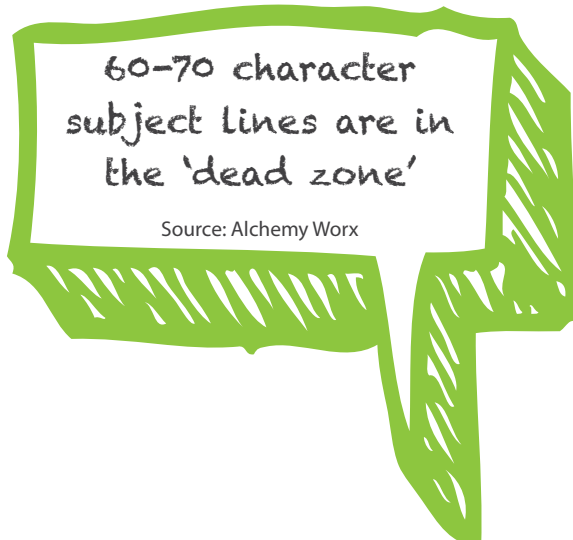
A study by Return Path[1] found that open rates were 12.5% higher where subject lines contained less than 49 characters compared to those that were 50 characters or more long, while click through rates were 75% higher for the shorter subject lines. Pinpointe[2] and Net Imperative[3] also found this to be the case, with shorter subject lines having slightly higher opening rates and much higher click through rates. Other studies[4] have also found that open rates of 35 characters or less have higher open and click through rates. However, a caveat to all of this - the majority of this research is cross-sector and focused on large pureplay retail senders, and therefore may not be transferable to your business.

However, Alchemy Worx[5] found that although emails with subject lines less than 60 characters long were the most opened, click to open rates were optimised by subject lines with over 70 characters. Click to open refers to the percentage of people who click on an email once they have opened it. As a result, subject lines 60-70 characters in length fell into a 'dead zone', where neither open nor click to open rates were optimised. Mail Chimp[6] again found that subject lines of less than 50 characters were more effective, unless they were being sent to targeted audiences.
It is clear that prevailing research indicates that either very short or very long subject lines are optimal, but there are certainly some variables around this trend. Does our research follow suit, and how are different industries affected?

> Subject lines with less than 49 characters generate 12.5% more opens than those of 50 or more characters.
>
> Source: ReturnPath

> 60-70 character subject lines are in the 'dead zone'
>
> Source: Alchemy Worx

[1] **Return Path blog – Subject Line Research: Response Goes Down As the Characters Go Up, by Ed Taussig, 2nd May**
   http://www.returnpath.net/blog/intheknow/2006/05/subject-line-research-response-goes-down-as-the-characters-go-up/
[2] **Pinpointe – The Ideal Email Subject Line Length** http://www.pinpointe.com/blog/what-is-an-ideal-email-subject-line-length
[3] **Net imperative - Email subject lines: Does length matter?** http://www.netimperative.com/news/2008/december/email-subject-lines-does-length-matter
[4] **Mailermailer's Email Marketing Metric Report (2008)** http://cdn.mailermailer.com/documents/email-marketing-metrics-2008h1.pdf
[5] **Subject lines – length is everything (2008)** http://www.alchemyworx.com/Alchemy-Worx-Subject-lines-length-is-everything.pdf
[6] **Mail Chimp – Best Practices in Writing Email Subject Lines** http://kb.mailchimp.com/article/best-practices-in-writing-email-subject-lines

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# What is the optimal number of characters for your subject line?

The majority of the research that has been conducted into subject line length has been focused on high street retailers – so, massive campaigns (lists of 500k+) with similar purposes. However, we were curious if the same trends held for all of our clients, no matter what size their list is. The results are fascinating, to say the least.

Why we used % vs the average
Instead of looking at actual open rates, what we are most interested in is the relative difference between the open rate for that category versus the overall average open rate. To illustrate, in the first row of the graph below shows that open rates for campaigns with up to and including 10 characters in the subject line experience an average increase open rate of 15.1% compared to the average open rate of all subject line lengths. The same goes for the click through rates and click to open ratio.

Why we used the Click to open rate
Click to open rate refers to the percentage of people who click on an email once its open.
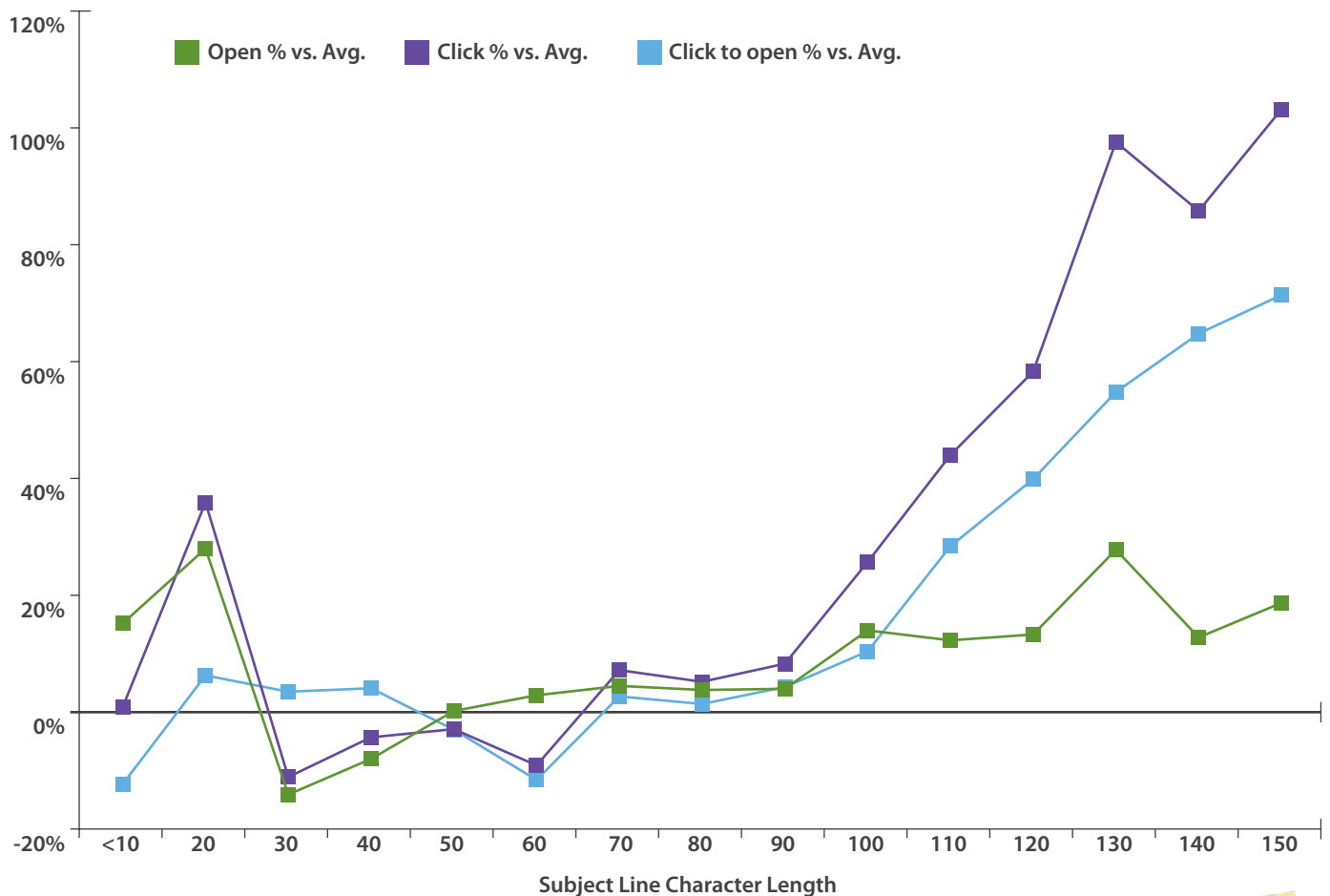
At first glance (and when only considering open rates) it appears that either very short or very long subject lines deliver better results. However, when also considering the click through and click to open rates, there is strong evidence that longer subject lines are more effective. They drive opens and importantly also lead to action being taken once the email has been opened.

Top tip: Longer subject lines allow you to suggest multiple benefits of the email.

When we break this down by sector, the results change somewhat:

First of all, note that the blank fields are there because we have removed results that were not statistically significant. For example, in ecommerce there was only one campaign sent out with less than 10 characters in the subject line. Therefore there is not enough data with which to draw conclusions.
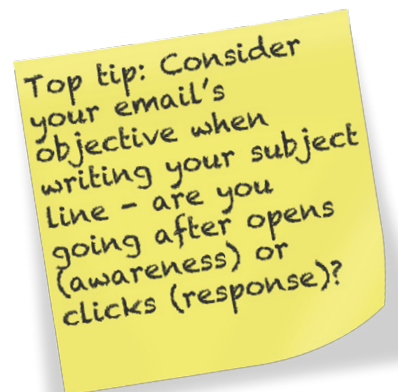
Length	Ecommerce			Events		
	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
<10				6.9%	-6.90%	-12.9%
20	81.1%	69.50%	-6.4%	16.3%	23.50%	6.2%
30	-48.0%	-39.00%	17.4%	15.2%	33.80%	16.1%
40	27.5%	-15.60%	16.5%	7.3%	4.00%	-3.1%
50	17.1%	4.20%	-11.0%	-0.1%	-5.10%	-5.0%
60	52.2%	6.00%	-30.3%	-1.2%	-3.00%	-1.8%
70	69.7%	91.10%	12.6%	-6.8%	-15.10%	-8.9%
80	25.6%	-5.80%	-25.0%	-9.4%	-14.10%	-5.2%
90	30.7%	24.60%	-4.6%	-8.3%	-13.00%	-5.2%
100	38.2%	17.10%	15.3%	-0.5%	25.50%	26.1%
110	122.4%	6.40%	-52.2%	13.3%	31.80%	16.3%
120				-6.7%	43.60%	53.9%
130				14.1%	127.90%	99.8%
140				3.2%	217.50%	207.7%
150				4.9%	194.10%	180.4%

Ecommerce sector character count
With ecommerce, it's a catch-22 across the board. When open rates go up, response rates go down… but when open rates go down, response rates go up. It seems that subject lines with 70-90 characters offer a minor sweet spot, which is just enough space to include a somewhat descriptive offer. Subject lines with 70 characters also appear to provide a huge uplift in click throughs - pretty impressive!

Events sector character count
Short and punchy subject lines get the higher open rates, but interestingly, a much higher response (more clicks) occurs when the subject line is longer. The Click to open rate and click rate skyrocket from the 120 character mark – explain the benefits of your event in the subject line of your email and people will respond.

Top tip: Consider your email's objective when writing your subject line - are you going after opens (awareness) or clicks (response)?

Length	Publishing			Charity		
	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
<10	18.7%	44.90%	22.1%	86.1%	148.50%	33.5%
20	23.8%	37.20%	10.9%	33.8%	114.00%	60.0%
30	2.6%	1.30%	-1.3%	5.6%	-21.30%	-25.5%
40	7.0%	3.30%	-3.4%	3.5%	31.50%	27.1%
50	-3.3%	-7.50%	-4.3%	-13.7%	-9.60%	4.7%
60	-4.6%	-12.00%	-7.8%	-2.4%	-6.50%	-4.2%
70	-3.6%	-3.30%	0.4%	4.4%	14.50%	9.7%
80	1.1%	7.50%	6.4%	9.6%	-17.00%	-24.3%
90	-0.3%	10.60%	10.9%	43.6%	3.80%	-27.7%
100	8.9%	26.70%	16.4%	55.7%	12.30%	-27.9%
110	1.9%	35.20%	32.7%	63.9%	-13.20%	-47.1%
120	9.5%	51.00%	37.9%	62.1%	-28.90%	-56.2%
130	26.0%	101.20%	59.7%	74.9%	-43.70%	-67.8%
140	6.2%	57.50%	48.2%			
150	24.4%	116.90%	74.3%			

Publishing sector character count

The publishing world follows suit – short subject lines drive open rates (so great for regular newsletters) but longer subject lines drive click throughs. If you are sending a newsletter, and mention the top 2 or 3 headlines in the subject line, then users are more likely to click onto your website to read it.

Charities sector character count

Short subject lines drive both opens and response. If it's a donation campaign then this is critical! However, if it's an awareness campaign then longer subject lines will drastically improve open rates.

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	B2B			B2C		
Length	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
<10	10.8%	-29.5%	-36.3%	38.8%	106.4%	48.7%
20	24.6%	46.2%	17.3%	34.9%	22.7%	-9.1%
30	-8.8%	-2.2%	7.2%	-25.2%	-33.4%	-11.0%
40	-0.7%	10.0%	10.9%	-20.0%	-26.5%	-8.1%
50	1.6%	2.9%	1.2%	-4.7%	-14.9%	-10.7%
60	-0.2%	-10.4%	-10.1%	12.4%	-1.6%	-12.5%
70	-3.9%	-15.3%	-11.9%	21.3%	40.8%	16.1%
80	2.4%	2.2%	-0.2%	20.0%	43.6%	19.7%
90	2.3%	5.5%	3.1%	22.3%	61.7%	32.2%
100	10.0%	17.6%	6.9%	51.2%	167.9%	77.2%
110	9.7%	28.2%	16.9%	30.1%	152.0%	93.6%
120	3.3%	29.2%	25.2%	60.8%	191.3%	81.1%
130	14.1%	53.1%	34.2%	71.7%	225.9%	89.7%
140	6.2%	82.7%	72.0%	60.4%	180.9%	75.2%
150	-1.7%	57.0%	59.7%	93.2%	276.4%	94.9%

Next we segmented the results into B2B and B2C emails. With significantly different approaches to email, the comparison has given rise to some really interesting results!

B2B sector character count
With B2B emails, longer subject lines work better than the shorter ones with the 130 characters hitting the mark. Anything over seems to have a negative effect on the email open rates but click through rates increase dramatically. Being concise but informative will deliver results.

B2C sector character count
In the B2C sector the results are quite dramatic. It seems that any subject line with over 80 characters will transport your results into another dimension. With the huge increase in email sent to B2C email addresses, and the various ways inboxes are now organised and sorted, standing out from the crowd is so important. Longer subject lines which give more information could give you an edge.

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How many words in my subject line will make a difference?

What is the optimal number of words to make your email stand out?
The number of words in your email subject line is a critical factor to driving open rates. Do many words create value in your email, or does a short, to-the-point line work better? How many words will deliver the holy grail of high opens and clicks?

The effect of word count is similar to character count but amplified greatly. Very short word counts appear effective, especially if its two words, but then there is a long, underwhelming response dip. It doesn't pick up again until we start reaching around a dozen words. From sixteen words on, the results increase both in terms of opens and clicks.
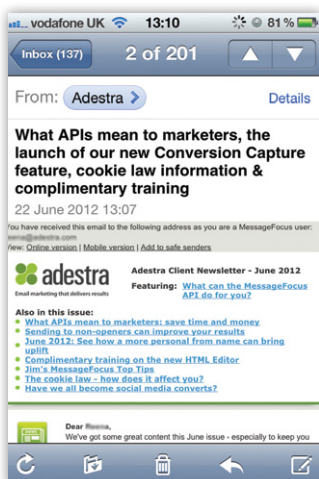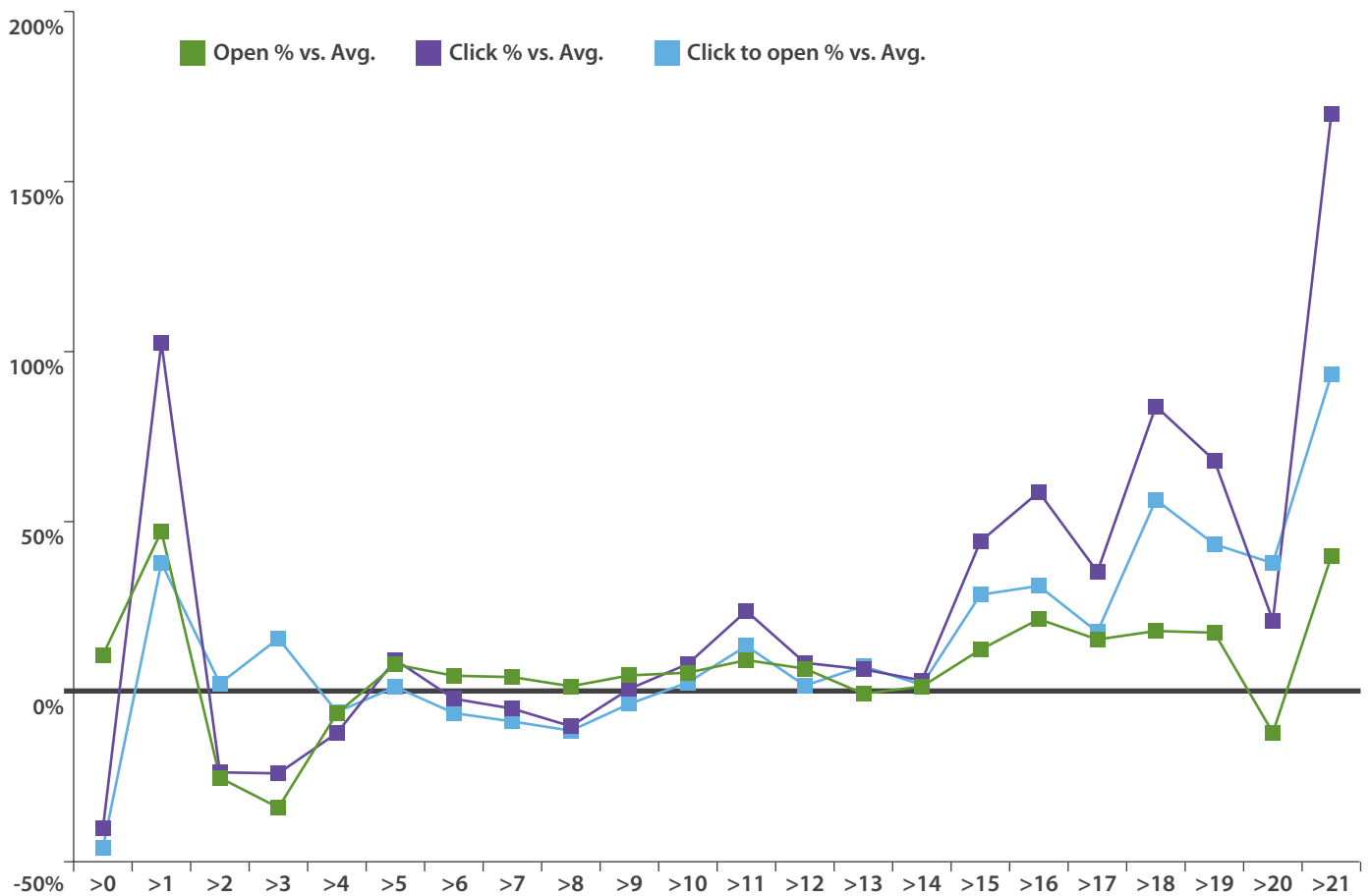
This is a trend we will see continuing. Consider iPhones – when you open an iPhone message you see the entire subject line on the screen. Longer subject lines with more words allow you to include more benefits of your product and services… and Marketing 101 tells us that benefits are what sell!

Top tip: Length is everything: Longer subject lines allow you to showcase more benefits and improve results.

Figure 1. Email with long subject line on an iPhone

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Here are the results by industry:

Word Count	Ecommerce			Events		
	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
1	235.0%	217.30%	-5.3%	-5.2%	-28.00%	-24.0%
2	61.6%	34.80%	-16.6%	12.2%	37.40%	22.5%
3	-48.4%	-35.40%	25.2%	9.1%	7.70%	-1.2%
4	-60.3%	-41.80%	46.5%	17.2%	55.50%	32.7%
5	-37.8%	-33.20%	7.4%	10.4%	4.70%	-5.1%
6	35.6%	25.40%	-7.5%	1.2%	-5.40%	-6.5%
7	63.0%	39.50%	-14.4%	-1.0%	-5.20%	-4.3%
8	43.9%	27.80%	11.2%	3.1%	3.10%	0.1%
9	53.7%	23.60%	-19.6%	-2.1%	-9.70%	-7.8%
10	50.9%	32.70%	-12.1%	-4.7%	-15.00%	-10.8%
11	52.7%	59.40%	4.4%	-4.3%	-7.60%	-3.5%
12	68.6%	76.00%	4.4%	-2.6%	3.30%	6.2%
13	45.8%	52.20%	4.4%	-7.2%	-11.20%	-4.3%
14	21.3%	-14.40%	-29.4%	-13.0%	-16.00%	-3.5%
15	24.2%	18.10%	-4.9%	-3.3%	6.90%	10.6%
16	31.7%	36.60%	3.7%	-3.7%	15.80%	20.3%
17	-39.2%	-73.70%	-56.7%	-6.8%	17.30%	25.9%
18				-3.7%	-4.50%	-0.8%
19				-1.1%	174.30%	177.3%
20				7.4%	176.10%	157.0%
21				-2.7%	161.70%	168.9%
22+				3.3%	237.40%	158.3%

Ecommerce sector word count

For ecommerce, the results remain paradoxical. The choice is clear – shorter subject lines drive clicks, and longer subject lines drive opens. You need to consider what your objectives are and then construct your subject line to follow suit.

Events sector word count

2-4 words deliver strong results for events organisations. However, the best click through rate comes from 15 words up. The former could be a simple message like "Registration now open!" and the latter could be focused on the benefits of attending a given event – be it the exhibitors, speakers, show features or whatever makes your show special.

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Word Count	Publishing			Charity		
	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
1	34.5%	-39.60%	-55.1%	86.1%	148.50%	33.5%
2	61.5%	144.10%	51.1%	99.2%	67.80%	-15.7%
3	0.3%	-11.70%	-12.0%	22.1%	47.70%	21.0%
4	5.3%	-2.00%	-6.9%	6.2%	-3.30%	-9.0%
5	1.6%	-5.60%	-7.1%	5.1%	11.70%	6.3%
6	4.0%	7.90%	3.8%	-0.3%	16.50%	16.9%
7	-5.1%	-17.50%	-13.1%	5.7%	18.70%	12.3%
8	-2.8%	-9.40%	-6.8%	-9.2%	-28.00%	-20.7%
9	-6.3%	-14.70%	-9.0%	-4.3%	7.40%	12.2%
10	0.2%	1.10%	0.9%	-19.2%	-37.30%	-22.4%
11	-1.4%	0.10%	1.5%	13.9%	3.40%	-9.2%
12	2.2%	19.70%	17.2%	59.5%	74.70%	9.5%
13	4.8%	5.60%	0.8%	-11.6%	19.00%	34.5%
14	-3.8%	11.50%	16.0%	15.1%	-17.70%	-28.5%
15	-4.9%	1.00%	6.2%	-7.4%	-39.60%	-34.8%
16	9.1%	43.60%	31.6%	0.0%	-27.70%	-27.7%
17	20.6%	59.50%	32.2%	61.5%	22.40%	-24.2%
18	11.8%	34.40%	20.2%	63.2%	-37.30%	-61.6%
19	10.6%	56.90%	41.8%	78.3%	-40.90%	-66.8%
20	9.3%	47.60%	35.1%	57.7%	-40.70%	-62.4%
21	-21.3%	-2.20%	24.2%	66.3%	-46.40%	-67.8%
22+	23.8%	135.80%	64.8%	71.3%	15.00%	-55.6%

Publishing sector word count
For Publishing, the results are quite clear – a higher word count delivers more opens and click through rates. The middle ground is the worst of both worlds, so avoid this if you can. Similar to the events sector, sell the benefits and give more information about what your email contains, and your responses will increase.

Charities sector word count
For this sector, the results vacillate wildly, with very short subject lines performing well. There is another sweet spot as word counts increase, albeit this is tempered by reduced response rates.
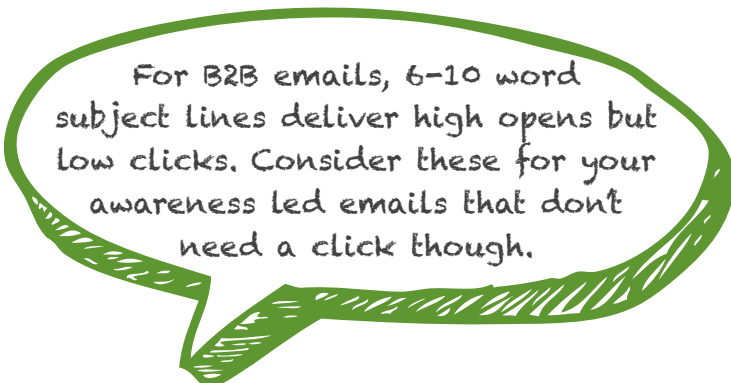
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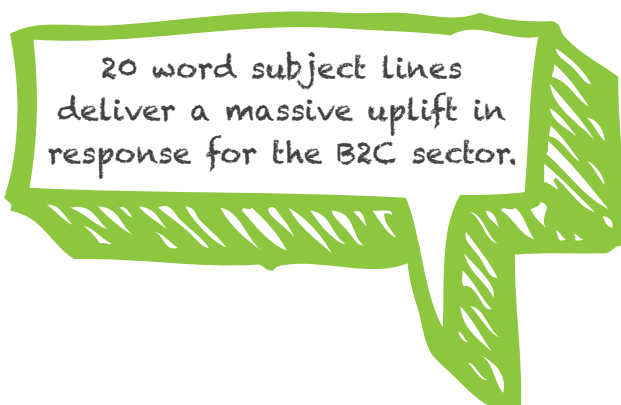|	B2B			B2C		
Word count	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.	Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
1	10.1%	-39.8%	-45.3%	87.5%	39.3%	-25.7%
2	69.9%	184.7%	67.6%	7.6%	-6.6%	-13.2%
3	-17.2%	-15.8%	1.7%	-40.0%	-39.7%	0.5%
4	-25.3%	-15.6%	12.9%	-47.2%	-42.1%	9.8%
5	-2.0%	-4.4%	-2.4%	-17.5%	-30.1%	-15.2%
6	7.7%	17.4%	9.0%	8.6%	-1.9%	-9.6%
7	0.6%	-5.1%	-5.7%	18.2%	13.1%	-4.3%
8	5.1%	1.5%	-3.4%	2.3%	-12.6%	-14.5%
9	0.7%	-4.6%	-5.3%	2.7%	-18.8%	-20.9%
10	0.9%	-2.7%	-3.5%	9.6%	1.0%	-7.9%
11	-0.2%	-9.4%	-9.1%	14.6%	27.4%	11.2%
12	-0.6%	-5.2%	-4.7%	28.0%	67.0%	30.5%
13	2.0%	-2.1%	-3.9%	17.7%	19.4%	1.5%
14	-2.0%	1.5%	3.5%	6.8%	31.2%	22.8%
15	0.3%	-4.3%	-4.5%	12.4%	52.8%	35.9%
16	15.1%	35.5%	17.8%	4.3%	57.9%	51.5%
17	7.5%	28.0%	19.1%	66.2%	150.0%	50.4%
18	7.2%	5.1%	-2.0%	68.8%	216.7%	87.6%
19	3.6%	42.0%	37.0%	81.2%	258.6%	98.0%
20	9.2%	59.9%	46.5%	115.5%	299.7%	85.5%
21	7.3%	36.0%	26.8%	-37.2%	-3.9%	53.0%
22 +	3.5%	43.5%	38.7%	92.7%	301.8%	108.5%

B2B sector word count

Quite simply, the more words the better for the B2B sector. Subject lines with 6 – 10 words drive open rates but don't deliver the resulting click throughs. Consider these for awareness emails that don't necessarily have a direct call to action to click. Anything over 16 words however can deliver on both.

B2C sector word count

In B2C, subject lines with 3-5 words appear to drive sinking open and click through rates, then anything from 6-10 words will deliver a high open rate but the click through does not reciprocate. A 20 word subject line appears to be a clear winner, delivering a massive 115% uplift in open rates and 85% uplift in clicks! Be clear about what your email is about and the trust of your recipients will follow.

> For B2B emails, 6-10 word subject lines deliver high opens but low clicks. Consider these for your awareness led emails that don't need a click though.

> 20 word subject lines deliver a massive uplift in response for the B2C sector.

What are the most effective words to include in my subject line?

This is the age old question that marketers wonder. We'll often look at campaign vs. campaign differences, but with so many other variables altering results this can lead to marketers making assumptions that are not based upon statistical significance.

We've looked across the 932,000,000 emails used in this research to determine by sector which keywords are the most effective.

In the following section you will discover which words and phrases are the most popular by sector. This gives you solid statistics by keyword on what works and what doesn't, and will give you some great ideas on how to improve your results.

N.B. Please bear in mind that these results are averages over nearly a billion emails. Individual emails had wildly vacillating results - just because a word works well on average doesn't mean it will for you. This research is meant to give you ideas of things to test but is not a silver bullet. It remains best practice to test, test, and test again!

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The Ecommerce Sector

		Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
Offers	Free	61.7%	53.8%	-4.9%
	Sale	62.7%	101.7%	23.9%
	Save	41.5%	-18.0%	-42.1%
	Half price	44.2%	44.7%	0.3%
	% off	61.5%	99.1%	23.3%
	voucher	27.5%	-24.7%	-41.0%
	coupon	-55.6%	-85.8%	-68.1%
	only	24.9%	-8.2%	-26.5%
Events	Birthday	36.7%	-12.3%	-35.9%
	Christmas	37.4%	6.5%	-22.4%
	Summer	51.7%	75.5%	15.7%
	Party	-1.6%	-19.1%	-17.8%
Benefits	Essential	41.5%	52.7%	7.9%
	Available	-58.4%	-47.1%	27.2%
	Advance	-70.7%	-51.6%	65.0%
	Next day delivery	51.3%	-46.2%	-64.5%
	New	85.9%	88.9%	1.6%
	Everything	90.9%	104.1%	6.9%
Money	£	34.5%	5.0%	-22.0%
	$	33.9%	23.1%	-8.1%
	€	43.1%	11.2%	-22.3%
Personalisation	First Name	45.5%	31.6%	-9.6%
Other	Application	-70.4%	-49.5%	70.6%
	Enclosed	-68.9%	-46.4%	72.6%

> Using "% off" and "sale" in the subject line increases open and Click to open rates

> The word "coupon" can have a detrimental effect to your campaign

Clearly not all offers are created equal! The words "coupon" and "voucher" have been ruined by group buying sites and now elicit an extremely poor response. However, giving specific information on the offer appears to drive both opens and clicks. For example, "% Off" and "Sale" proved particularly effective. If you are promoting an offer, be clear about what it is and the revenue will follow.

Being topical about an event certainly catches interest – for example Christmas and Birthday offers – but remember you're not the only one emailing them these offers, so response can drop off somewhat. However, if your product lines covers non-specific events (such as "Summer") then you'll stand out from the crowd.

Focusing on the benefits of your products is key, so word choice here is critical. Customers love to be at the cutting edge, so it follows that the word "New" drives results. "Next Day Delivery" gets people to read the email, but not respond at such a high level. Consider including next day delivery with an offer and your results will increase.

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The Events Sector

		Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
Product	webinar	-9.21%	-33.89%	-27.18%
	conference	-5.92%	-25.49%	-20.80%
	seminar	-3.64%	-34.22%	-31.73%
Money	$	27.63%	56.15%	22.35%
	£	16.53%	15.18%	-1.16%
	€	3.81%	-10.96%	-14.22%
	money	-20.23%	-11.99%	10.33%
Discounts	free	-7.66%	-0.88%	7.33%
	save	-3.75%	-37.00%	-34.54%
	early bird	-10.92%	-54.65%	-49.09%
	discount	11.45%	-51.17%	-56.18%
	offer	18.98%	4.79%	-11.93%
	2 for 1	40.41%	36.11%	-3.06%
Personalisation	First Name	32.01%	45.90%	10.53%
Urgency	last chance	-2.43%	-18.31%	-16.27%
	to go	10.47%	3.48%	-6.33%
	countdown	-25.72%	-42.65%	-22.79%
Features	new products	12.83%	21.40%	7.59%
	cpd	5.86%	39.29%	31.57%
	reasons	-26.59%	-42.94%	-22.27%
	announcement	2.30%	-20.11%	-21.91%
	keynote	-13.03%	-37.69%	-28.36%
	future of	-9.95%	-5.98%	4.41%
	speakers	-15.75%	-41.79%	-30.90%
	trends	-20.52%	-35.77%	-19.18%
	agenda	-14.34%	-36.66%	-26.05%
	programme	-10.69%	-31.46%	-23.25%
	2012	-1.85%	-0.81%	1.07%
Benefits	ROI	7.23%	17.93%	9.97%
	innovation	2.11%	-13.15%	-14.95%
	ideas	6.98%	-10.62%	-16.44%
	hundreds	20.15%	9.27%	-9.05%
	thousands	28.65%	171.16%	110.77%
	millions	56.61%	267.81%	134.85%
	exclusive	11.15%	-8.83%	-17.97%
	optimise	-27.34%	-44.88%	-24.14%
Questions	are you	4.54%	-0.51%	-4.83%
	can you	-24.02%	-20.99%	3.98%
	will you	-6.64%	-25.32%	-20.00%
Clichés	10 reasons	-35.49%	-65.05%	-45.83%
	5 reasons	-13.48%	-29.46%	-18.46%
Call to Action	attend	-11.48%	-9.98%	1.69%
	badge	29.62%	111.15%	62.89%
	invitation	9.16%	27.81%	17.09%
	register now	-3.67%	-15.64%	-12.43%
Free Stuff	iPad	-20.18%	-22.60%	-3.04%

> The words "conference", "seminar" and "webinar" have much less impact than selling the benefits in the subject line.

> Mentioning price, discounts or using currency symbols can create a big uplift.

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The first thing to note here is when mentioning what your event is ("conference", "seminar", "webinar") the response rate drops. There are dozens of events for every industry out there, so simply saying "Come to our conference" doesn't deliver a unique offer to your customers.

On the other hand, clearly mentioning the value of tickets or discounts (using currency symbols) drives a great response uplift. Even more stark is when explaining the offer. The phrase "early bird" has clearly reached saturation point and no longer has a great effect, but defining the specific offer (for example '2 for 1') drives massive response spikes!

One important thing to note is how effective personalisation is. When you include a person's first name, response rates drastically increase. Of course, your personalisation will only be as good as your data, so ensure that it's correct before you test this out.

As all marketers know, customers buy benefits, not features, and when looking at the metrics above this holds true. When mentioning event features ("Keynote", "Programme", "Speakers") response rates decay. But when focusing on the benefits, the opposite holds true – especially when saying things like "Meet thousands of people" or "Millions of pounds of business."

A common tactic is to ask questions in a subject line, but the effectiveness of these is marginal, if not detrimental! Even worse are the cliché lists ("5 reasons to attend…"). These were trendy a few years ago, but the time has passed. They don't work, so don't use them!

Top tip: Please stop bribing people with free iPad offers – unless you want 20% fewer opens!

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The Publishing Sector

		Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
Content	News	3.8%	-4.3%	-7.8%
	Update	18.8%	7.8%	-9.2%
	Breaking	12.6%	4.8%	-6.9%
	Newsletter	-11.4%	-40.3%	-32.6%
	Research	-6.2%	-30.1%	-25.5%
	Report	-15.2%	-52.4%	-43.9%
	Forecast	-31.7%	-78.9%	-69.1%
	Intelligence	-26.1%	-86.0%	-81.0%
	Issue	0.4%	-16.5%	-16.8%
	Latest	-6.3%	-6.2%	0.0%
	Top stories	-19.1%	-33.3%	-17.6%
	Video	29.6%	94.0%	49.7%
	Interview	7.7%	23.2%	14.3%
	Bulletin	20.8%	60.4%	32.8%
	Alert	26.2%	20.6%	-4.5%
	Exclusive	32.7%	119.8%	65.6%
	Special	8.9%	-15.7%	-22.6%
	%	8.9%	-27.1%	-33.0%
Date	2012	13.9%	18.1%	3.8%
	January	25.5%	16.9%	-6.9%
	February	8.2%	-13.7%	-20.2%
	March	1.8%	-19.6%	-21.0%
	Weekly	3.3%	-10.0%	-12.9%
Money	£	2.5%	4.8%	2.3%
	$	-9.6%	-21.1%	-12.7%
	€	-13.8%	-22.8%	-10.5%
	discount	-18.7%	-0.9%	21.9%
	Free Trial	-77.9%	-88.8%	-49.4%
	subscription	6.0%	-41.9%	-45.2%
Personalisation	First Name	-26.3%	-59.1%	-44.4%
iPad	iPad app	11.9%	-4.6%	-14.7%

> The word "newsletter" has lost its charm. Is it overused?

> Using "exclusive" in the subject line can have a positive impact on opens and clicks.

Newsletters benefit from consistency, sending it at the same time every day/week from the same address and so on. But the content of the subject line (and the naming of the newsletter itself) can deliver drastically different responses. For example, if you call it a "Newsletter" or "Forecast" or "Intelligence" your results will be worse. However, if you brand it using more active words such as "Bulletin" or "Alert" then your rates will increase. Consider this when deciding what to call your newsletter.

It's clear that recipients like new, cutting edge content, so for example, if it's "Exclusive" content your response rates will increase. The analysis clearly shows that readers respond strongly to "Video" and "Interview" content.[1]

Oddly, personalisation in this sector doesn't have a positive effect on results. Perhaps it's due to data quality, or perhaps it's because people don't want news sources knowing their names. Think about it this way: when you pick up a newspaper from a newsstand, do you want it to have your name printed across the top?

Lastly, it's evident that the market is ripe for iPad Apps. People are interested in them and are keen to read more, however, they're not clicking through enough. When promoting your app, make sure you outline the benefits in the copy of the email as well.

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1. To learn more about how you can integrate video in your emails contact your Email Service Provider or Adestra Account Manager. 18

The Charities Sector

		Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
Campaign	influencing	53.4%	-79.6%	-86.7%
	government	27.9%	-29.9%	-45.2%
	appeal	-23.6%	-58.7%	-46.0%
	gift	-34.8%	-38.3%	-5.4%
	donate	-30.0%	-41.5%	-16.3%
	give	45.7%	67.8%	15.2%
	child	-28.5%	-25.1%	4.8%
	kitten	41.2%	244.3%	143.9%
Awareness	upcoming	94.1%	30.0%	-33.1%
	events	90.4%	83.3%	-3.7%
	2012	53.0%	3.7%	-32.2%
	2011	23.9%	-20.4%	-35.7%
	join	38.9%	-38.2%	-55.5%
Money	% off	-18.9%	92.6%	137.6%
	half price	-29.4%	-12.5%	24.0%
	£	-25.1%	-53.8%	-38.4%
	$	-2.6%	-18.2%	-16.0%
	€	-9.6%	-29.0%	-21.5%
Personalisation	First Name	-2.6%	-18.2%	-16.0%
Benefits	little extras	-27.8%	-11.1%	23.1%
	new	38.6%	63.6%	18.1%
	free	-35.6%	-20.8%	22.9%

> The words "appeal" and "donate" have lost their appeal with recipients.

> The word "give" can increase your results dramatically.

For the charity sector, it is difficult to isolate individual keywords as the objectives of emails can vary wildly, from soliciting donations, to selling goods in online shops, to simple awareness emails to promote causes or campaigns.

However, some keywords do jump out as being either effective or otherwise.

When seeking donations, just coming out and saying it seems to work! For example, "Give" – people expect that from a charity and thus seem to respond to it. However, "Donate" and "Appeal" don't seem to have such a great response rate. It would be worth testing both to your lists and see which ones work best for your charity.

If you are looking to inform your lists about a cause, then mentioning the root of that cause (for example "Government" or "Influencing") has a great effect on open rates. The click rates are lower, but if that's not the objective of the campaign then it's a moot point.

And finally, people seem to hate children (-28% opens) but love kittens (+41% opens.) We'll leave it to you to consider the reasons for this and how you want to use it to your advantage!

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The B2B Sector

		Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
Teasers	News	14.8%	19.9%	4.5%
	Free	-3.0%	-21.6%	-19.2%
	Exclusive	-0.9%	-33.5%	-32.9%
	Video	6.7%	-1.7%	-7.8%
	Latest	-0.7%	5.6%	6.4%
Benefits	ROI	-2.9%	-9.4%	-6.6%
	Innovation	10.9%	-36.3%	-42.6%
	Ideas	-1.2%	11.7%	13.1%
	Profit	23.7%	87.6%	51.6%
	Revenue	13.1%	57.9%	39.6%
	Turnover	54.4%	211.8%	102.0%
	Asset	-3.2%	-24.8%	-22.3%
	Referral	28.2%	120.9%	72.3%
Money	£	26.0%	92.3%	52.6%
	$	17.6%	19.7%	1.8%
	€	5.5%	-4.3%	-9.3%
Personalisation	First Name	31.6%	-8.1%	-30.1%
General	Business	-20.0%	-58.2%	-47.8%
	Acquisition	15.7%	82.1%	57.3%
	Deal	6.9%	44.8%	35.5%
	Asset	-3.2%	-24.8%	-22.3%
	Summit	-10.5%	-62.8%	-58.5%
	iPad	5.6%	-9.1%	-13.9%
	B2B	-23.6%	-64.8%	-54.0%
	Commercial	2.4%	-27.6%	-29.3%
	Industry	-8.4%	-47.6%	-42.8%

> Any word relating to money will engage the B2B sector.

> Using the acronym B2B in your emails can cause your response rates to dive!

Money talks in the B2B sector, with subject lines containing monetary symbols and phrases such as "turnover", "revenue" and "profit" achieving fantastic results.

On the opposite end of the scale, words relating to the B2B sector itself have very negative results. Take the word "B2B" as an example which causes open and click through rates to clash through the floor. The words "business" and "industry" have the same effect. These terms are too generic for such a broad sector, so avoid subject lines that talk about "The latest information for your industry". Focus instead on your industry's colloquialisms and the results will follow.

The B2C Sector

		Open % vs. Avg.	Click % vs. Avg.	Click to open % vs. Avg.
Offers	Free	-1.7%	-14.2%	-12.7%
	Sale	24.4%	47.3%	18.5%
	Save	15.6%	-35.5%	-44.2%
	Half price	-6.7%	-32.9%	-28.0%
	% off	15.6%	29.4%	12.0%
	voucher	23.5%	-33.4%	-46.0%
	coupon	-64.0%	-78.2%	-39.3%
	only	8.6%	-27.9%	-33.6%
	2 for 1	34.3%	-43.7%	-58.1%
Teasers	News	44.8%	40.0%	-3.3%
	Video	50.3%	141.9%	60.9%
	Exclusive	47.4%	133.9%	58.7%
	Latest	65.5%	38.5%	-16.3%
Benefits	Essential	1.5%	-6.7%	-8.1%
	New	43.5%	85.3%	29.2%
Money	£	1.3%	-30.0%	-30.9%
	$	-24.4%	-37.4%	-17.2%
	€	-14.8%	-39.9%	-29.5%
Personalisation	$AMF_	-33.4%	-53.1%	-29.6%

> Stay clear from the word "free". It doesn't do anything for your results!

> Teasers can work well to entice B2C audiences to open and click on your emails.

The B2C sector encompasses such a wide array of businesses all trying to vie for attention in their customers crowded inboxes, so which words will make your audience engage with you and what will make them run for the hills?

Video content rules in the B2C sector, with the word "Video" boosting open and click through rates dramatically. Video that plays in email can now be done, and it's mainly webmail clients that support the functionality which explains the impact of the word on results.[1]

Offer led words such as "free" and "half price" have a surprisingly negative effect on response as they just don't do enough to inspire engagement. Try opting for a more specific "% off" instead and see the impact this makes.

Teasers also work very well in the B2C sector. Creating exclusivity for the recipient clearly drives response so make sure you're making the recipient feel special and responses will follow.

1. To learn more about how you can integrate video in your emails contact your Email Service Provider or Adestra Account Manager. 21
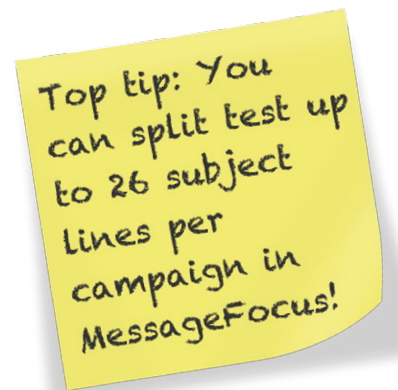
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To wrap up

In the above research you've seen a litany of statistics. But, what does all of this mean, and more importantly how can you benefit from it?

Firstly, it's crucial to believe that subject line optimisation can be sexy too! The statistics show just how much results can vary according to the subject line used for a campaign. Don't leave it until the last minute to think about yours!

Everything from the number of characters and words to the specific terms and symbols you use can create interest in your campaigns. When deciding on your subject line, the first thing to consider is what you believe your recipients will respond to. However, this is easier said than done. Sometimes your lists will surprise you - the only way to find out is by regular testing, and accurate tracking. Knowing what you want your email to achieve (opens, clicks or both), the people you're trying to communicate with and your industry sector (or sub sector) are important things to consider.

It's only one aspect of your email marketing arsenal, but when approached in the correct way subject line optimisation can prove to be an effective (and quick) tactical winner to help drive response rates.

Top tip: You can split test up to 26 subject lines per campaign in MessageFocus!

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About the authors:

Parry Malm – Account Director

Parry joined Adestra in 2010 and having run marketing teams in his previous roles, he has a deep understanding of client needs. He is a seasoned digital marketer and is responsible for running Adestra's Account Management team and for delivering high-level strategic direction to Adestra clients. As Adestra's only Canadian, on weekends, Parry can be found policing the mean streets of London in a Mountie uniform.

Parry Malm

Claire Shepherd – Account Executive

Claire came to us from a not-for-profit research and publishing organisation. She now provides support to the Account Managers, looks after some of her own accounts and generally makes sure clients are happy and well informed. Claire also has a background in Biology and has an active interest in conservation projects in her spare time.

Claire Shepherd

Founded in 2004, Adestra set out to be the most respected Email Service Provider (ESP). Over 300 organisations globally and over 4,500 marketers work with our technology, people and deliverability solutions to generate effective email marketing that delivers results.

If you have any questions about this study, or Adestra, then please do get in touch by calling us on +44 (0) 1865 242425, or emailing us on moreinfo@adestra.com. We'd love to hear from you.

A selection of our clients

informa   endemol   Oxfam   ALM *An Integrated Media Company*   BLUE CROSS *FOR PETS*   UBM   Dennis