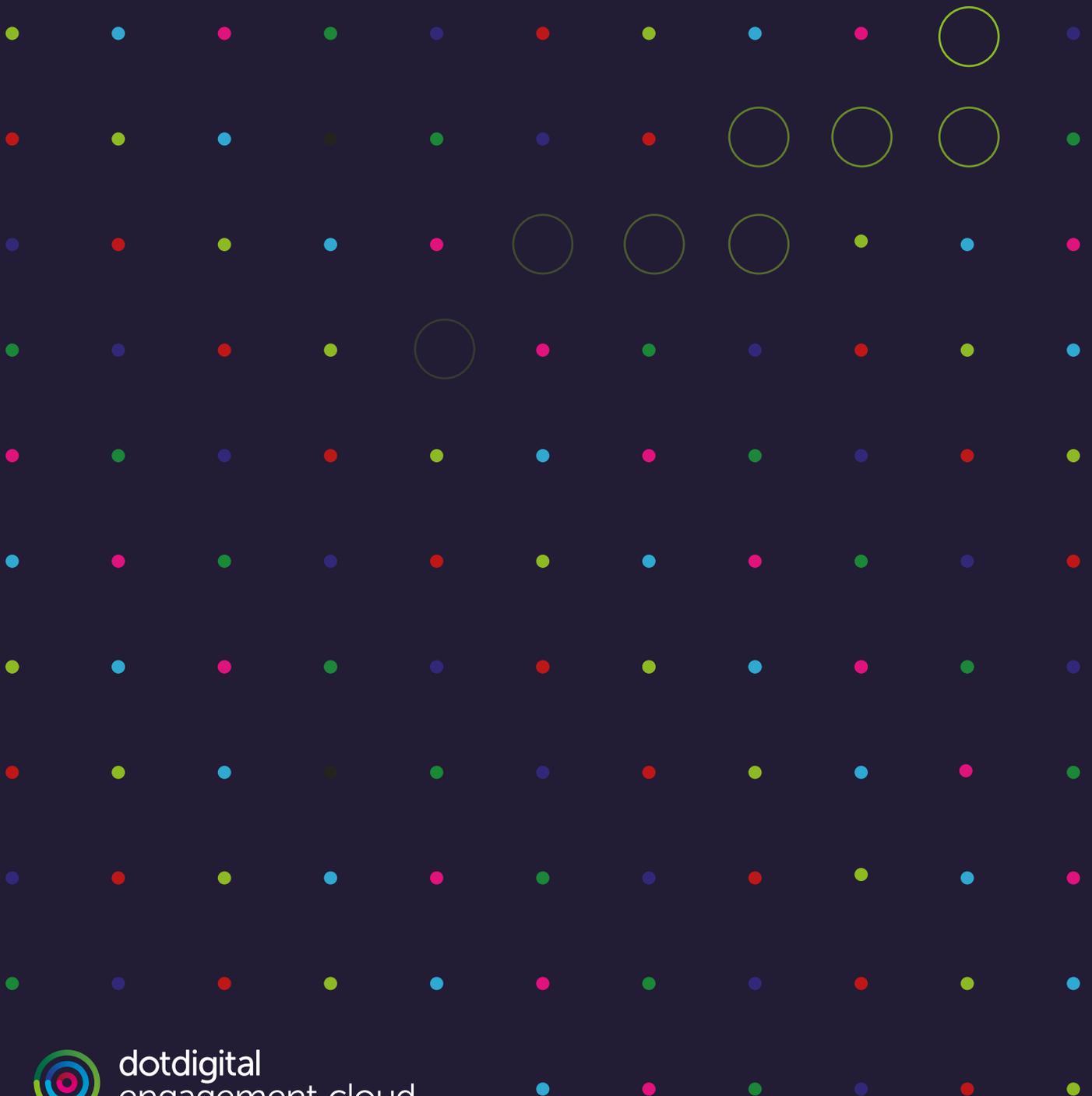


BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

# Email marketing 101: Deliverability



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# Email marketing 101: Deliverability

Make sure everything you're doing is  
doing everything for your deliverability

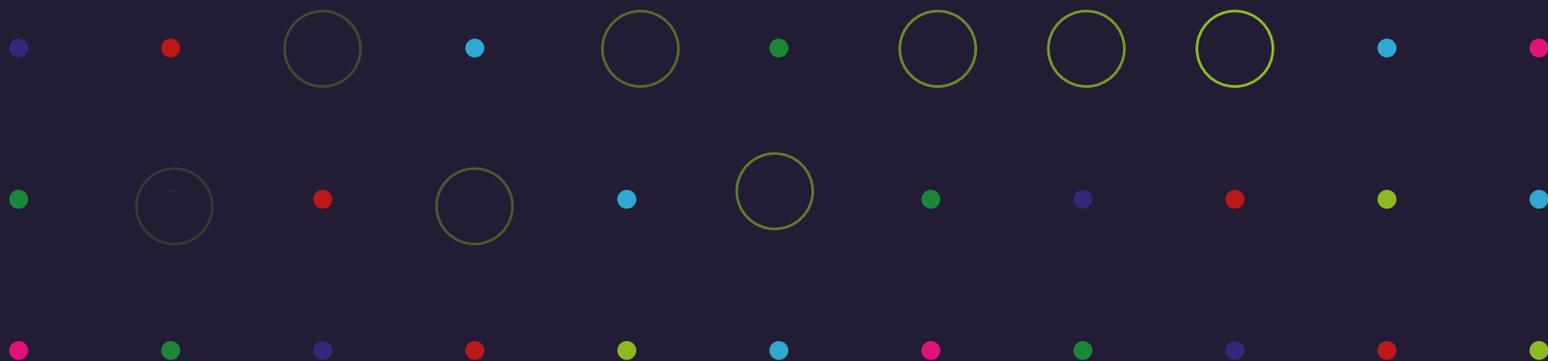
It's easy to shy away from deliverability best practice; it isn't considered a sexy subject among marketers, and the truth of the matter is: not all of us really know what 'it' is. We think it's probably time to find out. In this guide we promise to deliver:

- A strong understanding of deliverability and how it's measured
- A strategy you can implement to ensure your emails reach every intended customer
- 3 deliverability myths busted
- A 5-step best practice checklist you can put in place today

As marketers, we take immense pride in our campaigns. We spend hours agonizing over the perfect sentence, and will split-test tiny creative elements to come up with emails that deliver the best ROI. We work hard so that when we hit send, we can put our feet up and wait for the returns to roll in. We know that not every recipient might be moved by our marketing messages, but we assume that at the very least they will get the opportunity to read them.

In reality, this is not always the case; sometimes an email fails to make it to your reader's inbox. As a result, you have wasted time, money and effort, and are in danger of damaging your relationship with that subscriber and their email provider.

At dotdigital, we pride ourselves on our deliverability expertise; we're one of the only ESPs to have a global, multi-specialism team of consultants, technicians and investigators who work directly with clients and industry bodies alike. And when it comes to securing the sky-high ROI that email marketing offers, we want you to have your cake and eat it too. We've jam-packed this guide with key actions you can take to ensure maximum deliverability and maximum revenue.



## 'What is deliverability and why should I care?'

A better understanding of what happens when you hit send makes it much easier to avoid your marketing efforts getting 'lost' in the digital wilderness. For all its simplicity on the surface, making it to the inbox is one of the more complex and widely misunderstood elements of email marketing. And to get it right you need to understand the distinction between 'delivery' and 'deliverability':

### Delivery

Delivery refers to whether your recipient's mail server accepts your message or bounces it back, and is determined before the email gets anywhere near the inbox.

### Deliverability

Deliverability refers to the art of landing messages in the inbox rather than the spam folder; it incorporates anything that touches email delivery. There are many factors that can affect the deliverability of your emails including, but not limited to:

- The reputation of your domain and sending IP address
- The quality of your contact list, which comprises engagement, opt-in confirmation, source ethics and so on
- Your message's design and content
- The frequency of your messaging and its relevance

## Myth #1

**If the unsubscribe link is hidden or obscured, fewer people will opt out of your emails and your deliverability rate will be better.**

This one's a no-brainer. Aside from increasing your chances of being marked as spam - damaging your overall sending reputation and harming your chances of good deliverability - hiding the unsubscribe link can cause your brand major legal issues. There are safer actions to take to prevent opt outs – like implementing preference centers and re-nurture programs.

## The journey to the inbox

Once sent, your campaign will hit many touchpoints where anything can happen. This flow chart on the right provides a visual representation of the journey an email message takes to the inbox. Let's take a look at the different stages in some essential detail:

### Recipient's mail server

Mailbox providers - like Google, Yahoo, AOL or Comcast – act like a sorting office, checking to ensure that both your address and your recipients' addresses are valid and safe to receive. Bulk and commercial emails go through extra checks with email classification systems that screen for common spam tactics; we'll go into more detail on these spam checks later.

To ensure that your emails make it to the receiver's mail client, you need to make sure that you're sending to an address that is in use by a real recipient who's signed up to your mailing list. This is crucial best practice; it helps determine that a contact is genuinely engaged and protects your list from malicious subscriptions such as those undertaken by spam bots. Using a confirmed opt-in (COI) process is the most time and resource-efficient way to get real data for your email list.

You should also keep tabs on whether your IP address and domain has been blocked by any email receivers. There are a number of reasons why this can happen – and unless you're committing frequent malpractice, the block is usually temporary. Your ESP should be your first port of call if you think you've been blocked by an ISP. dotdigital has deliverability packages which give access to tools to monitor blocks, enabling you to take responsibility for your ROI.

### A whistle-stop tour of bounces

A 'bounce' occurs when an email is rejected by a customer's receiving server. There are a variety of both temporary and permanent reasons why an email might bounce; you can find a detailed list in dotdigital's Support's knowledge base. Bounce rates affect your reputation. If your rates are too high, receiving servers may block your domain or IP address to protect the customer's inbox. However, every ISP is different and there's no magic number of bounces that would result in a block.



**There are several types of bounces relating to the various reasons for rejection:**

## Hard bounce

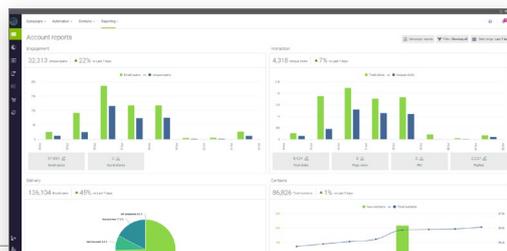
A hard bounce occurs when an email is rejected because of a permanent condition. This could be because the recipient email address or domain name doesn't exist, or the recipient's email server has blocked all deliveries. It could also be because your sending IP address has been blacklisted; some serious blacklistings will cause certain receives to hard bounce all of your emails until you've been removed.

Continual sending to an address that produces hard bounces can damage your sender reputation. In Engagement Cloud, any hard-bouncing addresses are automatically suppressed to protect your sending address and your server from being blocked for spamming.

## Soft bounce

Soft bounces typically indicate a temporary delivery issue: the mailbox could be full - indicating that it's been abandoned - the recipient email server could be down or offline, or the message itself could be too large to be accepted.

Engagement Cloud handles soft bounces differently to hard bounces. We'll continue to attempt to deliver the email over the course of three days. If the email continues to soft bounce during that period, we'll log it as such in your campaign reports. If an email address continues to soft bounce across multiple campaigns (5 maximum), the address will eventually be considered a hard bounce and will be suppressed.



**Top tip:** keep a close eye on your campaigns' bounce rates with Engagement Cloud's Reporting tool; ensure that everyone's receiving your marketing emails and stay compliant with spam laws without stress.

## Classifiers

Email receivers implement spam filters or ‘classifiers’ to categorize messages as they arrive, and ultimately decide their destination. It’s important to remember that these classifiers do not set out to scupper your strategy; they’re implemented to control <400 billion messages that are sent on average every day.<sup>2</sup> By understanding how the different classifying processes work, you can better understand how to make your email marketing appeal to every receiving inbox and every customer, leading to better relationships and maximized revenue generation.

Classifiers are in constant evolution, and judge an incoming message on as many as 1,000 criteria. Many are concerned with:

- Recipient behavior
- Authentication
- The reputation of the sender’s domain and IP address
- Characteristics of the email content

Classifiers are captured in automated algorithms. As a result, even compliant senders with permission-based lists can be misidentified as spam. You can avoid these false positives by leaning on your ESP’s deliverability consultants for guidance - and by using your new-found knowledge of classifiers to inform your email marketing strategy!

**In 2018, 45.3% of global email traffic was market as spam. That’s down from 92.6% in 2008.<sup>1</sup>**



At dotdigital we see customer protection as a #1 priority. We’ve pioneered adoption of the most important email authentication technologies, including Sender Policy Framework (SPF), DomainKeys Identified Mail, and Domain-based Authentication, Reporting and Conformance (DMARC), available to all of our customers.

1. Statista, 2018

2. Talos Intelligence, May 2017

## Combine good sender reputation with great infrastructure to achieve optimum deliverability

While it may seem like a minefield, the pathway to good deliverability is relatively straightforward if you follow the appropriate procedures and best practice pointers. The key is to establish compliant foundations under the guidance of your ESP and perform regular, thorough checks on your reputation.

### Good reputation opens the door to even better revenue

In the world of email, there are a set of specific metrics relating to your sending practice that make up your overall reputation. Senders who achieve good reputation enjoy more un-barred access to the inbox and therefore better returns on their email marketing. Take a closer look at the metrics ISPs use to determine the sending reputation of your business:

- **Relevant, well-structured communication**

Quality communication is the cornerstone of good sending reputation and helps protect your brand from disrepute. Implement a COI process to protect from list-bombing and ensure that your marketing has the highest chance of converting genuine interest into generous returns. Promote relevancy by giving customers a choice in what kind of emails they'll receive from you with a preference center; this also gives recipients the ability to "opt-down" instead of opting out altogether.

- **A consistent volume of sends**

Consistency in send volume is a key consideration for ISPs and will give you a better chance of getting to the inbox. Businesses who regulate the volume and frequency of their sends to subscribers' preferences have a higher chance of getting to the inbox.

- **Controlled growth**

Whether you're adding new mail streams or increasing send volume, taking a gradual approach to growth is crucial in establishing and maintaining your good reputation with receivers. Deliverability consultants have a number of strategies to help you do this effectively and efficiently.

- **Infrequent and few complaints, bounces, and blacklisting appearances**

Companies whose email marketing communications generate fewer complaints – whether that be blocks, bounces, or spam flags – are more likely to have a better sending reputation. Make sure you're using an ESP that monitors and suppresses hard-bounce addresses for you, and maintain good list hygiene.

- **Avoidance of spam traps**

Spam traps or 'honey pots' are email addresses monitored by ISPs and black list operators which are intended to catch spammers in the act; sending to a spam trap can greatly affect your overall deliverability and should be avoided at all costs. Implementing a COI and keeping a clean, properly acquired list will help you to avoid getting stung.

### Myth #2

#### **Sending plain text messages to subscribers is good for your deliverability, inbox placement rate and open rates**

There are lots of factors that weigh in on your ability to get into the inbox (as opposed to the spam or bulk folders). Among them are domain reputation, IP reputation, content, etc. – but whether your email is HTML versus plain-text isn't one of them. It's also impossible to prove whether or not plain-text emails receive better open rates; in fact, plain-text emails don't process opens at all!

## 5 best practice essentials to implement today

### 1. Permissions and preference centers

Keep every customer relationship in the honeymoon period by tailoring your communications to their preferences; this helps keep unsubscribes and complaint rates a minimum and builds long-term brand resonance. For example, a customer who's elected to receive recommendations is likely to respond positively to campaigns that uses order insight to push relevant products.

### 2. Data hygiene and spam trap avoidance

Keeping a clean list is the best way to avoid spam traps and keep bounce rates low, which in turn leads to shining sender reputation. Many purchased and rented lists are peppered with spam traps and invalid addresses, so avoid these at all costs. If you're using Engagement Cloud, you'll be able to monitor the health of your list easily in-app. A regularly implemented win-back campaign can help to identify unengaged contacts who may pose a risk to your reputation.

### 3. Welcome programs

The humble welcome email goes a long way to nurturing good deliverability. More than a dressed-up transactional message, this campaign can be used to set customer expectations, introduce your email program and collect more data (used to make campaigns more relevant). Use your welcome to get subscribers used to having you in their inbox; let them know often they can expect to hear from you and set the tone for a successful, long-lasting relationship.

### 4. Honesty and transparency

Responsible marketing is founded on transparency. While your day-to-day energies go into creating top-notch emails, it's crucially important to remain open with customers when it comes to the data you're collecting and how it's going to be used and safely stored. Each email you send should contain a link to your privacy policy – and we've already mentioned that unsubscribe link. Establishing these simple best practice essentials make all the difference when it comes to ROI.

### 5. Campaign creation checklist

We all know how daunting it can be to send a campaign. To avoid any last-minute hesitating over the send button, keep this deliverability best practice checklist to hand:

- Customers have agreed to receive this kind of email from me
- This email contains relevant content that my customers want to read
- This email is a positive reflection of my brand and its personality
- Customers can easily read this email on a mobile device

- Customers have a way to reply to me should they wish to

#### Top tip:

dotdigital recommends avoiding sending from a no-reply address if you want to secure a spot in the inbox. ISPs like Gmail and Hotmail automatically add replied-to email addresses to customers' contact lists; allowing subscribers to respond to your campaigns via a dedicated reply address greatly slashes the chances of your emails being marked as spam.

- Customers can choose to unsubscribe from within the email

### Build your strategy on strong foundations

Complex, challenging and costly – three words no marketer likes to hear. Managing your business' infrastructure can require a commitment of time and resource, especially if you send a high volume of emails regularly. A dedicated in-house team who specialize in deliverability best practice might suit marketers. But for the majority, working in small teams focused on creative strategy, turning to their best-of-breed ESP for support is the best way to make it to the inbox.

## Achieve industry leading delivery with dotdigital Engagement Cloud

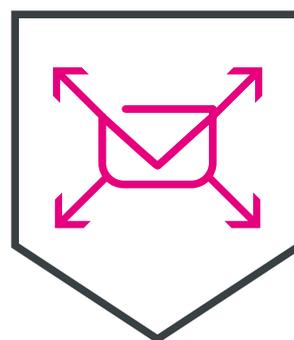
No other email service provider is as committed as dotdigital to guarding your reputation and improving your delivery rates. From our unique predictive protection software to our dedicated team of strategists and technicians, you're never alone in the battle for the inbox.

Our two protective technologies are unique to the Engagement Cloud platform, and work tirelessly in the background to maintain a finely-tuned delivery environment:



### Data Watchdog

On the lookout for known hard bounces, spam trams and domains, the Data Watchdog predicts, detects and actively prevents you from sending emails that may cause complaints and issues. Intelligent and self-learning, it quarantines any 'high risk' files before they're even uploaded.



### Smart reputation protection

Our automated reputation manager (ARM) protects the reputation of all our customers. Constantly refining and learning, the ARM moves senders into different sender pools based on their contact data to improve email deliverability for everyone.

## Through our dedicated Deliverability team, dotdigital's customers have access to a high-spec delivery toolkit anytime, anywhere.

As a dotdigital customer, you'll benefit from a multi-level team of experienced strategists and technicians who'll empower you to achieve industry-leading delivery. Here's a taste of what you can expect:

- **Comprehensive prospect vetting**

Every prospective dotdigital client goes through a variety of checks to make sure they'll fit with our existing users' sparkling reputation.

- **IP ramp up and warming strategies**

To get you off on the right foot, we prioritize tailored ramp up plans for all new clients. This ensures that your mail streams are properly introduced to the internet and helps you hit the inbox every time.

- **Abuse monitoring and proactive de-listing**

To preserve your sending reputation, we operate a zero-tolerance policy on spam practice. All of our deliverability consultants receive texts in real time so that any emergencies can be mitigated in the moment.

- **Industry relations**

The world of data-driven tech is based on trust, so dotdigital works hard to foster mutual respect. We do this by making sure that we are sending digital messages that recipients want to receive. dotdigital is a member of several organization bodies that help us remain in solidarity with both sides of the messaging community. The organizations we actively participate in, among others, include: The Messaging Mobile Malware Anti-Abuse Working Group (MAAWG), Email Service Provider Coalition (ESPC), The Direct Marketing Association (DMA), and Women of Email

- **Compliance, privacy and data protection**

Be it brand new regulations or legal business as usual, we make it our business to stay ahead of the curve, so you can focus on creating brilliant email strategy.

### Myth #3

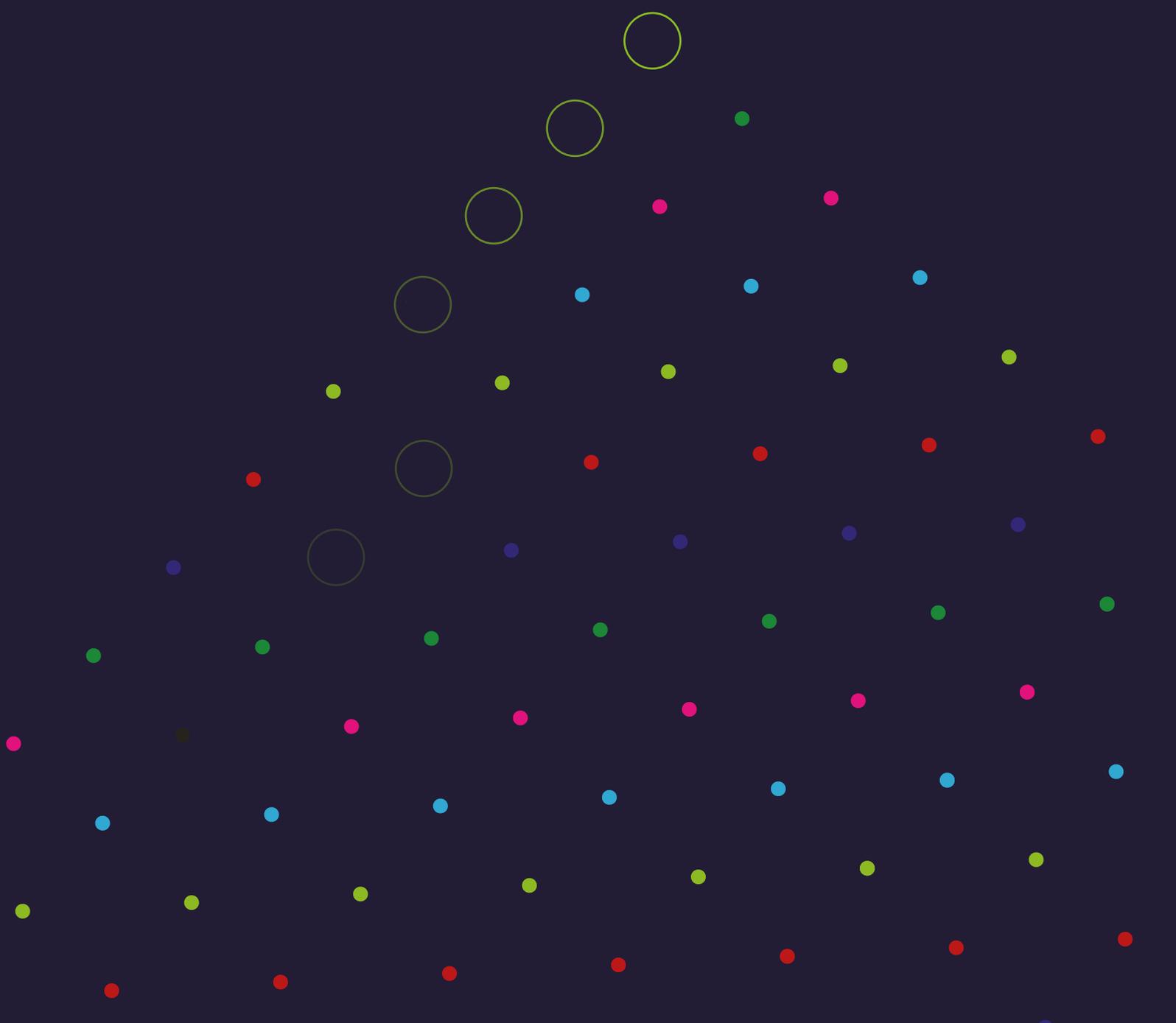
**Getting in-email clicks will improve your deliverability because your engagement score will be higher.**

Whether a recipient clicks on a link within a message or not has no impact on the reputation score that they give to a sender. Receivers have said that they don't track user behavior within the message. Instead of using it as a reputation indicator, use clicks as a measurement of how your recipients interact with your emails - and benchmark yourself against those rates.

The world of email is ever-evolving. Making sure you're well placed to receive any changes without concern is the best way to maintain maximum ROI without interruption. Start prioritizing good deliverability today by implementing the five best practice tips in this guide, and enjoy better returns for your efforts. What are you waiting for?

**Still having deliverability issues?**

If you're still struggling with deliverability after reading this guide, get in touch with your ESP. dotdigital's technical support team is available 24 hours a day, five days a week. You can also visit our support hub.



# The dotdigital difference



## Empowering technology

Super-powerful and easy to use – so you can do it all yourself.



## Learning

We help you get smarter with inspiring events and action-packed content.



## Service

If you're busy or short-staffed, we can do it all for you.



## Expertise

We've been by your side for 20 years; our combined heritage and experience puts you in good hands.



## Innovation

Our freedom to innovate means we're always looking ahead.

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