



The Simple Formula For Creating Compelling Subject Lines

Whether it's a blog, microblog, or email – creating a compelling subject line is the most important aspect. Research shows that it all comes down to a basic formula.

By Jean Van Rensselar

Multiple studies have shown that the subject line is the most important factor in driving digital marketing results.

If a house has curb appeal, chances are good that potential buyers will want to go inside and have a look around. Without curb appeal, they'll drive past and go to the next house. It's the same with subject lines. If the subject line is compelling, people will click to the message to find out more. If it's not, they'll delete the message without a second thought and move on.

You can spend hours composing a truly informative email or post for clients and prospects, but it's a waste of time if no one reads it. The bottom line is that you have about 50 characters to create *clickable* interest. It's not much, but research shows there's a formula for writing compelling subject lines. Here's where to begin.

You Actually Have Two Lines - Not One

In addition to the subject line, you also have the *From* line, which you can configure however you want. Most companies use the *From* line to clearly identify the sender – opting for either the company name or the sender's given name.

Research shows that people are more likely to open emails that have a personal name, but only if it's a name they recognize. If you're sending out an email to a large number of prospects, many won't be familiar with your personal name. However if you only include the company name on the *From* line, the open rate will be lower.

One way to solve this problem is to put your name first – without a title - followed by the company name. But you'll only have about 20-21 visible characters to do this. So include your full first name, use only the initial of your last name and abbreviate the company name where possible by eliminating spaces and shortening or eliminating common words. For example:

Jean Van Rensselaar – Smart PR Communications (38 characters)
becomes
Jean VR-SmartPRCommun (21 characters)

I know what you're thinking, "I could use the From Line for something a little more interesting." In a word, don't. If your clients and prospects are other businesses, you can bet they aren't in the mood for clever or cute. Busy people look through From and Subject lines to decide what they *need* to open, not what they'd like to open.

So this is your formula for the From Line:

Personal Name – Company Name

The Subject Line

First off, consider writing the subject line even before you write the message to ensure that the message lives up to the promise.

The subject line should coordinate with the From line (i.e. don't mention the company name again in the subject line). The length of the visible subject line varies according to the email provider, but 50 characters is always safe. In those 50 characters, you'll need to be straightforward, be as brief as possible, avoid certain words, and convey these three messages:

1. A clear feature or benefit
2. Ease of access
3. Immediate value

Be Straightforward

Do not make promises in the subject line about the email message that aren't true. No one will ever open your emails or read your posts again. The best advice is to use the subject line for telling, rather than selling what's in the message.

Be as Brief as Possible

The optimal length of a subject line is a hot topic. While research shows that the shorter the subject line the better, some experts believe relevance is more important than length.

The *Short Subject Line* camp points out the fact that emails from friends and relatives tend to have shorter subject lines and very high open rates. For example, "Tomorrow" "My House" or "FYI". But what they forget is that emails from friends and relatives have a huge advantage in the From line – people always open them because they know who they're from.

The *Relevant at Any Length Subject Line* camp believes that the open rate is higher for emails with compelling subject lines, regardless of length. *Relevance*, however is not easy to quantify – hence the lack of data to back up this assertion.

A commonsense approach is to keep the subject line as short, focused, and relevant as possible. This means, don't go over the 50 characters that appear in the visible subject line space and make every character count.

Avoid Certain Words

The three words/phrases you'll want to avoid are these:

- Help
- Percent off
- Reminder

In addition to avoiding these three words, avoid other words that convey the same sentiments. For example, "Don't Forget" is the same as "Reminder". Why? Researchers have discovered that the click through rates on subject lines with those words and sentiments are low. No one can say exactly why – but they speculate that "Help" and "Reminder" imply work and "Percent off" is always too good to be true.

However, there are legitimate reasons for using those words – for example, someone that opted into a clothing company's email or Twitter list probably *would* like to know that jeans are 30% off. The operative words here are "opt in".

There are other subject line words and phrases that will trigger a spam filter. You shouldn't be using these anyway. Some are:

- The recipient's name
- Information you requested
- Guarantee
- Special Promotion
- Winner
- Free

The list is actually rather long. But you've been erasing emails messages for many years and probably know what these words are.

Offer a Clear Feature or Benefit

Assuming that you know the demographics of your email list, offer a feature or benefit that the people on your list will care about. You'll have to summarize the feature/benefit in a word or two – this will be your most difficult subject line task (made easier with an online or print thesaurus).

If torn between mentioning a feature or benefit, use this yardstick: Mention the feature if the benefit is obvious. If not, mention the benefit.

Promise Ease

The combination of a relevant benefit and an easy read is powerful. Busy people are much more likely to open something they're interested in if it looks like it will cut to the chase.

You can do this three ways.

1. Include a word such as "quick" or "easy"
2. Include a small number, "4 Ways to..."
3. If you have room, include both, "4 Quick Ways to..."

Again, if you say it's going to be "Quick" or "Easy" – it better be.

Promise Immediate Value

Only promise “10 Tips for Reducing Packaging Costs” if you include those tips in the body of the message, in an attachment, or one link away. If there’s room, I like to include the words, “Here’s How” at the end of the subject line.

For example, don’t provide a link to the information that requires the reader to register, wait for a registration confirmation, and then go back to the link. It will annoy readers and get your relationship off to a very bad start. The only thing that will annoy readers more is if they’re asked to pay \$95 for a white paper or sign up for a \$300 course. If there’s a cost involved, imply it in the subject line. “Course – 10 Tips for Reducing Packaging Costs.”

Finally

Always send a test email/post to yourself first. Don’t copy words from a document and paste them into the subject line. This can cause the characters to mistranslate during the sending process. Always type in the subject line.

Don’t use all caps or exclamation marks. Don’t use imperatives such as:

- Must
- Now
- Always
- Never
- Immediately
- Or else

Offer information that your sure most of the readers haven’t heard before. And offer information that isn’t obviously self-serving. Most people are no longer interested in “10 Tips for Saving Gas” and most can see through “Smart Advice for Buying Fleet Insurance” (coming from an insurance rep).

Approach your email subject line and message with the sincere desire to make people’s lives better and easier, and you can’t lose.

Some Good Subject Lines

- From a corporate gift supplier: “3 Trends Make Company Gift Selection Easier.” (37 characters)
- From a law office: “A 5-Minute Summary of the New E-Discovery Law – Attached.” (47 characters)
- From a bearing manufacturer: “3 Quick Ways to Prolong Coupling Life.” (33 characters)
- From a hardware store: “Take 5 Minutes to Salt-Proof your Shoes – Here’s How.” (43 characters)

So Here’s Your Formula

Switch these factors around until you arrive at a formula that’s right for most of the messages you send out. But it really is this simple.

Small Number + Feature/Benefit + Ease + Immediate Value

About the Author

Jean Van Rensselar is the owner of Chicago-based Smart PR Communications, which specializes in public relations and communications strategy, creation, and implementation for small and mid-sized tech-oriented B2Bs. You can reach her at Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com or 630-363-8081.