

# A Guide to Email Suppression List Management



# Introduction

One of the most important elements of a successful email marketing campaign tends to get very little attention. You won't read many articles about it, find it getting top billing on any email marketing guide, or see any keynotes on the topic at industry conferences. But, if email marketers ignore it, they face a host of negative consequences, from recipients having a bad brand experience to serious legal implications involving costly fines.

So, what is this important element of email marketing? [Email Suppression List Management](#).

From a marketing standpoint, it's not the most exciting topic. While marketers know the importance of compliance, it tends to be thought of as part of the program infrastructure – it gets set up, runs efficiently, and then receives little attention unless an issue comes up.

However, many successful email marketers take a more holistic view of their email programs. These top marketers think strategically about email suppression and find ways to gain a wide variety of advantages from the process, well beyond that vital and foundational value proposition of legal compliance.

This guide will provide a look at the foundational aspects of email suppression list management, the regulatory landscape in the U.S. and also how companies can turn suppression files into strategic assets within their marketing programs.





## Why Email List Suppression Matters

The most common use for email suppression files is to ensure a company's email marketing program is compliant with laws in the U.S. and most developed countries around the world that require marketers to accept, process, and honor opt-out requests from recipients who indicate they no longer wish to receive emails from the sender. While the specifics of the regulations vary by country (timeframe to act on a request, etc.), the basic rule that a recipient's opt-out request must be honored is fairly universal around the world.

As with any law, there are consequences involved if a marketer is found to be non-compliant with the rules in their particular country or region. Typically, these involve financial penalties for the non-compliant company, along with the negative impact on their brand for being taken to court or other public announcement of their actions.

In the U.S. the relevant law is the **CAN-SPAM Act of 2003**. This law was specifically designed to create guidelines for companies to follow when using email to market to customers and prospects. Of particular note, and a significant difference between the U.S. and many other countries is that CAN-SPAM allows companies to send unsolicited commercial email to recipients (as long as they have not previously opted out). Numerous other countries require that companies obtain some form of opt-in or consent from individuals before reaching out to them via email.

This provision in CAN-SPAM has allowed email marketing to be a consistently effective method for both acquisition and retention based marketing in the U.S.

# CAN-SPAM

If you use email marketing to reach individuals in the U.S. you need to follow the rules set forth in the CAN-SPAM Act. Here are some of the highlights of this email marketing regulation.

The CAN-SPAM Act requires, “that your email give recipients an opt-out method.” The law also states that, “You cannot help another entity send email to that address, or have another entity send email on your behalf to that address.”



CAN-SPAM includes a number of additional provisions.

**Bans false or misleading header information.** Your email’s “From,” “To,” and routing information – including the originating domain name and email address – must be accurate and identify who initiated the email.

**Prohibits deceptive subject lines.** The subject line cannot mislead the recipient about the contents or subject matter of the message.

**Requires that your email give recipients an opt-out method.** You must provide a return email address or another Internet-based response mechanism that allows a recipient to ask you not to send future email messages to that email address, and you must honor the requests. You may create a “menu” of choices to allow a recipient to opt-out of certain types of messages (i.e. a Preference Center), but you must include the option to end any commercial messages from the sender.



## Opt-Out Method

Any opt-out mechanism you offer must be able to process opt-out requests for at least 30 days after you send your commercial email message. When you receive an opt-out request, the law gives you 10 business days to stop sending email to the requestor's email address. You cannot help another entity send email to that address or have another entity send email on your behalf to that address. Finally, it's illegal to sell or transfer the email addresses of people who choose not to receive your email, even in the form of a mailing list, unless you transfer the addresses so that another entity can comply with the law.

Your message must contain clear and conspicuous notice that the message is an advertisement or solicitation and that the recipient can opt-out of receiving more commercial email from you. It also must include your valid physical postal address.

Failure to comply with these rules can result in fines up to \$43,280 per email found to be in violation.

For more information on CAN-SPAM, visit the FTC website.

<https://www.ftc.gov/tips-advice/business-center/guidance/can-spam-act-compliance-guide-business>

*Disclaimer: Nothing in this Guide should be taken as legal advice. We encourage you to obtain professional legal advice as to how email regulations may impact your business.*



# Basic Suppression List Management

The foundation of email suppression list management revolves around dealing with unsubscribe requests. As mentioned above, honoring those opt-out requests is foundational to running a compliant email marketing program. But, there is more to suppression list management than simply processing opt-outs.

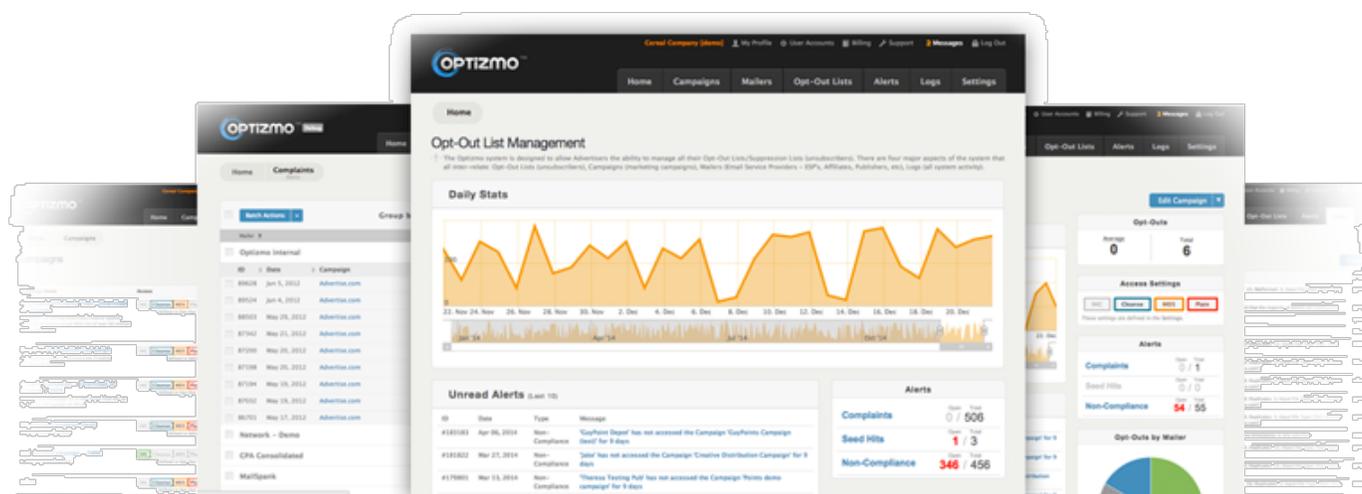
## The Email Opt-Out Management Process

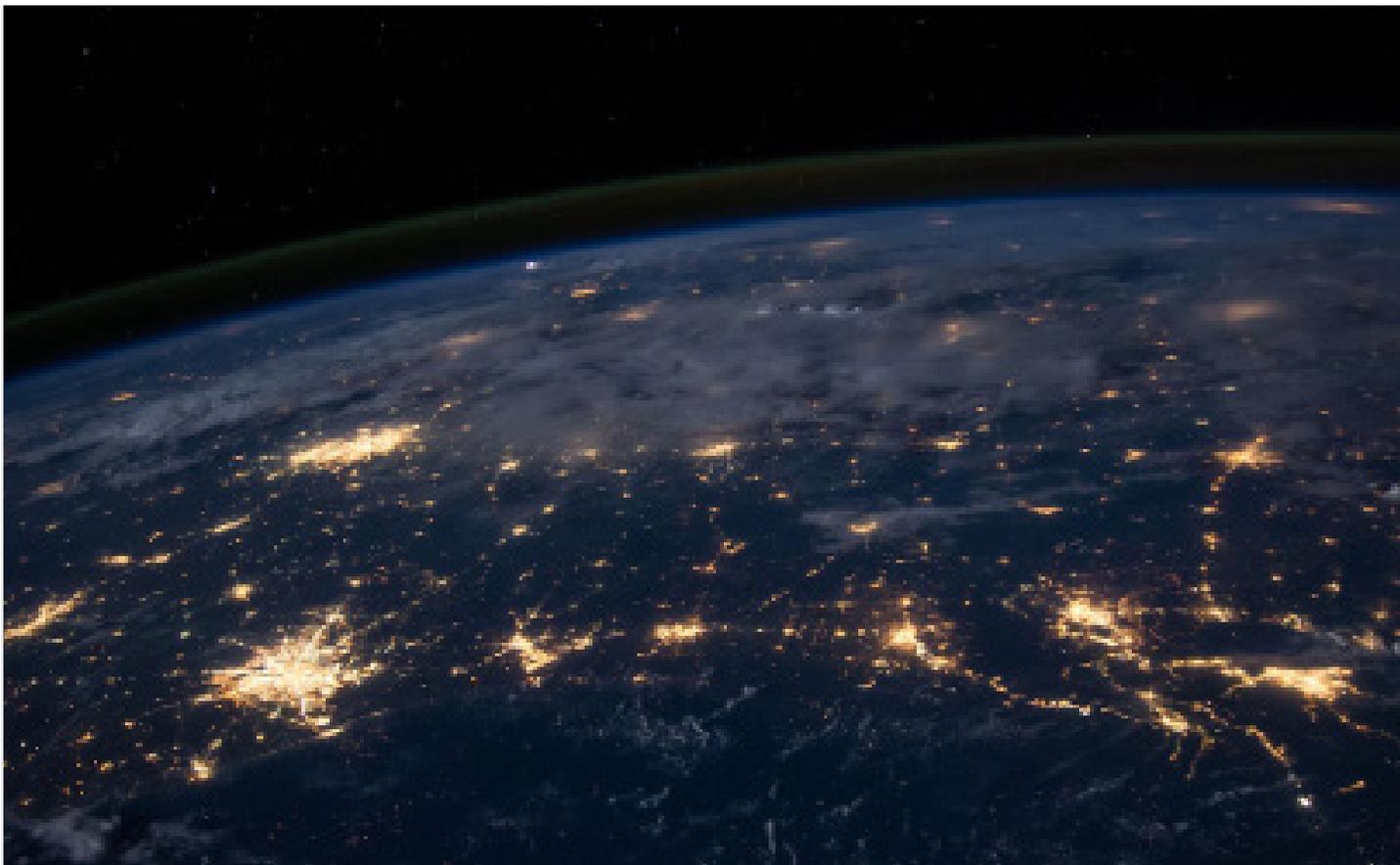
### Opt-Out Collection & List Suppression

As a part of complying with CAN-SPAM, email marketers need to provide recipients with a method for unsubscribing from future email marketing messages. This is typically handled with an opt-out link within the email that takes users to a web page where they can submit their opt-out request or otherwise manage their email preferences (called a Preference Center).

Opt-outs are collected and the associated email addresses are added to a list of unsubscribes. This list is then used as a suppression file when the company executes future email marketing campaigns, to ensure all opt-outs are removed from the mailing list prior to the campaign being sent.

This can be a relatively straightforward process for advertisers who are only running their own internal email campaigns with a single list. However, when a company engages with 3rd parties to email on their behalf, the process becomes more involved.





## Email Suppression List Distribution

One situation where email suppression list management becomes complicated is when a company uses 3rd parties (affiliate marketers, performance agencies, etc.) to deliver email marketing campaigns on their behalf. The specifics of CAN-SPAM make it clear that the rules of honoring opt-outs extend to 3rd parties mailing on a company's behalf. So, if a recipient opts out of receiving marketing email from Company 123, if that company has affiliate marketers mailing their campaigns/offers to outside email lists, those mailers must also honor the same opt-outs when sending emails on Company 123's behalf.

In addition, if recipients of those marketing emails sent by affiliates for Company 123 submit opt-out requests, those unsubscribes must also be collected and added to the overall unsubscribe list of Company 123 and then re-distributed to all 3rd party mailers. This process happens constantly as campaigns are mailed and new opt-outs are received on an ongoing basis.

This additional distribution and opt-out processing requirement adds a layer of complexity that every advertiser and mailer needs to navigate in order to successfully execute email campaigns while maintaining their compliance. These additional requirements are typically not addressed by most email service providers or mailing platforms.

# Advanced Email Suppression List Strategies

When many email marketers think about lists to use for suppression purposes, it often starts and stops with users who have opted out of receiving future messages. However, advertisers with extensive experience in email marketing will often leverage multiple suppression lists beyond just opt-outs, as an important aspect of their overall audience targeting strategies.



In these instances suppression files can be used to effectively identify negative target audience members that the advertiser prefers not be marketed to via email.

But wait... if email marketing is so profitable and such a high performing marketing channel, why would a brand want to exclude a recipient from an email campaign, other than due to a prior opt-out request?

From a marketing standpoint, there are many reasons. Here are just a few suppression strategies that different companies employ to enhance the performance of their email programs – both those managed in-house and those undertaken by 3rd party mailers on the company's behalf.

## Suppressing Current Customers

As consumers, we are all familiar with receiving marketing messaging touting special introductory offers, extreme discounts, or other deals designed especially for new customers. Many companies have traditionally used these types of promotional offers to attract new customers. But, another common aspect of the aggressive customer acquisition offer is that it is not available to current or previous customers. Plenty of us have had the experience of seeing an ad from our current satellite or cable TV provider promoting a package that is far less expensive than our current subscription. Then, when you call the company to request the lower rate, you are told it is only for new customers. You hang up, annoyed that the company seems to value a new customer's business more than yours. The end results – an ad campaign designed to drive sales has also produced an unhappy current customer. The next step just might be that you go shopping for an alternative service from a competitor.

Many companies take steps to avoid sending customer acquisition offers to current customers. While it's largely impossible to ensure that a current customer won't ever see an acquisition offer, efforts can be taken to reduce the likelihood they receive an email about it from the company or any affiliate mailing on the company's behalf. One way to implement this strategy is to use a list of current customers as a suppression file for acquisition email campaigns and implement it just like an opt-out suppression file.

### Benefits:

- 1 No payments are made to affiliates for driving sales from current customers.
- 2 No potential loss of revenue by exposing current customers to aggressive acquisition offers.
- 3 It's typically one of the easiest suppression files to create and use universally.



## Suppressing High Frequency Non-Responders

Over a period of time, email lists will eventually include to number of recipients who have never engaged with a previous message (opened, clicked, responded, etc.). At some point – typically some number of contacts or a time period with no response – analyzing campaign data may determine that it is no longer cost-effective to continue mailing a recipient, since they are highly unlikely to respond to future email campaigns. In these cases, advertisers can build a list of the non-responders and use it as a suppression file for future campaigns – either internal mailings or those driven by affiliates or other outside mailers.

Suppressing this particular group of lower value prospects may also deliver other campaign benefits. Mailing to a large number of unresponsive email recipients can have negative impacts on overall deliverability and sender reputation with different email platforms, over time. Removing these records from future mailings provides a cleaner list of more potentially responsive recipients. While email is a very cost-effective marketing channel, there are still higher costs to mail larger lists. The incremental cost of adding one more address to an email campaign may be completely negligible, but once that number reaches thousands, tens of thousands or more, that cost becomes more of a factor.

### Benefits:

- 1 Reducing email marketing costs by removing addresses of recipients who are highly unlikely to ever respond or generate revenue.
- 2 Improving email campaign performance metrics like open rate, click rate, and conversion rate.
- 3 Having a positive impact on overall deliverability and sender reputation with email platforms.



## Suppressing Past Recipients

When companies use affiliates or other 3rd parties to email on their behalf, they are often focused on customer acquisition within those campaigns. In these cases, removing current customers is certainly vital to effective audience targeting. It may also be beneficial (or even a core part of the campaign strategy) to ensure that new email campaigns are sent to recipients who have not received previous email offers – or perhaps only specific offers.

In this case, another suppression file could be created that includes every email address that has been included in prior campaigns over a certain time period, or every address that has received a particular offer, but has yet to receive another (like a sequential campaign). This type of strategy might also be customized to suppress recipients of a certain type of offer, or possibly any recipient from the last 12 months, etc.

### Benefits:

- 1 Enabling a higher level of control over campaigns designed to reach net-new prospects.
- 2 The ability to create offers designed specifically for a net-new prospect audience.

These are just a few ways in which suppression files can be used to optimize campaign performance. However, you are really only limited by the data at your disposal and your imagination on how to leverage this negative targeting approach to drive performance.

If you are involved in email marketing, a thorough understanding of how to use suppression lists is a requirement for compliance and can also be a vital piece of your overall email strategy. Leveraged to their full extent, email suppression files can both mitigate risk and enhance marketing performance.

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