

## The Hard and Soft Truth of Bounce Code Management

By Irene Cherkassky, senior editor, Target Marketing

Given today's rigorous e-mail marketing standards, a hands-on approach to bounce code management is essential. Bounces occur when a sent e-mail consistently is rejected by a server and never reaches the intended recipient's inbox. There may be myriad reasons why an e-mail bounces. A hard bounce indicates an invalid, closed or nonexistent e-mail account. A soft bounce occurs when an e-mail is sent to an active e-mail address, but is turned away before being delivered. This can occur for a number of reasons: an inbox may be full or an away message is active.

Whenever an e-mail is rejected by a server, an ISP will return to the sender a set of bounce codes identifying why the message was rejected. How efficiently and how quickly marketers handle that bounce code information can determine not only how ISPs perceive them, but also the ultimate success of their e-mail marketing programs. Rick Buck is director of privacy and ISP relations for e-Dialog, a Lexington, Mass.-based e-mail service provider that works with marketers to optimize their e-mail marketing programs. Buck notes, "From a marketer's point of view ... [bounce code management] is highly important because we want to have some sense of the hygiene of [marketers'] lists; we want to have some sense of optimizing the response rates of their lists." Bounce code management is equally important from the ISP point of view, adds Buck, because if a marketer doesn't handle bounces in a timely fashion, then the ISPs may begin to perceive that company as not worthy of having its e-mail delivered in the first place.

Below, Buck offers several suggestions for effective bounce code management:

- In cases of a soft bounce, attempt to mail an e-mail address three times for three mailings, for a total of nine attempts. "If after nine attempts over three mailings, over approximately a two-week period you are still soft bouncing, then [e-Dialog] considers that a hard bounce," describes Buck.

- If a hard bounce is received, or a soft bounce is reclassified as a hard bounce, flag those addresses for suppression.
- Analyze your customers. Some of them can be saved, even if their e-mail addresses have returned hard bounces. Take a look at how many hard bounces you have in a given time period, and then ask who these people are. Are they worth saving? If so, ask how you can reach out and contact them.

How do you know when to reach out to a customer and when to let him go? Points to consider:

- If a customer hasn't been active over an extended period--say over a year and a half--those customers may be allowed to churn.
- If a customer is found to be active and profitable, consider taking steps to reactivate that customer. Buck describes one option: "For some of our clients, we have set up a dynamic printing program, where on a regular basis all the hard bounces get an actual postcard that's automatically generated every quarter saying, 'We used to have an online relationship with you; your e-mail address is no longer deliverable; here's all the cool things you're going to miss out on if you don't give us your new e-mail address.'"

Buck also suggests that better understanding of your customers will help cut down on bounces.

"Marketers, in general, need to take a hard look at who is on their list and do a better job at accessing people who are their best, worst and intermediate customers, and really get targeted about what they're saying to each of those respective blocks of people," he says. "It cuts down on bounces, because you know the people you're mailing to are responsive, so you know they're deliverable addresses."

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