ITERABLE

Email Deliverability 101: How to Reach the Inbox Every Time

When we're all facing an onslaught of pings, alerts, and 24/7 updates, it can feel impossible to stand out in the sea of digital noise. Too often, brands struggle with deciding what messages to send, but they don't prioritize the work to ensure those messages actually land in the inbox.

Your brand's success hinges on effective deliverability. After all, you can't drive engagement with your customers if you can't even reach them.

In this guide, we reimagine deliverability for the era of **moments-based marketing**.

We'll explore:
- A strategic framework for each phase of the email lifecycle
- Key areas of consideration according to our deliverability experts
- Practical tips to level up your approach for data-driven, real-time engagement

From setting up authentication to sunsetting inactive subscribers, Iterable's got you covered.

Along the way, we'll also share the parts of our ecosystem you can leverage today to boost your deliverability, including Iterable's latest AI-powered features and our premier technology partners that can help you send smarter.

Deliverability 101 Definitions

What is email deliverability?

Email deliverability measures the likelihood that your brand's email ends up in a subscriber's inbox—rather than their spam folder.

While email delivery simply measures whether an email was sent, deliverability encompasses where that email was placed.

List hygiene, send frequency, and subscriber engagement are just a few important factors that impact email deliverability.

What is email reputation?

Email reputation refers to your brand's trustworthiness in the eyes of mailbox providers, such as Gmail, Yahoo, and Apple Mail.

Similar to your personal reputation, email reputation is based on your historical actions.

While each provider calculates reputation differently, certain metrics—like bounces, complaints, and spam traps—can negatively impact your reputation.

A Step-By-Step Framework for Better Deliverability

Ever wish that email deliverability were as easy and organized as a paint-by-numbers project? Now it can be.

This 101 guide breaks down the nuances of deliverability into four main components, following the phases of the email lifecycle.

Within each section, we cover the basics, build upon that knowledge with expert considerations, and provide tangible recommendations on how to take your email marketing to the next level.

Phase 1: Foundations of Deliverability

How to set up your email infrastructure for a strong reputation

Good deliverability isn't built in a day. To construct a solid foundation, email marketers must consider the crucial roles of the following key areas.

Email Authentication

When emails are not properly authenticated, mailbox providers may classify them as suspicious or fraudulent, resulting in lower deliverability rates. The **email authentication** process impacts deliverability in several ways:

- **Reputation and trust**. Authentication mechanisms like SPF, DKIM, and DMARC (see the callout below for definitions) contribute to a sender's reputation and trustworthiness. A positive reputation increases the likelihood of emails landing in inboxes.
- **Spam avoidance**. Unauthenticated emails raise red flags for mailbox providers, which may flag messages as spam or even block them. Authenticating emails helps them bypass these filters and reach the intended recipients.
- **Spoofing and impersonation prevention**. Email authentication serves as a safeguard against domain impersonation and email spoofing, where malicious actors attempt to mimic trusted sources. This ensures that recipients receive emails from the actual sender, thereby fostering a safer email environment.

It's important to note that authentication isn't a nice-to-have—**Google and Yahoo** now require senders to pass both DKIM and SPF protocols, as well as have a passing DMARC record. This raises the bar for email marketers to continue providing the most value to their audiences.

Deliverability 101 Definitions

What is SPF?

SPF, or Sender Policy Framework, is a DNS-based email authentication method that leverages TXT records (a text-based DNS file).

Domain owners and organizations specify which IP addresses are authorized to send emails on their behalf.

If the source IP of an incoming email is on the authorized list, the SPF check passes, indicating the email is legitimate.

What is DKIM?

DKIM, or DomainKeys Identified Mail, utilizes public-key cryptography to verify the authenticity of an email's content.

When sending an email, the sender's domain generates a unique private key and attaches a digital signature to the email's header or body.

The corresponding public key is published in a TXT record associated with the sender's domain.

What is DMARC?

DMARC (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting, and Conformance) builds upon SPF and DKIM, adding a layer of policy enforcement and reporting.

Domain owners publish a DMARC record that specifies their preferred email authentication policies.

This record also includes an email address to receive authentication failure reports.

IP Warm-Up

When sending on new infrastructure, such as a fresh dedicated IP address, mailbox providers want to see specific behaviors from senders. This is why an **IP warm-up** can make or break a sender's deliverability.

These recommendations will keep your IP warm-up from torching your reputation:

- Gradually ramp up to your brand's email volume
- Establish predictable sending patterns
- Demonstrate positive engagement signals, like opens, clicks, and responses

Most IP warm-ups span 4-6 weeks, but longer durations may be needed based on data quality and recipient engagement. As a general rule, plan for no more than 1 million to 1.5 million emails per dedicated IP address per day.

Transactional vs. Marketing Messages

Typically, email service providers recommend defining a sender's message streams into Transactional and Marketing to ensure compliance with mailbox requirements.

Marketing messages are mandated to offer an easy one-click way to unsubscribe, whereas **Transactional messages** are for mission-critical information, such as order confirmations and password resets.

Some senders will colloquially refer to 1:1 messages as "triggered," but it's worth noting that triggered emails are not transactional in nature. Welcome emails, cart abandonment notifications, and personalized recommendations still count as Marketing messages.

How to Level Up

An email service provider (ESP) with a robust and flexible platform, like Iterable, is essential for establishing and maintaining a healthy sending reputation. Make sure your ESP can handle massive amounts of data at scale for real-time email personalization.

Iterable Resources

- Building a Strong Email Reputation With IP Warm-Up
- 10 Post-Warmup Strategies for Lasting Deliverability
- Key Considerations When Sending From a Root Domain vs. a Subdomain

Deliverability Toolkit

Iterable's Smart Ingest	**Inbox Monster**	**Valimail**
Co-developed with Hightouch, Smart Ingest unifies data from across your tech stack for real-time activation—critical for foundational deliverability practices.	Inbox Monster helps Iterable customers see exactly where their emails land with a global seed address network. They monitor blocklists and spam traps, send real-time alerts, and ensure messages render correctly.	Valimail helps Iterable customers implement DMARC, BIMI, and more with minimal time, energy, and resources. They make email acronyms easy!

Phase 2: Building a Healthy Audience

How to keep your subscriber list squeaky clean

Much of the conversation around setting up your email infrastructure and warming up IPs is quantitative in nature—ensuring that your business can handle large send volumes. But the quality of your audience is just as important as its size when it comes to deliverability.

Here's why your **list hygiene** makes a huge impact on the success of your email program:

- **Improved inbox placement**. First and foremost, keeping your email list clean strengthens your overall deliverability and domain reputation. Removing email addresses that are inactive or no longer exist reduces your bounce rate, which prevents the likelihood of mailbox providers marking your emails as spam.

- **Accurate data**. If your list isn't organized and your deliverability suffers because of it, you risk receiving inaccurate and unhelpful data in return. By cleaning your lists, you can ensure that not only are your subscribers' email addresses correct, but also that the messaging they're receiving is relevant.

- **Happy customers**. More relevant messages ultimately lead to higher engagement and a better overall customer experience. With the right audience on your list, you can more easily create individualized campaigns that feel like you're speaking to each customer personally.

> **Note:** Just like spam complaints, a recipient's lack of engagement (e.g., not opening or clicking your emails) can negatively impact deliverability over time.

There are many ways you can proactively keep your list clean, including:

- ✓ Requiring double opt-in upon signup
- ✓ Adding reCAPTCHA or honeypot fields to protect your forms from bots
- ✓ Automating bounce suppression and removing unreachable subscribers
- ✓ Using an email validation tool like Kickbox

How to Level Up

List hygiene isn't a one-and-done task, and keeping customer profiles up to date involves more than sending to the right email address. Your ESP should dynamically enrich user profiles in real time, so look for platforms that offer advanced segmentation capabilities. This way, you can deliver hyper-relevant messages that resonate—and improve your sender reputation.

Iterable Resources

- Keep It Clean With Email List Hygiene
- Using Seed Testing to Predict Inbox Placement
- Making Better Customer Segments and Why It Matters
- Kickbox: Genius Ways to Grow Your Email List

Deliverability Toolkit

Iterable's User Profiles

Each user you add to one of your Iterable projects gets their own unique user profile. User profiles provide a comprehensive, dynamically updated view of each user as they engage with your messages.

Iterable's Segmentation

Iterable's Segmentation helps you identify groups of users with similar interests or behavior. Segmentation enables building and targeting audiences for relevance and accuracy.

Kickbox

The Kickbox integration with Iterable helps you maintain a healthy, high-performing email list—whether you're cleaning an existing audience or validating new contacts in real-time.

Phase 3: Optimizing Engagement

How to tackle content, cadence, and audience targeting

Much like your list hygiene needs regular pruning, your email engagement should be continuously optimized to maintain high performance. In fact, deliverability and engagement are directly related, and strengthening one will have a positive impact on the other.

To evolve your generic, one-size-fits-all sends into personalized customer experiences that drive ROI, your email program must support the following key areas:

- **Right message**. Effective, relevant content requires dynamic recommendations. Make sure your ESP has a metadata store (such as **Iterable's Catalog**) for activating important business and e-commerce data, including store locations, product inventory, and creative variations. This functionality is vital because you don't have to duplicate data on user profiles, making it easier and more efficient to match people with the products and content they'll love the most.

- **Right audience**. The more targeted your audience, the deeper your relationship with each customer will be. Once you've upgraded to an ESP with advanced segmentation, you can segment based on demographic data (e.g., age, gender, location) and behavioral data (e.g., purchase history, browsing behavior, cart abandonment, previous message engagement). Knowing your audience's individual preferences, interests, and needs allows your brand to not only meet their expectations but also exceed them.

- **Right time**. 9:00 a.m. on Tuesdays isn't cutting it anymore. In the age of on-demand convenience, consumers are their own schedules—not yours. By intimately understanding how your audience engages with your messages, you can send at the exact right moment, whether that's on their lunch break or scrolling before bed. And with sophisticated automation, send times can be put completely on autopilot.

How to Level Up

If sending the right message to the right audience at the right time sounds daunting, that's because it is. But with the latest AI-powered features, it doesn't have to be hard. As you can see below, with Iterable's AI Suite, there are numerous tools and deep insights that can enable smarter, automated decisioning.

Iterable Resources

- Email Opens and Clicks: Human or Not, Here's What You Need to Know
- 'Tis the Season: Get a Jump Start on Holiday Email Marketing
- 4 Things You Didn't Know You Could Do With Audience Segmentation

Deliverability Toolkit: Iterable AI Suite

Send Time Optimization	Frequency Optimization	Channel Optimization	Predictive Goals	Brand Affinity
Ensures messages are delivered when individual users are most likely to engage.	Sets personalized caps for message volume per user.	Directs messages to a user's preferred channel based on previous engagement.	Forecasts the likelihood of individual customers satisfying particular business goals.	Calculates a score that indicates how likely a user is to interact with marketing messages.

Phase 4: Adapting the Customer Lifecycle

How to re-engage and strategically sunset subscribers

From a deliverability standpoint, one of the worst things you can do as a brand is continue contacting people who don't want to receive your communications. Every email to an inactive or disengaged user carries weight with mailbox providers, directly impacting your sender reputation.

To strike the right balance between reclaiming lost attention and safeguarding your inbox placement, consider sending a **re-engagement campaign**. Re-engagement can be defined in various ways, but it most commonly refers to users who have not opened or clicked previous emails within a specific time frame.

> **43% of people cite excessive email frequency as the primary reason they unsubscribe from a mailing list**
>
> Zerobounce

Here are some successful tactics we've seen with re-engagement campaigns:

- **Ask them if they're still interested**. Re-permission messages are a great way to ask your customers directly if they want to continue receiving your content. A personalized "we miss you" can let them know you're paying attention.

- **Reintroduce yourself**. Remind your unengaged audience why they signed up to receive your content in the first place. Show them the cool things you're working on or sneak peeks into new products or features they can get excited about.

- **Understand their preferences**. Perhaps your subscribers would like to continue hearing from you, but not every week or only on specific topics. Give them options by directing them to a preference center or a short survey. By asking them to perform an action, you can gain more concrete signals on how to communicate and keep subscribers from ghosting you entirely.

- **Lead with exclusivity**. Let your subscribers know that something big is coming soon. This will keep their interest piqued and encourage them to stay subscribed to learn more. Consider asking them to confirm whether they would like to be the first to know about new products or announcements.

As a best practice:

- ✓ Limit re-engagement to 3-5 touches per inactive subscriber
- ✓ Give multiple opportunities for engagement actions (opens, clicks, visits)
- ✓ Monitor spam complaints, unsubscribes, and reputation metrics closely
- ✓ Pause further sends if you see spikes in complaints to protect deliverability
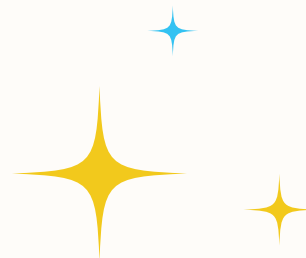
How to Level Up

Knowing when to say goodbye to your subscribers is a delicate skill, so leverage as much data and insights as you can to make an informed decision. If email isn't a good fit for your inactive users, consider engaging them through another channel, such as **SMS** or **WhatsApp**.

Holding onto disengaged users isn't just sentimental—it's actively harming your reputation the longer you send to them. It's not realistic to win over everybody, long-term, so don't be afraid to sunset subscribers after a re-engagement campaign.

Ultimately, by focusing your efforts on engaging eager customers, you will free up your time and energy to delight your biggest supporters.

Iterable Resources

- Re-Engagement and Deliverability: Best Practices for Email Marketers
- It's Not Me, It's You: Breaking Up With Your Subscribers

Deliverability Toolkit

Iterable's Messaging Insights

Iterable's Messaging Insights analyzes aggregate campaign performance to identify trends by segment, location, or device. These insights can then inform re-engagement and sunsetting strategies.

The Future of Deliverability: AI and Evolving Trends

Email has been around for decades, but that doesn't mean the marketing channel is stagnant. Marketers today are leaning hard into AI tools, which is having a profound impact in two key areas:

Automated personalization at scale

Without massive amounts of data, there is no artificial intelligence. And without AI, personalization becomes near-impossible. AI enables marketers to put their customers in the driver's seat, dictating how brands communicate with them based on their real-time behavior. Now we can effectively support millions of personalized conversations at the same time.

Non-human engagement

As marketers feed emails into AI tools to summarize or analyze them, those tools are clicking the links to "see" what's behind the message, which is getting logged alongside human user interactions. This means we need to get smarter about how we interpret engagement metrics, utilizing filtered clicks for email and SMS to gain more accurate insights.

Navigating the nuances of deliverability is only going to become more complex as technology advances, so seek **AI solutions** that are transparent, fully customizable, and flexibly integrated into your tech stack.

Unlocking Deliverability Excellence With Iterable

As you now know, your deliverability is dependent upon the tools at your disposal. There are countless email service providers on the market, but only Iterable is built for the era of moments-based marketing.

Iterable's AI-powered communication platforms turn your email subscribers into lifelong fans, by making them feel like they're your brand's only customer.

With Iterable, you can:

- **Activate your data** across all teams and tools with modern, cloud-native architecture
- **Engage your customers 1:1** by personalizing every message with dynamic content
- **Reach audiences wherever they are**—email, push, SMS, in-app, social, and more—with a unified cross-channel platform
- **Optimize your performance in real time**, thanks to always-on experimentation that keeps you on track with your goals

Iterable is here to help ensure your messages arrive as intended, and you don't have to go at it alone. Our Deliverability Services is a best-in-class, in-house team of experts.

They help senders maximize the ROI of their email program by focusing on strategic and tactical best practices designed to improve their reputation and achieve ideal inbox placement.

You'll gain direct access to actionable deliverability data, along with ongoing guidance and support to enhance your engagement over time.

Contact us today to learn more about Iterable and schedule a one-on-one consultation with our Deliverability Services team.