

EMAIL MARKETING

# Deliverability: The Missing Chapter

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- ✓ Print-optimized
- ✓ Expert-curated
- ✓ Actionable tips

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## Deliverability: The Missing Chapter

### Advanced fixes for stubborn inbox problems the basic guides never cover

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You've already done the obvious work. SPF, DKIM, and DMARC are published. Your list is opt-in. You removed the spam-trigger words. And yet a quarter of your sends still slide into Promotions, Gmail throttles you on big days, and one ISP keeps deferring your mail for no reason you can find.

This is the chapter the checklists skip. It's about what to do when the fundamentals are right but inbox placement still isn't. Work through it section by section — each one is a self-contained fix you can run inside two weeks.

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#### 1. Seed List Testing (See What Your Subscribers See)

You cannot fix what you cannot measure. Open rates lie — they only count people who already got the email and opened it. They tell you nothing about the mail that silently went to spam.

A seed list is a set of inbox addresses you control across every major provider, salted into your real sends.

##### How to set it up:

1. Create or collect addresses at Gmail, Outlook/Hotmail, Yahoo, Apple iCloud, and at least one corporate (Microsoft 365 / Google Workspace) domain. Aim for 15-25 seeds.
2. Add them to a hidden segment and include that segment in every broadcast.
3. After each send, check each seed by hand (or use a tool like GlockApps / Mailtrap) and record: Inbox, Promotions, Spam, or Missing.

##### What to do with the data:

- Track placement per provider over time, not as a single number. Gmail and Outlook fail for completely different reasons.
- A sudden drop at one provider = a reputation event there. Investigate that ISP specifically.
- Run a seed test before any large or unusual send (product launch, re-engagement blast) so you catch problems before they hit your whole list.

*Rule of thumb: if Gmail Promotions placement is fine but Outlook spam placement spikes, the problem is reputation/authentication, not content.*

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#### 2. Domain Reputation Repair (Digging Out of a Hole)

If your domain reputation has tanked, sending more mail makes it worse. Reputation recovers through consistent positive engagement, not volume.

### The 14-day repair protocol:

- **Days 1-3:** Stop sending to everyone except your most engaged segment — people who opened or clicked in the last 30 days. This is usually 10-20% of your list.
- **Days 4-10:** Send your best content only to that segment, on a steady daily or every-other-day cadence. Consistency signals legitimacy. Avoid heavy images, lots of links, and anything that looks like a promo blast.
- **Days 11-14:** Slowly widen the audience to 60-day openers if complaints stay below 0.1% and bounces below 1%.

### While repairing:

- Check Google Postmaster Tools daily. Watch the Domain Reputation graph move from Bad/Low toward Medium/High.
- Do NOT mail cold or inactive segments. They drag the average down exactly when you can least afford it.
- Resist the urge to "make up" for paused sends with a big blast at the end. That undoes the repair.

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## 3. Complaint Rate Control (Below 0.1% or Bust)

Gmail's published threshold is 0.3% complaints; the safe target is under 0.1%. A single bad campaign above that line can poison placement for weeks.

### Cut complaints at the source:

- **Make unsubscribe easier than complaining.** A one-click unsubscribe (List-Unsubscribe header + a visible top-of-email link) means frustrated readers leave quietly instead of hitting "Report Spam."
- **Honor Feedback Loops (FBLs).** Register for FBLs at the major mailbox providers so complaints are reported back to you. Move every FBL complaint to a permanent suppression list in real time — never mail them again.
- **Match expectation to reality.** Most complaints come from people who forgot they signed up. Send a welcome email within minutes, keep your From name consistent, and remind people why they're hearing from you.
- **Throttle frequency for low-engagement segments.** Someone who hasn't opened in 90 days does not need four emails a week.

**Real-time suppression flow:** complaint received → add to suppression list → exclude from all future sends → review monthly for patterns (a specific signup source or campaign type driving complaints).

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## 4. Engagement Segmentation (Send Less, Land More)

Mailbox providers infer reputation from engagement. Sending to people who never open is the fastest way to teach Gmail your mail is unwanted.

### Build engagement tiers by last-open / last-click date:

Tier	Last engaged	Send strategy
Hot	0-30 days	Full frequency, your best offers

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Tier	Last engaged	Send strategy
Warm	31-90 days	Reduced frequency, high-value only
Cooling	91-180 days	Monthly, re-engagement focus
Cold	180+ days	One win-back series, then sunset

**The sunset policy:** if a Cold contact ignores a 3-email win-back series, stop emailing them. Suppressing dead weight raises your aggregate open rate, which raises your reputation, which lands more of your mail for everyone who *is* engaged. It feels like shrinking your list. It actually grows your reach.

## 5. Provider-Specific Tactics

Treating "the inbox" as one thing is why generic advice fails. Each provider behaves differently:

- **Gmail** weights engagement heavily and sorts into tabs. To escape Promotions: cut the number of links and images, write more like a personal email, and earn replies/stars from engaged users.
- **Microsoft (Outlook/Hotmail/Office 365)** is reputation-driven and slow to forgive. Warm up gradually, keep volume steady, and register for SNDS (Smart Network Data Services) to monitor it directly.
- **Yahoo / AOL** lean on complaint rates and FBLs. Keeping complaints low matters more here than almost anywhere else.
- **Apple Mail Privacy Protection** pre-fetches images, inflating open rates. Lean on clicks and conversions as your real engagement signal, not opens.

## Next Steps

- Pick the 2 fixes that match your symptoms and run each for a full 14 days before judging results.
- Stand up a seed list this week — it's the measurement layer everything else depends on.
- Re-run a seed test after each fix to confirm the placement actually moved.

GetMailer automates the hard parts — seed testing, FBL processing, real-time suppression, and engagement-based sending — so these stay fixed instead of drifting.

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## Symptom → Fix Quick-Reference

Match what you're seeing to the section that fixes it. Don't run all five at once — pick the one or two that match your symptom.

Symptom	Most likely cause	Go to
Inbox everywhere except one ISP	Provider-specific reputation	\$1 Seed testing, \$5 Provider tactics
Open rate halved across the board, no content change	Domain reputation drop	\$2 Reputation repair

Symptom	Most likely cause	Go to
Open rate fine, but unsubscribes/spam reports climbing	Frequency or expectation mismatch	§3 Complaint control
Gmail dumps you in Promotions	Too many links/images, low replies	§5 Gmail tactics
Big sends throttled or deferred on launch days	Volume spike on a cold list	§4 Engagement segmentation
Reputation graph "Bad" in Postmaster	Sending to unengaged contacts	§2 + §4 together

## The 14-Day Recovery Worksheet

Fill this in before you change anything. It forces you to measure, not guess.

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BASELINE (today)
Gmail inbox placement (seed test):      ____%
Outlook inbox placement (seed test):    ____%
Complaint rate (Postmaster/FBL):       ____%
Bounce rate last send:                  ____%
% of list opened in last 30 days:      ____%
Postmaster domain reputation:           Bad / Low / Medium / High

PICK ONE FIX TO RUN: _____

DAY 7 CHECK
Complaint rate trending:                 up / flat / down
Reputation trending:                    up / flat / down
Engaged-only sends only? (Y/N):         ____

DAY 14 RESULT
Gmail inbox placement:                   ____% (delta: ____)
Outlook inbox placement:                 ____% (delta: ____)
Decision: widen audience / hold / repeat 14-day cycle

```

## Go / No-Go Thresholds

Before widening your audience past the engaged segment, all of these must be true:

- Complaint rate **below 0.1%** on the last 3 sends
- Bounce rate **below 1%** on the last 3 sends
- Seed-test inbox placement **above 90%** at Gmail AND Outlook
- Postmaster domain reputation at **Medium or higher**
- No new ISP-specific spam spikes in the last 7 days

If any box is unchecked, hold the audience where it is and run another 14-day cycle.

TAKE THE NEXT STEP

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