

\$47



# MINUTE MARKETER

## Email Subject Lines

9 tactics to grab attention  
and boost open rates

# 30-Minute Marketer

## Email Subject Lines: 9 tactics to grab attention and boost open rates

**Author**

Bobbi Dempsey, Editor, *30-Minute Marketer*

**Editor**

Adam T. Sutton, Manager of Editorial Content

**Production Editor**

Brad Bortone, Senior Research Editor



*30-Minute Marketer* – Email Subject Lines: 9 tactics to grab attention and boost open rates

US \$47.00 / ISBN: 978-1-936390-51-9

Copyright © 2012 by MarketingSherpa LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, faxing, emailing, posting online or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.

To purchase additional copies of this report, please visit [www.sherpastore.com](http://www.sherpastore.com)

Bulk discounts are available for multiple copies. Please contact:

Customer Service

MarketingSherpa LLC

1-877- 895-1717 (outside US, call 401-247-7655 or email [service@sherpastore.com](mailto:service@sherpastore.com))

# TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *30-Minute Marketer* – a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we focus on how you can effectively use subject lines to attract readers' attention and boost your email open rates.

Your subject line is the teaser that (hopefully) entices the recipient to open and read your email. You could send the most brilliant email in the world, but it is useless if no one actually reads it.

In this report, we'll show you:

- How to write specific subject lines, and why
- Tips on teasing readers into opening
- How “front loading” a subject line can boost open rates
- The results of several subject line tests

We know you're in a hurry, so let's get started!

Bobbi Dempsey  
Editor, *30-Minute Marketer*

## **About *30-Minute Marketer***

MarketingSherpa's *30-Minute Marketer* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We provide quick, simple tips that you can put into action right away.

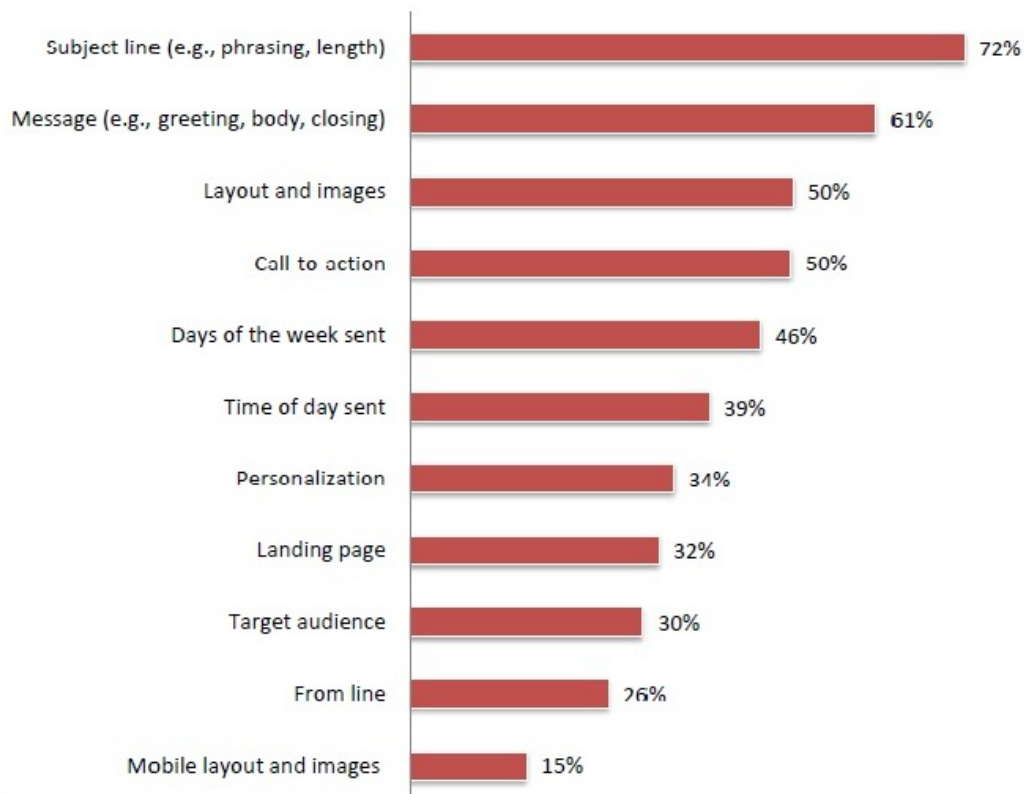
For each *30-Minute Marketer*, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and benchmark reports, to MarketingExperiments optimization tests and analysis. We highlight tips to help improve your marketing performance right now ... or, at least, by the time you're done with lunch.

When it comes to email marketing, we cannot overemphasize the importance of a good subject line. The subject line is often the first thing readers see, and it will often determine whether they open or delete the message. The subject line acts as a mini-billboard, trying to quickly grab your readers' attention as they scan their inboxes.

It's worthwhile to spend a little extra time crafting your subject lines carefully. This is something most savvy marketers seem to realize, as this chart from the MarketingSherpa [2012 Email Marketing Benchmark Report](#) illustrates.

Chart: Subject lines most popular email element to test

Q. Which of the following email campaign elements do you routinely test to optimize performance?

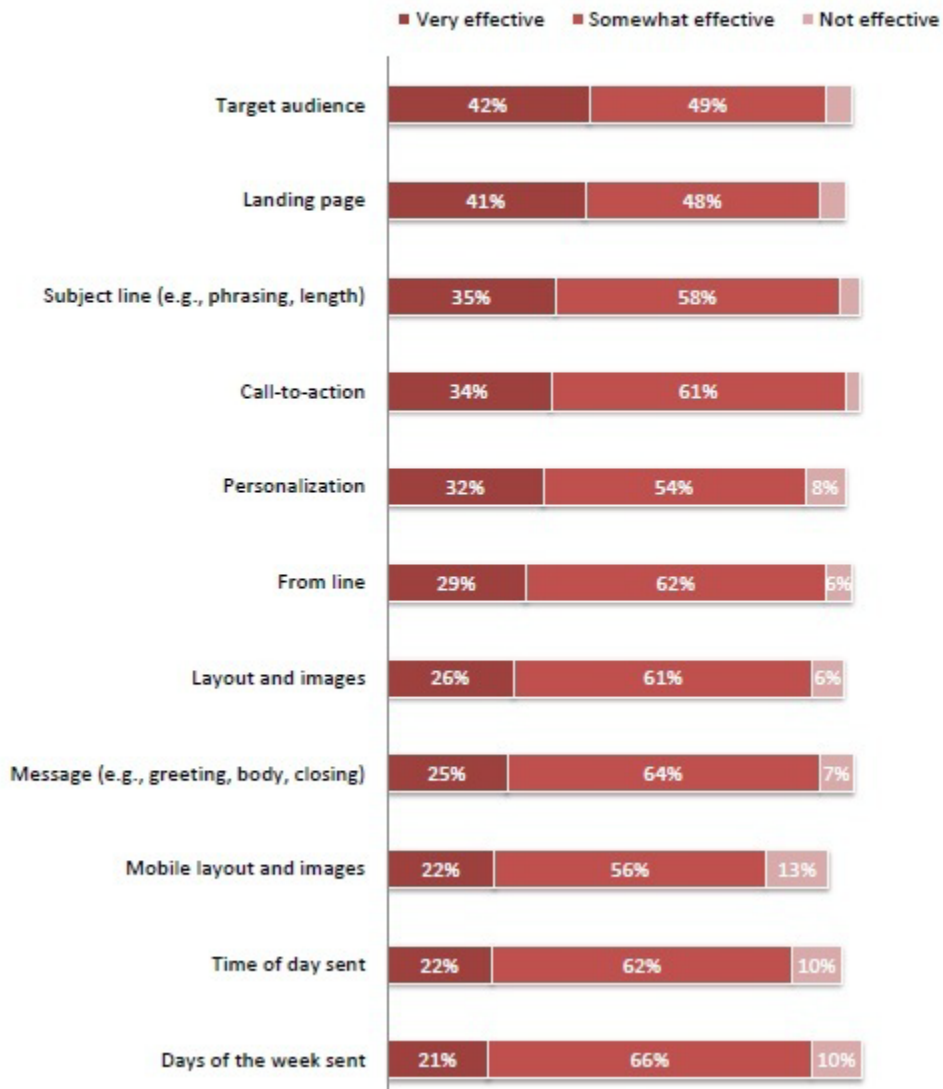


As you can see, subject lines are the most popular part of an email to test. This is partly because marketers understand their importance, and also because subject lines are among the easiest elements to change and test.

Subject lines are also among the *most effective* elements to test. As shown in the chart below (also from the MarketingSherpa *2012 Email Marketing Benchmark Report*), 35% of marketers said subject line testing was very effective, while 58% felt it was somewhat effective.

**Chart: Effectiveness of email testing and optimization tactics**

*Q. Please indicate the level of EFFECTIVENESS for each of the email testing and optimization tactics your organization is using.*



We know that subject lines are important, but how do you make sure yours are the best they can be? There is no one single secret to perfection, but there are many elements that can make or break your subject line. We discuss several tips below to help make your subject lines more effective.

## Tactic #1: Keep subject lines very specific

A general rule of thumb when it comes to subject lines: the more specific, the better.

The MarketingExperiments blog post, "[Email Testing: More specific subject line improves open rate by more than 35%](#)," Daniel Burstein describes of an email used to promote a MarketingSherpa workshop.

The email initially had this subject line:

- *Coming to Denver: New Live B2B Marketing Certification Workshop*

The team worked to improve the subject line by making it more specific and came up with the following:

- *Coming to Denver: New Lead Generation Certification Workshop*

**Results:** The second subject line saw a 38.4% increase in open rate, due to increased specificity about the workshop's topic.

### Promoting a specific event

If you have an upcoming event that would be of interest to your readers, specify it in the subject line. Readers will see that the email contains something want, and will be enticed to click.

Here's an example from the MarketingExperiments blog post, "[Email Subject Lines: Longer subject increases opens 8.2%](#)," by Brad Bortone. The marketing team at an international oil field services provider needed to craft an effective email to promote an upcoming industry event.

Here's the email's original subject line:

- *First Look at New Products, Technology and More*

Now, the improved version:

- *IADC 2011—Exclusive First Look at New Products, Technology and More*

The two are very similar, and the marketers assumed the original, shorter subject line would be more successful. However, the second subject line earned an 8.2% higher open rate.

Why? The first subject line did not provide enough information on the email's subject or sender. By adding "IADC 2011" – the name of the conference discussed in the email – and the "exclusive" tag – which added more perceived value – the team boosted the open rate.

## Tactic #2: Promise new data or breaking news

People enjoy an exclusive, or the opportunity to learn something new and groundbreaking. In the MarketingExperiments blog post, "[Email Marketing: Testing subject lines](#)," David Kirkpatrick describes how marketing software provider HubSpot wanted to promote an upcoming webinar called "The Science of Timing," which focused on the best times to engage in social media.

The team's goal was to generate the largest possible number of leads. Because HubSpot had a very large email list, even a seemingly minute increase in open or clickthrough rates would translate to a large number of additional leads.

The marketing team tested five different subject lines for an email promoting the webinar. Here are the subject lines and their results:

### Test 1:

- Subject line: [New Webinar] What time should you blog, tweet and email?
- Open rate: 13.90%
- CTR: 2.22%

### Test 2:

- Subject line: [New Data] The Science of Timing: When you should tweet, blog, email and more
- Open rate: 14.21%
- CTR: 2.25%

### Test 3:

- Subject line: [New Webinar] The best times to do your online marketing
- Open rate: 13.79%
- CTR: 1.96%

### Test 4:

- Subject line: [New Webinar] Learn the science of timing your blog posts, tweets, emails and more
- Open rate: 13.40%
- CCTR: 2.22%

### Test 5:

- Subject line: Learn the best days and times to blog, email, tweet and more
- Open rate: 12.94%
- CTR: 2.07%

As you can see, Test 2 had the highest open and clickthrough rates. It also provided a 7.4% lift over the control. Kirkpatrick theorized that this and the next-best subject lines were the only two that:

- Gave a solid promise (of data or a webinar)
- Used one or more of what journalists call the 5Ws (in this case, What and When)

This information enticed subscribers and let them know that opening this email will allow them to find out the answers to those questions.

### **Tactic #3: Consider word selection and placement carefully**

You have a very small window of opportunity in which to grab readers' attention. You have to do it in your first few words—or even the very first word, if possible.

In the MarketingSherpa blog post, "[Email Subject Lines: Words, order as critical as length](#)," Sean Donahue says marketers should "front load" subject lines with the most important information. This includes starting with "hot button" industry buzzwords or company names.

Some examples Donahue provided of effective subject lines:

- Top 12 Email Newsletter Mistakes
- Best Time to Send Email: Test Results
- How to Conduct Email Audits
- Google AdWords: 8 Tips to Life ROI
- Use Facebook to Market Yourself & Your Company

In short, while it is important to keep subject lines short, the words you choose and the order in which you place them can be even more important.

### **Tactic #4: Stress benefits and value**

Readers are busy people. They need to know it will be worth their limited time to open and read your email.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Email Marketing: Global telecom combines email and content strategy to segment database](#)," David Kirkpatrick describes about ECI Telecom, a broadband, transport and data networking infrastructure company based in Israel. The company had an unruly email list of 40,000 unengaged prospects, and wanted to segment and engage the list through email and content marketing.

As part of this effort, ECI created an email that offered a whitepaper the team felt would interest subscribers.

The team tested four subject lines for the email:

- "Get Valuable Information for 2011 From ECI Telecom"
- "Complimentary Yankee Group 2011 Predictions whitepaper"



- "Unwrap your ECI gift early"
- "Download Yankee Group's 4G Fuels the Decade of Disruption whitepaper"

**Results:** The first subject line was the clear winner with an 8.1% open rate. The other three had open rates around 4%. Leading off the email with the word "valuable" stressed that the content would be worth readers' time.

## Tactic #5: Questions can add intrigue

Using a question can make your subject line more intriguing—readers will open the email to learn the answer.

This example comes from the MarketingSherpa article, "[List Growth: Blockbuster Express' Hollywood-inspired intrigue increases audience by more than 300%](#)," by Jeri Dube.

NCR, the parent company of Blockbuster Express, wanted to make its email campaign exciting and compelling. Its initial subject lines explained the benefits of the Blockbuster Express website, but failed to impress the audience. The team decided to shake things up and make the subject lines more entertaining.

The team began posting trivia questions in its subject lines. Some examples:

- Who has won 26 Oscar statues?
- Who directed *In the Land of Milk and Honey*?
- How do Smurfs travel long distances?

**Results:** This strategy, among other efforts, helped turn around NCR's email program. The team's email list grew by 300% over a two-year period, with some of the highest performing segments experiencing 70% open rates.

## Tactic #6: Tempt readers with a special bonus

Another way to make your message hard to resist is by adding the allure of something that's limited to a select group (namely, subscribers who open and read the email).

The MarketingSherpa article, "[Behavior-based email send times life opens, CTRs and referrals: test and results](#)," by Adam T. Sutton, describes how the team at Mint.com wanted to boost its open rates and encourage readers to forward emails. As part of that process, the marketing team tested two incentive-based subject lines against a generic one.

- The generic/control subject line: "*Spread the word.*"
- Test subject line A: "*Spread the word and win an iPod.*"
- Test subject line B: "*Want early access to new Mint.com features?*"

**Results:** Test subject line B earned a 7% increase in open rate and a 13% increase in clickthrough rate. Why did it win? It offered readers something valuable (early access) without implying required effort.

In contrast, subject line A offered something valuable (an iPod), but mentioned that people would have to work for it ("spread the word").

## Tactic #7: Add a personalized touch

Everybody likes to feel like they're getting special attention, and personalizing a subject line can grab subscribers' attention and make them feel like you're addressing them directly.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Email Makeover: 7 Optimization tactics to boost revenue](#)," the team at Motorcycle Superstore wanted to optimize its email campaigns, while operating with tight deadlines and limited staff.

The team decided to test personalized subject lines by including the recipient's first name in the copy – a best practice according to many email professionals.

The A/B split test pitted a first-name approach against a generic subject line:

- Generic: *"Don't be this guy, try Preferred Installer!"*
- Personalized: *"[First Name], is this you? Try Preferred Installer!"*

**Results:** The personalized email outperformed the control by 5.1%, achieving a 22% open rate. The generic email came in at 16.9%.

*[Note: To keep the novelty from wearing off, the team sometimes uses non-personalized subject lines, as well.]*

## Tactic #8: Highlight specific sale items or offers

People love saving money and getting a deal. When your email is promoting a sale or special offer, promote that in the subject line. This is especially effective if it's a popular item, and even better if you can segment your list and promote the sale item or category that would most appeal to a particular group.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Email Marketing Basics: 29% sales lift from simple landing page](#)," Adam T. Sutton describes how food redistributor Dot Foods wanted to clean up its outdated and disorganized email marketing system. As part of the overhaul, the team tested the subject lines for its weekly email promotion, The Commodity & Pallets Promo.

Previously, all subscribers received the same subject line each week: "C&P Promos." The team tested sending part of its audience subject lines that mentioned low prices on certain products. This would increase the subject line's relevance and feature available deals.

The tactic worked and consistently beat the old subject line. Examples of recent subject lines:

- *Look at Pinto Pricing on C&P Promos!*

- *Jalapeno Deals on C&P Promos!*
- *Check out the Peanut Oil Pricing on C&P Promos!*

After overhauling its email promotions, the team realized a 32% increase in open rate, and a 29% increase in pounds sold (the team measures sales in pounds, not dollars).

## Tactic #9: Tie subject line to creative theme

If you can tie the subject line into a creative theme in the email, and incorporate tactics like adding an element of intrigue or a special bonus, your message becomes more interesting while reinforcing the brand.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Email Tests: 100% to 400% improvement for website re-launch announcement](#)," Adam T. Sutton describes how social news site Digg created a campaign to promote a major website redesign.

The team chose a monster theme for the campaign, along the lines of "Frankenstein." It segmented its list into three groups – active, lapsed and very-lapsed – and sent test emails to samples of each group to uncover the best messages.

Here are the subject lines and results of the winning emails for each group:

### 'Active' member email:

- Subject line: *"We've Created A Monster - The New Digg Is Here"*
- Open rate: 42% (5x increase over typical Digg marketing email)
- CTR: 13% (4x increase)

### 'Lapsed' member email:

- Subject line: *"Resurrect yourself on the new Digg"*
- Open rate: 20% (2.5x increase)
- CTR: 7% (2x increase)

### 'Very-lapsed' member email:

- Subject line: *"Look Alive. The New Digg is here."*
- Open rate: 15% (2x increase)
- CTR: 6% (2x increase)

The fun and creative subject lines keep recipients entertained, and made them want to keep reading. Notice how the subject lines sent to the less-active subscribers gave them a subtle nudge to revisit the site while also tying into the monster theme.

**Useful Links and Resources:**

[Email Marketing: How Your Peers Create an Effective Email Message](#)

[Email Summit 2012: Top 5 Takeaways from the Industry's Largest Research-Based Event](#)

[MarketingSherpa 2011 Advanced Practices Email Marketing Handbook](#)

# About MarketingSherpa LLC

MarketingSherpa is a primary research facility, wholly-owned by MECLABS, dedicated to determining **what works in marketing** via exclusive case studies, surveys, and results data analysis. Then we publish what we learn so our community of marketers and weekly readers can improve their results and train their teams.

Praised by *The Economist*, Harvard Business School's Working Knowledge Site and Entrepreneur.com, MarketingSherpa is distinguished by offering **practical, results-based marketing** information researched and written by a staff of in-house reporters.

MarketingSherpa features:

- **Best Practices:** 1,000+ brand-side marketer case studies and 3,500+ Creative Samples
- **Research:** 2,000+ marketing and research abstracts
- **Instruction:** 800+ how-to articles
- **Newsletters:** 230,000+ marketers read weekly case studies on topics such as email, search, social, lead generation, lead nurturing, optimization and content marketing
- **Training:** 100+ live, hands-on training sessions providing practical and proven solutions
- **Summits:** 3 annual vendor-neutral, research-based marketing events

## About MECLABS

MECLABS is a science lab that uses real-world research and training to **help business leaders get better use out of sales and marketing technology and resources**, including Internet marketing, website optimization, and lead management. We have been involved in direct research partnerships with companies throughout Europe and North America since 2001.

MECLABS deploys a rigorous methodology to conduct research. This research is compiled from:

- More than **10 years** of research partnership with our clients
- **1,300** experiments
- Over **1 billion** emails
- **10,000** landing pages tested
- **5 million** telephone call
- **500,000** decision maker conversations

MECLABS has consulted with companies like Cisco, Johnson & Johnson, *The New York Times*, 1-800-Flowers, and NetSuite to optimize sales and marketing processes and achieve triple-digit ROI gains.

Register for Summits and Workshops at [MECLABS.com/training](http://MECLABS.com/training) or contact:  
Customer Service (available M-F, 9:00am-5:00pm ET)  
[service@marketingsherpa.com](mailto:service@marketingsherpa.com)  
1-877-895-1717 (outside the U.S. call 401-383-3131)



1300 Marsh Landing Parkway Suite 106  
Jacksonville, FL 32250

[www.meclabs.com](http://www.meclabs.com)