



## A/B Testing

### *Digital Marketing Best Practices*

**Goal:** Improve the performance of email campaigns to achieve digital marketing objectives.

**Strategy:** Test elements of an email's design and messaging, such as subject lines and calls-to-action, to determine the highest-performing variants and optimize campaign results.

*Performance metrics are the secret sauce of digital marketing, allowing marketers to directly measure the results of their campaigns. But why settle for evaluating performance metrics after a marketing campaign has run? Why not use those metrics to your advantage — to evaluate, adjust and improve performance during a campaign? That's the promise of A/B testing: Sending two variants of an email to a portion of your list to determine which performs better. When done correctly, A/B testing will drive email opens and clicks and improve campaign results.*

#### **How to set up an A/B test**

An A/B test, also known as a split test, is a digital marketing tactic that involves testing two versions of a campaign asset to determine which performs better. In some cases, the "winning" asset may be immediately deployed; in other cases, the asset may be further tested against another variation in an iterative process to optimize several different campaign elements.

A/B testing can be used to evaluate any type of digital marketing asset, but it is commonly associated with automated email marketing. In an email campaign, the test is sent to a small percentage of the list — say, 10% of the list receives version A and 10% receives version B. After a period of time, the better-performing version is automatically determined by the email platform and deployed to the remaining 80% of the list.

#### **Email campaign elements that can be tested**

Nearly any aspect of an email can be tested — but it is critical to test only one element at a time. If there is more than one difference between version A and version B it will be impossible to determine why one performs better than the other.

Email campaigns commonly A/B test one of these elements:

- **Subject line:** What message prompts the higher open rate?
- **Sender:** Should the email come from a company, person or other brand name?
- **Call-to-action:** Which color, button or active verb drives more clicks?
- **Headline:** Which title pulls recipients into the message and results in clicks?
- **Imagery:** Do recipients respond to a photo, illustration or particular design treatment?





### **Testing subject lines**

The subject line, the single-biggest driver of email opens, is the most common element tested in an email campaign. A subject line test allows you to see what message better resonates with your audience so you can optimize results. Questline's performance metrics show that emails with A/B-tested subject lines achieve 7% higher open rates.

### **Testing calls-to-action**

While email opens are obviously a critical first step, your campaign's call-to-action is what drives results. Emails with A/B-tested call-to-action placements improved click-through rates by 16%, according to Questline performance metrics. Depending on your message's design, we recommend testing the size, color or placement of a CTA button and/or the text used in the call-to-action.

### **Sample size needed for an A/B test**

There isn't a hard-and-fast rule to determine how big your test sample should be. The variables to consider include the total size of your list and the expected response rate. Basically, you want to send to enough recipients so that the test results are statistically valid and achieved in a timely fashion. Accounting for these factors, sending a test to 10% to 20% of your list is usually sufficient.

### **Time needed to run an A/B test**

As with list size, there isn't an easy answer to how long a test should run. For a large list, 24 hours is usually sufficient. If you have a small list (and time to wait), running an A/B test for a week has the advantage of eliminating fluctuations caused by the day of deployment.

### **Determining the winner of an A/B test**

The variable that a test measures is determined by the element you are testing and your campaign goals — typically open rate, click-through rate or conversion rate. These parameters are defined when setting up an automated A/B test; for example, the "winner" is the subject line with the higher open rate.

In order to eliminate random chance (or other quirks) from test results, it's important to measure statistical significance. A good rule of thumb is to look for 95% confidence between the variants; depending on the sample size, this translates to a 25% to 35% difference in performance metrics. So, for example, if subject line A drives an open rate of 20% and subject line B has an open rate of 26% — an increase of 30% — you can say with statistical significance that subject line B is the winner of your A/B test.

*Recommendations based on Questline research and performance metrics.  
For more, see the annual [Energy Utility Benchmarks Report](#).*

