



• ARCHITECTURE NOTES · RESOURCE

Deliverability is week one of retention

Most retention plateaus are deliverability problems disguised as content problems. Fix the floor before you tune the flow.

Companion to: The deliverability work that comes before any retention flow.



Why this deck exists

The article makes one structural claim: a welcome flow on a domain with bad reputation is a slow brand bleed. This deck takes that claim and turns it into the deliverability checklist you run before you write a single subject line. It is built for retention leads, brand operators, and the founder who keeps getting pitched copy iterations when the actual lever is sender reputation. The work is unglamorous and costs almost nothing in dollars. It costs attention and discipline, and it is the prerequisite for every flow that follows.

- The three authentication layers that form the floor
- Why subdomain isolation is non-negotiable
- The list-hygiene cadence most teams skip
- How to sequence this in week one of any engagement



The four-layer deliverability floor

01 Authentication alignment

SPF, DKIM, and DMARC alignment is the floor. Not just published records, but actual alignment between the From domain and the signing domain. Misalignment is the most common silent failure when teams self-audit.

02 Subdomain isolation

A dedicated subdomain for sending. Marketing on its own subdomain, transactional on its own subdomain. The cost of separation is one DNS record. The cost of skipping it is reputation contagion.

03 List hygiene

Suppress bounced addresses immediately. Suppress unengaged segments older than ninety days. List hygiene is the lever most teams skip because it temporarily lowers the addressable list size and looks like the wrong direction.

04 Reputation monitoring

Track inbox placement, complaint rate, and sender score on the dedicated subdomain over time. Reputation is a slow-moving variable. You need the baseline before you can tell if iteration is helping or hurting.



Content problem or deliverability problem

Looks like a content problem

- Open rate flat across cohorts
- Click rate flat across cohorts
- Welcome flow conversion stuck for quarters
- Subject-line tests barely move the needle
- New creative does not change the curve

Actually a deliverability problem

- Marketing and transactional share a subdomain
- No DMARC policy or policy set to none
- Bounced addresses still receiving sends
- Unengaged ninety-day cohorts still in the audience
- Complaint rate above the platform threshold

The math of inbox placement (illustrative, not a case study) ❖

SENDS

100,000

Monthly volume on the marketing subdomain

INBOX AT 95% PLACEMENT

95,000

Industry+ healthy floor for an isolated, well-warmed marketing subdomain

INBOX AT 78% PLACEMENT

78,000

Common range we observe in audits when subdomains are not isolated and the marketing

LOST REACH PER MONTH

17,000

The deliverability gap, before any copy work, subject-line testing, or creative iteration is even attempted



Week-one deliverability runbook

- **Audit current SPF, DKIM, DMARC records**
Confirm publication and alignment. A record published does not mean a record aligned.
- **Move marketing to a dedicated subdomain**
Separate from transactional. One DNS record cost, multi-quarter benefit.
- **Set DMARC to quarantine, then reject**
Stage the policy. None is a monitoring stance, not a protective one.
- **Suppress hard bounces immediately**
Automate the suppression at the platform level so a manual cleanup is never required.
- **Suppress ninety-day unengaged**
Older than ninety days with no opens or clicks. Move them to a sunset flow or off the list.
- **Warm the new subdomain**
Ramp volume across two to four weeks before sending the full audience.
- **Establish a reputation baseline**
Inbox placement, complaint rate, sender score, captured weekly so iteration is measurable.



Anti-patterns we see in audits

01 **Mixing transactional and marketing on one subdomain**

A marketing complaint spike pollutes the transactional reputation that order confirmations and password resets depend on. The cost of separation is one DNS record. The cost of contagion is customer trust.

02 **Iterating copy with no DMARC alignment**

Subject-line tests that run on a misaligned domain are testing inside the spam folder. The result is noise, and the team concludes the offer is wrong.

03 **Refusing to suppress unengaged cohorts**

Teams hold on to ninety-day unengaged because the list size is a vanity metric leadership tracks. The unengaged cohorts are the ones tanking the reputation that suppresses everyone else.

04 **Treating deliverability as an IT ticket**

Deliverability sits at the intersection of brand, retention, and infrastructure. When it is owned by IT alone, no one is accountable for the marketing outcome it gates.



Signals to watch after the floor is fixed

INBOX PLACEMENT

industry+

Target: 95%+ on the marketing subdomain

COMPLAINT RATE

meaningful floor

Below platform thresholds, ideally well under the warning line so the next campaign send does not put

BOUNCE RATE

Driven down by automated suppression of hard bounces and ninety-day unengaged cohorts at

DMARC PASS RATE

100%

On legitimate sends after SPF, DKIM, and DMARC alignment is fixed and the records actually align



- NEXT STEP

Get the floor right and the flow numbers move on their own.

Run the deliverability runbook in week one. Then write the welcome flow. The order matters more than the copy.

[Read the full architecture note ->](#)