

Positive User

White Paper



EMAIL DELIVERABILITY

A practical guide to landing in the inbox



Table of contents

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----------|
| 01 | Deliverability in one look | 05 |
| | What deliverability actually means | 06 |
| | Why it matters | 06 |
| | What influences deliverability the most | 06 |
| | The four pillars of deliverability | 07 |

| | | |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| 02 | Understanding deliverability | 08 |
| | Signals | 09 |
| | A concrete example | 09 |

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----------|
| 03 | Pillar 1: Build a healthy, permission-based list | 11 |
| | Why list quality matters | 12 |
| | Grow an engaged opt-in audience | 12 |
| | Effective and ethical ways to grow | 13 |
| | The importance of double opt-in | 13 |
| | Keep your list clean over time | 13 |
| | What to avoid at all costs | 14 |

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----------|
| 04 | Pillar 2: Build trust with email providers | 16 |
| | Your sender reputation, explained simply | 17 |
| | How filters judge you | 17 |



| | |
|---|----|
| Consistency is key | 17 |
| Authentication made simple | 17 |
| SPF, DKIM, DMARC – Understanding the trio | 18 |
| Behaviors that look like spam | 18 |
| Examples of spam-like behaviors | 18 |
| Make unsubscribing easy | 19 |

05 Pillar 3 : Design and context that boost inbox placement 20

| | |
|--|----|
| Why content influences deliverability | 21 |
| Best practices for readable, accessible design | 21 |
| Key principles for effective design | 21 |
| Personalization that actually matters | 22 |
| Before you hit send | 22 |
| Your pre-send safety check-list | 23 |

06 Pillar 4: Measure, learn, adapt 24

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| The metrics that matter | 25 |
| How to react when performance drops | 25 |
| Keeping subscribers active | 26 |
| Staying ahead of trends | 26 |

Conclusion 27

About Positive User 28



Introduction : Why deliverability matters more than ever

You put heart and strategy into your emails. Whether it's to inspire, to help, or to share news, every message counts. But for that connection to happen, your email needs to arrive safely.

That's where deliverability comes in. It is the bridge between hitting "Send" and actually being heard. Without it, even the most beautiful email remains invisible.

The challenge? Inbox providers (like Gmail or Outlook) are getting smarter and stricter. They act as gatekeepers to protect users from spam. Sometimes, even legitimate businesses with good intentions get caught in the filter. It happens, and it can be frustrating.

The good news. This guide is here to make deliverability simple, human, and manageable.

You don't need to be a developer or a technical wizard to get this right. You just need to understand the basic rules of the road.

We've designed this guide to help you adopt the right habits and clear up the confusion. Let's walk through it together, step by step.



Deliverability in one
look

01



| | |
|---|--|
| | <p>Deliverability might feel like a technical hurdle, but at its core, it is based on a surprisingly simple concept: trust.</p> <p>Inbox providers need to trust that you are a legitimate, consistent sender who respects the rules. At the same time, your audience needs to trust that your communications are useful, relevant, and expected. Without this double pact of trust, even your best emails risk staying unseen.</p> |
| What deliverability actually means | <p>When we talk about deliverability, we are talking about your ability to land in the primary inbox rather than the spam folder. It is not just a technical detail; it is the decisive factor that determines whether your message is opened, read, and acted upon. To put it simply: an email that doesn't make it to the inbox is effectively a message that doesn't exist.</p> |
| Why it matters | <p>Deliverability is the foundation upon which your entire email performance rests. If it is solid, every part of your marketing, from nurturing to promotions, works better. It translates into higher visibility, stronger engagement, and more conversions. However, if your deliverability is weak, everything else you build on top of it risks failing.</p> |
| What influences deliverability the most | <p>Deliverability never depends on a single element. It is the result of all your choices as a sender, much like a credit score. It depends on the quality of your list, which must be clean and permission-based. It relies on your technical setup, proving you are who you say you are. It also hangs on the relevance of your content and, crucially, how your audience reacts to it. Deliverability is born from the balance between all these factors.</p> |



The four pillars of deliverability

To help you navigate this, we have organized this guide around four essential pillars:

- A healthy, permission-based list
- A trusted sender identity
- Relevant, readable content
- Continuous measurement and adaptation



Understanding deliverability

02



Signals

Deliverability does not depend on luck or magic. It relies on signals.

Every time you send a campaign, inbox providers observe how your recipients react. They are constantly looking for answers to simple questions: Do your contacts open your emails? Do they click on your links? Or do they delete the message immediately without reading it?

To a spam filter, engagement is evidence of trust. Positive signals strengthen your reputation, while negative signals weaken it.

Think of inbox providers as gatekeepers. Their job is to protect their users' inboxes. If they see a reliable sender with a consistent schedule and a happy audience, they welcome you in.

However, if they detect weak signals, sudden spikes in volume, or suspicious behavior, they start to tighten security. This is exactly when even legitimate emails can get stopped at the door and redirected to the spam folder.

A concrete example

Imagine a brand that usually sends two well-curated newsletters every month. Their performance is solid, and providers recognize this stable behavior.

Then, during a seasonal promotion, the pressure mounts. That brand decides to send five emails in just one week, targeting everyone in their database, including old contacts who haven't opened an email in months.

What happens next? Spam complaints increase, engagement rates drop, and algorithms detect unusual activity. The result is an immediate decline in inbox placement. The emails themselves didn't get worse, but the audience's reaction changed, sending a powerful negative signal to the providers.



The good news: Deliverability can be nurtured. It is not a static condition but a living ecosystem that you can improve day by day. By adopting healthy habits and maintaining a consistent, caring approach with your audience, your presence in the inbox becomes more stable and reliable over time.



Pillar 1:
Build a healthy, permission-
based list

03



Why list quality matters

Your contact list is the heartbeat of your email strategy. A strong, permission-based list ensures that your messages reach people who genuinely want to hear from you. This positive engagement is exactly what sends the right signals to inbox providers.

Building and maintaining a high-quality list is not about volume. It is about relevance, consent, and consistency.

A clean list proves to inbox providers that your audience trusts you, whereas a neglected or purchased list signals the opposite.

List quality affects everything, from your open rates to your overall sender reputation. It creates a domino effect on your performance.

When your list is healthy, filters see strong engagement and reward you. This leads to better inbox placement and more stable performance over time.

On the flip side, poor list quality acts as a drag on your efforts. It generates bounces and hits "spam traps", which lowers your engagement scores. In severe cases, this can even lead to your domain being throttled or blocked entirely. Even your best content can be flagged as spam if the list itself is weak.

Ultimately, list quality isn't just technical hygiene. It is relationship management.

Grow an engaged opt-in audience

The most powerful email lists grow naturally through genuine interest. When someone actively chooses to subscribe, they are expressing curiosity and openness. This initial interest leads to better engagement and healthier deliverability down the line. Growing your list should always feel like an invitation rather than pressure.



Effective and ethical ways to grow

There are several ways to capture attention without being intrusive:

- **Optimized signup forms:** Place clear forms on pages where visitors show the most intent.
- **Helpful pop-ups:** Use timing triggers so your pop-ups inform users at the right moment instead of interrupting them.
- **Valuable resources:** Offer checklists, guides, or templates. These "lead magnets" provide immediate value in exchange for an email.
- **Events and webinars:** Registrations for live events often create the most engaged subscribers because they are looking for specific expertise.

The importance of double opt-in

We highly recommend using a double opt-in mechanism. This simple confirmation step filters out typos, bots, and fake addresses before they pollute your data. Remember that the goal is not to grow fast, but to grow meaningfully. A smaller list of engaged readers will always outperform a massive list of passive ones.

Even the most carefully built list naturally evolves over time. People change jobs, abandon old inboxes, or simply lose interest. That is why cleaning your list is never a loss of reach. Instead, think of it as an investment that protects your future reputation and metrics.

Effective maintenance is not just an occasional check-up. It is a continuous process that requires attention and care.

The first step is to remove "hard bounces" immediately. These are addresses that are permanently invalid. Keeping them on your list sends negative signals to inbox providers, who interpret these errors as a sign of poor data quality.

Keep your list clean over
the time



It is also crucial to identify contacts who have been inactive for several months. This isn't about punishing people who don't open your emails, but simply recognizing that their interest may have shifted. Before giving up, you can launch targeted reactivation campaigns to see if the spark is still there or if it is time to say goodbye.

If a contact remains silent despite your efforts, it is time to remove them. Deleting subscribers might feel counterintuitive, but it is a strategic choice that strengthens your domain reputation and improves your overall performance.

Finally, don't overlook the importance of validating new signups. Verifying that addresses are correct and active helps prevent typos, bots, and spam traps right from the start. A clean list begins with a safe entry point. Together, these habits keep your list healthy, reliable, and performing well for the long haul.

What to avoid at all costs

There are short-term shortcuts that come with long-term consequences.

In the world of email marketing, shortcuts can be tempting. You might feel the pressure to grow your sending base quickly, but these "hacks" almost always turn into traps that compromise your deliverability for the long haul.

The danger of purchased lists

The most harmful practice is buying or renting lists. Not only do these lists lack genuinely interested people, but they are also often filled with inactive addresses, invalid emails, or even spam traps. Using them sends an immediate signal to inbox providers that you are not a trustworthy sender.



Risks of old or unverified data

Similarly, importing old lists that have never been verified is a recipe for trouble. If people do not remember signing up, they are much more likely to mark your email as spam. High bounce rates and negative reactions tell filters that your data quality is poor.

The necessity of consent

Another common mistake is emailing people without clear consent, even if you found their details in an internal database or collected them offline. Permission is a fundamental requirement. Without it, providers interpret your messages as potential spam.

Caution with event leads

Finally, be careful with contacts collected at events. Mass-adding them without a confirmation step might seem harmless, but you risk importing typos, temporary addresses, or inactive accounts. These are all negative signals for filtering algorithms.

The long-term cost

What starts as a shortcut to boost your numbers can cause damage that is difficult to repair. It can lead to a sudden drop in reputation, blocked emails, and poor performance that lasts for months. Investing in quality, not quantity, is always the strategy that pays off in the end.



Pillar 2:
Build trust with email providers

04



Your sender reputation,
explained simply

Deliverability thrives on trust. Every time you send an email, inbox providers evaluate whether you are a reliable partner or a potential risk. The stronger your reputation, the smoother your path to the inbox becomes.

Think of your sender reputation like a financial credit score. It is built over time through consistent, transparent behavior. Every campaign you send contributes to raising or lowering this score.

How filters judge you

Inbox providers analyze concrete signals to make their judgment. They look closely at your engagement rates (opens and clicks), keep an eye out for negative reactions like spam complaints or bounces, and monitor the consistency of your sending schedule. They also check technical factors, such as the age of your domain and your authentication status.

Consistency is key

A strong reputation takes time to establish, but it can be compromised quickly. A single campaign with high complaints or erratic behavior is enough to weaken your standing. That is why your goal should always remain simple: send relevant emails that your audience actually wants to open, and do it with regularity and respect.

Authentication made
simple (SPF, DKIM,
DMARC)

Authentication allows email providers to verify that your emails really come from your domain. It protects you from fraudulent use of your name (spoofing) and reinforces your credibility as a sender.

While SPF, DKIM, and DMARC might sound like intimidating technical acronyms, their roles are actually quite straightforward.



Understanding the trio

- SPF specifies which servers are authorized to send emails on behalf of your domain. Think of it as a guest list at the door: if you are not on the list, you don't get in.
- DKIM applies a digital signature to the message, guaranteeing that it has not been altered during delivery. It works like a wax seal on an envelope to prove it hasn't been opened.
- DMARC tells providers what to do with messages that fail the SPF or DKIM checks. It gives you control over your security policy.

When these settings are missing or configured incorrectly, providers may block, downgrade, or divert your emails, even if your content is flawless. Setting up correct authentication is one of the most direct and secure ways to strengthen your reputation and ensure your emails land safely.

Behaviors that look like spam

Inbox providers don't just track malicious senders. They also scan for patterns that "resemble" spam because these behaviors often indicate risk or a lack of care in list management.

Examples of spam-like behaviors:

- ALL CAPS or too many exclamation marks
- misleading subject lines
- image-only emails
- sudden sending spikes
- frequent emailing of inactive contacts

These patterns can make even a legitimate sender appear suspicious. To avoid being mislabeled, focus on transparency and consistency: write clear and honest subject lines, maintain a natural balance between text and images, set a consistent sending schedule, and favor active and engaged contacts.

Trust comes from transparency and authentic behavior, not from tricks.



Make unsubscribing easy

Making the unsubscribe process simple and immediate is one of the strongest signals of respect you can send. It demonstrates transparency and care for the user experience.

A clear, visible unsubscribe link prevents frustration. If people cannot find an easy way out, they will often mark your email as spam instead. By making it easy to leave, you reduce complaints, keep your list healthy, and preserve your overall reputation.

When people feel respected and in control, they do not feel pressured. This makes them more likely to stay and, in some cases, even to return in the future.



Pillar 3:
Design and content that boost
inbox placement

05



Why content influences deliverability

An email is not just a message for your subscribers to read; it is also a collection of signals that inbox providers analyze.

Clear, readable, and engaging emails improve the user experience. This naturally leads to better engagement, which sends positive signals to providers and automatically strengthens your deliverability

Filters are constantly observing how your audience behaves. If your emails are regularly ignored, deleted without opening, or flagged, algorithms assume they are not relevant.

On the other hand, well-crafted content that invites people to read, click, or reply keeps attention alive. Every positive interaction is a vote of confidence, while every negative interaction weakens your reputation. Writing interesting emails does not just build relationships; it directly impacts your technical ability to reach the inbox.

Best practices for readable, accessible design

Design plays a crucial role. It determines how quickly and pleasantly a reader can understand your message. A clear, well-organized layout is not just about aesthetics; it is about reliability. Your message needs to remain understandable even if images fail to load or if the person is reading on a small screen.

Key principles for effective design

- **Keep the structure simple:** Use a clear headline, short paragraphs, and a visible call-to-action.
- **Prioritize visual hierarchy:** Make sure the most important elements stand out immediately.
- **Think mobile-first:** Today, most emails are opened on smartphones, so your layout must adapt flawlessly.
- **Use alt text:** Always add descriptions to your images for accessibility and for times when images are blocked.



Personalization that actually matters

- **Balance text and images:** Too many images can trigger spam filters, while too much dense text can feel overwhelming.
- **Make CTAs obvious:** Ensure your buttons are easy to find and easy to tap.

Ultimately, great design should not distract from your message. Its job is to support it and make it shine.

True personalization goes far beyond just inserting a first name in the subject line. It is about making your subscriber feel recognized and understood. It means sending a message that feels like it was written specifically for them, rather than a generic blast sent to everyone.

To achieve this, look at the signals your users are giving you. You can tailor your messages based on pages they viewed, their recent purchase history, items left in a cart, or specific interests they selected in your preference center. These clues allow you to address real needs instead of guessing.

When someone receives an email that feels useful and timely, they are much more likely to open it and interact. Since every positive interaction—like an open or a click—strengthens your reputation with inbox providers, personalization becomes a powerful multiplier for your deliverability.

Before you hit send: your checklist

A brief but thorough review can save you from small errors that have big consequences. Before launching a campaign, take a moment to ensure everything is in order. This simple habit protects both your user experience and your sender reputation.



Your pre-send safety check

- **Honest subject line:** Does it accurately reflect the content?
- **Recognizable sender:** Will they know who you are immediately?
- **Functional links and images:** Have you tested every button?
- **Alt text:** Is there a description for every image?
- **Mobile preview:** Does it look good on a small screen?
- **Correct segment:** Are you targeting the right people?
- **Volume check:** Is this sending volume consistent with your history?
- **Unsubscribe link:** Is it easy to find?

Consistency and attention to detail are your best defense against the spam folder.



Pillar 4:
Measure, learn, adapt

06



The metrics that matter

Deliverability is not a "set it and forget it" task. It is a continuous practice that requires observation, correction, and constant small improvements. By monitoring your data and adjusting your habits, you protect your performance for the long run and build a stable, reliable reputation.

When it comes to deliverability, not all numbers are created equal. You need to focus on the metrics that truly reflect trust and engagement.

Key indicators include your open and click rates, which show interest. You must also closely monitor negative signals like spam complaints, hard bounces, and unsubscribe rates.

Crucially, do not obsess over a single campaign. One bad result can happen due to external factors. The truth lies in the long-term trends. If you notice these metrics consistently improving or declining over time, that is the real indicator of your health as a sender.

How to react when performance drops

It happens to everyone eventually. You might see open rates dip, clicks decrease, or complaints inch up. The problem itself matters less than how you respond to it.

Diagnose and adjust If open rates fall, it might be time to refresh your subject lines or reconsider your sending frequency. A smart tactical move is to temporarily prioritize your most engaged segments to restore positive signals.

If spam complaints rise, verify that your content is truly relevant. You should also make the unsubscribe process even simpler and perhaps reduce your volume towards less active contacts to calm things down.



Keeping subscribers active

If bounces increase, this is a hygiene alert. Check the quality of new signups, run a list cleaning operation, and ensure your domain settings remain correct.

Challenges are part of every sender's journey. What counts is your ability to intervene quickly and precisely to restore balance.

A list is only as strong as the people interacting with it. Inactive subscribers do more than just take up space; they weaken your engagement signals and risk dragging your reputation down.

That is why a reactivation strategy is essential. You need a process that reconnects you with people who are still interested and helps you say a healthy goodbye to those who are not.

To keep your list vibrant, use specific tools like reactivation flows or preference centers that let users choose their own frequency and topics. Implement "sunset policies" to automatically remove contacts who have been silent for too long, and use segmentation based on engagement levels.

Ultimately, your list should evolve and mature over time, not just accumulate numbers.

Staying ahead of trends

The world of email changes constantly. Filters update, privacy regulations evolve, and human habits shift. The senders who maintain high deliverability in the long run are not necessarily the most technical ones, but those who remain curious, informed, and ready to adapt.

Deliverability is not just a technical topic; it is an ongoing conversation between you, your subscribers, and the inbox providers. The more this conversation is based on listening, consistency, and transparency, the more likely your emails are to arrive exactly where they belong.



Conclusion: A trust-based approach to email

Deliverability is not a battle against filters, nor is it a technical switch you flip once and forget. It is the result of a relationship built on trust over time.

This trust must be earned on two fronts: with email providers, who need to recognize you as a reliable sender, and with the people on your list, who need to perceive your messages as useful, relevant, and respectful.

When you consistently focus on list quality, engaging content, and a balanced sending rhythm, deliverability stops being a problem to solve. Instead, it becomes the natural outcome of your approach. Whether it is a cleaner list, a sharper segment, or a clearer subject line, every small improvement adds up to strengthen your reputation and stabilize your inbox placement.

You don't need to revolutionize everything overnight. Real success comes from the ability to observe, correct, and improve step by step.

Ultimately, good deliverability is simply a reflection of how you communicate. If you respect your readers and put their experience first, inbox providers will notice, and your emails will reach the people who are ready to engage with you.



About Positive User

Positive User is an all-in-one customer engagement platform designed to help teams communicate clearly, personally, and consistently across every channel. From email and SMS to WhatsApp, chat, and push notifications, everything is managed from a single, unified workspace.

We make automation simple and human. By leveraging a native Customer Data Platform and advanced segmentation, you can send messages that are both relevant and timely, ensuring you reach each person with the right context.

Whether you are in marketing, sales, product, or support, Positive User gives you the flexibility to build meaningful experiences at scale without the usual complexity. Our goal is to help you work smarter, faster, and more human.

Our mission is clear: to support you in creating authentic connections throughout the entire customer journey, from the very first visit to long-term loyalty.

[Request a demo](#)

