Your subject line isn't why nobody replies. The six-layer stack and the sequences that are.

Arnold Gatilao
Workforce3One

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INTRODUCTION

Who this is for

You send cold email to a long list. You rotate 5 inboxes in Instantly, warm up the domains, write personalized first lines, and your open rate looks fine. But the replies don't come. Or the replies you do get are from people who ask to be removed, or worse, they report the email as spam. Or you hit a wall where no matter what you do, the deliverability keeps dropping and you don't know why.

This guide is for people who have the technical knowledge to fix the problem. The SPF, DKIM, and DMARC records are correct. The warm-up pool is healthy. The sending volume is low enough that it shouldn't trigger anything. But something is still broken, and you need a system that tells you what to fix and in what order.

The problem is not one thing. It is six layers that all have to work together, and most people only know how to diagnose two of them. This guide covers the full stack: DNS authentication, domain reputation, IP reputation, list hygiene, sequence design, and the feedback loop that connects your reply rate back to all of it. By the end, you should be able to diagnose which layer is broken and know what to do about it.

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01 Why cold emails get ignored, and it is not the subject line

Most guides can convince you that a subject line is the problem. Rewrite it, test it, and your open rate will improve. But if your emails are not reaching the inbox in the first place, no amount of subject line testing will matter. The subject line is irrelevant if the email never arrives.

The first is whether the email ever reaches the inbox. The SPAM folder is where it goes when the system decides it is not worth showing to the person you wrote it for. Once it lands in the inbox, the second question is whether it gets opened, read, and whether the person who opens it feels anything worth responding to. Deliverability is upstream of everything else. If the email never reaches the inbox, the rest of the stack does not matter.

Cold email deliverability is the set of systems that determine whether your outreach reaches the inbox or the spam folder. It is not one setting or one tool. It is a stack of six layers that all have to work together, and most people only know how to diagnose two of them. The six layers are DNS authentication, domain reputation, IP reputation, list hygiene, sequence design, and the feedback loop that connects your reply rate back to all of the above.

The DNS layer is where the message was sent and is the foundation on top of it sits the rest. If the DNS layer is broken, no amount of good copy or clean list will fix the problem. The domain reputation layer is what the receiving mail server remembers about your sending history. The IP reputation layer is what it remembers about the IP address you sent from. The list hygiene layer is what it contains the emails, the sequence layer is what you send to those emails, and the feedback layer is how you know whether any of it is working.

Why cold emails get ignored

If your reply rate has fallen to more than 50% within a few weeks of an unchanged sequence, the problem is almost never the copy. It is one of the six layers above, and the rest of this guide is how to find which one and what to do about it.

Quick diagnosis

- Bounce rate is spiking: check DNS, IP reputation, list hygiene
- Bounces are low but replies are gone: check domain reputation, sequence
- Everything looks fine but nothing gets opened: check DNS, domain reputation, IP reputation
- Opens are fine but nobody replies: check sequence, feedback loop
- Inboxes are fine but the email is in the spam folder: check DNS, domain reputation, IP reputation

Cold email deliverability is the set of systems that determine whether your outreach reaches the inbox or the spam folder. It is not one setting or one tool. It is a stack of six layers that all have to work together, and most people only know how to diagnose two of them.

02 The outreach deliverability stack

Layer one: DNS authentication

SPF, DKIM, and DMARC are three DNS records that tell receiving mail servers that you are authorized to send email from your domain. If any of the three is missing, misconfigured, or pointing to a tool you no longer use, Gmail and Outlook will treat your mail as suspicious by default. Setup takes about an hour. Most people get it wrong in at least one way.

Layer two: domain reputation

Gmail and Outlook remember how your domain has behaved in the past. Spam complaints, hard bounces, and low engagement all lower your domain's score. Once it drops, every email you send from that domain starts from a worse position. Recovery takes weeks, not days. Domain reputation is the layer most people never think about until their cold email stops working.

Layer three: IP reputation

Your IP address has its own reputation, separate from your domain. Shared IPs inherit the behavior of every other sender on the same server. Dedicated IPs need a warm-up period before they can send at scale. Most cold email tools default to shared IPs on their cheapest plans, which means your deliverability depends on what the other customers on your IP address are doing.

Layer four: list hygiene

Every bounce, every spam trap hit, and every complaint on your list lowers your sender score. Sending to a list you bought or scraped without verification is the fastest way to destroy your domain reputation. Bounce rate should stay below 2%. Spam complaints should be as close to zero as you can get them.

Layer five: sequence design

Volume, timing, and content all contribute to whether a sending identity stays healthy. Too many emails too fast triggers rate limits and spam flags. Sending at 2 AM looks different than sending at 9 AM in the recipient's time zone. Identical copy across 500 contacts looks different than personalized copy across 500 contacts. Sequence design is the layer where you control how your sending behavior looks to the mail server.

Layer six: feedback loop

Bounces, complaints, opens, and replies are the signals that tell you which of the five layers above is broken. Without a feedback loop, you are guessing. With a feedback loop, you can see that your bounce rate spiked after you changed your sending time, that your domain reputation dropped after you added a new sequence, or that your IP reputation recovered after you switched to a dedicated IP. Most people have none of this and wonder why their cold email stopped working.

Why authentication alone isn't enough

Setting up SPF, DKIM, and DMARC is the first step and it is necessary. But it is not sufficient. Authentication proves you are who you say you are. It does not prove that your sending behavior looks like a legitimate sender. Gmail and Outlook can authenticate your mail and still send it to spam if your domain reputation is low, your IP is shared with spammers, or your list has a high bounce rate.

Authentication is the entry ticket. The other five layers are what determine whether you actually get inbox placement.

03 Building a prospect list that won't get you flagged

Most lists are fatal from the moment they hit the outreach stack. The contact validation is roughly 60% to 70% accurate, the titles are stale, the companies have been acquired or shut down, and the people who do still work there are not the people you wanted to reach. Sending to that list does not just waste the sends. It lowers your domain reputation, your IP reputation, and your bounce rate, and it makes the next list you send harder to deliver.

Why bought lists fail

- Contact validation is roughly 60% to 70% accurate
- Titles are stale, companies have been acquired or shut down
- Spam trap hits and complaints from the list damage your domain and IP reputation
- Bounce rate climbs and every future campaign starts from a worse position

Why sellers just let by catch-all's harder than anyone else

Catch-all mailboxes accept mail for any address on a domain, which means a large percentage of them look valid to validation tools. Outreach.com finds about 40% of B2B SaaS prospects' business email addresses are catch-all. Most other tools simply mark those as "unverified" and let you decide what to do with them. Sending to catch-all addresses is risky because the mailbox will accept the email and then the recipient never sees it, which looks like a bounce to the sender's domain reputation. Outreach.com runs a separate verification layer on catch-all addresses to check whether the specific mailbox actually exists before you send. Most other tools do not.

Scraped vs. licensed vs. first-party data

Scraped data is the cheapest and the most dangerous. It is unverified, it goes stale fast, and it carries the highest risk of spam traps and complaints. Licensed data from a provider like ZoomInfo or Apollo is more expensive but more reliable, with better coverage and more recent verification. First-party data, collected from your own website or product, is the most accurate and the most defensible, but it takes time to build and the volume is limited.

Why list quality matters more than volume

A 500-contact list with a 2% bounce rate and a 0.1% spam complaint rate will outperform a 5,000-contact list with a 8% bounce rate and a 0.5% spam complaint rate every time. The smaller list preserves your sender reputation and the larger list destroys it. Volume is the last thing you should optimize when your deliverability is broken.

04 Five sequences that actually book meetings

A long template looks impressive. The sending tool allows it. Half a paragraph, two paragraphs, three paragraphs, and the prospect stops reading at the second one. Most cold email templates are too long because the sender wanted to show how much they know about the prospect, and the prospect wanted to know how much it costs and how long it takes to see results.

The five templates below are short on purpose. Each one has a specific job, a specific length, and a specific reason why that length works for that job. Copy them, swap the bracketed fields for your own, and test them against your current sequence before you write anything else.

1. The congratulations opener

Subject: [Company] + [recent trigger]

Congratulations, [first name]. Saw [recent trigger] and wanted to be the first to say congratulations.

[Company] + [recent trigger] = 5 to 8 words. Specific enough that the prospect knows you actually read something about their company, vague enough that it could not be copied to a competitor's list. Congratulations is warm but not sycophantic. Ending with a question keeps the door open without forcing a meeting ask in the first sentence.

2. The peer-to-peer opener

Subject: [Mutual connection] or [shared context]

Hi [first name], [mutual connection] suggested I reach out. Thought you might find [one specific thing] useful given what you're building at [company].

Mutual connection or shared context gives the prospect a reason to read the email that has nothing to do with the sender's pitch. The specific thing should be something you genuinely think is useful, not a generic feature list.

3. The compliment-to-curiosity opener

Subject: [Specific compliment]

Hi [first name], [specific compliment]. Curious how you manage [related problem] at [company].

Compliment + curiosity in two sentences. Specific compliment, not "love what you do." Curiosity about a problem the prospect actually has, not a feature they may not care about.

4. The trigger event opener

Subject: [Company] + [trigger event]

Congrats on [trigger event], [first name]. Usually that means [common consequence] is coming next.

Trigger event + consequence. Funding, hiring, acquisition, product launch. The consequence is what the trigger usually means the company is now dealing with.

5. The pattern-interrupt opener

Subject: [Company] + [observation]

Hi [first name], [company] + [observation]. Not sure if this is relevant, but [one specific thing] that usually comes up right after that.

Pattern interrupt. Short, low-pressure, and the sender admits they are not sure the thing is relevant. Works because it does not pretend to be a perfect fit.

Which one to use first

Start with the trigger event if you have a reliable way to find recent events. Fall back to the compliment-to-curiosity opener when you have a specific observation but no trigger event. Use the peer-to-peer opener when you have a mutual connection worth mentioning. Use the pattern-interrupt opener when you are testing something low-pressure across a cold list.

05 The pre-send checklist

Most of the six layers can be checked once and then left alone. The exceptions are the feedback loop, which needs to be set up before you start sending, and the sequence layer, which needs to be reviewed every time you change your copy or your volume.

Before you send the first email

- Confirm SPF, DKIM, and DMARC are all passing for the sending domain
- Check the domain's reputation on a free tool (Google Postmaster Tools, MXToolbox)
- Check the IP reputation if you are on a dedicated IP
- Verify the list has been run through a catch-all verification layer
- Confirm the bounce rate on the last list was below 2%
- Set up a feedback loop so bounces and complaints are visible within 24 hours

Before you change something

- Pause the sequence before changing copy, volume, or sending time
- Wait 48 hours after the change before judging the results
- Change one variable at a time so you can tell which one broke things

Before you scale

- Confirm the sender score is stable for at least two weeks
- Check that spam trap hits are not increasing
- Review the bounce rate by list source, not just the overall number
- Confirm the feedback loop is still working after the volume increase

06 Signs deliverability is hurting your campaigns

Bounce rate climbing above 2%

Hard bounces mean the list is stale or the verification layer is not catching invalid addresses. Every bounce lowers the domain's sender score and makes the next list harder to deliver. Bounce rate should stay below 2%. If it is climbing, the list is the first place to look.

Spam complaints above 0.1%

Spam complaints are almost 0 percent on a single send. Even a small number of complaints can push the domain into spam folders for the rest of the campaign. Common causes: irrelevant targeting, aggressive follow-up, missing unsubscribe, and sending to people who never opted in to anything. Gmail and Yahoo both publish complaint thresholds and will start rejecting mail if the rate stays above 0.1%.

Sudden drop in open rates

Usually means a domain reputation hit or a spam folder placement change. Check Google Postmaster Tools for domain reputation and MXToolbox for blacklist status. If the reputation is fine and the blacklist is clean, the problem is more likely the subject line or the sender name, not the deliverability stack.

Reply rate falls while opens rate holds

Inboxes are still receiving the email but the recipients are not opening it. Usually means the subject line is not working, the sender name looks suspicious, or the preview text is boilerplate. Fix the subject line first. If opens also start dropping, the problem has moved from the subject line to the sender reputation.

Inboxes are fine but everything lands in spam

Domain reputation is the most common cause. The domain has recently dropped, IP is being shared with spammers, or the sending volume jumped too fast for the domain to absorb. Check Google Postmaster Tools for domain reputation and MXToolbox for blacklist status.

07 Tools worth trying for domain reputation

Sending, warm-up, and inbox rotation are the tools most people already have. Domain reputation is the layer most people never think about until their cold email stops working. The tools below are the ones worth checking when the rest of the stack looks healthy but the inbox rate still is not there.

Google Postmaster Tools

Free, from Google, and it shows the domain reputation Gmail is using for your sending domain. If the reputation drops, this is the first place it shows up. Setup takes about 10 minutes and requires a DNS record to verify ownership. Most people never check it until something already broke.

MXToolbox

Free blacklist checker. Checks your domain and IP against about 100 blacklists. If you are on a blacklist, this is how you find out which one and how to start the delisting process. Most blacklists have a self-service removal form once the underlying issue is fixed.

Postmark DMARC

Free DMARC monitoring for up to 100 messages per month. Easier than setting up a DMARC record from scratch because it parses the reports into a readable dashboard instead of raw text files. Useful for checking whether your authentication is actually working after you think you fixed it.

Mail-Tester

Free spam score checker. Sends a test email and returns a score out of 10 with a breakdown of what triggered the score. Useful for checking whether a new template, a new IP, or a new domain is starting from a clean position or from a bad one.

Why these are not the same as a sending tool

Sending tools handle the volume and the warm-up. Domain reputation tools tell you what the receiving servers remember about your domain. Most people have the first category covered and the second one is the gap that shows up when the rest of the stack looks healthy but the inbox rate still is not there.

08 Verification as a habit, not an event

Why one-time verification decays

The list you verified last month is already stale. People change jobs, companies get acquired, domains expire, and mailboxes get deactivated. Verification is not a one-time cleanup. It is a recurring check that has to run every few months if the list is being used for outreach.

Catch-all's are worth a separate check

Catch-all mailboxes accept mail for any address on a domain, which means a large percentage look valid to standard validation tools. Outreach.com runs a separate verification layer on catch-all addresses to check whether the specific mailbox actually exists before you send. Most other tools do not. Sending to a catch-all address that does not exist looks like a bounce to the sender's domain reputation.

Wrong verification into the sequence

Verification results are only useful if they actually stop the bad addresses from reaching the sequence. Most teams run a verification step and then ignore the results and send to everyone anyway. The verification step then adds cost and latency without changing the outcome. The value only shows up when the system actually removes the failed addresses before the sequence starts.

Verification is not the same as deliverability

Verification proves the mailbox exists. It does not prove the sender's domain looks safe to the receiving server. Bounce rate is the downstream signal that tells you whether the verification layer is actually catching the right addresses.

09 The SOR daily workflow scorecard

A real week of sending reference: the Tuesday, Wednesday and Monday that made up a typical Workforce3One outreach run. Numbers are illustrative but the structure is what a real log looks like.

Daily volume thresholds

	Tuesday	Wednesday	Monday
Cold emails sent (Mon-Wed)	150-200	200+	150+
Bounce rate (rolling 7 day)	1.8%	1.9%	2.0%
Spam complaints	0	0	0
Open rate (rolling 7 day)	55-60%	55-60%	55-60%
Reply rate (rolling 7 day)	8-10%	8-10%	8-10%
Bounces	3	4	5
Spam complaints	0	0	0

The weekly rollup: Wed

- **Sending.** 150 cold emails sent, 0 bounces, 0 spam complaints. Full day, 8 am to 5 pm, with a 30 min lunch break.
- **Bounces.** 3 hard bounces, 2 soft bounces. Hard bounces are dropped and never retried. Soft bounces are retried once after 24 hours.
- **Replies.** 12 replies, 8 positive, 4 neutral. Positive replies are flagged for a human to take over. Neutral replies are logged for the weekly review.
- **Pipeline.** 2 new prospects added to the pipeline. Both were qualified by a human before they entered the pipeline, not auto-added from the sequence.
- **Anomalies.** None. Open rate dropped 2 points from Tuesday but stayed within the normal range.

Why this matters

The numbers are not the point. The point is that a human can look at this log and know whether the system is healthy in 30 seconds. If the bounce rate jumped to 5% on Wednesday, the log would show it immediately and the operator would know to check the list before the next send.

OUTREACH360
Bring the list. We will return one your sequence can actually reply to.
If your reply rate has fallen below 1% or it has never reached double digits, the problem is almost never the subject line. It is one of the six layers above, and the rest of this guide is how to find which one and what to do about it.
Outreach360 runs the full stack: DNS authentication, domain reputation, IP reputation, list hygiene, sequence design, and the feedback loop that connects your reply rate back to all of it. Most other tools cover two of the six layers and leave the rest to the operator.
Catch-all verification is a separate layer that most tools do not run at all. Outreach.com runs it on every list before it enters the sequence, so the catch-all addresses that look valid but bounce never reach the sender's domain reputation.
Pricing starts at $99 per month for 1,000 contacts and 5,000 sends. Free trial available.
Start a free trial