Zen & the Art Of Subject Line Testing

Dela Quist

Touchstone

AlchemyWorx
Driving growth through email

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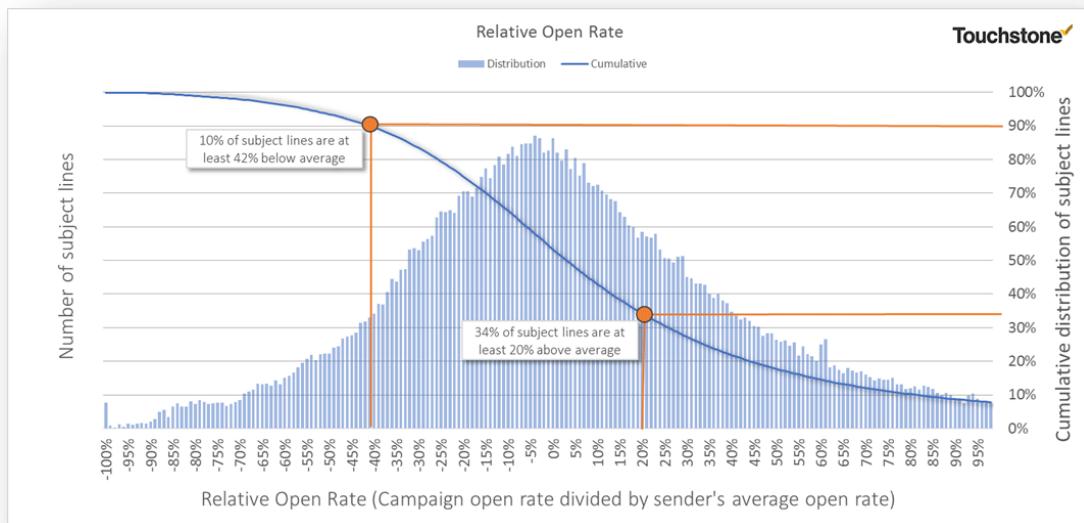*"The truth knocks on the door and you say, "Go away, I'm looking for the truth," and so it goes away. Puzzling."*

When it comes to email few would argue with that the subject is, one of if not THE, single most important part of an email. Here's why. Average open rates are between 15% and 25% range depending on industry, so for the 75% to 85% of recipients who do not open any given email they receive, **the Subject line IS the email**. Everyone with an email address is exposed to multiple subject lines on a daily basis. According to the latest research by the Radicati Group an astounding 3.7 billion people have an email address. This year 269 billion emails will be sent to - and by, those people. Globally, each address gets an average of 72.5 emails every day. That's a LOT of subject lines! No wonder "How do I improve my Subject lines?" is the No.1 FAQ of all time.

The answer is deceptively simple **TEST!**

Testing works.

To help you understand the impact of testing I would like to share some data taken from Touchstone a virtual test platform for subject lines (SLs). What we found surprising was when it comes to testing effectively A/B is not enough.

Subject Line Performance Curve – No test

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This bell curve taken from the campaign data held with Touchstone shows the distribution of open rates for every SL in the database. All open rates are computed relative to the sender's average open rate, so an open rate of +20% here means that it performed 20% above average.
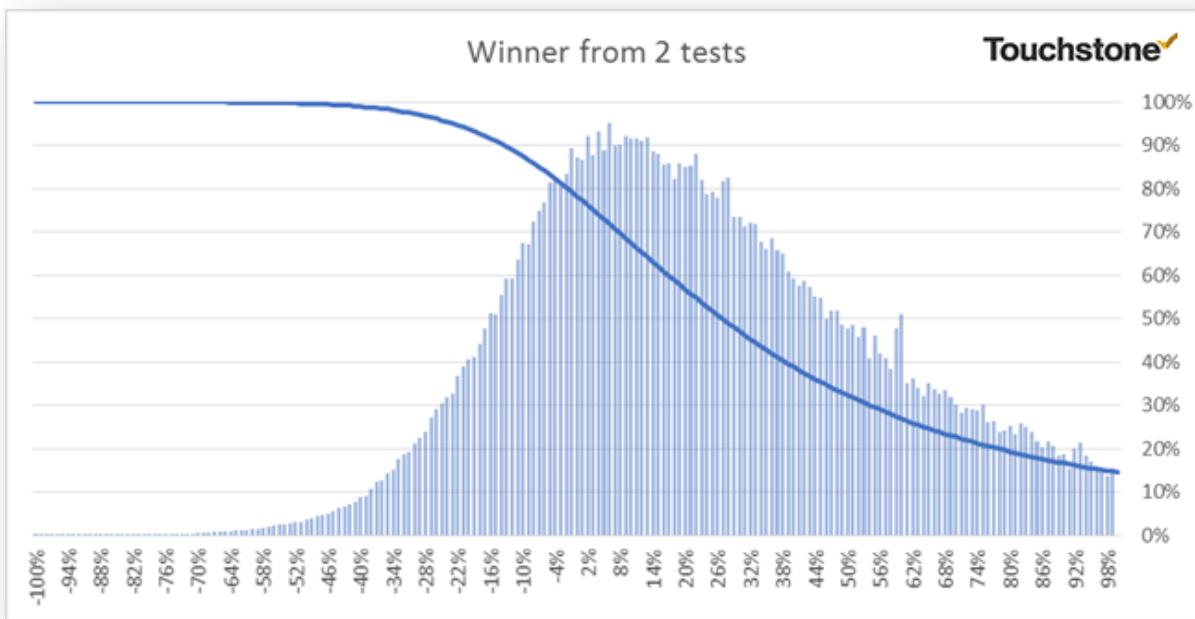
Let's start with how many SLs you should test to ensure you get a significant lift. The term A/B test would imply that two is ok, but the data would suggest otherwise. The data shows us that any given SL has roughly 1 chance out of 3 of performing at least 20% above average. In other words, to be sure to get a 20% lift in your open rate, you should test at least 3 SLs on every single campaign.

We can also see what happens if you don't test, or test too little. If you use only one subject line, there is a 1/3 chance that it will underperform the average by at least 20% and a 1/10 chance that it will perform 42% below average. So if you select only two subject lines in your test, then each has a 1/3 chance of underperforming by >20%. In other words there is a 1/9 chance that both will be 20% or more below average. SL "A" is bad, "B" is worse – bad beats worse, but they are both crap!
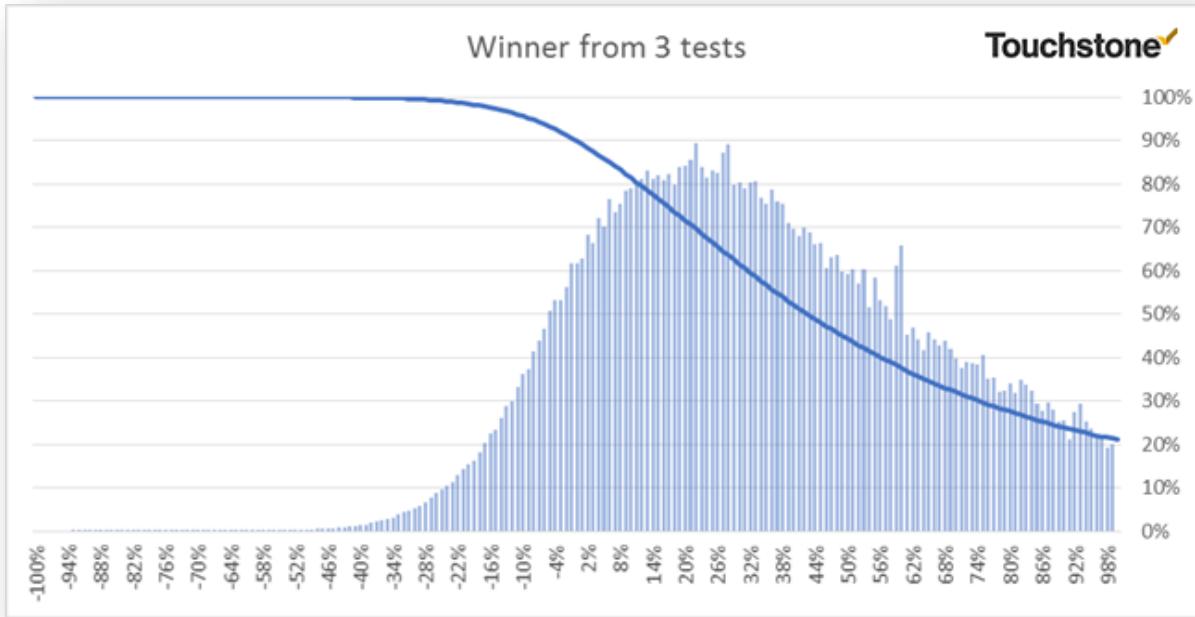
The more SLs you test the greater the chance that at least one of them will be one of those great SLs to the right of this chart, and reduce the chances that you'll send one of the less effective SLs on the left.

As you will see from the next 3 charts every incremental SL you test improves your chances of getting a lift.

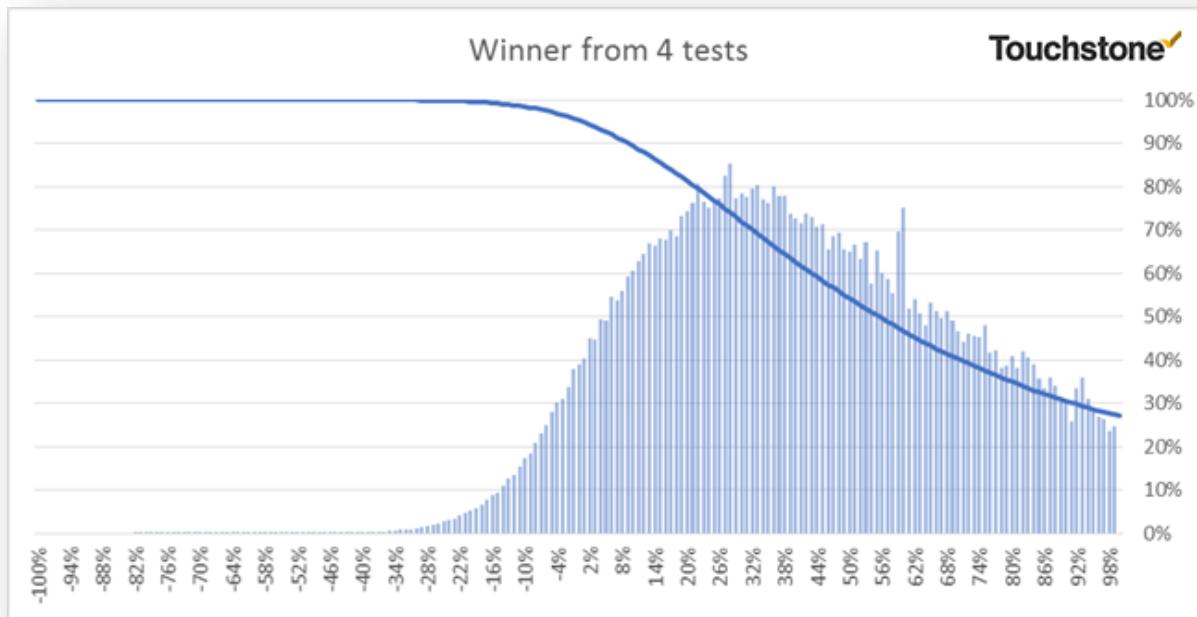## Predicted Performance from 2 Subject Line (AB) test

Predicted Performance from 3 Subject Line test

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Predicted Performance from 4 Subject Line test

The same is true whether you decide to optimize for Click Rate or CTO rate as this handy chart taken from the data demonstrates.

No. of SL's	Predicted Gain		
	Opens	Clicks	CTO
2	3%	0%	0%
3	21%	42%	25%
4	33%	79%	47%
5	44%	111%	65%
6	53%	141%	80%
7	60%	169%	94%
8	68%	194%	106%
9	74%	220%	117%
10	81%	242%	128%

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So if you test 3 SLs the chances are you can expect a 21% improvement in your open rate 42% in click rate and 25% improvement in your CTO. The need to test is something that even the AI language generating services such as Persado or Phrasee cannot sidestep. Both services promise/deliver an uplift – but require you to test between 10 and 20 SLs. So it doesn't matter who or what writes your subject lines you MUST test to guarantee a lift.

What to optimize

"We take a handful of sand from the endless landscape of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world."

Email marketing practitioners (and the people they report to) tend to see the Subject Line as the primary way to get someone to open an email. Each email open is seen as the Holy Grail, the primary thing marketers want their subscribers to do with every email. The thinking goes like this:

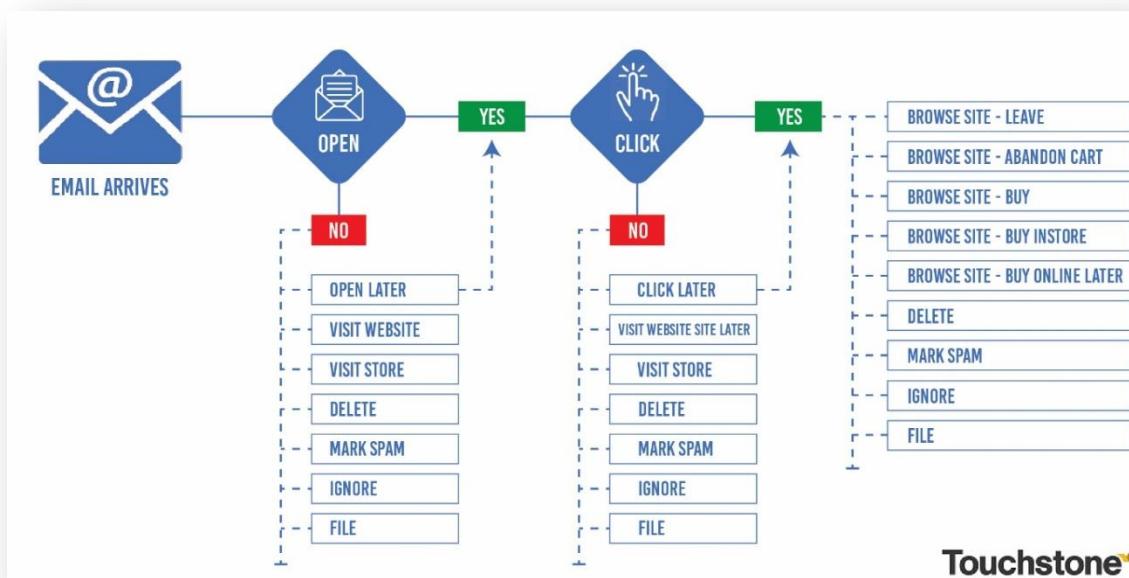Write a good SUBJECT LINE, get more people to open – get more clicks – get more conversions.

Write a bad subject line - fewer people open the email – get fewer clicks get less conversions.

Armed with this highly simplistic view, marketers set about trying to optimise their subject lines. However the reality could not be further from the truth!

As the chart below shows, the number of actions and decisions that a SL influences for better or worse is exponentially more complex than:

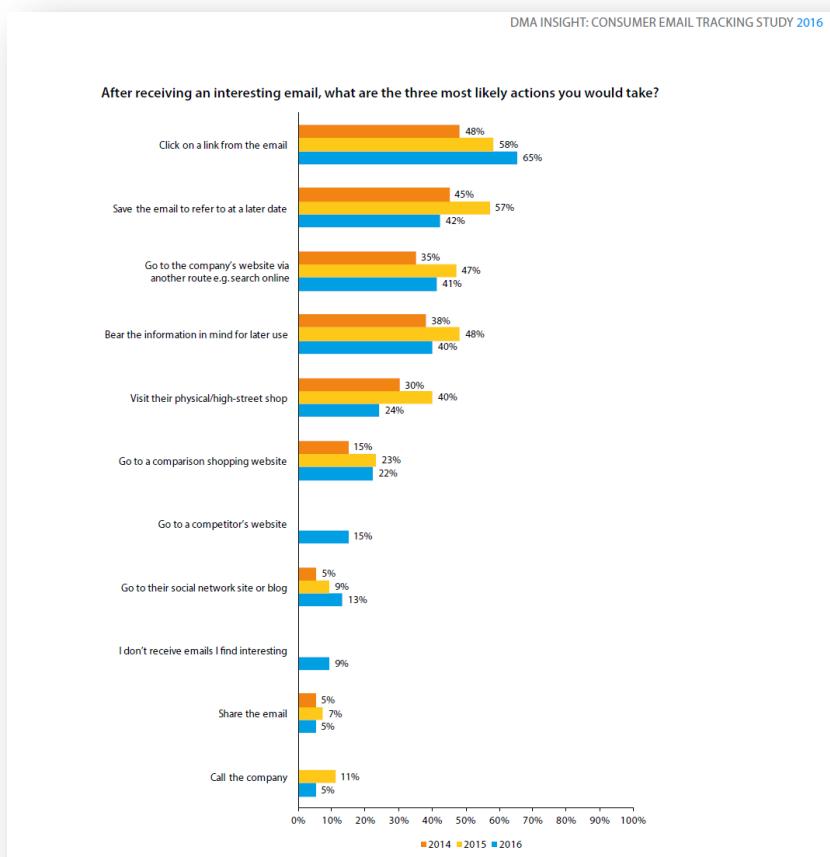Open Yes or No? If Yes – Click, If NO delete/mark spam.

Click Yes or No? If Yes – Convert If NO delete.

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If you think that is complicated you need to remember that every one of those actions is influenced by the emails and Subject Lines you have already sent and will influence those you are yet to send. For e.g. someone gets an email from GAP saying "Great deals on leggings in store and online". They do NOT open the email, but happen to be walking past a GAP store that day and pops in to take a look at them and work out the best size as not enough time to make the purchase. Two days later another email arrives from GAP repeating the message or reminding them the offer is about to expire. The person opens that email then clicks and buys. Throw in things like what device each SL was viewed on, whether they "read" or just "skimmed" the email content and you will see what I mean.

So it is not only possible, but quite likely that an email with a very high open rate will generate less sales (if you take other channels into account) than one with a very low open rate that "nudged" thousands of people who did not open into the store or to visit your site. For further evidence of the nudge effect of email SLs you need go no further than the 2016 DMA Consumer Tracking Report.

DMA INSIGHT: CONSUMER EMAIL TRACKING STUDY 2016

After receiving an interesting email, what are the three most likely actions you would take?

Click on a link from the email — 48%, 58%, 65%
Save the email to refer to at a later date — 45%, 57%, 42%
Go to the company's website via another route e.g. search online — 35%, 47%, 41%
Bear the information in mind for later use — 38%, 48%, 40%
Visit their physical/high-street shop — 30%, 40%, 24%
Go to a comparison shopping website — 15%, 23%, 22%
Go to a competitor's website — 15%
Go to their social network site or blog — 5%, 9%, 13%
I don't receive emails I find interesting — 9%
Share the email — 5%, 7%, 5%
Call the company — 11%, 5%

2014 2015 2016

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As you can see from the chart at least four and arguably five of the six most likely actions taken by consumers as a result of receiving a marketing email do not involve a click. If the Subject Line is informative enough the email may not even have been opened! So if you really are serious about optimising your Subject Lines you have to beyond the opens and clicks immediately generated by your subject line and THAT requires you to (re)consider your attribution model for email.

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"You look at where you're going and where you are and it never makes sense, but then you look back at where you've been and a pattern seems to emerge."
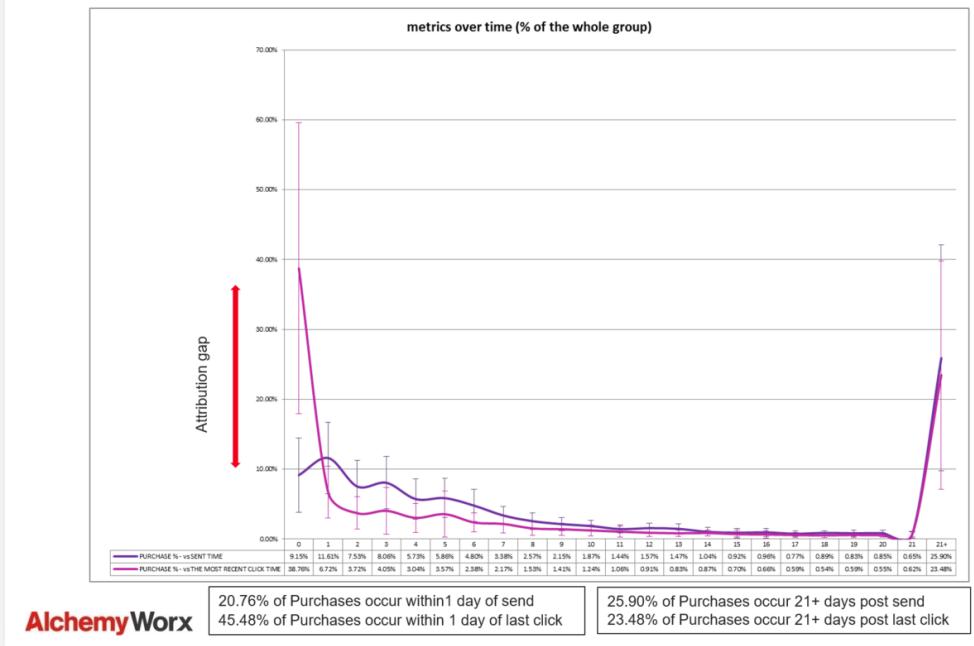
Attribution

If you truly want to optimise your SLs you have to accurately measure and fully understand the true nature of the contribution your email campaigns to the mix.

Timing

When do you stop counting opens or clicks generated by the email? Do you stop attributing after a day, week or when the next email going out? As we showed before, even straight forward and very measurable actions like an open or a click come with a sting in the tail. Open Later Click Later or Buy Later, which begs the question. How late is later? The chart below taken from an attribution audit conducted by Alchemy Worx for a large retailer. We analyzed every campaign sent over a 3 month period with no cut off for email attribution and compared it with a 7 day cut off - the existing attribution model being used.

We found under the 7 day model, 95% of the final total for Opens and 96% of total for Clicks had occurred, but crucially only 51% of revenue generated by those emails got accounted for. 49% of the revenue eventually generated by the email sent during the period did NOT get attributed to email!

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To better understand what was going on we zoomed in on sales. Both lines here represent average daily sales attributed to their campaigns. The darker line represents average sales per day post deployment and the lighter line represents average sales per day from last click. The difference is startling. While 20.76% of sales happen within a day of the email being deployed, 45.48% of sales happen within a day of the last click. This attribution gap highlighted by the red arrow is caused by people clicking and in some cases opening an email a day or more after it was sent. If that doesn't make you sit up then consider this, around 25% of sales came 21 days or more after the email was sent.

"Is it hard?'

Not if you have the right attitudes. Its having the right attitudes that's hard."

In order to truly optimise your SLs you need to measure and understand its impact even when there was no open or click – [what we call the halo effect](#).

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Firstly, it's important to understand the most common attribution models (that determine how sales and conversion are determined) email marketers are using. Typically, the following three measurement criteria are considered.

The type of action – opens, clicks or conversion.

The time frame – do you cut off after days, weeks, or months from send.

Touch – first touch, last touch or any touch.

Most email marketers will choose some combination of the three depending on what works best for their business, typically in relation to its sales cycle, but the popular approach is to focus on tracking conversions via last click.

However, the truth is a click doesn't necessarily tell a marketer anything. Not everyone that clicks through from an email will actually go on further and make an immediate purchase. It also doesn't account for the likelihood the clicker might go on to purchase via another channel at a later date. Clearly, there is value to a SL that is not being taken into consideration if you just focus on clicks or opens for that matter. The question then becomes, how can we measure this?

My initial advice is to run an analysis of revenue from all channels as a starting point. Then deduct the email specific revenue as you currently attribute it (opens and clicks, first or last touch) and break down this new number into days when emails to the majority of your list were and weren't sent out. We have done this for a number of clients. The results consistently show the average daily revenue on days in which email was sent to more than 30% of the list was higher for the non-email channels too. We then looked at the source of the lift in revenue, where the lift was most marked based on last touch and first touch. Email had an impact on every other channel search, both natural and paid, affiliate programs, even social.

So what does this all mean? Essentially, our main conclusion was that email SLs are certainly driving sales in other channels and this is one way to prove it. I must, admittedly caution marketers from defining email and the halo effect too broadly and overstating the revenue generated by email or defining it too narrowly and underestimating. However, if marketers can find the right balance and look at email

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as part of the bigger picture, they'll quickly see that it can work in a capacity similar to broadcast and drive additional revenue in other channels.

This brings us back to the importance of attribution models. If email SLs are driving sales in other channels on and offline, then marketers need to consider that fact and look for a model that takes this into account. If marketers are able to look beyond simple click-based attribution, and make sure they are tracking and analysing sales holistically both online and offline, they will find demonstrating the true value of their email marketing and getting additional funding for testing will become much easier.

"For every fact there is an infinity of hypotheses."

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What to Test: The golden rule and top 10 tips

The golden rule is to plan ahead.

Every Subject Line that goes out the door should be tested. Ideally it will be an ABCD (4 SLs) or more test and never less than ABC (3 SLs). To do that it is important to have a good sense what you want to test and plan ahead. Remember more variables = Better results. A plan that lays out the variables you want to test and when you test them will not only save you time when it comes to writing your subject line – you'll already know your content and how you're going to approach it, it will give you better results.

So what variables should you test?

1. Test extreme lengths

A lot of advice tells you SLs should aim to be around 35 characters and unfortunately most people – whether they know it or not seem be following that advice. Looking at the data we found 63% of subject lines that are sent are between 20 and 65 characters in length. What may come as a surprise to you is [SLs of that length tend to underperform](#)!

Normalized Open Rate: All Subject Lines

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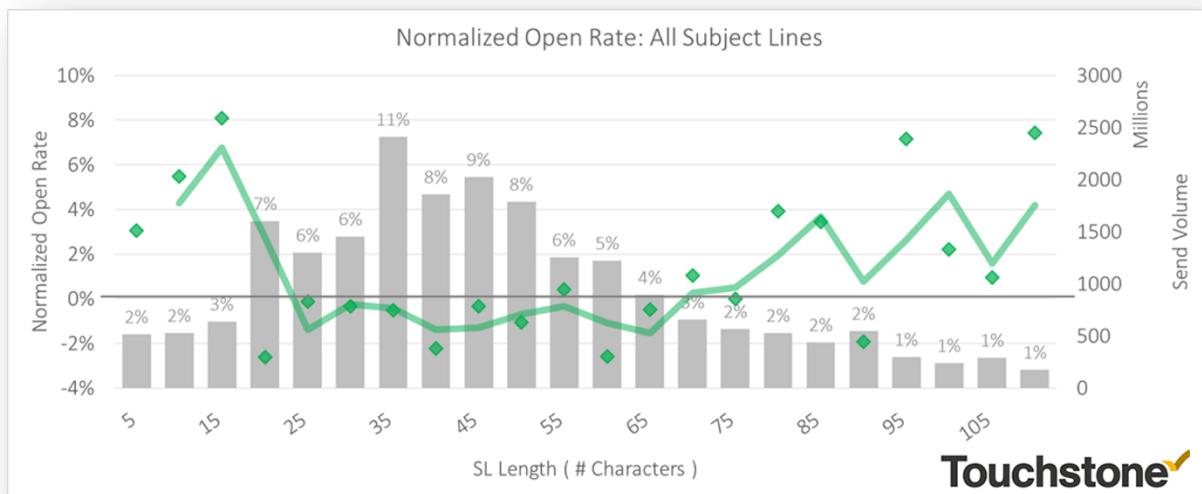
So if your idea of short is 25 characters and long 65 characters your SL length tests will give you no joy.

2. Test CTA's

Although one of the key aspects of successful copywriting is telling readers what they need to do, this is often overlooked in SLs, where your focus is often trying to catch attention rather than drive action. We found for one client that telling subscribers what to do by including a direct CTA helped to boost engagement. So rather than just saying 'Summer Sale' it became 'Summer Sale – take a look at the latest offers in store and online'.

3. Test questions

Using a question instantly makes your SL look and feel very different in the inbox. It also helps you come up with completely new ways of promoting your email content. For example, you might go from 'Save 50% today' to 'New favourite dress? Save 50% today' – a jump that would have been hard to make without the framework of a question.

4. Test original words

We've [written before](#) that using original words in subject lines can boost click rate by 34%, yet less than a third of subject lines feature original words. Try using a thesaurus or taking inspiration from the dictionary definition to change some of your most-used words.

5. Test personalization

While first name personalization is very common now, it can still have an effect if you don't overuse it. Look at available data fields to see what other personalization you can include in the SL – such as surnames, recent purchases or locations including a city name can perform well, for example.

6. Test the impact of external events and iinfluences

We find that being reactive and riding on the back of current events is a great way of boosting response but the lift often doesn't last for long because other brands jump on the bandwagon. The email itself doesn't have to be themed, as long as

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your SL makes sense and doesn't mislead. For example it could be as simple as sending 'Bored of the tennis? Escape with top 10 weekend breaks' during Wimbledon.

7. Test emoji strategically

Emoji can be used in **3 different ways** syntactic (as punctuation), lexical (to replace a word) and illustrative (as a decorative or design element). It's a useful framework that can help you test them effectively and strategically.

8. Test tone of voice

Within a brand voice there is still a lot of room for variation in tone – for example in the difference between a promotional email and a service email. Try mixing them up where appropriate – so rather than 'Hurry - check out our latest events' you might use 'we wanted to let you know'. But remember it's about subtly changing the tone, not misleading customers.

9. Test pronoun use

One of the first things you learn about copywriting is to use 'you' more than 'we'. But 'we' and 'our' can be effective if your customer trusts your brand and sees you as an authority. Try positioning your subject line from both points of view and see which is more effective, for example instead of 'Top picks for you' you might try 'Top picks from our team'.

10. Test Punctuation & Separators

Keep testing and optimizing

The only way to stop your open rate performance from dipping over time is to keep your subject lines FRESH! Once and done testing is does not work. Our subject line tool Touchstone lets you test and optimise hundreds or iterations of your subject line in minutes. So once you know your approach, you can continue to edit and improve it before every single email you send goes out. Below is a screen grab of 10 VERY different subject lines I tested using Touchstone the images below show the results.

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Touchstone has analyzed 1,663 similar subject lines with 84,577,943 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

Taco Cat 🐱

8%	17%	-1%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 142,763 similar subject lines with 20,175,692,072 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

Extra 40% Off All Toys on Gilt Kids (Holiday gifts are here!). Plus, Prada Handbags: Up to 70% Off, Blush Lingerie & Sleepwear and More Start Now

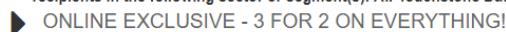| 13%	99%	0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 260,800 similar subject lines with 34,951,600,901 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

OMG. 🙊 FREE Shipping + $10 Off

-49%	-68%	0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 339,574 similar subject lines with 41,280,299,635 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

Hi Dela, 💥 More Currys Christmas deals with £20 bonus Super Points back 💥

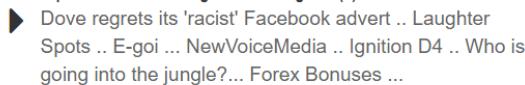| 99%	99%	-0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 134,623 similar subject lines with 13,698,953,107 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE - 3 FOR 2 ON EVERYTHING!

-6%	10%	-0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 32,814 similar subject lines with 2,141,040,440 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

Happy Sunday!

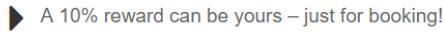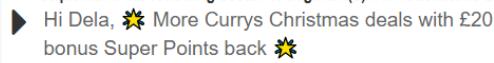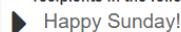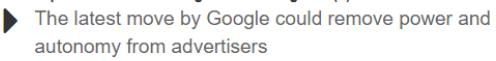| 99%	99%	-2%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 7,799 similar subject lines with 1,123,383,970 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

Dove regrets its 'racist' Facebook advert .. Laughter Spots .. E-goi ... NewVoiceMedia .. Ignition D4 .. Who is going into the jungle?... Forex Bonuses ...

| -20%	-27%	0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 32,154 similar subject lines with 3,340,182,282 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

The latest move by Google could remove power and autonomy from advertisers

20%	53%	0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 110,335 similar subject lines with 12,463,705,613 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

A 10% reward can be yours – just for booking!

-49%	-68%	0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

Touchstone has analyzed 189,770 similar subject lines with 15,299,849,107 recipients in the following sector or segment(s): All Touchstone Data

Hi Dela, 🎉1,000 extra Super Points when you shop!🎉 Our anniversary celebration is still on.
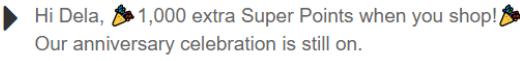
99%	99%	-0%
Opens	Clicks	Delivered

What do these results mean? ❓

About Alchemy Worx

Established in 2001, Alchemy Worx is a global email marketing agency with over 70 employees across three continents. We currently create, manage and deploy over 400 consumer and business emails every month for more than 40 national and international brands including Aviva, Tesco, Sony, Hilton, Allianz, Dixons Carphone and Getty Images.

As well as strategy, ESP solutions, design, content, HTML coding, deployment services, reporting & analytics, we are the leading implementer of Intelligent Automation. This solution automates message delivery, content, analytics and optimization whatever the ESP, allowing our clients to send highly personalized messages to everyone all the time.

We have also developed an industry-leading subject line tool, Touchstone. It uses an ever-expanding database of 21 billion emails to instantly predict open, click and delivery rates before campaigns are sent, which according to Smart Insights, may eliminate the need to A/B test subject lines

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Driving growth through email

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