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Artificial Open Rates [1]

October 20, 2023 by Melanie Jones [2]

Upgrades occur all the time, but it doesn't always alter email marketing practices. Many email client's recent upgrade will enhance privacy for recipients, gradually resulting in inflated, artificial open rates for email marketers. With a key piece of reportable data becoming more unreliable, we must reconsider how success is measured.

What is it?

Brief Summary

Apple released Mail Privacy Protection as part of their recent iOS 15 and Mac OS upgrade. Once Apple Mail users upgrade they will be able to make a choice - Protect Mail Activity or not. If mail activity is protected, open rates on Apple Mail will no longer be reliable.

Mail Privacy Protection is available with Apple Mail on mobile devices (iOS 15) and desktop (Mac OS). This includes non-Apple email addresses (like Gmail or Outlook) when used with Apple Mail.

It's important to note, this example highlights Apple Mail but some other email clients already have a similiar approach, and those that don't will likely follow the trend soon.

How does it technically work?

Today, open rates are tracked by a single pixel image hidden within an email. When an email is opened and the image is downloaded, Marketing Cloud calculates an open. With the new Mail Privacy Protection enabled, images will be downloaded upon delivery. That means Marketing Cloud will calculate an open when a message is delivered, rather than when it is opened.

Spam Filters and Inflated Open Rates

Spam filters may cause an increase in unique open rates through system generated opens. Spam filters have become increasingly sophisticated over time, and bots now check links within incoming emails before allowing them into the recipient's inbox. The bot opens the email in order to access the links it wants to check. If you have a send with high open rates (>90%) with recipients all having the same or similar open times, spam filters are likely the

cause.

Although spam filters can work in different ways, they typically examine sending reputation, email content, and recipient engagement when determining if a message is spam. Learn more about how spam filters work [3].

Currently, there are no technical solutions which allow Marketing Cloud tracking systems to confirm if the Opens or Clicks are human or system generated. Learn more about how to filter anti-spam software opens from Marketing Cloud tracking data [4]. This article contains the query you can run to analyze Open times. You will need to modify line 16 of the query to account for Opens instead of Clicks, depending on the use case.

What's the solution?

Re-think key performance metrics (KPIs)

Take Open Rates For What They Are

For years, open data usefulness has been debated and could already be considered unreliable for numerous reasons. It's difficult to create a strategic plan for recipients who are all indicated as opened (or not opened), given the variety in those interaction. For example:

- An open is not counted when images aren't downloaded, giving a false negative.
- Someone who accidentally opens an email is tracked as an open, essentially giving a false positive.
- Someone could open the email and get annoyed/offended or love the content; both would be tracked the same.

Focus on the click (or another action)

Click data will not be impacted by Apple Mail's privacy change and remains a useful metric. Even better, you can focus on a further action the recipient takes, such as registering for an event or subscribing to a newsletter.

Focusing on the click might require re-working your email. For example:

- If your email doesn't have any opportunities to click, add some. This might be hyperlinked text and/or a button.
    - All your story's content doesn't need to be in the email. Provide a teaser and link to the rest of the story.
- If you have too many opportunities to click, it can be overwhelming for the recipient. Avoid having more than 10 links.

External Articles

- Salesforce: Apple’s Privacy Changes Will Force Marketers To Innovate – Here’s Where To Start [5]
- What's New in Publishing: How publishers need to adapt to Apple iOS 15 email privacy changes

[6]
- How do Spam Filters Work? [7]
- Filter Anti-Spam Software Clicks (Opens) and Clickbots From Marketing Cloud Tracking Data [8]

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