Get Your Message Across: How to Improve Email Delivery and Avoid Spam Filters

Email is an important part of many organizations' communication strategy. Unfortunately, not all emails sent by a nonprofit can be delivered. Read on to find out why this happens, how thedatabank maximizes delivery of our clients' messages, and what more you can do to increase delivery.

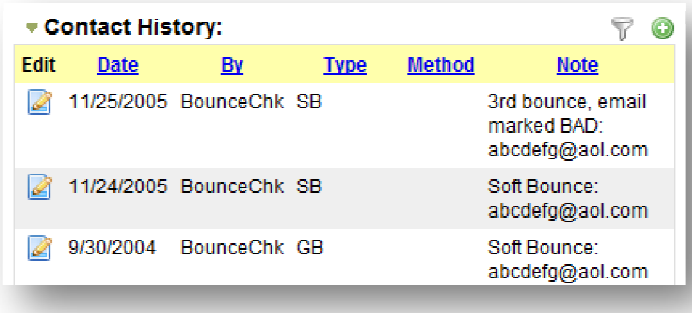
Why are some emails not delivered?

There are a number of things that might interfere. Here are a few of the chief culprits:

- spam filters
- bad addresses
- "flooding" an ISP with too many messages - ISP blocks you
- excessive spam complaints against your email address, domain or server - gets you on a blacklist and therefore blocked

How do I know who got my messages?

Your Databank tracks delivery problems and other message results in the Contact History for each member. A contact note is generated when a message is published using PowerMail or our Action Alert system. An additional contact note is generated if the message is opened (PowerMails only), or if it bounces. By looking at the results of a PowerMail message or Action Alert message, you can easily see how many messages were opened.



Our BounceCheck system catches and records thousands of types of bounces. If the Databank detects a bounce, you will see "BounceChk" in the contact record under "Contacted By." The contact types are defined below.

- Hard Bounce (HB): The email server was unable to deliver your message. (example: 550 Mailbox not found) After one hard bounce, the system marks the address as a "bad email."

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- Soft Bounce (SB): The email server temporarily cannot deliver your message. (example: Mailbox size exceeds quota, Host not found) After three soft bounces of any kind, the system marks the address as a "bad email."
- General Bounce (GB): A type of soft bounce; the message was returned without explanation.
- Transient Bounce (TB): The email server temporarily cannot deliver your message, but it is still trying. (example: Warning: message still undelivered after 4 hours. Will keep trying until message is 2 days old)
- Mail Block (MB): Notification that the recipient's email server is blocking email from your server. (example: 554 Client host rejected)

Automatic responses from the recipient such as "Out of Office" or "On Vacation" are ignored by the system.

Keep in mind there may still be messages that are never viewed, yet a bounce is not recorded. That may be because the recipient never opened the message, or because a spam filter blocked the message.

How does a message get marked as spam?

Anti-spam software may exist at several levels, such as your ISP, mail server, and individual mail program.

Most spam filters examine an email message and assign points based on the content of the message. The more points the message has, the more likely it is to be blocked.

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Here are some examples of what will rack up points:

- Words like free, diet, sex, etc.
- Subject lines with excessive punctuation (!!!) or words in ALL CAPS
- Lots of colored text
- Email addresses in the "from" field that do not actually exist
- Large messages (over 40K)
- Messages that are mostly images with little or no text

This point system was devised based on characteristics that spam messages tend to have. Unfortunately, many non-spam messages - including yours - can have these same characteristics. Anti-spam devices do produce false positives.

Here are some other cases that can trigger a spam filter:

- Message sent to a large distribution list (not allowed in The Databank; individual message is sent to each recipient)
- Attachments (not allowed in The Databank)

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- There are literally thousands of other rules that can be used to accumulate points for the spam score. Different email administrators apply rules based on their own experiences, the needs of their organizations, and industry standards.

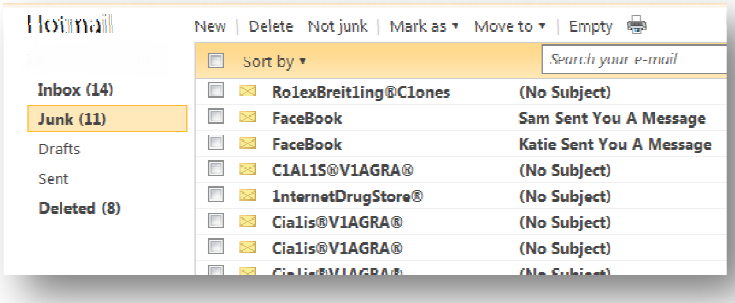
How does thedatabank maximize delivery?

At thedatabank, we take our reputation as an email service provider very seriously. Thedatabank regularly scans over 100 different blacklists to be sure our servers are not listed as senders of spam. We are whitelisted with AOL. We aggressively follow up on any spam complaints with customers and ISPs.

thedatabank has a no tolerance anti-spam policy. Only permission based email messages are allowed.

Here are a few more details on what we're doing at thedatabank to make sure your emails get past the spam filters.

- Most important, we prevent spam from being sent through our systems, both by having a no-tolerance spam policy for customers and by providing tools to keep our customers in compliance with the CAN-SPAM law. You may read our policy here: http://www.thedatabank.com/pubdw/antispam.html.
- The templates that are available with PowerMail are designed to earn a minimum number of points. Although they look sophisticated, the HTML code is kept as simple as possible.
- We do not allow attachments, and our email system handles images in a way that minimizes the size of each message.
- We limit the number of messages per minute we send to major ISPs, to reduce the chance that they will think we are flooding them.
- We monitor our email system in order to head off problems before they occur.
- Our email servers are secure and have no open relays.
- Our servers are not listed on SpamCop.net, mail-abuse.com, or any other spammer databases we've seen. We regularly test our servers against 275 such blacklists, and have never been listed on any of them.



- Several providers (AOL, Comcast, Juno, NetZero) send thedatabank an email every time one of their members marks an email as spam. thedatabank automatically unsubscribes these people. This keeps the number of spam complaints down. We will pursue this capability with other ISPs who offer it.

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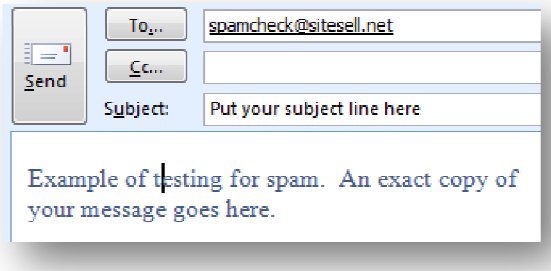
- All our emails include the List-Unsubscribe header. This is a "good guy" feature that makes it easy for email programs to provide an Unsubscribe button in their program.

What can I do?

You work hard to formulate your message and send it to a carefully selected group of supporters. Receiving a bounce notification is the last thing you want! Here are some tips for getting your emails through:

- Ask your recipients to add your sending address (e.g., info@mydomain.com) to their address book. You may also request that they add your domain (e.g., mydomain.com) to their list of approved senders (whitelist).
- Write subject lines that make it obvious you are sending a legitimate, opt-in email. For example, use the word "newsletter" in the subject line - it may reduce your spam score!
- Get to the point. Concise messages are less likely to get blocked. Plus, short messages go out faster, because they take less time for the server to process. Instead of rambling on, include a link where readers can see the full story, take action, or fill out a form.and you will have an opportunity to engage them more fully through your web site.



- Use restraint with colored text. Using a limited palette - black and one or two accent colors - will not only reduce your number of points, it will also make your emails look more professional. A limited number of fonts (I suggest 1 or 2) is also helpful.
- Include your organization's name and address in every bulk email message, as required under the CAN-SPAM act.
- Test your emails for spam indicators before publishing them, by sending a test message to sales-spamcheck@sitesell.net. In the subject line, type TEST (in all caps) followed by the subject you want to use. Spam Assassin will tell you how many points your message gets. You can experiment until you get the desired number of points. This doesn't guarantee you'll pass every ISP's spam filters, or every recipient's spam filters, but it should do a good job of alerting you to messages that have a high potential for being flagged as spam.

By choosing The Databank, you have already taken a big step toward maximizing the delivery of your email messages. By carefully selecting your list and crafting your message, you can improve delivery even more. Best wishes!

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