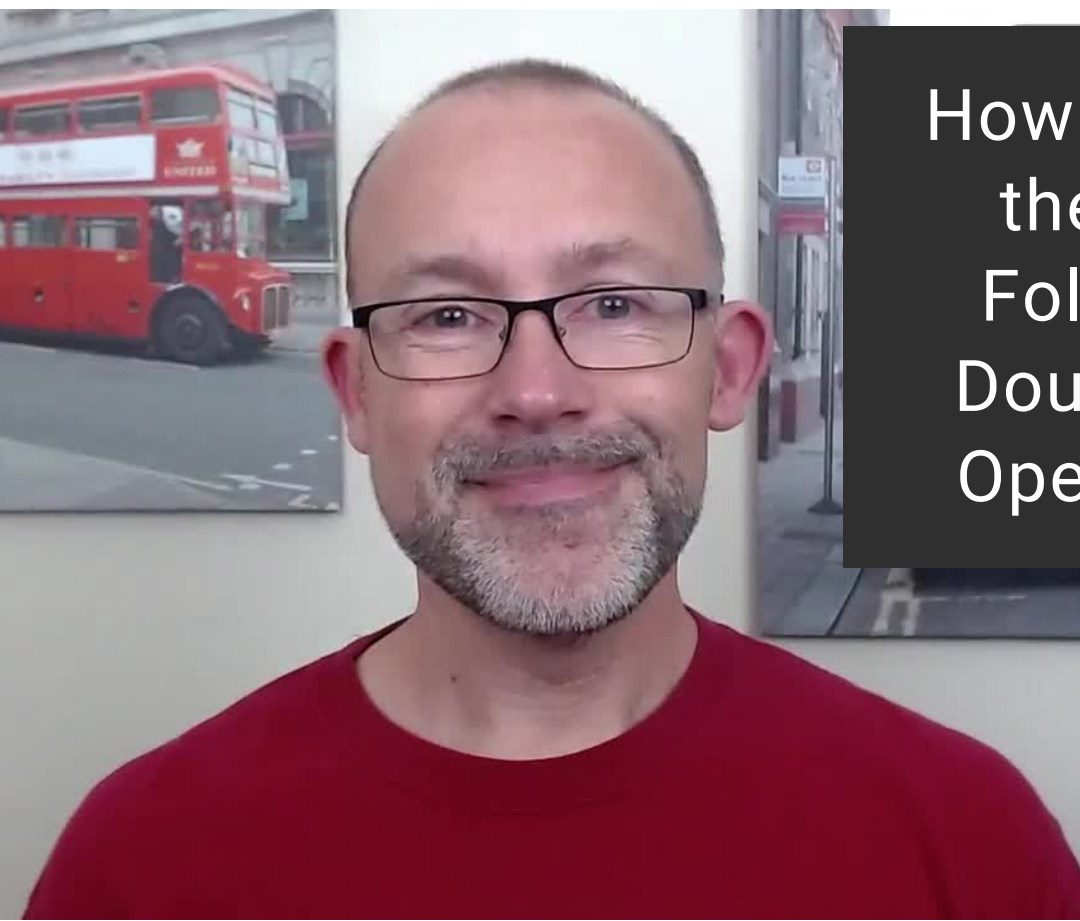


# The RACE Method Checklist



How To Avoid  
the Spam  
Folder and  
Double Your  
Open Rates

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**DELIVERABILITY  
DASHBOARD**

# How To Avoid the Spam Folder and Double Your Open Rates

If you've seen me introduce any of my presentations on email deliverability, you might have heard me say:

“It doesn't matter how big your list is or how good your emails are if people aren't seeing them.

It doesn't matter if you have the best offer in the world with the best possible email copy, if people don't even get the chance to open your emails.

People have a good reason to worry that their emails are ending up in the spam folder.

I don't know a single person who hasn't been told by someone "I found your email in my spam folder" at some time or another.

The good news is that, just because the email goes to one person's spam folder doesn't mean it's going to spam for everyone else.

And there are plenty of things you can do to stack the odds in your favour and make sure that as many of your emails as possible will be delivered to the inbox.

I've often been asked for a checklist that summarises the most important points of the RACE method that I introduce in my presentations. Until now, I hadn't written one. So this article is putting that right.

# Introducing The RACE Method

## The RACE Method

Firstly, I'll remind you of the four pillars of deliverability that can all affect whether or not the emails you send will reach the inbox, or whether they'll be confined to the spam folder. They spell out the word RACE, which stands for:

**R** - Reputation  
**A** - Authentication  
**C** - Content  
**E** - Engagement

## About The Checklist

In this checklist, I'll cover the most important aspects of the RACE Method that'll help you maximise the chances of your emails arriving in your audience's inboxes.

If you follow everything covered by this checklist, you'll have more people opening more of your emails, getting your message, and taking up more of your offers.

In short, follow this checklist and you'll **be heard** more often, by more of your audience.

Don't have time to read the whole checklist? Each point is summarised on the next page but make sure you don't miss the details in the **Engagement** section at the very end of this article - that's where the most important tips are.

# Checklist Summary

## Reputation

- Audience Quality:** Has everyone on your list given explicit permission for you to email them?
- Domain Reputation:** Are you listed on any block lists?
- Spam Traps:** Have you made sure you've eliminated all spam traps from your mailing list?
- Unauthorised Opt-Ins:** Are you protecting against spam-bots?

## Authentication

- Signing Your Emails:** Are you using DKIM to digitally sign emails from every platform you use?
- Who You Trust:** Are you using SPF to list all the email providers you trust to send your emails?
- When Authentication Fails:** Are you using DMARC to protect from spoofed emails?

## Content

- Words:** It's not just what you say, it's the way that you say it.
- Images:** Are you using too many images?
- Links:** The fewer the better! And, be careful what you link to.
- Frequency:** Send emails to your engaged contacts as often as you can.

## Engagement

- Be Ruthless:** Only send emails to contacts who have engaged in the last 30-90 days.
- Let Them Go:** Any contacts older than 30 days who've never opened anything? Ditch 'em now!
- Manage New Contacts:** Remove new contacts that haven't engaged in the first 14 days.
- Encourage Replies:** Where appropriate, ask your audience to reply to you.
- Re-engage:** Add contacts to re-engagement campaigns at 30 and 90 days of unengagement.
- Most importantly:** Check Your Email Health Score for free at <https://deliverabilitydashboard.com>

# Reputation

First up, let's look at reputation. If your sending reputation is damaged, the chances are that most of your emails will end up in the spam folder.



## **Audience Quality: Has everyone on your list given explicit permission for you to email them?**

If not, stop mailing them right now! Buying lists or, worse, scraping email addresses from the Internet, is a huge no-no. Don't do it. You'll end up in Google Jail before you can say "spam trap" (and see below about that...)



## **Domain Reputation: Are you listed on any block lists?**

If you've not been 100% following best practices, your sending domain could be on a block list. Check out Hetrix Tools (<https://hetrixtools.com>) and MX Toolbox (<https://mxtoolbox.com/blacklists.aspx>) to make sure your domain isn't listed.



## **Spam Traps: Have you made sure you've eliminated all spam traps from your mailing list?**

Sending emails to spam trap addresses is the quickest way to trash your domain reputation. Use [Klean13](#) to scrub your list and remove all toxic email addresses. We have a free integration in [Deliverability Dashboard](#) to make this quick and easy.



## **Unauthorised Opt-Ins: Are you protecting against spam-bots?**

From time to time, your website may be targeted by malicious spam-bots (often based in Russia, but it's a global menace) intending to damage your reputation. They automatically fill out your web forms using real email addresses of people who have never heard of you and don't want your emails. When they receive your emails, they'll probably report you for spam.

Luckily, you can kill this problem dead using [SpamKill](#), the best perimeter defence solution I've seen. (<https://spamkill.co>)

# Authentication

Getting your authentication right is vital. If you don't, you're risking many of your emails going to spam, even if you're doing everything else right.

All three authentication methods listed below can only be set up if you have access to your DNS Control Panel, which you normally find in your Web Hosting or your Domain Hosting control panels.

If you need help setting your authentication up, we offer a Done For You Authentication service that will take care of everything for a one-off cost.



## Signing Your Emails: Are you using DKIM to digitally sign emails from every platform you use?

It's very easy to send emails from any address you like, even if you don't own the domain. Signing your emails using DKIM (Domain Keys Identified Mail) proves that you are a legitimate sender and that the email really came from you.

DKIM has to be set up inside each email platform that you use, so we can't go into too much detail here. Just search for "Email Authentication" or "DKIM" in the help instructions for each system you use.

Bonus Tip: Don't just set up DKIM on your email marketing platform; make sure that emails sent from your day-to-day mailbox provider, such as GSuite or Microsoft 365 are also signed using DKIM, as well as any other platform you send email from.



## Who You Trust: Are you using SPF to list all the email providers you trust to send your emails?

If you don't have SPF (Sender Policy Framework) set up correctly, there's a strong risk your emails could be rejected completely or end up in the spam folder because they don't recognise your email marketing platform as a trusted sender.

If you're getting particularly low open rates with Microsoft (Office365, hotmail etc.), this could be why.

Again, make sure that every email platform you use is listed, and only ever have one SPF record set up! Having two SPF records is as bad as not having anything set up at all.

If you need to know how to set up SPF, check out this guide: <https://dmarcian.com/create-spf-record/> and note that you probably won't need to include any IP addresses; focus on the "include" statements that you'll need to add, normally one "include" statement for each email platform you send from.

Once you've set up your SPF record, check it by going to <https://dmarcian.com/spf-survey/>



## When Authentication Fails: Are you using DMARC to protect from spoofed emails?

DMARC (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting & Conformance) specifies what mailbox providers should do when they receive an email from you that hasn't passed any other form of authentication.

Be careful - get DMARC wrong and all your emails might end up going to spam. But set it up correctly and it'll reinforce that you're a legitimate sender and make sure that other people can't send emails from you.

If you need help setting up your DMARC record, use the wizard at <https://dmarcian.com/dmarc-record-wizard/> and, as a minimum, accept all the defaults you're offered and leave the "Aggregate Reports" option empty.

Once you've set up your DMARC record, check it by going to <https://dmarcian.com/dmarc-inspector/>

## Content

The look and feel of your emails still plays a very important part in whether your email will land in the spam folder rather than the inbox. Here's a nice handy acronym to help you remember what's important with content: it spells out the name **WILF**.

## Words: It's not just what you say, it's the way that you say it.

"Spammy" words in emails isn't as much of an issue as it once was, but you should still avoid words that are blatant red flags typically used in spam or phishing messages - extreme examples include "viagra" or, in the current pandemic, "covid" or "coronavirus".

Rather than worrying about individual words, we'd recommend that you just focus on writing authentic emails that sound like you and are well-written. "Direct response" types of mails with poor grammar etc. won't help your cause though (if you don't know what this means, you probably don't need to worry about this). And don't send War and Peace type messages when you can convey the same message briefly and concisely. You can always link through to a web page with more content.

An extra bonus - choose your subject lines carefully and make sure you use the "Preview Text" option that most email platforms offer to build curiosity and get people more likely to want to open your emails.

## **Images: Are you using too many images?**

The more images in your email, the more likely it is to be seen as a promotion, or even spam. It's best to limit your emails to just one or two images - ideally just a "feature" image in the body of your email, plus a signature image. Definitely ditch all those images with social media icons and similar... they really won't be doing you any favours.

## **Links: The fewer the better! And, be careful what you link to.**

First of all, anything more than three links in an email will massively increase your chances of ending up in the Promotions tab, if not the spam folder. So keep the number of links down. Remember the "Unsubscribe" link counts as one of those links, and if you repeat the same link more than once, each one counts as a unique link.

Secondly, only link to domains that aren't on a block list somewhere. Use the tools shown in "Reputation" above to make sure you're not linking to a site with a bad reputation. One hint: social media sites and YouTube often appear (temporarily) on block lists. Never use link shorteners such as **bit.ly**, because spammers use them too!

Thirdly, remember that any text containing a domain name is treated similarly to a link. If your email content mentions any domain or website that's on a block list, you could well still end up in the spam folder.

## **Frequency: Send emails to your engaged contacts as often as you can.**

How often you send emails to your engaged audience can make a huge difference. It's a waste of time sending emails to your unengaged audience (see Engagement below), but the more often you can send emails to people who've opened emails recently, the greater your chances are of getting your emails seen by more people

Think about this for a moment... if you send emails that have an average 35% open rate, it won't be the same 35% who open every time. The more emails you send, the greater the "scatter effect" - I've written a separate blog article about this. In tests, we've seen that a series of 12 emails can reach as much as 85% of an engaged audience.

If you send one email per month, it'll take a whole year to reach most of your list (and many will have lost interest by then). We'd recommend you send two emails a week to your engaged audience - it'll only take 6 weeks to reach the same number of people.



# Engagement

Although mailbox providers look for lots of different signs of engagement, the only metrics we normally have visibility of in our email marketing platforms are whether an email was opened, or clicked.

Most email platforms let you search for how recently a contact has engaged with you, but it can be a cumbersome process to do this on a regular basis.

Our **Deliverability Dashboard** tools make it super easy to monitor how well you're managing your engagement, and **Deliverability Defender** helps you quickly and reliably identify your engaged and unengaged contacts on a daily basis so you'll always send the right emails to the right people.

Here are the most important things that will help you improve your Engagement and hence improve your Domain Reputation.

## **Be Ruthless: Only send emails to contacts who have engaged in the last 30-90 days.**

To maximise your domain reputation, don't send any mails to people in your audience who haven't opened anything from you in the last 90 days.

The majority of your emails should only be sent to contacts who have opened something in the last 30 days, plus anyone who has recently opted in to your email list. Then, occasionally, you should send an email to the contacts that have opened something between 30 and 90 days ago.

Let's say you send out content emails twice a week. Our suggestion would be to restrict most of your content emails only to the people who have opened something in the last 30 days; then send two emails per month to the people who have opened something between 30 and 90 days ago.

It goes without saying that there's little point sending "sales" or "offer" emails to people who haven't engaged in the last month - the chances of them opening one of your emails is much lower and, if they've not read your content recently, they'll be less likely to take your offer up even if they do open the email.

## **Let Them Go: Any contacts older than 30 days who've never opened anything? Ditch 'em now!**

This should be a no-brainer. One definition of insanity is "doing the same thing and expecting different results". If they didn't open anything from you in the first 30 days, they almost certainly won't open anything in the future either. Watch the Frozen movie and "Let it Go"...

## **Manage Those New Contacts: Get rid of new contacts that haven't opened anything in the first 14 days.**

Think about this for a second... the time when someone is most likely to open one of your emails is immediately after they've signed up to your email list. If they don't open anything in those first 14 days, here's what you need to do.

Firstly, make sure your initial messages are appropriate to what they've signed up for and are compelling enough that they'll want to open them. If you haven't already got a process in place to send a series of welcome messages to new contacts, now is the time to do so.

Secondly, make sure the follow-up you do have in place is effective and that you're chasing them if they don't open those first couple of emails.

Finally, once your initial emails are as good as they can be and you're following up as well as you can, consider removing anyone from your database who hasn't engaged in the first 14 days, and certainly no later than the first 30 days.

## **Encourage Replies: Where appropriate, ask your audience to reply to you.**

Replying to an email is one of the best signs of engagement that mailbox providers are looking for. From time to time, it's worth encouraging your audience to reply to you - but be careful! If you ask for replies, make sure you acknowledge the people who reply and have a process in place to follow up with them. Otherwise your reputation could be hurt when people feel ignored.

## **Re-engage: When contacts reach 30 and then 90 days unengaged, put them through a re-engagement campaign.**

This one can make all the difference. When it gets to 30 days since a contact last opened an email from you, send them a short series of "tickle" emails to wake them back up. Make sure it's your best content - something that's really compelling that they're more likely to open.

Then, when they get to 90 days of no engagement, send them some "last chance" re-engagement emails. Start with your best content, then maybe follow up with a quick question you can ask (either get them to reply, or to click a link to answer a multiple-choice question) and finally, send a "goodbye" email saying you're going to unsubscribe them unless they click on the link in the email.



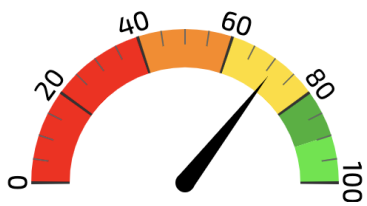
## Most importantly: Check Your Email Health Score

Go to <https://deliverabilitydashboard.com/> and sign up for our Free Email Health Check.

It'll tell you how well you're managing your engagement right now and give you a simple score between 0 and 100, along with hints and tips to improve your engagement and hence your domain reputation and hence your email performance!

The Free Email Health Check is quick and easy to understand:

Your Email Health Score is 71 out of 100 - This is Fair.



#### Key to Scores:

- 0+ Poor: Your sending reputation is at risk!
- 40+ Not Great: You need to take action
- 60+ Fair: Can still be improved
- 80+ Good: Keep up the good work
- 90+ Excellent: You're winning at email

This Email Health Score was last updated 15 hours ago

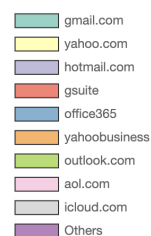
Deliverability Dashboard also includes many other tools and reports:



Audience Analysis: Marketable Contacts Only

Domain	Count	Percentage
All Contacts	63688	100.0%
gmail.com	36150	56.8%
yahoo.com	5759	9.0%
hotmail.com	5718	9.0%
gsuite	3485	5.5%
office365	1408	2.2%
yaooobusiness	1114	1.7%
outlook.com	998	1.6%
aol.com	952	1.5%
icloud.com	934	1.5%
Others	7170	11.3%

Breakdown of Domains



# Next Steps

There's plenty of advice in this checklist. You should be able to put most of it into practice without much help, but we offer lots of help and support if you need.

Firstly, make sure you've checked out **Deliverability Dashboard**. It's our online portal giving you access to reports and tools that help you measure your Email Health Score and dig right down into the facts and figures you need to see to understand how well you're managing your engagement.

**Deliverability Defender** is our premium tool that sits inside the Dashboard and makes it super easy to identify your engaged contacts so you're only sending the right emails to the right people at the right time.

If you found this checklist useful and would like to learn more about the art and science of reaching the inbox, you might like to check out our **Email Deliverability Training Course**, which is a recording of the 5-day workshop we ran in July 2020.

Our exclusive **Inner Circle** group gives you direct access to our email deliverability experts: Adrian Savage, Evan Samurin and Mark Penney. You get access to a **private Facebook Group** where you can post questions and share hints and tips with other members, and join **one-hour group Q&A calls** that are held twice per month.

If you'd like us to do the hard work for you, our **Email Authentication** and **List Scrubbing** services are great ways to make sure the best possible foundations are in place for your email sending.

We also offer personalised **Email Deliverability Audits** that provide a detailed analysis of your email performance, offering a comprehensive set of recommendations that will help you maximise your chances of getting as many emails as possible into the inbox.

Finally, if you'd really like the personal touch, we offer **One-on-One Consulting and Implementation** services where we'll work with you to take care of as many aspects of your email deliverability as possible.

If you'd like to learn more about any of these services, check out the links above or get in touch with the team by sending an email to **support@deliverabilitydashboard.com** and we'll be happy to help you choose the right products and services that will be best for you.