GRANICUS

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO
BOOSTING
ENGAGEMENT RATE

Introduction

An important question government communicators need to ask themselves is, "How do I know if my engagement strategy is working? "A good way to tell is by measuring and monitoring your digital engagement metrics, and then using those metrics to compare your strategy against your peers'.

That's why Granicus created the *2017 Benchmark Report*, which contains data from over 3,000 public-sector organizations across the U.S. and the U.K. We published this one-of-a-kind report to help organizations study and measure their own engagement rates, but also to identify best practices for continuous improvement.

One of the metrics that is most often discussed in response to the Benchmark Report is engagement rate. While it's one of the most important metrics to monitor, engagement rate is also one of the hardest digital metrics to clearly define. In the Granicus Benchmark Report, engagement rate is defined as the metric that aggregates click and open rates over a period of 90 days, then is divided by the total number of emails sent to an audience. In other words, engagement rate is measuring your most active participants over a three-month period.

The 2017 Benchmark Report identifies the median engagement rate as 45 percent. Top performers (top 20 percent) will see an engagement rate of 60 percent or more (*see the full infographic of metrics here*).

Are you not seeing this level of engagement, or are you looking for best practices to become a top performer? We've dedicated this step-by-step guide to help you increase your engagement rate over time.

01

Build an Authentic Audience

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? The first step in any successful digital engagement strategy is to *build an authentic audience*. The term "authentic" in this case refers to the number of citizens who raise their hand, ask to hear from you and opt in to receive your messages. In other words, they're receiving information from your organization by choice. This includes citizens who subscribe to your emails, opt in to receive text messages or come to your website for more information.

When you provide your audience a choice to connect with you, it can be empowering, leading to real and lasting change through citizen involvement at all levels of government.

Best Practices for Increasing Your Authentic Audience

TRY AN OVERLAY: These are boxes that *appear on the homepage of a website* asking new visitors for their email address before they can view the rest of the page. Try a casual request for their email address, such as, "Want to stay in touch with us? Enter your email here." Overlays have also been known to increase subscriber rates by 144 percent, according to the *2017 Benchmark Report*.

LEVERAGE THE GOVDELIVERY NETWORK: Consisting of over 150 million authentically engaged citizens, the GovDelivery Network uses a cross-promotional model to encourage subscribers to sign up for multiple topics from various organizations. For more information on the GovDelivery Network, visit the *Granicus website*.

ALWAYS USE CALLS TO ACTION: When sending an email asking for citizens to sign up or participate in an event of some kind, make sure you have a clear call to action. This is something actionable for readers to engage with, whether it's asking them to sign up for an event, download a document or even just a link where they can learn more about what you've sent them. Looking for inspiration? *Check out these 5 examples of awesome public-sector emails*.

02
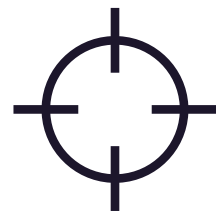
Segment Your Audience

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? While there may be some emails that apply to your entire email audience, it should be a rare occurrence. *Segmenting your audience* is all about reducing the overall pool of subscribers into more targeted groups in order to connect more strategically. Segmenting will also keep unsubscribe rates lower because it will mean more people receive information that's relevant to them.

If you are already segmenting your audience but are still seeing low engagement, it might be a worthwhile exercise to do an audit of your topics. It might be that you are offering too many topic options, or not enough. For cleaning up your topics list, *visit this blog on sleepy topics*.

Best Practices for
Segmenting Your Audience

DEMOGRAPHICS (ZIP/POSTAL CODE, GENDER, AGE): Separating your audience geographically could help your engagement rates in a very noticeable way. Imagine sending urgent weather notifications to only the impacted areas, or informing neighbors that a new workforce center is opening down the street or that open enrollment is now available for a certain age group. These highly targeted messages are more impactful and have stronger results than sending general information to a broad audience.

START WITH THREE PERSONAS: If segmenting by demographics isn't an option, start a practice of building personas of audience members that can help you target your messaging. A great first step is to start by grouping your audience into three buckets. For example, if your organization focuses on economic development, your three personas might be business leaders, local government stakeholders and job-seekers. This practice can you help you group your content and hone your messaging.

IDENTIFY NEW OR DIFFERENT TOUCHPOINTS: While we know that email communication has the greatest return on investment for marketers and is highly effective for large audiences, you may want to consider new avenues for connecting. By looking at key demographics of your audience and building off of personas, you might learn that a majority of your audience is using text messaging more than email. By trying different platforms, you'll be able to see what works best.

03

Send Timely and Relevent Content

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? Before sending an email, put yourself in your audience's shoes. Why did they sign up? What kind of information do they want from you? How much do you know about them? By analyzing your answers to these questions, you can start to *form a content strategy*.

Content marketers in the public sector send communications for one of the following reasons: to raise awareness for a new program or service, to engage citizens in a public process (such as voting or public meetings), and to help change or guide citizen behavior over time.

When sending information, it's helpful to keep these reasons in mind. Make sure your content is relevant to your audience, and that it's being sent out in a timely manner. For example, by waiting to send meeting minutes to attendees six months after the meeting has taken place, you may risk alienating a large portion of your audience due to unreliability.

Best Practices for Sending Timely and Relevant Content

CREATE EVERGREEN CONTENT: This type of communication is considered sustainable, lasting or consistently relevant. *Evergreen content* is not necessarily tied to an event or trend; it stands alone and can be useful long past when it's published. For example, it could be a list of tips for keeping your home safe, or a guide to help citizens find their way around a new community. Keep these on hand for periodic sending.

PREPARE WITH STRONG TEMPLATES: The GovDelivery Communications Cloud Advanced Bulletin Editor has a number of strong templates that are ready to use right away, but it also is a good practice to prepare custom templates ahead of time so that you're ready to connect with your audience when the timeline is short. For inspiration on creating strong templates based on your segmented lists, here are *5 examples of awesome emails* created by using the Advanced Bulletin Editor.

REUSE OLD CONTENT: Don't be afraid to send certain content again, especially if it's performed well in the past. It's acceptable to *repurpose old content* as long as you update it with new dates or information. Don't miss an opportunity to connect with your audience.

04
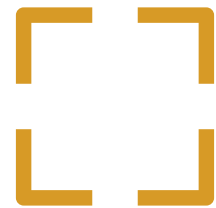
Maximize the Power of Your Email

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? Most of us aren't graphic designers or expert marketers, but it's still easy to put together a strong email that will catch readers' eye and keep them interested. Audiences — especially over digital platforms — tend to be more visual, and will gravitate toward things that are aesthetically pleasing. Plus, using strong calls to action and plain language can drastically impact your click and open rates over time.

Best Practices for Maximizing the Power of Your Email

INCORPORATE STRONG IMAGERY: While it may be tempting, it isn't necessarily effective to blast your audience with a wall of text via email. Most of them will likely open it, glance at the text and decide they don't have time. Whenever possible, incorporate images to break up the text and help your reader's eye travel down the page.

KEEP IT SIMPLE: You might be feeling inspired now, and that's great! But be careful not to overwhelm your audience with too much design. Don't overthink it. You only have eight seconds to grab your reader's attention, so make sure you at least have the four key ingredients to a strong email: *a strong subject line*, a powerful image, a brief summary of the purpose of your email and a call to action.

USE PLAIN LANGUAGE: Using plain language — or wording that your audience can understand the first time they read it — is an incredibly powerful tool. Not only has it been proven to reduce confusion and increase customer service standards, but plain language has also been proven to drive greater engagement over time. Download the *Plain Language Playbook* to see results from organizations that have implemented plain language.

05

A/B Test to Find Out What Works Best

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? If you've ever wanted to get a better idea of why more people aren't engaging with your emails, *A/B testing can provide valuable insight*. A/B testing is where you compare two variables for the optimal impact. This allows you to try sending two slightly different emails to similar audiences to see which one performs better in terms of open and click rates. By measuring this data, you gain greater visibility into how well your messages impact your target audience. It helps answer who cares about your messages, what topics interest your subscribers, what techniques are most effective in generating a response, and most importantly, what elements of your communications strategy drive the most engagement.

Best Practices for
A/B Testing

START SMALL: If you're preparing for a large email send — perhaps to your entire list — it's a good idea to try *A/B testing* on smaller groups beforehand. You could practice doing a 10/10/80 test, where you send one version of your email to 10 percent of your list, then another version of your email to another random 10 percent, and the winner is sent to the remaining 80 percent of your audience. This way, you get a better idea of what works before your big email send.

PRACTICE TESTING REGULARLY: Like anything, practice makes perfect. The more you try A/B testing and make it a regular part of your communications efforts, the more sophisticated your emails will be over time. Every email should give you a valuable piece of insight, and when you continue to build on lessons learned, you'll be on your way to becoming an expert communicator.

CONSIDER AUTOMATION: *Advanced A/B testing* with the Advanced Package for Communications Cloud allows for side-by-side comparisons so you can better optimize your content and maximize impact. A few ideas for things to test with the Advanced Package:

- ☑ **Subject lines**
- ☑ **Message content**
- ☑ **Images or video use**
- ☑ **Timing of email (morning versus evening, Monday versus Friday)**

Conclusion

The *2017 Benchmark Report* was created to help organizations use digital engagement metrics to gain valuable insight into their strategy, but it is only one piece of the puzzle. While the solutions for lower engagement might be more clear for some organizations, it might take months for others to test, learn and apply new strategies in order to make an impact.

It's also important to remember that engagement rate is just one metric.

What's most valuable at the end of every day is how our communication efforts are impacting overall objects — whether that's informing veterans of their benefits, or sending a timely follow-up of city council meeting minutes. These outcomes are what we're all striving for, and we know that digital communication can provide impactful results when taking a strategic approach and applying best practices.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO CONNECT?
Would you like to connect with Granicus on ways to leverage best practices to enhance your digital communications? Contact us at *info@granicus.com*.

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