

# Design Strategies in B2B Email Marketing: A Study on Existing Customers

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# **Design Strategies in B2B Email Marketing: A Study on Existing Customers**

## **Abstract:**

This study investigates the role of design features in B2B customer marketing email campaigns targeted at existing customers . Specifically, we aim to identify the design elements that influence customers' repeat purchase intent. In this context, call-to-action (CTA) links serve as an effective means of presenting the most critical actionable information and guiding customers toward the desired action. We use marketing and website analytics data from 70 B2B customer marketing emails, consisting of 184.213 customer contacts. Our findings suggest that lengthier marketing emails with higher character count reduce the number of CTA clicks, while the number of links in the marketing email increases the CTA clicks. The multimedia elements, such as images, videos, and audio files embedded in the email seem not to influence CTA clicks. The results recommend that B2B marketing managers should minimize the textual length and enrich the content with links to get the maximum number of CTA clicks on email marketing messages.

*Keywords: B2B email marketing, email design, repeat purchase intent*

*Track: Business-To-Business Marketing & Supply Chain Management*

## 1. Introduction

Even today email marketing stands out as one of the most trusted, cost-effective, and efficient marketing channels for B2B firms. A survey conducted in 2023 revealed that 25 percent of marketers identified email marketing as their most effective marketing channel (Mailmodo, 2024). Email remains the main way of communicating with and marketing to existing customers (Bailyn, 2022). This is not surprising, as email marketing allows firms to reach a targeted audience with personalized messages, fostering stronger customer relationships, and driving conversions (Kumar, 2021). According to HubSpot (2023), one in three marketers currently utilize email marketing, and 87 percent intend to either maintain or increase their investment in this channel.

The existing customer relationship with the companies allows B2B firms to utilize email marketing in various ways (Russo et al., 2017). B2B firms can tailor email campaigns to enhance customer engagement and foster long-term business interactions. Research has explored various dimensions of email marketing, including design considerations (Bonfrer & Drèze, 2009), email customization (Algesheimer et al., 2010), and the role of emails in customer relationship management (Zhang et al., 2017). Kumar (2021) studies the B2C consumer email newsletters and their effect on purchase behavior. However, there is a lack of research when it comes to how existing B2B customers interact with email marketing. Marketing strategies targeting existing B2B customers emphasize fostering repeat purchases (Homburg & Giering, 2001; Blocker et al., 2011), including techniques such as upselling and cross-selling. The design and execution of email content are crucial to the success of email marketing (Kumar, 2021; Sahni et al., 2018). Our research examines the effectiveness of design strategies in B2B customer marketing emails to existing customers.

To determine the success of an email campaign for B2B firms, it's important to track and analyze specific metrics that help to reveal the performance of this digital touchpoint (Kumar, 2021). Key metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of a B2B email campaign include delivery rate, personalization, email character count, multimedia count, links, etc. The primary goal of such campaigns is to drive customer action, often facilitated through call-to-action (CTA) buttons (Kumar, 2021), which outperform text links (Mailchimp.com, 2023) by increasing click-through

rates by 28% (Campaign Monitor, 2019). We aim to identify the design elements that motivate customers to click the CTA link, thereby initiating steps toward a repeat purchase journey. Based on the information processing theory (Chen & Berger, 2016), buyers tend to engage in a more thorough processing of information when it is presented to them, as opposed to when they actively seek it themselves. CTA buttons in emails serve as an effective method for presenting the most critical actionable information to customers. This study analyzes marketing analytics data from 70 B2B marketing emails sent to 184,213 customer contacts over 12 months, stored in HubSpot and Google Analytics. We examine key email design features, including email character count, the number of links, and the use of multimedia, using CTA clicks as the primary performance metric.

Focusing on emails sent to existing customers, to our knowledge this is the first research that explores how email design impacts repeat purchases. The findings of this study have significant managerial implications, as they highlight effective email design features that can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of customer marketing email campaigns.

## **2. Email design features and customer action**

Email design elements, including email attributes and situational factors, which either simplify or complicate customers' information processing, and either assist or hinder their purchase decisions, will have a positive or negative impact on their email responses and purchasing behavior (Kumar, 2021). Call-to-action prompts are essential components of effective marketing strategies, guiding users toward desired actions and bridging the gap between engagement and conversion. These prompts, which typically appear as buttons, links, or phrases, serve as clear instructions for what the audience should do next and represent the action the firm desires from its email marketing campaign (Mailchimp.com, 2023). CTAs are directly tied to conversions, for example, completing a purchase, signing up for a newsletter, downloading a resource, etc. By prompting customers to take immediate action, CTAs reduce friction in the decision-making process. Strategically placed CTAs, combined with persuasive language and visual appeal, can significantly improve conversion rates. A CTA click is a relational metric, it captures the consumers' responses towards an email marketing (Drèze & Bonfrer, 2008) (Kumar, 2021). Kumar (2021) adds that this metric quantifies the success of email campaigns, this metric is also

well suited for B2C and B2B firms alike and in his study, he finds that among open, click, and reopen, we find clicks tend to have the highest impact on consumers' purchases. Open and click rates have been used to quantify the success of email newsletters (Dr`eze and Bonfrer 2008).

## 2.1 Email character count

Email character count measures the length of the email. There is a common assumption that recipients may be less likely to engage with long emails, as they are perceived to be time-consuming and potentially overwhelming. However, the relationship between email length and engagement with CTA is not always straightforward. In digital marketing, the overwhelming volume of information presented often hinders the buyer's ability to discern meaningful content (Koroleva et al., 2010). This phenomenon, known as information overload, occurs when an excessive amount of information reduces cognitive engagement (Sicilia & Ruiz, 2010). Larger marketing emails, which typically contain more information, contribute to this overload. Consequently, such information-heavy emails often elicit negative responses from consumers (Kumar, 2021). We test this assumption by examining whether longer emails have a negative impact on CTA engagement or whether, conversely, the additional content supports and enhances the effectiveness of the CTA.

Therefore, we hypothesize that; H1: Emails with a higher email character count get fewer CTA clicks.

## 2.2 Number of links

The placement of links within email campaigns significantly impacts click-through rates (Kumar et al., 2016) and subsequently affects consumers' responses to email newsletters and their purchasing behavior (Kumar, 2021). As essential digital design elements, links play a crucial role in nurturing customer-firm relationships by facilitating value co-creation (Grant et al., 2010). Drawing on cognitive balance theory (Heider, 1946), research suggests that links can shape perceptions of the relationships between communicating entities (Stewart, 2003), thereby fostering trust between the sender and recipient (Stewart, 2006). This trust often encourages recipients to engage more deeply with the information provided. Consequently, in the context of

online marketing, links within email campaigns serve as physical markers that enhance interaction between the sender and receiver (Stewart & Zhang, 2003).

Links are incorporated to direct recipients to additional information, though they can influence the number of clicks on CTA. CTA clicks specifically represent the recipient's engagement with the desired action set by the B2B firm. Other links are intended to provide supplementary information or enhance the overall content shared within the email. However, too many hyperlinks can be distracting and take the customer's attention away from the CTA. Therefore, we hypothesize that; H2: Emails with more links get fewer CTA clicks.

### 2.3 Multimedia count

The multimedia count in an email refers to the number of multimedia elements, such as images, videos, and audio files embedded in the email. These multimedia elements are used to enhance the visual appeal, interactivity, and engagement of emails. They can be strategically used to support the message, highlight key offers, or make the content more compelling.

The inclusion of multimedia in marketing emails function as an Internet atmospheric cue, influencing customer response behavior (Richard, 2005). In the context of email marketing, firms often incorporate banner images to shape customer reactions. Research indicates that banner advertisements can significantly enhance consumer response rates (Sherman & Deighton, 2001), increase visit frequency (Rutz & Bucklin, 2012), and boost purchase behavior (Manchanda et al., 2006). Beyond these effects, banners serve a dual purpose. These multimedia elements help mitigate information overload by providing visually appealing cues that organize content while simultaneously capturing consumer attention. By linking to additional sources of information, multimedia elements encourage email recipients to engage more actively, potentially prompting responses and facilitating purchase decisions (Kumar, 2021). Thus, multimedia elements in email campaigns contribute not only to a more engaging user experience but also to the achievement of marketing objectives.

Therefore, we hypothesize that; H3: Emails with higher multimedia count get more CTA clicks.

### 3. Data

We will analyze marketing analytics data derived from 70 unique customer marketing emails used in different B2B campaign types. These emails were designed to promote upselling and cross-selling opportunities by targeting existing customers in the B2B database. The primary goal of these campaigns was to educate recipients about relevant products and services while encouraging repeat purchases. Collectively, these emails reached 184,213 contacts from the customer database, representing a diverse audience that varied in company size, job level, and geographical location. The marketing analytics data collected over a 12-month period is stored in the HubSpot email automation and Google Analytics platform. We analyze the email marketing design features, including the email character count, number of links, and multimedia count. We evaluate the email campaign performance using the clicks on CTA links as the primary metric. All recipients included in the dataset have explicitly provided consent to receive marketing communications, ensuring that the data aligns with legal and ethical standards for customer outreach. As part of their contractual relationship with B2B firms, customers provided consent in compliance with data protection regulations, ensuring they were aware of and agreed to being contacted for B2B marketing purposes. All emails in our dataset were sent to existing customers, allowing us to specifically analyze how the design of email marketing influences customers' repeat purchase intentions.

### 4. Results

We use linear regression to estimate the relationships of email character count, number of links, and multimedia count on clicks on CTA (Table 1). A look at the VIF values shows that multicollinearity should not be an issue, as VIF values of the independent variables are modest, ranging between 1.261 and 3.102. The results support hypothesis H1 at the 90 percent confidence level with results showing that when character count increases, the CTA clicks decreases ( $\beta = -0.362$ ,  $p = 0.069$ ). Hypothesis H2 claims that a higher number of links in an email would generate lower number of CTA clicks. The data shows the opposite, suggesting that a greater number of links increases the number of CTA clicks ( $\beta = 0.351$ ,  $p = 0.089$ ). This rejects H2. Hypothesis H3 presumes that marketing emails with more multimedia content will receive more CTA clicks. The data does not support this assumption as the relationship between number multimedia count and the number of CTA clicks is statistically non-significant ( $\beta = -0.165$ ,  $p = 0.206$ ).

DV: Average number of CTA clicks	$\beta$	p	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Independent variables					
Character count	-0.362	0.069	2216.04	800.783	641253.694
Number of links	0.351	0.089	8.21	2.948	8.693
Multimedia count	-0.165	0.206	3.54	1.775	3.150

**Table 1. Results**

## 5. Discussion

We research the design features of B2B customer marketing emails to understand which elements incite customer action, which benefits the company. We analyze three key features of the email, the character count, the number of links, and the number of multimedia elements (multimedia count) in the email, and how these predict customer clicks on call-to-action (CTA) links.

The study provides insights into how specific aspects of email design can drive customer engagement and support business objectives. The findings indicate that a higher character count in emails decreases the average number of CTA clicks. This suggests that as the length of the email increases, it may overwhelm or disengage recipients, leading to fewer interactions with the CTA. However, opposite to our presumption, we find that a higher number of links increases CTA clicks. The reason for this could be explained by several factors. Multiple hyperlinks in an email can enhance interactivity and engagement, making the CTA more visible by surrounding it with clickable elements (Monitor, 2019). This can increase the likelihood of the customer noticing and interacting with the CTA. More hyperlinks can create a smoother navigation experience, guiding the customer toward the CTA. As the email is structured to encourage clicks, the CTA may be perceived as a natural and easy next action to take. Finally, the results suggest that emails containing more multimedia content do not affect CTA clicks. The inclusion of multimedia, such as images or videos, has the potential to enhance the visual appeal and engagement of emails. However, to comply with technical requirements, such as spam filters, load time, and email exchange acceptance, B2B markets only use simplistic multimedia messaging. Consequently, the most important message is often conveyed through text, with multimedia elements used primarily to break the monotony of text-heavy content. This may

explain why the presence or absence of multimedia does not significantly affect the number of CTA clicks. These findings provide valuable insights into how specific email design elements can influence customer engagement with CTAs and, by extension, their potential to drive desired behaviors such as repeat purchases.

### 5.1 Managerial implications

B2B managers can enhance email marketing effectiveness by understanding how specific design features influence customer purchase intent. By analyzing elements such as character count, number of links provided, and the number of multimedia elements in an email, managers can tailor their campaigns to better engage recipients and drive desired behaviors, such as CTA clicks. A clear understanding of which design aspects resonate most with the target audience allows B2B firms to craft more effective, personalized emails that not only capture attention but also encourage action. This knowledge helps optimize email campaigns, increase response rates, and ultimately strengthen customer relationships and business outcomes. Our results suggest that B2B marketers should keep the character count of marketing emails to a minimum and provide additional information with links to boost CTA clicks.

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