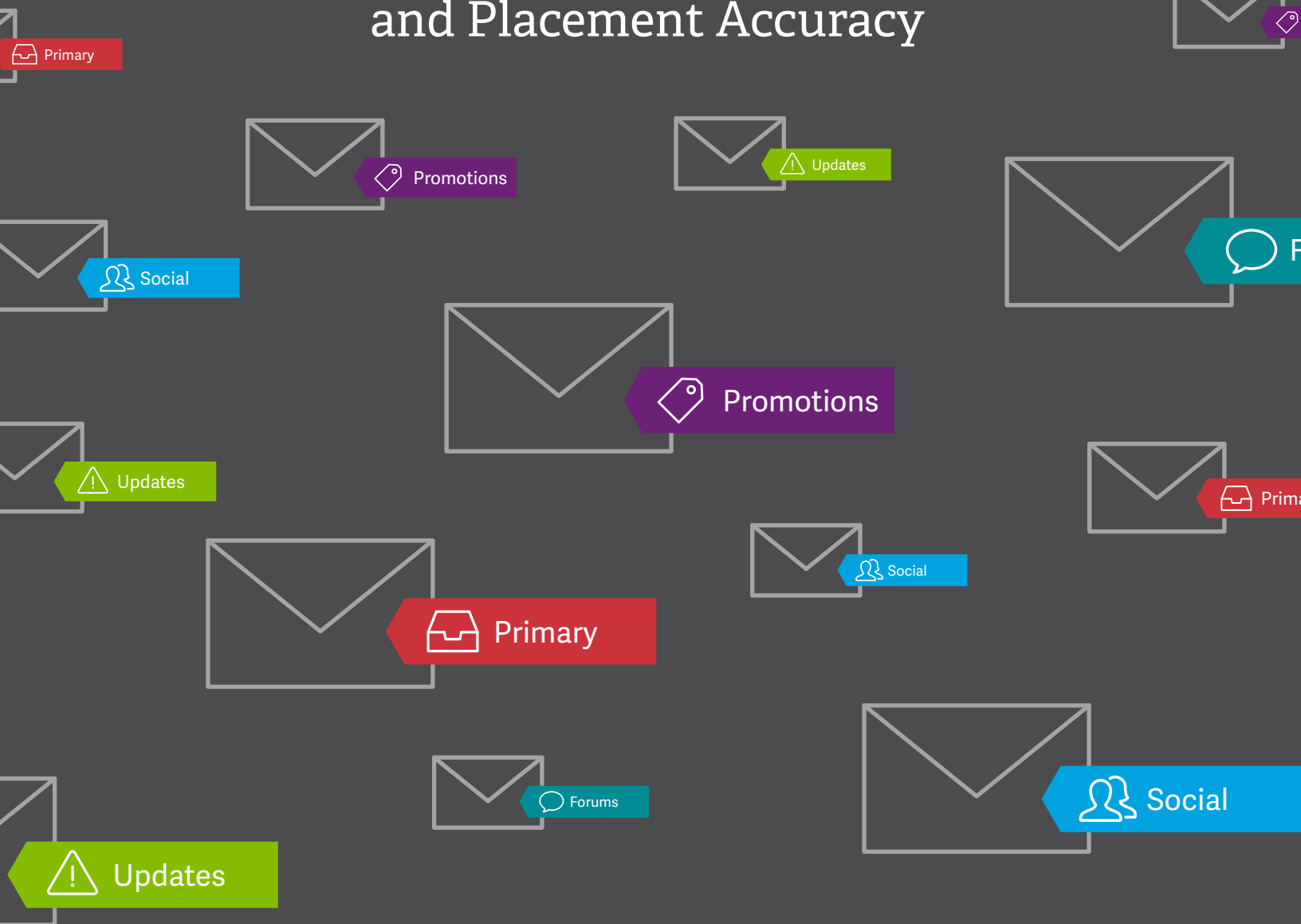


# The Email Marketer's Guide to Gmail Categories

Analysis of Consumer Adoption and Placement Accuracy








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# Introduction to Gmail Categories

It's been nearly four years since Gmail started rolling out its own solution to "inbox overload" with its tabbed inbox and email categories. To help users sort through their inbox maze of promotions, personal email, and purchase confirmations, Gmail started categorizing all incoming email with the following labels:

 Social	Social notifications and updates
 Promotions	Email marketing promotions and offers
 Updates	Transactional emails like receipts and shipping notifications
 Forums	Mailing lists and groups
 Primary	Personal emails and messages from other categories where the tab isn't turned on

Though Gmail offered the capability to sort email into these five different categories, individual Gmail users needed to enable tabs to unlock their tabbed inboxes and begin seeing their email filtered by category. Once enabled, users were able to select which configuration of the five available tabs they wanted. If emails couldn't be classified, they were labeled as "unknown" and run through more spam filters. If these unknown emails were ultimately deemed safe and wanted, they would then be placed in the Primary tab.

# The Initial Impact of Gmail Tabs

The introduction of this five inbox system was met with a lot of hostility by marketers. Many assumed that with the new Promotions tab, subscribers would no longer see nor interact with their messages. Some even claimed these tabs would “kill” email marketing. Many marketers even began a “move me” campaign asking subscribers to mark their messages as Primary in an attempt to get their emails delivered to the Primary folder.

To find out the true impact of Gmail tabs, Return Path released two research papers measuring the [initial](#) and [six month](#) impact of Gmail tabs on response rates. At the time, we compared the response rates for those that opted into tabs and compared open rates before and after the roll out. What we found was that impact varied significantly across different industries. Many industries saw a slight decline in key email marketing metrics, a number saw no change, and some even saw much higher read rates.

During the rollout of Gmail’s tabbed inbox in 2013, Return Path was also able to determine which tabs users enabled in their inbox. At the time, 77 percent opted to use the Social tab, 46 percent activated the Promotions tab, and 46 percent used the Updates tab. Only six percent used the Forums tab, and virtually no one (0.25 percent) chose to simply direct all messages to their primary inbox with no tabs enabled.

Now that four years have passed, we decided to see what impact Gmail’s tabbed inbox is having on both users and marketers. Are marketers still asking subscribers to move their messages to the Primary tab? If not, should they? Are Gmail’s classifications accurately classifying messages? If not, what can a marketer do? We’ll answer these questions and more in our latest look at Gmail’s categories and tabbed inbox.

## Gmail Tabs Usage Survey

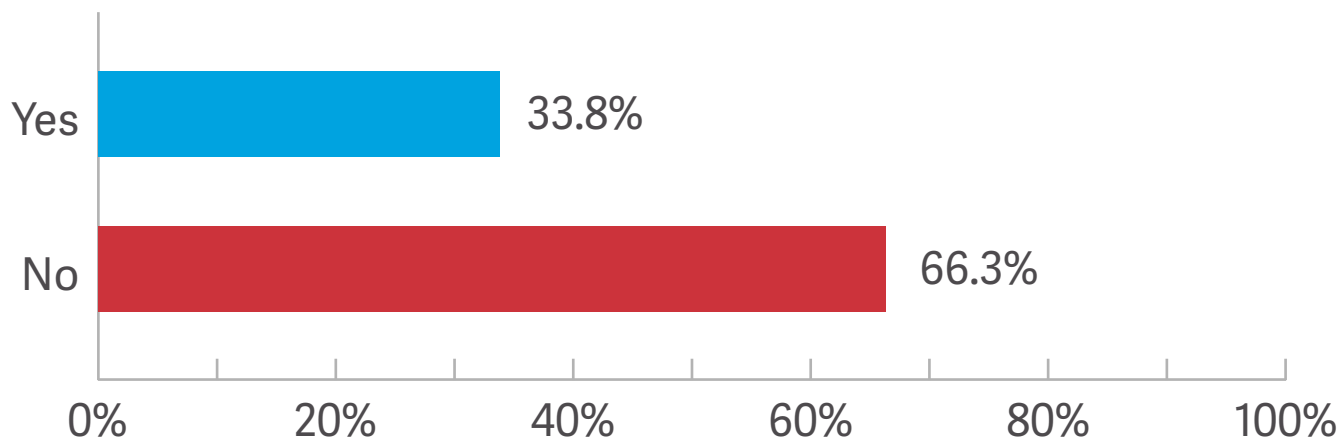
To uncover how Gmail users are using Google’s tabbed inbox today, Return Path surveyed 1,628 Gmail users on December 15, 2016, using Google Consumer Surveys.

# How Many Users Have Enabled Gmail Tabs?

A lot has changed in the past four years. From its initial mass adoption, Gmail tabs are now used by slightly more than one in three Gmail users (33.8 percent). This equates to a 66 percent decrease in users since 2013.

As many Gmail users opt to return to one centralized inbox, the impact of Gmail tabs on email marketing has decreased significantly, but is still an important factor to consider.

## Do you currently use Gmail tabs to sort your email?



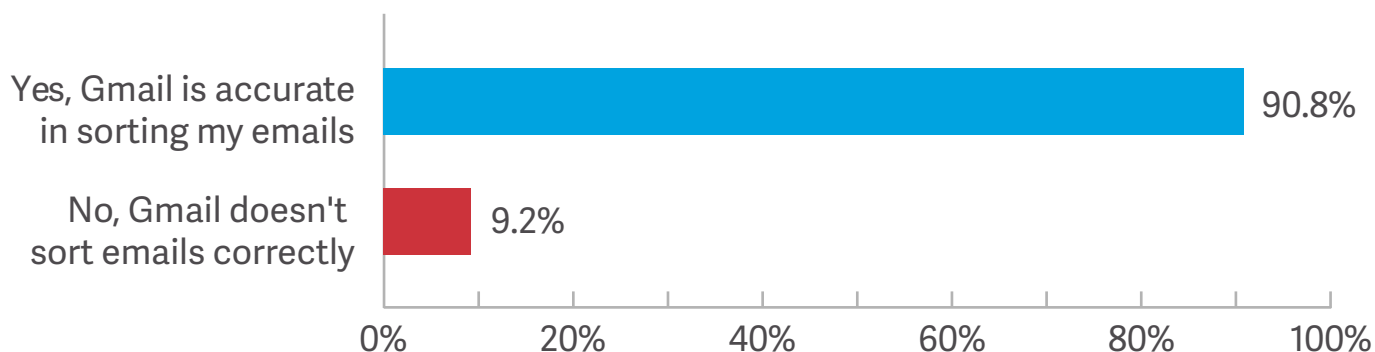
# Do Users Find That Gmail is Accurate in Sorting Email?

If your messages are delivered to the spam folder, the chances of your subscribers interacting with them are very slim. The same principle applies to Gmail tabs. If messages are not delivered to the location subscribers expect, they won't see them.

As a marketer, it's important to ensure your emails are being classified correctly as either Social, Promotions, Updates, or Forums. A misclassified email can result in lower open rates and cause a bad user experience. Case in point, one Gmail user indicated she missed a flight because her plane ticket was misclassified as a Promotion rather than an Update.

We asked Gmail users if they found that Gmail was accurate in sorting their emails. Almost one in 10 responded that Gmail is misclassifying their email. Email that is incorrectly sorted—and then delivered to the wrong tab—will be hidden from Gmail users who are expecting it elsewhere. This could mean that an inbox placement rate of 80 percent is actually closer to 70 percent after factoring in those misclassified. To make sure messages are delivered where they are expected, marketers need to be monitoring the Gmail tabs classification of all their messages.

## Does Gmail accurately sort emails to the correct tab?

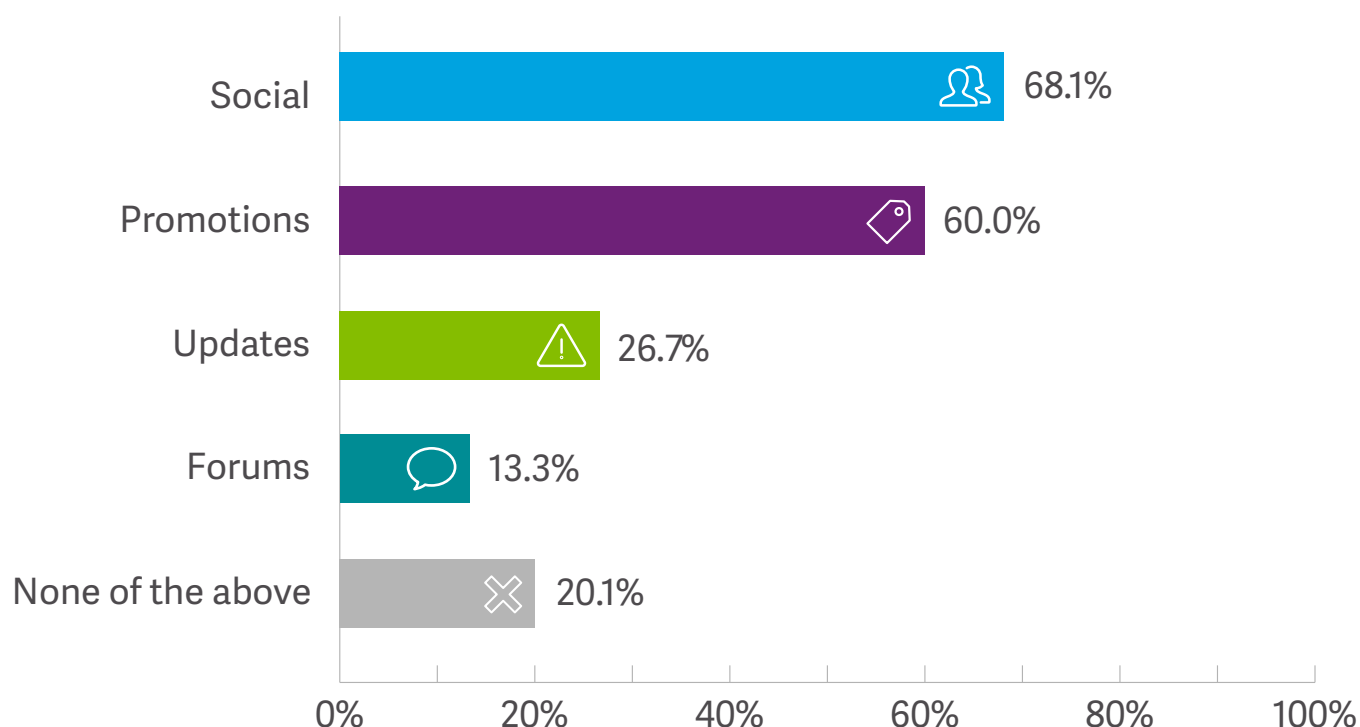


# Which Tabs Have Users Enabled?

Much like in 2013, Gmail users are most likely to use the Social and Promotions tabs. Today, Social is the most used tab, enabled by 68.1 percent of users, followed by the Promotions tab with 60 percent adoption.

The Updates tab, which saw the same level of usage as the Promotions tab in 2013, has dropped to one in four users. This lack of adoption is likely a result of the fact that the Social and Promotions tabs are enabled by default when a Gmail user enables tabs, while Updates requires users to manually enable.

## What Gmail tabs do you currently have enabled?

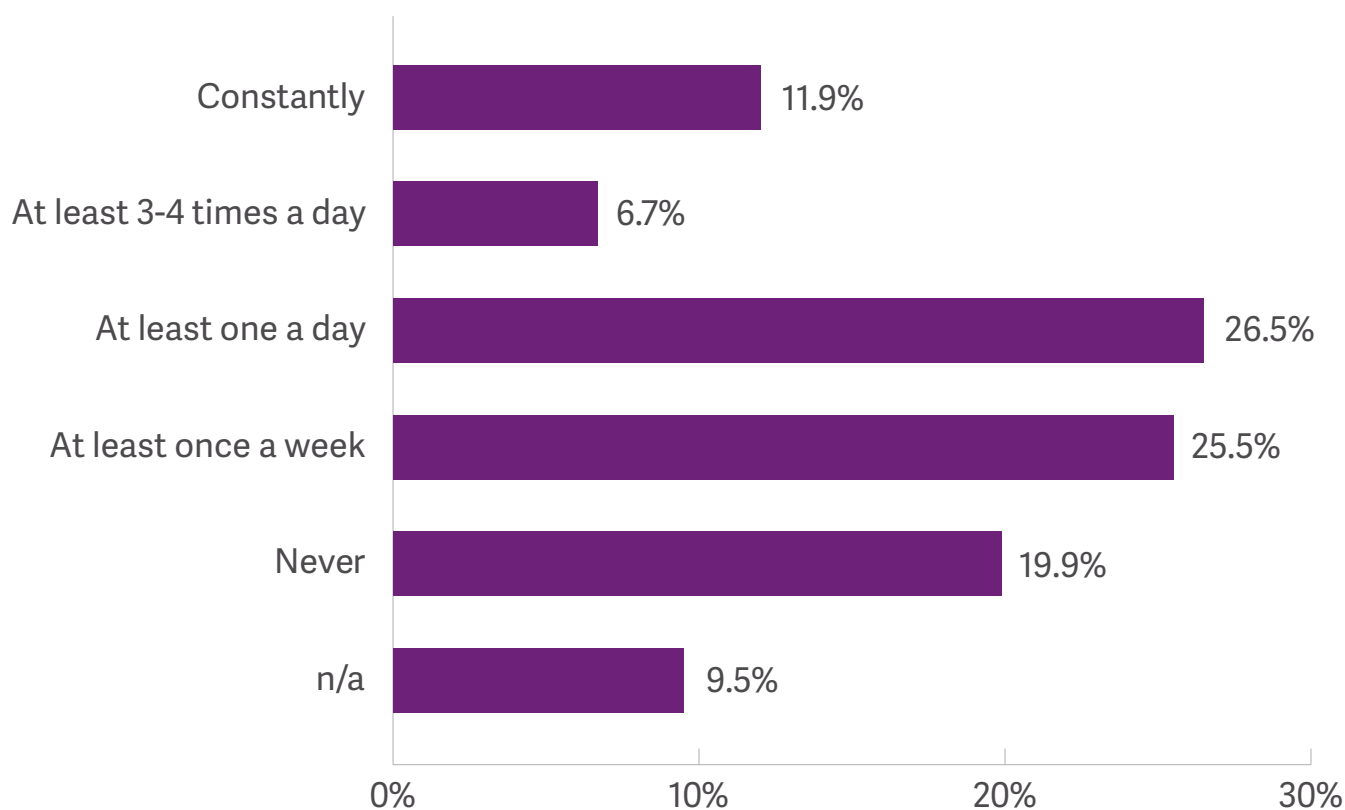


# How Often Do Users Check Their Promotions Tab?

Gmail users use the Promotions tab in a variety of ways. Based on the results of this question, we see that almost half (45.1 percent) of Gmail users are checking their Promotions at least once a day. This shows that they are using the Promotions tab to filter their marketing messages for easy access, enabling them to quickly react to these offers.

One in five Gmail users takes a different approach to the Promotions tab. Despite having the tab enabled, 19.9 percent of Gmail users never check the Promotions tab. Instead, they use this tab as a way to filter out unwanted email marketing messages from their inbox.

## How often do you check your Promotions tab in Gmail?

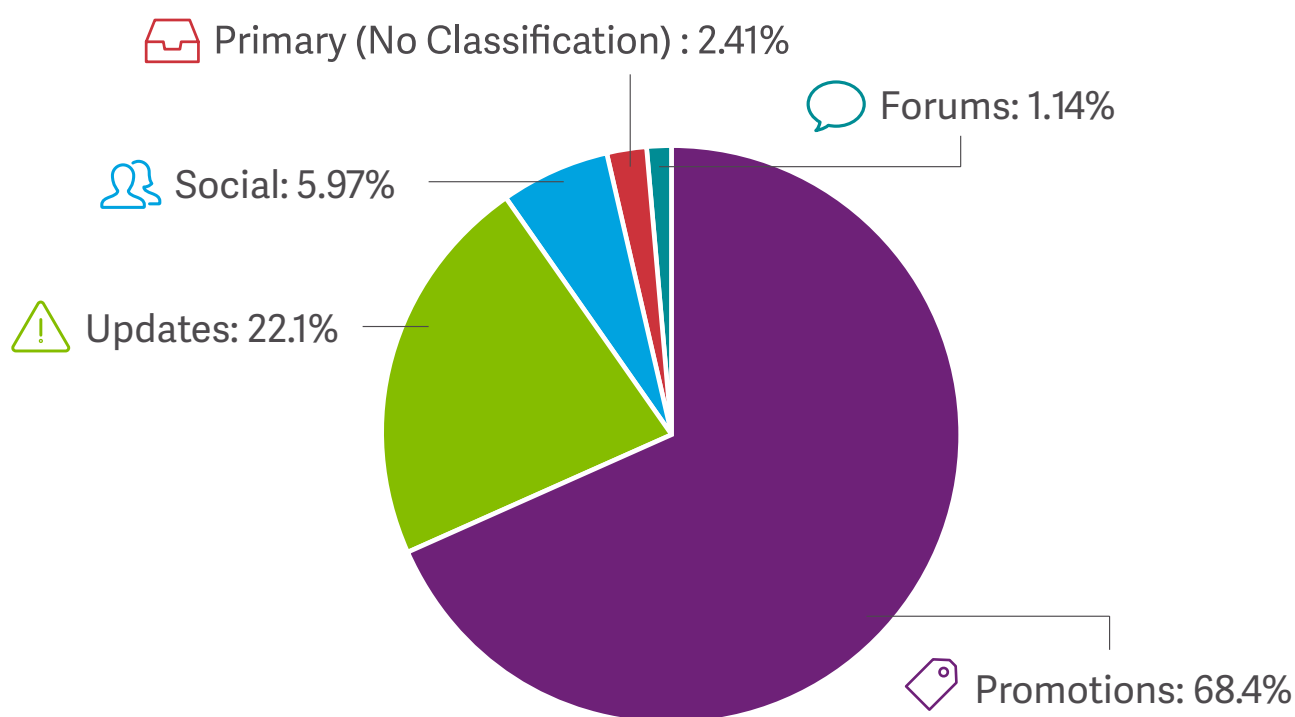




# Volume Breakdown by Category

Of all email sent to Gmail users, more than 90 percent is classified as either Promotions (68 percent) or Updates (22 percent). What's interesting is that Social—a tab enabled by the majority of users—is only relevant for 6 percent of email, while Updates—enabled by only 22 percent of users—would filter 22 percent of incoming email, if it were turned on.

**Tabs Classification of Total Volume**








# Inbox Placement and Read Rate by Category

Messages tagged as Social have the highest inbox placement rate (87.2 percent) followed closely by Updates (86.8 percent). Uncategorized messages struggle to land in the inbox with an inbox placement rate of 55.5 percent.

Messages labeled as Updates receive the highest subscriber engagement with a read rate of 28 percent. Most of the remaining classifications generated read rates between 22 and 20 percent, with Promotions receiving the lowest rate at 19.2 percent.

As Gmail classifies all incoming messages into a tab, these rates are based on the activity of all Gmail users, regardless of whether tabs are enabled.

Gmail tab	Inbox placement rate	Read rate
 Promotions	84.5	19.2
 Primary (No Classification)	55.5	22.0
 Social	87.2	22.4
 Forums	77.8	21.1
 Updates	86.8	28.0

# What is the Top Tab per Industry?

Using the Gmail Categorization feature of our Inbox Monitor tool, we identified the category breakdown for each industry.

Promotions Updates Social Forums Primary



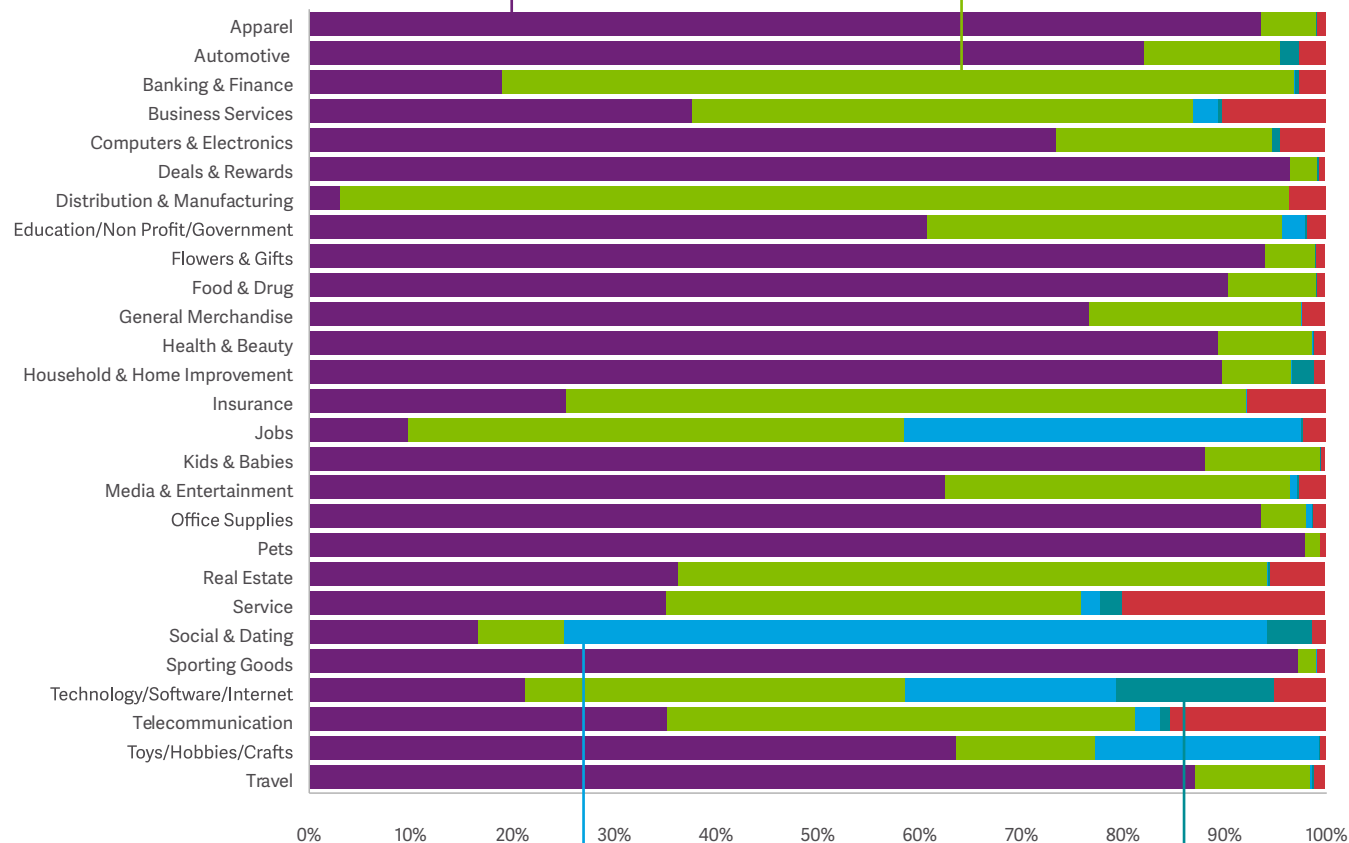
## Promotions

Not surprisingly, most retail industries see the bulk of their messages classified as Promotions. Pets (98 percent), Sporting Goods (97 percent), and Deals & Rewards (96 percent) had the greatest percentage of messages classified as Promotions.



## Updates

Industries where Gmail users are likely to hold accounts—Banking and Finance (78 percent) and Insurance (67 percent)—see the majority of their messages classified as Updates.



## Social

As expected, Social & Dating industries see the majority (69 percent) of their messages classified as Social. Job search industries also see a significant portion (39 percent) of their mail categorized as Social.



## Forums

In most industries, it is rare to have messages classified as Forums. The exceptions are Technology/Software/Internet and Service which include many companies that manage their own help forums.

# Tab Classification by Unique Subject Line

To test the accuracy of Gmail's categorizations, we analyzed the tabs classification of what we call unique subject lines. A unique subject line is one subject line that has been sent to multiple Gmail users—for example "30 Percent Off Sale Items"—the assumption being that all emails using the same subject line would be classified into the same tab.

In the chart below, we show the average tab classification for unique subject lines and the percent of these subject lines being classified in multiple categories. Ideally, each industry would receive a score of one—indicating that all messages using the same unique subject line were sorted into the same tab.

	Average Categorization for Unique Subject Lines	Percentage of Subject Lines Categorized in More than One Tab
Apparel	1.17	13
Automotive	1.11	10
Banking and Finance	1.13	11
Business Services	1.32	21
Computers & Electronics	1.21	16
Deals & Rewards	1.26	18
Distribution & Manufacturing	1.10	8
Education/Non Profit/Government	1.33	19
Flowers & Gifts	1.15	13
Food & Drug	1.22	14
General Merchandise	1.18	13
Health & Beauty	1.19	14
Household & Home Improvement	1.14	12
Insurance	1.12	10
Jobs	1.16	11
Kids & Babies	1.17	13
Media & Entertainment	1.35	21
Office Supplies	1.18	14
Pets	1.15	11
Real Estate	1.15	11
Service	1.25	17
Social & Dating	1.11	9
Sporting Goods	1.14	12
Technology/Software/Internet	1.18	13
Telecommunication	1.07	6
Toys/Hobbies/Crafts	1.18	14
Travel	1.15	10

What we found is that, despite Gmail users perception that their email is categorized correctly, many messages are actually being misclassified.

Media & Entertainment companies saw the most disparity as their unique subject lines were delivered to an average of 1.35 tabs, and more than 21 percent of their messages were classified in multiple categories. This could indicate that Media & Entertainment emails are harder to classify, or possibly that Gmail Users are manually re-categorizing them.

Telecommunications had the least amount of miscategorization, with unique subject lines being sorted into just 1.07 categories. In addition, only 6 percent of unique subjects lines sent by Telecommunication companies are classified in multiple categories. This indicates that emails from Telecommunications companies are likely classified the most accurately.

# Conclusion

Though Gmail has created one of the industry's most advanced email classification and sorting systems, one in 10 users believe their messages are being misclassified.

Messages that are not sorted into the expected tab are likely to go unnoticed and unopened by your subscribers. Just as you measure your deliverability by tracking whether your messages land in the inbox, you should pay attention to the tabs classification of all your messages, ensuring they are being categorized correctly.

Following are some suggestions to help ensure your messages are directed to the correct tab:

Send different categories of mail (e.g., promotions, transaction notifications, social updates) from different, authenticated sender addresses, and try to keep those addresses consistent over time.

Avoid mixing different types of content in one email, since each message can only be sorted to a single category. For example, putting a promotion into a transactional email may cause the message to be misclassified as a promotion.

Source: [Gmail Bulk Sender Guidelines](#)

# Methodology

Return Path created this report based on results from a Google Consumer Survey and data from Inbox Monitor. The Google Consumer Survey ran on December 15, 2016, and surveyed 1,628 Gmail users. The Gmail classification analysis is based on over 6 billion messages sent to Gmail users between October 20–27, 2016.

# A Smarter Way to Use Email Data

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