Return Path

State of the Inbox Quarterly Snapshot: Q4 2014

State of the Inbox, Quarterly Snapshot: Q4 2014

Don't believe the hype: There was no holiday email blizzard burying subscribers under heaps of unwelcome marketing messages. Neither was there a consumer backlash against email marketing, or evidence of weakening engagement or offer fatigue around Christmas 2014. In fact consumers' interest in email marketing actually increased during the peak of the holiday shopping season.

Return Path's analysis of 2 million active subscribers' email engagement between October and December 2014 reveals an intriguing relationship between consumers and popular brands that contradicts some long held beliefs about inbox overload and the holiday shopping season.
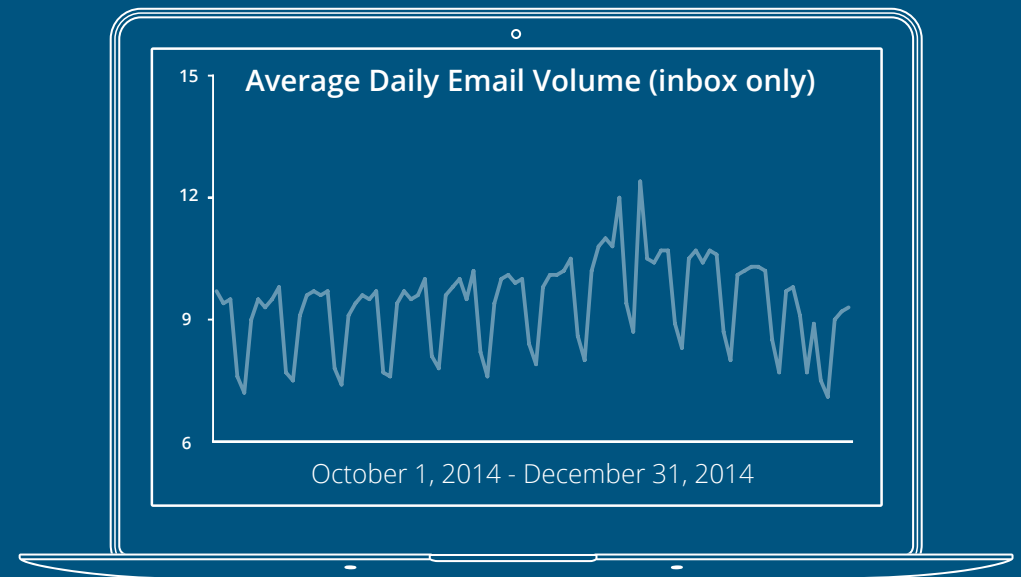
The Inbox is Commercial

Only 18% of messages in the typical inbox are personal, peer-to-peer communications. The rest are commercial, and most (53%) are promotional. That means marketing: offers, but also newsletters, marketing content, and other non-transactional messages from consumer brands.

During the quarter, that meant that the typical inbox received roughly two personal messages, five promotional messages, and two other commercial messages per day -- around nine altogether (9.4). Volume climbed steadily in mid-November to a high of 12 daily messages on cyber Monday, with promotional mail making up roughly all of the additional volume. The daily holiday increase was far less pronounced on other days, though: Between November 24 and December 23 the typical inbox received ten messages, six of which were promotional.

More email went directly to subscribers' spam or junk folders during the quarter, at an average of twelve (12.4) messages per day. There was no meaningful increase in the number of messages that went to consumers' spam folders during the holiday peak, either. If there was a glut of spam among the holiday messages, it never made it to mailboxes.

Average Daily Email Volume (inbox only)

15

12

9

6

October 1, 2014 - December 31, 2014
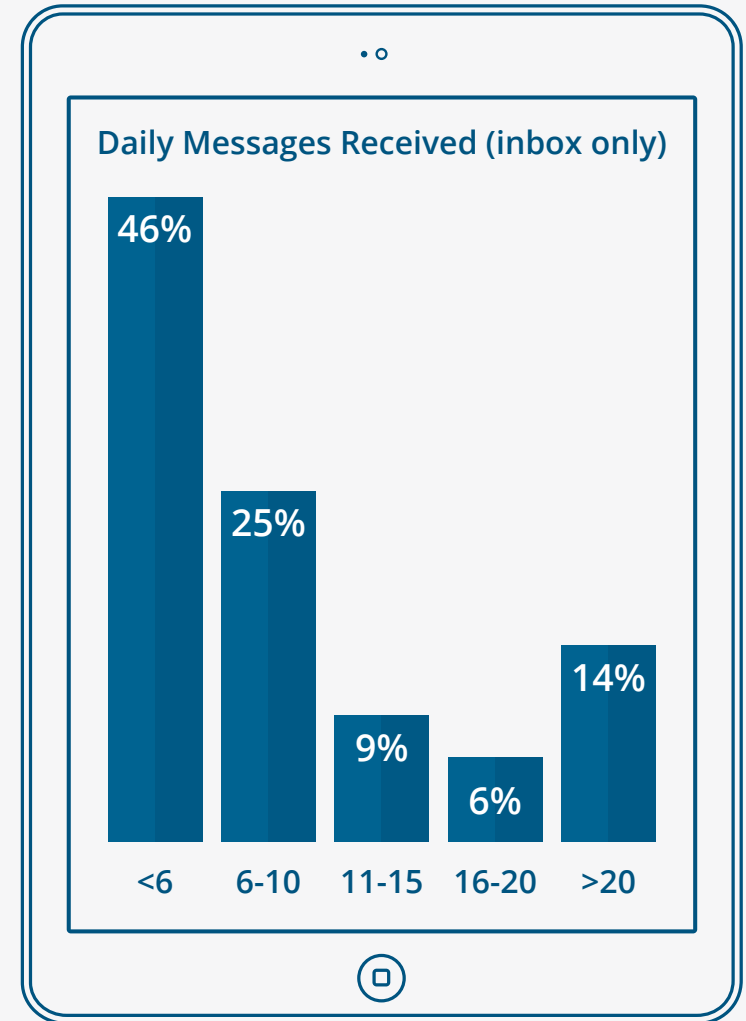
Most People Aren't Average
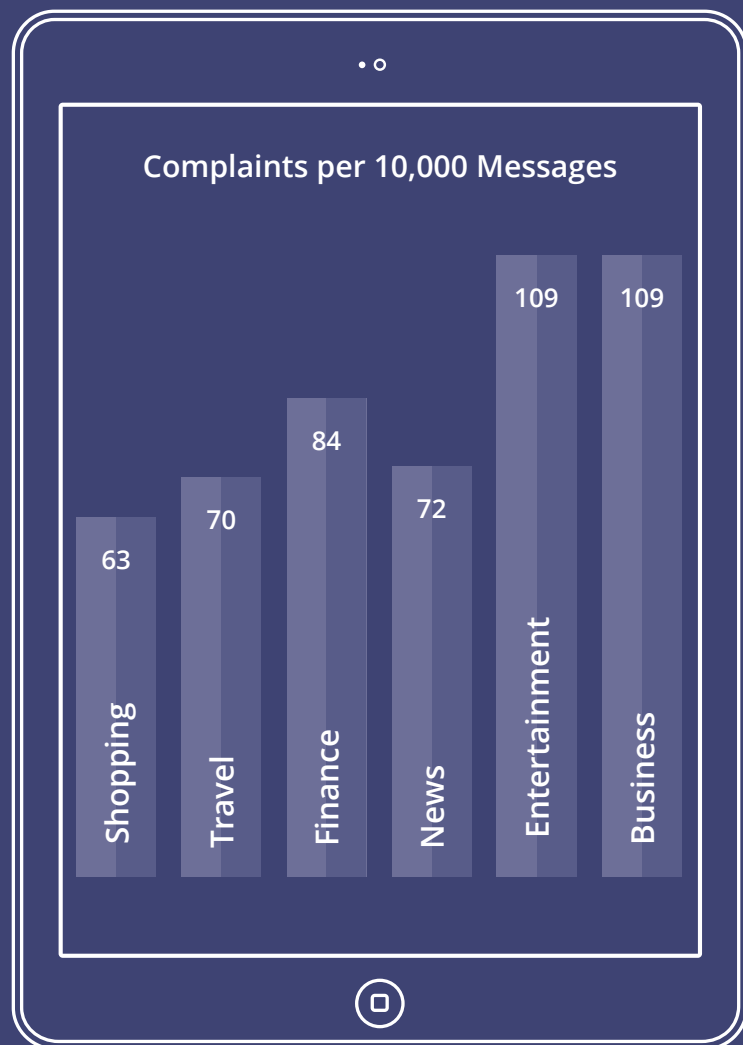
Of course, few subscribers are typical.

One subscriber in seven inboxes (14%) received more than 20 email messages per day. Nearly half (46%) receive five or fewer daily messages. In fact only 25% of subscribers fell within the average range, receiving 6-10 daily messages delivered to the inbox.

Daily Messages Received (inbox only)

Range	Percentage
<6	46%
6-10	25%
11-15	9%
16-20	6%
>20	14%

Engagement Holds Steady During the Holidays

25

Complaints per 10,000 Messages

Shopping	63
Travel	70
Finance	84
News	72
Entertainment	109
Business	109

Even as email volumes climbed subscribers remained engaged, reading 22.4% of their daily messages during the holiday shopping season, only slightly below their quarterly average of 22.8%.

Neither did they complain about increases in commercial mail; in fact, when they complained about unwanted messages, the senders were rarely retail brands. For every 10,000 messages classified as "shopping," subscribers lodged 63 "this is spam" complaints -- a lower rate than for messages classified as travel, finance, news, and entertainment.

Methodology:

To profile consumer email usage and engagement during Q4-2014, Return Path analyzed the anonymous, aggregated mailbox interactions of a representative sample of 2 million actual subscribers with more than 3.8 billion email messages received between 1 October and 31 December 2014.

About Return Path

The world's biggest brands rely on Return Path to keep them connected to their customers.

We analyze the world's largest collection of email data to show marketers how to stay connected to their audiences, strengthen their customer engagement, and protect their brands from fraud. Our solutions help mailbox providers around the world deliver great user experiences and build trust in email by ensuring that wanted messages reach the inbox while spam and abuse don't. Consumers use Return Path technology to manage their inboxes and make email work better for them.

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