ENGAGE OR DISRUPT:

Maximizing content investment through email marketing

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PACE

Content. Engagement. Results.

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Overview

Throughout this whitepaper, readers will learn not only why email is valuable to digital content activation, but also how to incorporate it into a holistic content marketing strategy. Although we are focusing on email, it is important to remember that this is just one key part of your overall targeted content distribution strategy.

The development of a detailed email marketing strategy that is continuously optimized over time can lead to high ROI. Without a measured, strategic approach to email marketing, or any content marketing for that matter, you are simply producing content without data-driven knowledge of its effectiveness, which means you won't know how—or what—you can improve. Content activation is more grounded in analytics and methodology than ever before, so for email marketing, data and strategy go hand in hand.

We provide insights to help readers understand the importance of email marketing within these activation practices as well as answer some frequently asked questions, such as:

- **What is the value of email marketing?**
  Email marketing can be integral to a successful content strategy. It is a key relationship-building tool that can be used and improved throughout the entire customer journey.

- **How do I develop and implement an email marketing strategy?**
  To develop and implement your email marketing strategy we recommend asking yourself some key questions and following six steps that can lead you to success.

- **What does success look like?**
  What are some baseline metrics and ranges?
  While industry benchmarks are a good place to start, we encourage comparing against yourself using historical data. This will steer you toward producing high-quality content that will yield the maximum ROI.

- **What are some email-marketing best practices?**
  Throughout the entirety of the paper, we explore a variety of best practices, such as list governance, A/B testing, optimizing for different platforms, and segmentation and personalization.

> **"** Throughout this whitepaper, readers will learn not only why email is valuable to digital content activation, but also how to incorporate it into a holistic content marketing strategy.

Introduction

Email is a permission-based style of marketing that makes it easy to engage consumers with personalized and relevant content, and, according to a study by ExactTarget, 77 percent of consumers prefer to receive these permission-based marketing communications through their email.[1] However, marketers often struggle with low subscriber-engagement rates, inactive list members and unsubscribes. These roadblocks can diminish the effectiveness, but we have to keep in mind that the key to successful, high-yield email marketing lies within a strong email-marketing strategy based on gathered data and analytics.

EMAIL AND E-COMMERCE

82% of consumers open emails from companies and **66%** of online consumers made a purchase as a result of an email-marketing message.[2]
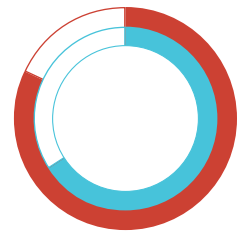
One of the greatest strengths of email marketing is its wholly traceable nature. You can follow every open, click and minute spent looking at email content. You can gather data and track customer's interests with a variety of software, giving you more insights and therefore more opportunities to connect. Think of an email like a series of gates. Each gate that a consumer opens allows you to gain more knowledge of what content they prefer. This kind of information can then be used to steer the editorial work, the personalization efforts and the deployment cadence.

While many believe that email is becoming an antiquated form of business communication in comparison to other channels, such as social media, it is still proving to be an effective way to drive consumers through the funnel. While it may seem like social media is an omnipresent force in our everyday lives, we shouldn't forget

that email is still an effective way to achieve high levels of customer conversion. Seventy-two percent of people prefer promotional content through email, compared to 17 percent who prefer social media,[3] and email marketing is 40 times better at acquiring new customers than social media.[4] While social media is still an important part of a content strategy, many brands find that social and email marketing strategies working together achieves greater success rates.

Readers should keep in mind that there are three different types of emails that can be used and should be tested based on the business goals and recipient responsiveness. These emails will serve different purposes and drive consumers to take different actions, so they need to be considered as a part of your overall email marketing strategy in order to achieve the best results possible.
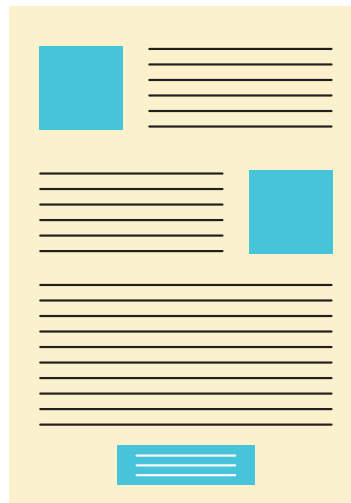
NOT ALL EMAILS ARE THE SAME

PROMOTIONAL
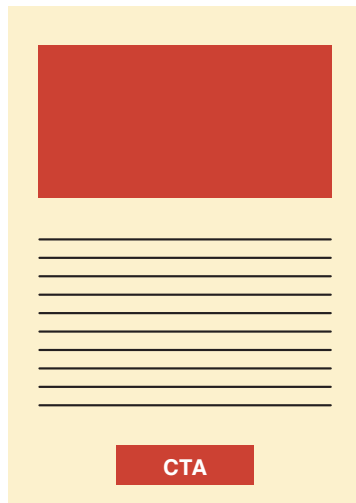
Emails designed with a transactional goal. Typically less text, more imagery and prominent CTAs to drive website traffic to purchase a product.

CONTENT

Emails with more text, often with the goal of increasing awareness and interest in a brand. Establishes high-level exposure to a brand without having to visit a website.

SEEDED CONTENT
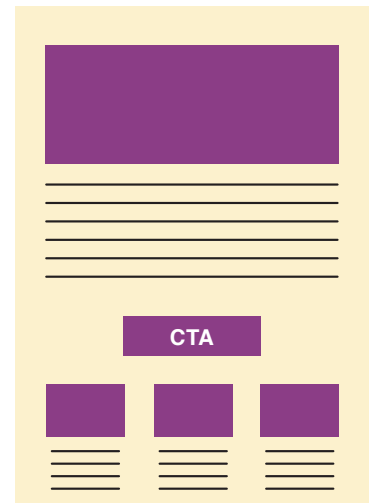
Hybrid model that can build an e-commerce brand while maintaining the transactional value of a promotional email. Can provide content that can help educate the consumer.

For 63 percent of consumers, the first thing they do in the morning is check their email.[5] Your brand has the potential to be the first thing someone sees when they wake up. When you consider that there are more than 2.6 billion email users in the world—expected to be 3.0 billion by 2020[6]—it's hard to deny that email can give your brand more reach and relevancy with a widespread audience.

Easy Access With Mobile

We exist in the age of mobile, and email remains a steady means of communication in large part because of that. Fifty-five percent of email is now opened on a mobile device.[7] This constant access to email makes it easier for marketers to reach consumers. You're always at their side; now you simply need to entice them to read your email over the hundreds of others flooding their inbox.

So, despite broad claims that email is becoming less relevant, especially among millennials, studies and usage prove that it's still a key form of communication between businesses and consumers as long as it can be viewed on a variety of platforms.

EMAIL IS STILL RELEVANT

90% of millennials use the internet to send and receive email, along with **87%** of Gen X, and **91%** of all U.S. consumers still use email daily.[8]
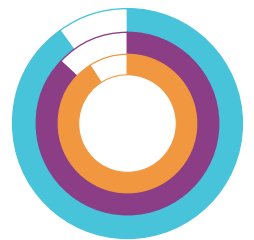
Optimization for mobile devices including smartphones, tablets and even wearables can greatly improve the user experience. Poor optimization and design for mobile will result in reduced engagement rates. In fact, $243 per customer is lost due to bad user experience.[9] Your email needs to be effective and user friendly on every device and every platform, especially to capture the attention of the digital natives and the highly sought-after millennial segment.

Understanding the Value

Relationship Building

Because the brand-consumer relationship often exists completely online, the content that is shared needs to be compelling. Email should serve as an introduction and ongoing conversation with consumers that have shown interest in your brand. Conversations don't take place between you, your consumer and 4,000 other people, so your emails shouldn't either.

Email provides an opportunity to engage consumers through personalized, relevant content that makes them pay attention to your brand. The key words here are personalized and relevant. Emails with personalized subject lines are 26 percent more likely to be opened, and marketers have found a 760 percent increase in email revenue from segmented campaigns.[10]

Email marketing is a way to build up a relationship that makes the consumer feel connected to your brand more than just the product or the purchase. Thanks to email, your content is right next to messages from friends and family, making your consumers feel that much closer to your brand. Now it's your job to maintain that intimacy through targeted, personalized and relevant content.

There are sequential levels of personalization that can be achieved in an email marketing campaign, and each one can help you achieve better engagement and ROI as your customers feel more and more catered to. Here they are, broken down:

Segmentation
Audiences are divided into segments based on data including location, age or gender. They are provided with slightly different email content based on these defined divisions.

Basic Personalization
This requires a frequently updated email list as recipients receive content that includes their name, or that is based on a known preference.

> "Emails with personalized subject lines are 26% more likely to be opened, and marketers have found a 760% increase in email revenue from segmented campaigns.[10]

Sequencing Retargeting

This must be done in conjunction with website tracking, as it requires data about the content an individual viewed back to their profile. You further segment these audiences based on their identified needs and send out behaviorally triggered responses. This helps drive customers to product-purchase faster while making them feel catered-to.

COST EFFECTIVENESS IN NUMBERS

When it comes to cost, email marketing can have an efficient ROI, often far exceeding other forms of marketing due to the relatively low investment costs and high conversion rates.

Three-quarters of companies agree that email offers "excellent" to "good" ROI.[11]

For every dollar spent, $44.25 is the average return on email marketing investment.[12]

Eighty-one percent of online shoppers who receive emails based on previous shopping habits were at least somewhat likely to make a purchase as a result of targeted email.[13]

Those who were most likely to use email on a daily basis were those with a college degree or an income greater than $75,000.[14]

Developing and Implementing Your Strategy

Email should be considered as one part of a whole content program strategy, and therefore needs to have its own strategy. Without a detailed plan, email marketing is nothing more than sharing content that you find interesting with a list of recipients. This style of marketing should be considered strategically because there are many different elements and components that can make it or break it. Before proceeding with an email marketing campaign, we suggest first looking at how email fits into your brand's content strategy as a whole, and then considering each of the following items to establish your email marketing strategy.

KEY QUESTIONS TO HELP DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT YOUR STRATEGY

TO ESTABLISH BUSINESS GOALS AND RULES:
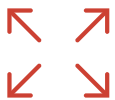What do I want to accomplish through this email campaign?

TO DESIGNATE A TARGET AUDIENCE:
Who do I want to engage with?

TO PLAN A DISTRIBUTION CADENCE:
How often do I want them to engage?

TO OBSERVE AND OPTIMIZE CONTENT:
What is performing the best and why?
What is performing the worst, and how can I change it?

TO MAINTAIN LISTS:
Who is consistently engaging, and who is not?

TO STRIVE FOR LOW DROP OFF:
Do recipients have content and cadence options?

1. Establish business goals and rules

The first step in increasing effectiveness is to establish your goals. Is increasing brand awareness a priority? Are you looking for higher site engagement? Are you trying to drive consumers to purchase your product? These are key questions that need to be asked at the outset of an email marketing campaign because it will affect every aspect of the content and email design going forward. Your email hierarchy should be designed around these goals.

For example, if your goal is to increase sales, you would want to put a coupon or percent-off deal in your subject line, and then have the offer be the first thing the consumer sees when they open the email. Below that, you would want to have featured products and content based on their previous purchases or known interests.

In addition to establishing your business goals, this is the time to establish business rules that will govern your strategy as a whole, such as only emailing opt-ins or detailing data and privacy policies. As issues with collecting data and maintaining data privacy are growing concerns not only in the United States, but around the world, it is also important to determine just how much information you can and are going to collect on consumers, and how much of that information you can and are going to use.

2. Designate a target audience

Understanding who your target audience is will dictate what content you create and distribute. Email marketing should be designed for and dedicated to the recipient. It will also determine your segmentation and personalization tactics as you begin to gather data on those recipients. One way to better understand your target audience is by developing personas that can provide insights on what content they might want to consume. Personas can help you develop a highly targeted marketing campaign that is significantly more likely to be successful.

> "
> Understanding who your target audience is will dictate what content you create and send out. Email marketing has to be designed for and dedicated to the recipient.

Another, even better option, however, is using historical transaction data. While this may be more difficult because it requires a consumer profile and data collection from a website or microsite, it helps pinpoint customers' spending habits, and product and service preferences. The more you tighten your content to fit the needs of your audience, the more engaged your audience becomes.

3. Plan a distribution cadence

You need to establish how often you are going to send out your emails based on both the business goals and the audience. It is important to tell your recipients how often they will be receiving emails and what type of content they can expect—this can be done in an introductory email. After this initial email, either manually or through an automated system, you can determine what content to send out, in what order and time frame. Using triggered email campaigns, such as welcome emails, thank you emails, shopping cart abandonment emails and personal emails for birthdays or anniversaries is another way to maintain a consistent conversation with your customers.

A distribution cadence will help maintain consistency and relevancy in the eyes of your audience. It ensures that their relationship with your brand is maintained and that you have a continued interest in their activity with your brand. Once you determine your cadence, you can then plan out a content workflow to establish hours of work and deadlines.

4. Observe and optimize content

Your content needs to be carefully monitored with each send in order to continuously improve performance and engagement. This is a key part of email marketing and is its most practical element. You can easily gather data and use analytics to understand what parts of your email are working and which ones aren't. This means noting which subject lines tend to lead to the most opens, which links are clicked most often and which visuals perform best. After you have gathered all of this information, you should be testing different elements of the email to improve performance.

> "
> The more you tighten your content to fit the needs of your audience, the more engaged your audience becomes.

Developing and Implementing Your Strategy

Testing should be an active and ongoing mandate for your email marketing strategy. A/B subject line and multivariate testing, content placement testing, CTA layout testing and imagery tests can provide great insights that allow you to optimize your content and achieve better engagement rates. Personalized, dynamic content within emails should be based on the results of your testing efforts as this data can provide a more tailored content experience to recipients.

You can also test different days of the week and times of day for non-triggered or automated emails to generate the best open rates, and test until statistical significance is found to validate content inclusion and the best layouts to increase click-through engagement. Companies like Movable Ink have platforms that work in conjunction with your email service provider to conduct real-time testing to maximize results.

EXAMPLE RESULTS BASED ON AN OPTIMIZATION STRATEGY

GOAL	OPTIMIZATION STRATEGY	RESULT
INCREASE VIEWS	Increase open rate: We pushed subject line tests to the first 5% of each send to increase open rate.	+3.2% increase in open rate, generating 192,000 more reads off a 6 million send list.
INCREASE EMAIL ENGAGEMENT	Increase clicks to site: We practiced split tests and served the same content in two different layouts to attempt to increase click through-rate over a 3-month period to factor out content choice.	Challenging layout saw an average of +11.1% increase in click-throughs by limiting text and leveraging imagery to solicit clicks during test run.
STABILIZE RETENTION RATE	Reduce unsubscription rate: To offset high opt-out rates from a robust email promotional calendar as the holidays approached in an effort to boost sales, a customized opt-out form was created.	On the first email, we immediately saw reduction of 2 percentage points (from 3.6% avg. to 1.6%) of recipients that opted out of receiving all email messaging.

5. Maintain lists

List governance is absolutely essential to a successful email marketing strategy. This should be done periodically; go into your lists once every quarter to take a look at which recipients have been consistently engaging with content and which ones have not. Gather the names of those who have not, and work on sending a "we miss you email," or reach out with a special offer that might entice them to become an active list member again. Make sure you are taking unsubscribes off your list and paying attention to bounce emails, as this will affect your deliverability ratings. List governance can be tedious, but it is critical for your email marketing to thrive, and it has been made easier by some automation options.

6. Strive for Low Drop-Off

Offer custom opt-out pages so customers can select exactly what type of content they want to receive and the cadence (as opposed to just opting out entirely). These custom pages can lead to a lower unsubscribe rate, as customers can select weekly or monthly emails containing content they know they want to see. Not only does this empower the customer, allowing them to feel more comfortable and trusting of your brand, it also can lead to an increase in open and click rates because they know that email contains content that they want. It's a win-win for both the brand and the consumer.

> "
> List governance can be tedious, but it is critical for your email marketing to thrive, and it has been made easier by some automation options.

BE INCLUSIVE, NOT INTRUSIVE

Emails should be strategic to add value to your brand, and ensure that it does not become something that detracts from your brand value. To avoid this, you need to make sure that your email is inclusive—not intrusive—for your target audience. Here are a few quick do's and don'ts to help keep your email out of the digital trash can:

DO	DON'T

☑ DO focus on the customer

Email should serve the customer, not the product. Whether you're driving consumers back to your content or selling a specific product, your email needs to take into account the wants, needs, beliefs and habits of your consumer. You shouldn't be promoting content that isn't relevant to them, which means you need to know some of their preferences. That's how you can effectively serve them the right content at the right time.

☑ DO provide the reader with something valuable

Plain and simple, your email has to contain something that the customer wants. If it's just pushing content that has no relevance to their lives, they have no reason to read it. There has to be an incentive, whether it's more knowledge, a discount or a good laugh. Providing something of value to the customer will make them feel less like a wallet and more like a valued individual, making them more likely to positively associate with your brand.

☒ DON'T use lists

Sending emails to people that don't know your brand is like beginning a conversation with a stranger to whom you have not introduced yourself—they're probably going to be a little surprised, a little confused and a little uncomfortable, because you've decided to enter their personal space without their knowledge or permission. This will make them more likely to walk away from the conversation. An email-marketing best practice is only sending to opt-ins. While your list size may be smaller, your engagement rates will likely be better because you'll be having a conversation with people that know you and want to interact.

☒ DON'T make unsubscribing difficult

By making it difficult to unsubscribe, you make the customer feel trapped. This creates negative feelings toward your brand that will make them less likely to engage in the future. Roadblocks to unsubscribing, such as requiring customers to log in, drives them toward easier actions such as blocking, or marking your emails as spam. This is bad for both the consumer and the brand, so make sure your unsubscribe option is visible and leads to an easily accessible web form.

Determining Benchmarks and Success:

Email strategies should have predetermined benchmarks for content in order to measure and understand what is effective and what is not. The critical numbers to consider when it comes to email marketing are open rate, click-through rate, conversion and site engagement, although there are various other metrics to consider depending on what your business goals are.

METRICS TO CONSIDER BASED ON BUSINESS GOALS[15]

GOAL	METRIC
INCREASE CONVERSIONS	• Conversion rate (percent of targets performing the desired behavior, including minimizing shopping cart abandonment) • Cost per conversion/sale • Site conversion rate
ACQUISITION	• Acquisition rate (number of new subscribers, fans, followers) • Cost per acquisition • ROI (Return on Investment)
LOYALTY	• RFM (Recency, Frequency, Monetary Value) • Number of recommendations • Number of "Forward to a Friend" • Unsubscribe rate
AWARENESS	• Number of unique website visitors • Number of impressions • Open/Click-through rate • Time spent • Pages viewed • Search keyword impressions

Determining Benchmarks and Success:

While the desired metrics for each category may be different based on your brand's goals, it is important to consider each of these aspects in relation to your content and distribution. After analyzing the abundant data that email provides, you can make editorial and distribution recommendations to improve your reach.

Understanding industry benchmarks

If you're just starting out with your email marketing, you'll need to set your initial benchmarks using guidance from a source like Experian, IBM or Bronto. They have compiled data to get the average email marketing metrics by customer and industry, so you can establish some baseline numbers to try to hit when you start out with your email marketing. It is important to find an example as close as possible to your brand because, even in the same industry, business-to-business email metrics will be very different than business-to-consumer email metrics. While these numbers will likely change over time because every brand and company is different, they are helpful to give you an idea of what numbers you want to look for.

Establishing your own benchmarks

After you have completed three or four email marketing campaigns, you can begin to look at how your consumers are reacting and what your average metrics look like. This is the time to compare your metrics to the industry benchmarks and find an average goal for your brand or company. When doing this, it is important to compare apples to apples, i.e., promotional emails against promotional emails, rather than comparing a promotional email to a monthly e-newsletter. You should also pay attention to the differences between emails your brand pushes on a given date versus triggered or automated emails that occur within a customer's time frame—when they abandon a cart or sign up for your emails for example. These are the kinds of things that you need to take into account, as they can cause variations in your data.

> "
> While the desired metrics for each category may be different based on your brand's goals, it is important to consider each of these aspects in relation to your content and distribution.

Determining Benchmarks and Success:

As you continue to send out emails and review the subsequent data, you will be able to step further and further away from industry benchmarks and simply compare new data to your historical data. This is how your email campaign metrics should be determined throughout the rest of your marketing strategy development so that you can always work to outdo yourself. Success with your email marketing campaigns will mean you're hitting these benchmarks, and that will manifest into higher engagement rates, more site activity, more subscribers, higher conversion rates and increased ROI.

SAMPLE SUCCESSES

Our email optimization approach is always based on adapting our monthly testing variables to improve for the KPIs that are performing the lowest when compared to our benchmarks and objectives.

For example: Client A used a combination of A/B subject line testing and saw a 24 percent lift in open rate. The following month we used a combination of A/B image testing and updated their editorial approach based on content performance tagging to gain a 54 percent lift in click-through rate. Each month, we test, learn and adapt to constantly optimize each program.

CLIENT A

MONTH 1

MONTH 2

↑**54**%

A/B IMAGE

↑**24**%

A/B SUBJECT LINE
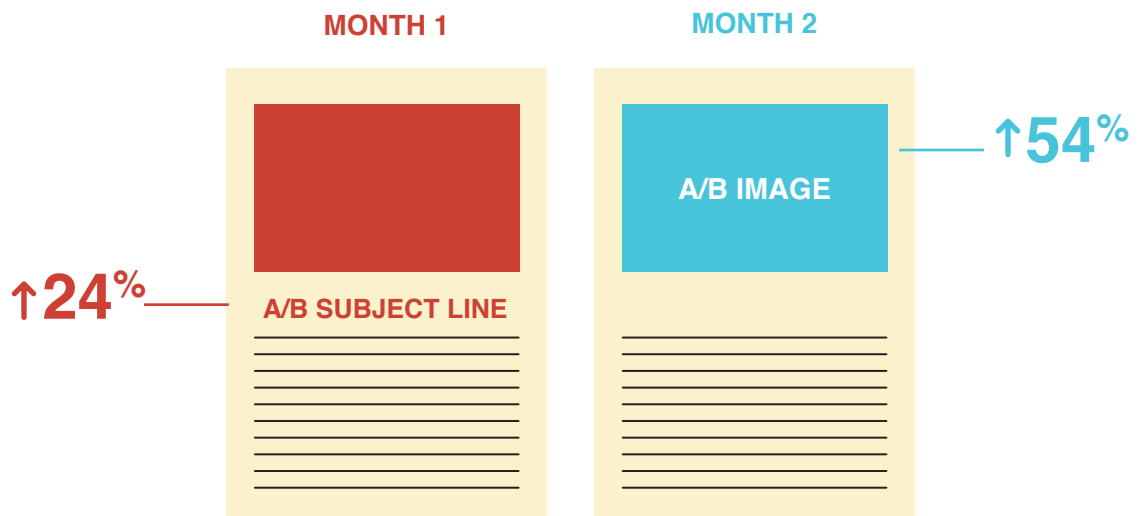
Conclusion

Email can be a strong and hard-working business driver, lead generator and relationship-builder. Pace believes in a holistic email marketing strategy that incorporates a test-and-learn mentality so that you are continuously optimizing your content and distribution. Email without strategy is often ineffective and will not yield maximum ROI.

As reviewed, there are a variety of important elements that go into a strong email marketing program, the most important of which are determining your brand's goals and target audience, creating a distribution cadence, producing relevant high-quality content, optimizing that content and maintaining your lists. Always keep in mind that the best results come when you outdo yourself, so keep your focus on exceeding your benchmarks and connecting with your audience, it will pay off in the end.

Email marketing will likely see a shift toward more automation and higher levels of personalization as it evolves, so your strategy should be somewhat flexible to accommodate these types of shifts, as we live in a fast-paced multi-channel market. Automation and personalization will benefit both brands and consumers, as they will work toward creating closer one-on-one connections through targeted content and better B2C conversations.

Also, keep customer expectations in mind, as the digital marketing landscape shifts based on their wants and needs. Your strategy needs to be able to adapt quickly to the different content, cadence and distribution desires of your target audience.

With strategic email marketing we can still reach out and make personal connections with customers in a fast-paced digital world, to add value to our brands as long as we are smart—and strategic—about it. Although the future of content marketing is shifting, email remains a foothold in industry and therefore it should be a key part of your overall targeted content distribution strategy.

> "
> Email without strategy is often ineffective and will not yield maximum ROI.

Work Citation

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About the Author and Contributors

JILLIAN SMITH
Associate Editor & Communications Manager

Jillian manages Pace's blog, social channels and Content+, the Digital Content Hub to support new business efforts and internal marketing. Jillian is a born storyteller with a passion for gaining new insights and sharing them with others. Drawing on her journalistic background, she helps create compelling content to tell Pace's story and assist in growing the pipeline. Jillian recently graduated magna cum laude from North Carolina State University with a degree in Communication Media. During her time at the university she served as Editor-In-Chief of the *Nubian Message* and was a communication and marketing intern for Enrollment Management and Services.

About the Contributors

ADAM BRAXTON
VP, Strategic Insights

Adam brings nearly 15 years of digital marketing and strategy experience to Pace. Adam's primary responsibilities include guiding digital and channel-optimization strategy for multiple Pace clients, including Wells Fargo and Walmart. He has extensive strategic experience and understanding in multidisciplinary and integrated programs, including platform management, program measurement, email and CRM performance, and applied marketing automation. Prior to joining Pace, Adam served as the director of digital marketing for Flow Automotive, a conglomerate of more than 30 dealerships, and was a senior digital strategist at Mullen. Adam is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and holds a master's in Business Administration from Wake Forest University.

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BROOKE WAGNER
Director, Social Media & Content Activation

Brooke leads Pace's social media and content activation team—and our clients—to the next level of digital success. Guided by her passion for digital strategy and emerging media, Brooke has led innovative marketing initiatives for notable brands such as Walmart, Office Depot, Delhaize Group, Destination Hotels & Resorts, Hyatt Hotels Corporation, Marriott Autograph Collection, Phoenix Children's Hospital and Mayflower. Her 14 years of agency and client-side experience give her a unique insight into the needs of businesses from every angle. Blending digital proficiency and a data-driven approach, Brooke leads Pace's social media and content activation team—and our clients—to the next level of digital success. Brooke's accolades include numerous Phoenix ADDY Awards and a prestigious Platinum Adrian Award from HSMAI. Brooke graduated cum laude from Florida State University.
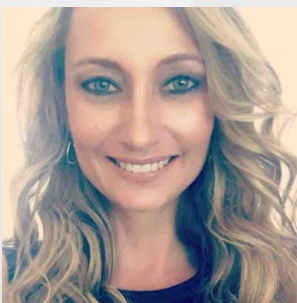
MISTY JONES
Strategist

Where others see just a spreadsheet, Misty sees a story. As strategist, Misty brings 10+ years of digital marketing experience to Pace as well as a command of how data drives decision-making. A graduate of N.C. State University with a degree in communication, Misty has extensive experience with digital marketing, including, but not limited to, email marketing, SEO strategy, e-commerce and social media. She thrives in the fast pace of the digital world. Prior to joining Pace, Misty was the digital marketing manager at an educational publishing company, leading the transition from marketing print-based products to digital.

About the Author and Contributors

NICOLE MARTIN
Director, Strategy

Nicole has extensive strategic planning experience with e-commerce and content-related websites involving both traditional and web marketing, brand management, affiliate marketing, organic and paid search, social media, email marketing, CRMs and influencer programs. Currently, she works with Pace clients including INVISTA, Trulia, Rackspace, Argo Group and Four Seasons to maximize online visibility, plan and create efficiency for digital marketing strategies and increase the volume of qualified visitors to content. This involves detailed site structural review and adjustments, user experience, conversion optimization testing, organic optimization, link building and other various SEO practices. She also provides conversion metrics and ROI evaluations to fully understand the impacts of Pace's content development and strategies. Prior to joining Pace, Nicole served in various marketing roles for large corporations, including Lowe's Home Improvement, Hanesbrands Inc. and Tanger Outlets.

EMILY WRIGHT
Director, Marketing & Research

Emily joined Pace more than 10 years ago. During her time with the organization, she has been responsible for agency marketing, new business support, account management and research for existing clients, including Verizon and Walmart. Prior to joining Pace, Emily worked for large media organizations including mtv.com and CNET, where she managed advertising partnership programs for technology-focused enterprises including, Intel, Netgear, and Microsoft. Emily is a graduate of Marquette University.

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ABOUT PACE

Pace is North America's leading independent content agency, specializing in multichannel branded content solutions that fuel loyalty, CRM, marketing, digital and social programs for many of the world's largest brands. We have a staff of more than 330 professionals located in five offices across the U.S.—Greensboro, North Carolina; New York; Dallas; San Antonio; and Rogers, Arkansas. We help our clients navigate through the complex marketing landscape to develop programs that deliver targeted outcomes.