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# Rethinking the Relationship between Subject Line Length and Email Performance: A New Perspective on Subject Line Design

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## Executive Summary

**In general, shorter subject lines are associated with better email performance, as determined by opens and clicks. Yet despite the attention this topic has received in the industry press, the correlation between subject line length and response is relatively weak for most email programs.**

**Epsilon's research shows that word order and content may be as important in eliciting response as the number of characters in a subject line. In other words, marketers should rethink how they develop subject lines and place increased emphasis on positioning the most important elements first — a concept Epsilon calls “pole position” writing.**

## Introduction

A subject line is often the first opportunity an email marketer has to capture a consumer's attention. Multiple analyses conducted by Epsilon have shown that the subject line is the most important factor in driving overall response, from initial open and click to eventual conversion. In more than 20 multivariate tests with Epsilon clients — using statistical methods to systematically vary creative content, placement and design to establish the winning combination, or “super email” — the subject line is almost always the factor most responsible for triggering opens and clicks. Common sense also underscores the vital importance of the subject line; it is one of the few factors consumers consider when deciding whether to open an email.

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of subject lines, companies often don't test their effectiveness. They spend little time thinking about and testing subject lines, compared to the time and resources devoted to creative development, even though significantly more people will see a subject line than its accompanying creative.<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written on one particular aspect of subject lines: the length. Most research on this

topic concludes that shorter subject lines are better. Other studies claim that longer subject lines work best. New research conducted by Epsilon confirms that shorter subject lines generally outperform longer ones but also quantifies the relationship between subject line length (SLL) and open and click rates. Additionally, the Epsilon findings discussed here suggest that word order and selection are vitally important considerations in subject line effectiveness. This white paper reviews new research on the relationship between SLL and response, and proposes a framework for evaluating SLL as it relates to email marketing efforts.

## Why is SLL Important?

In its 2007 Email Benchmark Guide, MarketingSherpa concludes, “When it comes to subject lines, shorter is better. It's as close to a universal rule of the Internet that simple messages that can be instantly digested are the best way to take advantage of our short digital attention span.”<sup>2</sup> However, the superiority of shorter subject lines isn't solely a function of consumers' busy lives and short attention spans. In fact, SLL is often predetermined by technical constraints.

<sup>1</sup> MarketingSherpa's 2008 Email Marketing Benchmark Guide (p.185) reports subject line testing usage is actually quite high (80% to 95%) among companies regardless of frequency, depending on industry or market segment. Epsilon's experience is that when companies do test subject lines, most do so *infrequently*.

<sup>2</sup> MarketingSherpa's 2007 Email Marketing Benchmark Guide, p. 263

Email domains often limit the number of subject line characters displayed by default in the inbox. AOL, which is responsible for approximately 22% of the U.S. email market, limits subject lines to roughly 38 characters. Yahoo!, with 21% of U.S. email, has an approximate limit of 47 characters per subject line. Hotmail, which has 14% of the U.S. email market, uses word wrap to display subject lines on multiple lines, allowing approximately 45 characters per line.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, 57% of U.S. email recipients see only the first 38 to 47 characters of a subject line when making the decision to open an email. Additionally, the growing reliance on mobile devices — and their smaller screens that display even fewer characters — affects this trend as well.

## Primary Research

Much of the research on SLL and email performance concludes that shorter subject lines work better.<sup>4</sup> However, these studies may over-simplify the impact by establishing artificial ranges for SLL and then averaging performance for these ranges. This has the effect of masking the overall strength of the relationship between SLL and email response.

Epsilon's analysis of SLL and response evaluates the correlation between the length of the subject line of each campaign and the unique open and total click rates of that campaign.<sup>5</sup> This approach not only determines whether shorter subject lines correlate with better email performance, it also analyzes the overall strength of the relationship.

## Methodology

Five Epsilon clients were chosen at random from Epsilon's retail client base. The analysis includes all messages from these clients between June 2007 and June 2008, with the exception of messages sent

to fewer than 100 individuals and messages with a personalized subject line.<sup>6</sup>

This analysis comprised 568.7 million emails from 2,365 campaigns. Opens were calculated as unique opens/(multipart emails delivered + HTML emails delivered). Clicks were calculated as total clicks/total emails delivered.

Another industry was selected to validate the findings

Table 1: Correlation between SLL and response for retail companies

Client	Avg. Open	Avg. Click	Avg. SLL	Open/ SLL Corr.	Click/ SLL Corr.
Retail Client 1	33.9%	7.3%	39.1	0.06	-0.21
Retail Client 2	37.1%	9.8%	44.2	-0.02	0.09
Retail Client 3	28.6%	8.1%	37.8	-0.15	-0.28
Retail Client 4	42.1%	21.5%	29.7	-0.31	-0.09
Retail Client 5	19.2%	6.5%	30.8	-0.08	-0.19
Average			36.3	-0.10	-0.13

between subject line and response. Thus, the same methodology was applied to five random clients in the consumer services industry, which resulted in 17,516 campaigns and more than 507.3 million messages.

Table 2: Correlation between SLL and response for consumer services companies

Client	Avg. Open	Avg. Click	Avg. SLL	Open/ SLL Corr.	Click/ SLL Corr.
Consumer Services Client 1	14.0%	3.8%	37.8	-0.42	-0.59
Consumer Services Client 2	21.5%	2.0%	47.8	0.04	-0.04
Consumer Services Client 3	33.0%	12.6%	36.4	-0.15	-0.03
Consumer Services Client 4	33.8%	12.0%	36.2	-0.15	0.04
Consumer Services Client 5	15.6%	3.3%	48.0	-0.46	-0.23
Average			41.2	-0.23	-0.17

Tables 1 and 2 clearly show that, overall, longer subject lines correlate with lower open rates and click rates for both industries, yet the rates vary by company. For example, the open rates of Consumer Services Clients 1 and 5 show a high negative correlation with SLL. Consumer Services Client 1 also has a high correlation

<sup>3</sup> Internal Epsilon research. Actual character lengths depend on interface configuration. These approximations are based on the default layout for these three domains.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see MailChimp's "Best Practices in Writing Email Subject Lines" at <http://www.mailchimp.com/resources/best-practices-in-writing-email-subject-lines.phtml>, and MailerMailer's November 2008 "Email Marketing Metrics Report" at <http://imagehosting.mailermailer.com/email-marketing-metrics-2007h2.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Correlation measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables. It is measured between -1 and +1, where a -1 correlation is a perfect negative relationship (as one variable increases the other decreases at the same rate) and +1 is a perfect positive relationship. A 0 correlation means that no linear relationship exists between the variables.

<sup>6</sup> Campaigns with personalized subject lines were removed from the analysis because the personalization aspect would render the subject line of variable length.

of SLL to clicks. Obviously, this company should be very attentive to the length of its subject lines. However, for most other companies in the study, the relationship between SLL and email performance is relatively weak. As much as writing short subject lines is a widely endorsed practice, Epsilon's analysis of more than a billion emails and nearly 20,000 campaigns shows that, in general, SLL isn't as important as commonly thought.

One email marketing company has written an article on SLL entitled, "Subject lines – length is everything."<sup>7</sup> Although SLL is still a valid and important consideration, Epsilon's study indicates that length shouldn't be the sole criterion for effectiveness.

Different publications offer different recommendations for maximum SLL, ranging from 35 to 50 to 60 and even 70 characters.<sup>8</sup> Marketers should keep in mind that most recipients will likely decide to open an email based on their relationship with the sender and the first 38 to 47 characters of the subject line. However, that decision may depend less on a subject line of 38 to 47 characters, and more on the information those 38 to 47 characters contain.

## Subject Lines: Beyond Length

Consider the following subject line couplet:

### Subject line 1:

"This weekend only at your local Acme Store, special savings on Ladies Apparel!"

### Subject line 2:

"Special savings on Ladies Apparel at your local Acme Store this weekend only!"

These two fictitious subject lines are identical in length but differ greatly from a functional perspective. The first subject line follows a time>brand>benefit>

category structure. The second follows a benefit>category>brand>time structure.

In all likelihood, these two subject lines would not perform the same. But without knowing the brand and the audience, a marketer would be challenged to predict which would perform better. This scenario illustrates how word order and word choice can trump absolute length.

Another example:

### Subject line 1:

"Last chance to order for Valentines Day is this Wednesday, Order Now"

### Subject line 2:

"Only 48 hours to order for guaranteed Valentines Day delivery"

Subject line 2 is shorter and uses a numeral in the subject line (a widely accepted best practice), yet subject line 1 provided a 23% lift in sales for the florist that sent it. Why? It may be due to the absolute deadline ("this Wednesday") versus the relative deadline ("only 48 hours") in the second subject line. Also, subject line 2 adopts the point of view of the company (48 hours from when message was sent, not 48 hours from when the subject line was opened), versus the point of view of the recipient. Thus, the first subject line may have been less confusing to the consumer. Finally, the first subject line referred to the holiday earlier in the subject line than the second subject line and used the ultimatum "last chance."

This example highlights two points: first, subject lines can have an enormous impact on a company's bottom line, not just their open rate; second, subject line testing is difficult.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.alchemyworx.com/subjectlines-lengthiseverything.php>

<sup>8</sup> See the MailChimp, MailerMailer, and Alchemy Worx studies previously cited.

A final example:

**Subject line 1:**

“U.S. May Face Shortage of General Surgeons”

**Subject line 2:**

“4/29/2008: U.S. May Face Shortage of General Surgeons”

The only difference between these two subject lines is the date at the beginning of subject line 2. In this case, subject line 2 performed slightly better in terms of opens and clicks. Simply put, sometimes a longer subject line is justified by an element that increases response. Other examples of this phenomenon are the inclusion of brand messaging or personalization in the subject line.

## Exceptions to the Rule

According to MailChimp, an email service provider specializing in smaller clients, “The general rule of thumb in email marketing is to keep your subject line to 50 characters or less.... The exception was for highly targeted audiences where the reader apparently appreciated the additional information in the subject line.”<sup>9</sup>

One email program that qualifies as MailChimp’s exception to the rule is the Kimberly-Clark brand GoodNites®, which markets products for children with bedwetting challenges.<sup>10</sup> Over the past year, GoodNites has averaged a whopping 94 characters for its subject lines—2 to 3 times longer what is commonly accepted as a “best practice.” Longer subject lines simply perform better for the brand, with SLL correlating to a unique open rate and total click-through rate of .47 and .53, respectively—high correlations by marketing standards. In fact, in 14 of 22 (64%) recent A/B or A/B/C subject line tests, the longer subject line performed better, regardless of subject line content.

One tactic that GoodNites employs in its subject lines is the use of lists, as in the example: “4 Bedwetting Causes, Parents Helping Parents, Valuable Coupon and More!” In GoodNites’ case, the extra information afforded by the longer subject line helps GoodNites reach a wide variety of consumers who are at various points in their relationship with the brand.

Ellen Watson, the member of Kimberly-Clark’s Media and Relationship Marketing team who manages the newsletter, says, “Someone who is just starting to confront the issue of bedwetting might be searching for advice and information, whereas someone loyal to the product would be more interested in coupons or special offers, and a highly engaged member of our online community might be interested in hearing stories from other parents. Our longer subject lines can speak to all these consumers at once.” Also, GoodNites’ extensive use of compound subject lines with short, pithy statements allows the subject line to be digested at multiple intervals, independent of the subject line’s appearance in the consumer’s inbox.

In terms of domain limitations, an AOL consumer might see the GoodNites subject line as “4 Bedwetting Causes, Parents Helping P;” whereas a Yahoo! consumer would see “4 Bedwetting Causes, Parents Helping Parents, Valu.” Although the subject line would be incomplete in both inboxes, it still holds meaning. For even higher response potential, GoodNites should test the order of subject line elements, given that not all elements will be visible from the inbox.

Given that most U.S. consumers see only the first 40 characters or so of a subject line, marketers should be careful to construct the subject line in such a way as to include the most vital information first. Epsilon calls this technique “pole position” writing. For one email

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.mailchimp.com/resources/best-practices-in-writing-email-subject-lines.phtml>

<sup>10</sup> Epsilon would like to thank GoodNites® for allowing us to share their experience with subject line testing.

campaign, the vital piece of information may be the brand name. For another, it may be the consumer benefit. Only systemized testing can reveal what works best in each situation and for each consumer population.

## Conclusions

Epsilon's new research confirms the widely held belief that, in most cases, shorter subject lines perform better. However, the research suggests that the way in which content and brand messaging are positioned can be as important to email success as the number of characters in the subject line. While a host of studies show that shorter subject lines improve email performance, Epsilon's research indicates that the relationship between SLL and performance is weaker than is widely believed. Other marketers have found that with specialized audiences, longer subject lines often deliver higher open and click rates. But in all cases, subject line content continues to be a vitally important element in delivering response.

Because higher open and click rates depend on the optimum combination of SLL and content, marketers should keep in mind the following rules of thumb:

1. Front load subject lines with the most important information.
2. Keep the subject line as short as possible to convey the message.
3. Use longer subject lines only when there is a compelling reason to do so.
4. When in doubt, test.

## About the Author

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