The Email Marketing Secrets Guide

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Great email marketing comes down to three secrets: get into the inbox, use AI to create faster and smarter, and squeeze more value out of the list you already have. Most marketers, from brand-new senders to five-year veterans, are missing at least one of them.

This guide is the step-by-step companion to my talk. Each section explains what the secret is, why it matters, and exactly what to do about it. Work through it in order: there is no point writing great emails if they land in spam.

How to use this guide

- **Section 1 and 2:** Fix your technical foundation (authentication and the mailbox provider rules).
- **Section 3:** Update how you measure engagement now that opens are unreliable.
- **Section 4:** Copy the AI prompts and adapt them to your own product.
- **Section 5:** Put your existing subscribers to work on other channels.
- **Section 6 and 7:** Protect your list with validation, then work the checklist.

Throughout, I use a running example: launching my (fictional) hot sauce, **Hank's Secret Sauce**. Swap in your own product, service, or offer.

Secret #1: Get into the inbox with email authentication

If your emails don't reach the inbox, nobody reads them, nobody clicks, and nobody buys. Authentication is how you prove to Gmail, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Apple that your email really comes from you.

There are three required records (SPF, DKIM, DMARC) and one optional one (BIMI). All of them live in your domain's DNS settings, wherever your domain is hosted (GoDaddy, Namecheap, Cloudflare, Google Domains, and so on).

Quick quiz: Can you say what SPF, DKIM, and DMARC stand for? If yes, use this section to double-check your setup. If not, start here.

Step 1: SPF (Sender Policy Framework)

What it does: SPF is a permission slip. It lists which services are allowed to send email for your domain. When I send from hankhoffmeier.com through my email platform, the receiving server checks: "Is this platform allowed to send for this domain?" SPF answers yes.

Why it matters: Without it, spammers can impersonate your domain more easily, and your real emails look suspicious.

How to set it up:

1. Log in to your domain host and open the DNS settings.
2. Look for an existing TXT record that starts with `v=spf1`. You can only have **one** SPF record per domain.
3. Get the "include" value from your email platform's help docs (search "[platform name] SPF record").
4. Add or edit the TXT record. It will look something like: `v=spf1 include:_spf.youremailplatform.com ~all`
5. If you send from several tools (Google Workspace, your ESP, your CRM), put all the includes in that one record: `v=spf1 include:_spf.google.com include:servers.youresp.com ~all`

Tip: Many platforms handle this for you, but never assume. Verify it.

Step 2: DKIM (DomainKeys Identified Mail)

What it does: DKIM adds a digital signature to every email. The receiving server uses a public key in your DNS to confirm the message came from you and wasn't altered along the way. Think of it as a tamper-proof seal.

How to set it up:

1. In your email platform, find the domain authentication or sender authentication settings.
2. The platform will give you one or more DNS records (usually CNAME or TXT) with a "selector" name, like `s1._domainkey.yourdomain.com`.
3. Add each record exactly as given at your domain host.
4. Go back to your email platform and click "Verify." DNS changes can take from a few minutes up to 48 hours.
5. Repeat for every tool that sends email as your domain.

Step 3: DMARC (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting and Conformance)

What it does: DMARC ties SPF and DKIM together and tells receiving servers what to do when an email fails those checks. It's the security guard at the entrance of your domain. It also sends you reports on who is sending email using your domain.

How to set it up:

1. Add a TXT record with the host/name `_dmarc`.
2. Start with a monitoring policy: `v=DMARC1; p=none; rua=mailto:dmarc@yourdomain.com`
3. The `p=` tag is your policy:
   - `p=none`: Monitor only. Deliver everything, send me reports.
   - `p=quarantine`: Send failing emails to spam.
   - `p=reject`: Block failing emails completely.
4. Leave it at `p=none` for a few weeks and read the reports. You'll often discover other departments, old tools, or even bad actors overseas sending from your domain.
5. Once every legitimate sender passes SPF or DKIM, move to `p=quarantine`, then to `p=reject`.

Reading DMARC reports: The raw reports are XML files that are painful to read. Use a free or low-cost reader like dmarcian, EasyDMARC, or Postmark's free DMARC tool to turn them into readable dashboards.

Note: `p=none` meets the minimum that Gmail, Yahoo, and Microsoft require today. But `p=none` doesn't protect your domain from spoofing, and BIMI (below) requires quarantine or reject. Treat `p=none` as a starting point, not a finish line.

Step 4 (optional): BIMI (Brand Indicators for Message Identification)

What it does: BIMI shows your logo next to your emails in the inbox instead of a plain initial. It builds instant recognition and trust, and helps you stand out.

What you need:

- DMARC at `p=quarantine` or `p=reject`
- Your logo as an SVG file in a specific format (SVG Tiny P/S)
- A BIMI TXT record at `default._bimi.yourdomain.com`

- For Gmail and Apple Mail, a mark certificate. Yahoo, AOL, and FastMail can show your logo without one.

Certificate	Trademark needed?	Starting price	What you get
Verified Mark Certificate (VMC)	Yes, a registered trademark	About $1,550 per year	Logo across major inboxes, plus a blue checkmark in Gmail
Common Mark Certificate (CMC)	No, logo in use for 12+ months	About $1,089 per year	Logo in Gmail, no checkmark

Prices from The SSL Store; shop around.

My take: If you have the budget, do it. If you don't, it's not the end of the world. Get SPF, DKIM, and DMARC right first.

Step 5: Check your work

Send a test email to a free checker and fix anything flagged:

- aboutmy.email: Send an email to the address it gives you and get a full report on authentication, BIMI, and more.
- MXToolbox: Look up your SPF, DKIM, and DMARC records individually.
- mail-tester.com: A quick deliverability score out of 10.

In Gmail, you can also open any email you sent, click the three dots, choose **Show original**, and look for `SPF: PASS`, `DKIM: PASS`, and `DMARC: PASS`.

Follow the rules of "Yahoogle Soft"

Google and Yahoo started enforcing sender rules in 2024, and Microsoft joined them in May 2025. I call this powerhouse trio "Yahoogle Soft." If you send 5,000 or more emails a day to their users, these rules are required, and non-compliant mail can be rejected outright. If you send less, follow them anyway: they're the new baseline for good deliverability.

Rule	What it means	What to do
Authenticate	SPF, DKIM, and DMARC (at least `p=none`) must be in place and aligned with your From domain	Complete Secret #1 above
One-click unsubscribe	An unsubscribe option in the email header, next to your sender name, not just a footer link	Confirm your email platform adds "List-Unsubscribe" headers (most major platforms do)
Honor unsubscribes fast	Process unsubscribe requests within 2 days	Never make people log in or retype their email to unsubscribe
Low complaint rate	Keep spam complaints under 0.1% (1 per 1,000 emails) and never reach 0.3% (3 per 1,000)	Check your rate in Google Postmaster Tools and Yahoo's Sender Hub
Valid reply address	Your From and Reply-To addresses should be real and working	Stop sending from "noreply@" addresses

Sources: dmarcian on Microsoft's requirements, PowerDMARC on Google and Yahoo's requirements.

Complaint rates are measured per mailbox provider. Your rate at Gmail and your rate at Yahoo each need to stay low on their own. If you send valuable, expected emails, you usually won't have to worry. If you're struggling, see the list hygiene tips below.

Your sender reputation is a credit score

Mailbox providers score two things every time you send:

- **IP reputation:** The reputation of the servers sending your email (your own, or your email platform's shared servers).
- **Domain reputation:** The reputation of your sending domain, like hankhoffmeier.com. This follows you no matter which platform you use.

Every email you send adds good or bad marks to that score.

Good signals	Bad signals
Clicks and replies	Bounces (sending to invalid addresses)

Good signals	Bad signals
Forwarding	Spam complaints
Starring or saving	Unsubscribes
Moving it out of spam ("not spam")	Being ignored or deleted without reading
Adding you to contacts	Spam trap hits

Being ignored hurts. If large parts of your list never engage, providers start assuming your mail isn't wanted.

How to keep your reputation high

1. Only email people who asked to hear from you. Never buy lists.
2. Send a welcome email right away so new subscribers remember who you are.
3. Deliver value in every email, not just offers.
4. Make unsubscribing easy. An unsubscribe is far better than a spam complaint.
5. Validate email addresses before you send (see the Real Secret section below).
6. Remove or re-engage people who haven't clicked in six months or more (see the next section).

Opens are dead: measure what matters now

Open rates can no longer tell you who is really engaged. Here's why, and what to do instead.

Why opens stopped working

Apple Mail Privacy Protection (MPP) automatically loads the images in emails for anyone using the Apple Mail app, even if they never look at the email. If you email me and my phone is in my pocket, it still counts as an open. That's true even if my account is Gmail, as long as I read it in Apple Mail.

The result: inflated open rates, and you can't reliably clean out people who "haven't opened in six months."

Why preview text matters less (and your body copy matters more)

Apple Intelligence on iPhone, iPad, and Mac now writes AI summaries of emails. In the inbox and on the lock screen, the summary can replace your preview text. That summary is written from the **body of your email**.

What this means for you:

- Your subject line still matters.
- Your preview text still helps, but it may not be seen.
- Your **first few lines of body copy** need to carry the main point and the reason to act, so the AI summary sells for you.

What to track instead of opens

- **Clicks and click-through rate:** The clearest signal of real interest.
- **Replies:** Great for engagement and for your reputation.
- **Conversions:** Purchases, bookings, and sign-ups from email.
- **Website visits:** Tracked with UTM tags on your links.
- **Unsubscribe and complaint rates:** Your early warning system.

Run a re-permission campaign

The newsletter Stacked Marketer handles this well. They send a short email that says, in effect: "Since Apple's update, we can't tell if you're still reading. Want to keep getting our newsletter every weekday? Click here and you're all set." Anyone who clicks is confirmed engaged.

How to do it:

1. Create a segment of subscribers with no clicks in the last 3 to 6 months.
2. Send a simple, honest email explaining why you're asking.
3. Include one clear button: "Yes, keep me on the list."
4. Tag everyone who clicks as engaged.
5. Send one or two reminders to the rest.
6. Suppress or remove anyone who still doesn't click. A smaller, engaged list delivers better than a big, sleepy one.

Sample copy:

> **Subject:** Still want to hear from us?
>
> Hi [First Name], email privacy updates make it hard for us to tell who's still reading. If you'd like to keep getting [tips / deals / updates], just click below. If not, no hard feelings, we'll stop sending.
>
> **[Yes, keep me subscribed]**

Secret #2: AI and email play by different rules

AI and email are a match made in heaven. AI won't replace marketers, but marketers who use AI will replace those who don't. As Gary Vaynerchuk put it, people said the same thing about tractors: jobs change, and new ones are created.

Email is also more forgiving of AI than SEO. Search engines judge content closely. With email, your subscribers are the judge. Low-quality copy that nobody engages with will still hurt your reputation, so always edit what AI gives you. **Garbage in, garbage out.**

Five rules for prompting

1. **Give context:** What you sell, who it's for, and the goal of the email.
2. **Set guardrails:** Length, tone, words to use, and things to avoid.
3. **Ask for options:** Five subject lines beats one.
4. **Keep the conversation going:** The AI remembers the chat, so refine instead of starting over.
5. **Edit everything:** Treat AI output as a first draft, never the final.

The prompts below work in ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or Copilot. Replace the bracketed parts with your own details.

Subject lines

```
I sell [product], called [name]. It's [key features / benefits]. I need
subject lines for an email that gets people to [goal: buy, book, register].
Use words like [word 1, word 2, word 3].
Give me 5 options. Use up to 2 relevant emojis per subject line. Don't always
start or end with an emoji, and don't use the same emoji twice in one subject
line.
```

Then follow up:

```
What is the character count and word count for each of these subject lines?
```

Target length: About 6 to 10 words, or roughly 40 to 50 characters, so it doesn't get cut off on mobile.

From my hot sauce example, AI gave me winners like "Heat seekers wanted: Hank's Secret Sauce awaits your palate." Not every option was good, but a couple were great starting points.

Preview text

```
Now write preview text for each of these subject lines. The preview text should extend the subject line, not repeat it. Keep each one under 90 characters.
```

Cut anything too long. Remember, Apple's AI summaries may replace preview text, so don't rely on it alone.

Body copy

```
Write 3 different opening paragraphs for my email about [product]. Use email personalization like [First Name]. The goal is to get people interested in [product] and to [action]. Put the main benefit and the call to action in the first two sentences.
```

Put your key point up top so it shows up in Apple Intelligence summaries. Then rewrite the result in your own voice.

Images

```
Create a realistic, minimal product photo of a hot sauce bottle. The label is black and says "Hank's Secret Sauce" in bold white letters. The glass bottle is orange, with small flames in the background. Keep it simple and as real as possible. No other text.
```

Tips for AI images:

- Put any text you want on the image **inside quotation marks**. It will spell it correctly most of the time.
- Check every image for misspelled or made-up words. My first try gave me a label that said "Pepy" for no reason.

- Be specific about style: "realistic," "minimal," "product photo," "flat illustration."
- Try more than one tool. Ideogram is strong with text in images. ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot also create images.

Segmentation

The four pillars of segmentation:

Pillar	The question it answers	Hot sauce example
Geographic	Where are they?	Email only Atlanta subscribers about an Atlanta pop-up shop
Demographic	Who are they?	Age, job, household, business type
Psychographic	What do they value?	Lifestyle, values, attitudes, interests, opinions (like health-conscious cooks)
Behavioral	What do they do?	Clicks, purchases, website visits, how often they reorder

How to collect this data when you only ask for a name and email at sign-up:

- **Two-step forms:** Ask for name and email first. After they submit, ask one or two more questions, and say why ("Tell us your spice level so we only send what you'll love").
- **Surveys:** Short, one-question surveys in your emails.
- **Preference centers:** Let people update their profile and interests.
- **Behavior:** Track clicks, purchases, and site visits automatically.

People will share more than you expect if the question is relevant and you explain why you're asking.

```
I sell [product]. Give me email segmentation ideas for my subscribers,
including ones I might not think of as a marketer.
```

For my hot sauce, AI suggested segments I hadn't considered: spice tolerance, usage frequency (for reorder reminders), cooking experience, flavor preference, special occasions (like the Super Bowl), and health-conscious buyers.

Don't forget your VIPs. Marketers often give new subscribers the best discounts and ignore loyal customers who've bought again and again. Create a VIP segment and reward them.

Automation

Marketing automation is convincing the right people to need what you provide at the right time.

```
I need ideas on how to use email automation to sell [product]. Don't hold back. List each automation, the trigger, and how many emails it should include.
```

The core automations every business should consider:

- **Welcome series:** Always welcome new subscribers, or they'll forget who you are and may mark you as spam.
- **Abandoned cart:** A must if you sell online.
- **Replenishment reminders:** "Running low? Time to restock."
- **Cross-sell and upsell:** Related products, bundles, and merch.
- **Seasonal promotions:** Holidays, events, and big games.
- **Reviews and feedback:** Ask happy customers for a review.
- **Loyalty and VIP rewards:** Thank your best customers.
- **Re-engagement:** Win back subscribers who've gone quiet.

Data analysis and cleanup

AI is great at analyzing and fixing data. Protect privacy: remove personally identifiable information (PII) first, or check your company's policy before uploading.

Find your top email domains:

```
Here is a list of email domains from my subscriber list. Give me a breakdown of the top 5 domains (like gmail.com, yahoo.com) with counts and percentages.
```

This tells you which mailbox providers matter most for your deliverability.

Analyze campaign results:

```
Here are the results from my last 5 email campaigns [paste or upload]. What patterns do you see, and what should I test next?
```

Fix ALL CAPS names:

```
Here's a file of subscriber names. Some are in all caps. Normalize them to
proper case (for example, HANK becomes Hank) and give me a downloadable file.
```

Nobody wants an email that yells "HI HANK!" at them.

Found a great use of AI for email? Email me. I'd love to hear about it.

Secret #3: The hidden potential of your subscriber list

Most marketers obsess over new subscribers and forget about the list they already have. Your current subscribers are your warmest audience, and you can reach them on other channels too.

(And yes: puppies and kittens in emails always help. Just saying.)

Play 1: Win back inactive subscribers with ads

Some subscribers stopped engaging. Maybe email isn't their thing, or maybe your emails went to spam before you fixed your authentication. Reach them somewhere else.

How to do it in Meta (Facebook and Instagram):

1. Export a segment of subscribers who haven't clicked in 6 months.
2. In Meta Ads Manager, go to **Audiences** and create a **Custom Audience** from a customer list. Upload the file, or connect it through an integration with your email platform.
3. Create an ad aimed at that audience. For example: "We haven't seen you in a while. Maybe email isn't your thing, and that's okay. Stay connected with us on Facebook." Add a follow button or an offer.
4. Launch, and watch for people who re-engage.

Play 2: Find new customers who look like your best ones

1. Export a segment of your best customers (for example, people who've bought three or more times).
2. Upload them as a Custom Audience in Meta.
3. Create a **Lookalike Audience** from that list. Meta finds new people who share their traits. A smaller percentage (1%) means a closer match, a larger one means more reach.

4. Run an offer ad. For example: "We heard you like hot sauce. We have a secret to tell you. Try Hank's Secret Sauce, 30% off the 3-pack."

Play 3: B2B? Use LinkedIn

LinkedIn has similar tools in Campaign Manager:

- **Matched Audiences:** Upload your contact or company list to target them directly.
- **Predictive Audiences:** LinkedIn's AI finds new people similar to your list.

Test video alongside static images. Video often converts better.

Play 4: Treat your VIPs like VIPs

Give loyal customers early access, exclusive offers, and a thank-you, not just the new-subscriber discount. People who feel left out stop engaging, and people who feel appreciated buy again and tell their friends.

The real secret: start with valid email addresses

None of this works if you're sending to bad addresses. Invalid emails bounce, bounces damage your sender reputation, and a damaged reputation sends even your good emails to spam.

Where bad addresses come from: Typos (gmial.com), fake sign-ups, old addresses that were shut down, spam traps, and aging lists in your CRM.

How to fix it:

1. **Validate at the point of sign-up.** Connect an email verification service to your forms through its API or a built-in integration, so bad addresses never enter your list.
2. **Clean existing lists before you send.** Upload older lists (especially from HubSpot, Salesforce, or event sign-ups) to a verification service and remove invalid and risky addresses.
3. **Re-verify regularly.** A meaningful share of any list goes bad every year as people change jobs and abandon inboxes. Clean your list every few months, and always before a big send.
4. **Use double opt-in** for sources that tend to attract fake sign-ups.

Popular verification services include Kickbox, ZeroBounce, NeverBounce, and Emailable. Most integrate directly with major email platforms and CRMs.

The order that works: Valid addresses, then authentication so they reach the inbox, then great content so people engage.

Your action checklist

Get into the inbox

- [ ] Check your SPF record (only one per domain, all sending tools included)
- [ ] Set up DKIM for every platform that sends as your domain
- [ ] Add a DMARC record at `p=none` and connect a report reader
- [ ] Review DMARC reports, then move to `p=quarantine` and `p=reject`
- [ ] Decide whether BIMI (and a VMC or CMC) is worth it for your brand
- [ ] Test with aboutmy.email or mail-tester.com

Follow the rules

- [ ] Confirm one-click unsubscribe is in your email headers
- [ ] Set up Google Postmaster Tools and track complaint rates (under 0.1%)
- [ ] Replace any "noreply@" sender addresses

Measure what matters

- [ ] Switch your main engagement metric from opens to clicks and conversions
- [ ] Put your main point in the first two lines of every email
- [ ] Run a re-permission campaign for subscribers inactive 3 to 6 months

Use AI

- [ ] Generate and test subject lines with the prompts in this guide
- [ ] Draft body copy and images with AI, then edit in your own voice
- [ ] Brainstorm new segments and add a two-step form to collect more data
- [ ] Build or improve your welcome series and one other automation

Use your list

- [ ] Upload inactive subscribers as a Meta Custom Audience
- [ ] Build a Lookalike Audience from your best customers (or LinkedIn Matched Audiences for B2B)
- [ ] Create a VIP segment and send them something special

Protect your list

- [ ] Add real-time email validation to your sign-up forms
- [ ] Clean your existing list before your next big send

Let's work together

Some secrets are meant to be kept. These are meant to be shared. Remember the three that matter most: authenticate your emails, use AI to create smarter, and put your existing list to work.

If you have questions, or you'd rather have an expert handle it, I can help. I work directly with businesses on email marketing, from authentication and deliverability audits to strategy, automation, and campaigns.

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Reach out with any question. I'd love to hear how you're putting these secrets to work.