On email deliverability

Answers, Not Opinions

The definitive step-by-step process to safely re-engage your unengaged email subscribers.

> Your sending domain's reputation is the most important thing you have to protect.

Author's note I wrote this because what works in the trenches is not what you see taught all over the internet. Give it a try, see for yourself.

By Chuck Mullaney, Expert.Email (expert.email)

Before we start

If other emailers seem to be pulling ahead while you work just as hard, look at what you're carrying.

Every email list has them. People who are still subscribed, never clicked unsubscribe, and haven't opened anything from you in months. Keep mailing them, and they turn into dead weight. Every send to them tells mailbox providers like Gmail that people don't want your email. Your sending reputation slips, more of your email lands in spam, fewer of your real readers ever see it, and your engagement and income go down with it.

Across my clients, marketers handle this one of two ways, and it splits almost down the middle.

Half keep dragging them along. Every broadcast goes to the whole list, and the people who never open quietly pull down the reputation your engaged subscribers depend on to see your emails at all.

The other half cut them loose to protect deliverability. That stops the damage, but it writes off a big piece of the list, and the revenue that used to come from it.

There's a third option: drop the dead weight today, then bring back the people who are still worth bringing back. It's how I've re-engaged unengaged subscribers by hand for my clients, and I've never taught the full method publicly before.

Today, ReEngage Pro does this automatically. But before it existed, this is exactly how I did it manually, step by step.

One rule sits above everything in this guide:

> Your sending domain's reputation is the most important thing you have to protect.
>
> Bringing anyone back comes second. Every step below is built around that.

1

Rule zero: stop dragging them today

The first thing I tell every client, no matter what happens next: segment your unengaged subscribers out of your regular broadcasts.

Do this even if you never try to bring a single one of them back. It protects the people who are still reading you, starting with your next send.

Everything after this is about bringing them back safely.

2

Before you send anything, look at where you stand

I never start a re-engagement project without a full look at the account first. Go through this for your own:

- Which email platform you use, how big your list is, and roughly how long your subscribers have been on it.
- What has worked and what hasn't in your email marketing so far.
- Your sending domain's technical setup. Authentication has to be right so your baseline is sound with every mailbox provider, and Gmail especially.
- Your current health: complaints, bounces, and your domain's reputation in Google Postmaster Tools.

If your reputation is already in trouble, that changes how carefully you go later. Know it before you start.

3

Decide what “unengaged” means for your business

Most marketers pick one cutoff and use it for everything. That’s a mistake. How long someone can go without opening before they count as unengaged depends on how often you mail and what you sell.

IF YOUR BUSINESS IS…	COUNT SOMEONE AS UNENGAGED AFTER…
A digital marketer mailing daily, or at least four times a week	30 days without an open
A physical product store mailing about twice a week	About 90 days
A business that makes most of its money in the holiday season	About 12 months

Then build a few sample segments to size the problem. How much of your list hasn’t opened in that window? How much hasn’t clicked? Get a clear picture of how big this group is before you touch it.

4

Why an open from this group still means a real person

You’ve probably heard that open rates don’t mean much anymore, and in general that’s true. Apple Mail Privacy Protection loads emails in the background, which registers an “open” whether or not a person ever looked at the message. Privacy features at the other big mailbox providers blur the picture further.

But there's one group where an open still means exactly what it used to: the people who haven't opened in a long time.

Think about it. If anything were opening their email automatically, they'd be showing opens. They aren't. You've been mailing them, and nothing has registered. So when someone in this group finally does open, that's a real person choosing to read your email.

That's why the open is the goal of everything that follows. In this segment, it's a true signal of human intent.

For the bigger picture on engagement numbers that aren't really people, see PhantomEngaged.com.

5

Why "we miss you" doesn't work

Here's where I part ways with almost everyone.

The standard win back email says something like "We miss you! Here's 20% off. Come see what's new." Think about how that lands with someone who stopped paying attention to you.

Some of your unengaged subscribers are dead addresses. Some had their life change: they wanted to learn to make money online, then got a job and stopped caring. But a lot of them are simply on a lot of lists. Somewhere along the way, you stopped being a voice they trusted and became one more sender in a crowded inbox. They never unsubscribed. They just stopped listening.

A coupon doesn't fix that. It makes it worse.

- **"We miss you"** reminds them why they stopped listening. *Right, that's why I quit opening these. Why would I start now?*
- **A discount** reminds them of the other reason. *Right, you never gave me anything. You just kept trying to sell to me.*

Neither one rebuilds the relationship you had when they first raised their hand and asked for your emails. So stop reminding them why they left.

6

Treat them like brand new subscribers

So I don't treat these people as unengaged. I treat them as brand new. I have to earn my place with them again, the same way I did the first time.

That changes how you see the open, too. If they open my email, they've done me a favor, and I owe them for it.

7

The re-engagement email

Your unengaged subscribers don't get the same email your engaged list gets. They get their own, and it's built in two halves.

Half one is technical. The subject line and body are built to give the email the best chance of reaching the inbox, and specifically the Primary tab.

Half two is psychological. The email's only job is to get the open, without reminding them of anything.

The subject line

My favorites are a good question or a cliffhanger: something that holds back enough of the story that they have to open the email to get the rest.

But that alone isn't enough, and this is the part I've been teaching for years. The subject line has to be so short and so vague that they can't even guess what's inside. If they think they know what the email says, even if they're wrong, it won't work.

The body has to pay off that exact subject line

The first thing they read after they open has to deliver on the subject line that got them there. This is where most testing goes wrong. A standard A/B test sends several subject lines with one shared body, so the body can't fully deliver on whichever subject line got each person to open. If you test subject lines, write a body for each one.

The rules

- **Write it like a note from the list owner.** Conversational, personal, written to them.
- **Keep it very short and simple.** You want to be able to assume that anyone who opened it read every word. With a long email, you never know who skimmed or stopped after the first paragraph, and anything you send afterward stops lining up. (It also helps that the average adult reading level in the US is around eighth grade.)
- **Nothing that points to the past.** No "we miss you," no "how have you been," no "things have changed around here." Nothing that reminds them they once decided to stop opening your emails.
- **No call to action.** In this segment, the open itself is the signal of a real person, so you don't need a click to prove anything. And an email without a call to action has a better chance of landing in the inbox.
- **No graphics.**
- **Don't irritate them.**

8

How to send it: a small slice alongside your full broadcast

Never send to your unengaged subscribers as their own blast.

Mailing an unengaged group always produces bad numbers. That's just what it is. Send them on their own, and those bad numbers become the whole story of that send.

So instead, every time you send a full broadcast to your engaged list, send a small slice of your unengaged subscribers their re-engagement email in the same timeframe. Their stats add up together with the broadcast's, and the good numbers from your engaged majority outweigh the slice.

How big a slice. My go-to is about 4% of the broadcast. If your broadcast goes to 50,000 engaged subscribers, send about 2,000 unengaged subscribers their re-engagement email at the same time.



Who goes first. Start with the most recently unengaged, not the oldest. They're the most likely to open and give you the best numbers.

When your numbers are already weak. If your complaints, bounces, or Postmaster reputation are already in rough shape, go smaller. The weaker your reputation, the smaller the slice.

What to watch on every send. Keep a very close eye on your deliverability stats and Google Postmaster the whole time: complaints, bounces, anything harmful, and above all your domain reputation in Postmaster.

Opens are reliable here. Remember section 4. Everywhere else, opens are a rough guide. On this slice they're a true measure, because you already know these subscribers aren't being opened automatically. So a very low open rate on the slice is a real warning sign.

THE STOP RULE.

If anything suggests the unengaged sends are hurting your sending domain's reputation, even slightly, stop and reassess before the next slice goes out. Excessive bounces, a very low open rate, any slip in Postmaster: stop. Your domain's reputation is the most important thing you have to protect.

The work it takes. Before every broadcast, you work out what 4% of that send is, cut the next sub-segment of exactly that size from your unengaged group, and send it alongside. Then you watch it. Then you do it again with the next broadcast, until you've worked through the whole group.

That's the job. It's careful, and it's a lot of hours.

9

What an open really means

When someone in this group opens, they're a real person, and that matters. But it doesn't mean they're re-engaged. It means you now have the **opportunity** to re-engage them.

An open is one signal, and one signal isn't enough. You're back at step one.

So don't drop them straight back into your regular broadcasts. Treat them like a brand new opt-in. You owe them for the open, so earn your place: give them something genuinely valuable, learn what they're interested in, and only then put them back into your regular rotation. Keep that flow small.*

** (If you don't know how to do this, you can request information about the next step at chuck@expert.email.)*

10

The people who never open

Some won't open, no matter how good the email is.

Usually one carefully built attempt is enough. Two is reasonable. Never go past three.

Then clean them off your list.

If a strategic, carefully built email didn't earn the open, sending it again and again only risks your reputation and irritates people who have already given you their answer.

Doing it by hand, or not

The whole method, in six steps:

1. Stop dragging your unengaged along in your regular broadcasts.
2. Know your account's health, and define "unengaged" for your business.
3. Send them a short, plain note built to be opened, not a win back offer.
4. Send it to a small slice alongside each full broadcast, most recently quiet first.
5. Watch everything, and stop the moment your reputation shows any strain.
6. Treat openers like new subscribers. Clean out the ones who never open.

It works. It's also a lot of careful, manual work, and the stakes are high. One misstep can damage the reputation your whole list depends on, from that day forward.

When I did this by hand, I babysat every single send. ReEngage Pro watches your numbers as they come in and adjusts on the fly, slowing down or stopping the moment something looks wrong. It's the same priority I've always had: protect your sending reputation first. Only it never blinks.

It also tests your re-engagement emails while the campaign is still running, with every subject line paired with a body written to pay it off. No person can keep up with that.

The result: ReEngage Pro averages about **28% first opens** from subscribers who hadn't opened in six months to two years. The industry average for win back emails after 30 days unopened is 12%.

If you'd rather not learn all of this, or risk getting it wrong on your own list, that's what ReEngage Pro is for. It's the safe, automatic way to do everything in this guide.

---

reengage.pro

About the author: Chuck Mullaney has spent 25 years in digital marketing, 17 years exclusively in email, and 16 years in deliverability. He has architected six email platforms, gaining unique insight into the email strategies of 26,000 businesses. expert.email