

Complementing Your Retail Business With E-mail

High-end shoemaker Allen-Edmonds has built die-hard customer loyalty -- by making great shoes and treating its customers like family. Enjoy this case study on how they extend customer relationships from retail to e-mail.

1) REWARD THEM FOR GIVING YOU THEIR E-MAIL ADDRESSES

When you step up to the counter at an Allen-Edmonds shoe store, you'll see a sign that offers a free bottle of shoe polish if you sign up for the e-mail list. It's an easy, relevant incentive for shoe-shoppers. As much as customers are wary about giving out their e-mail addresses to just anyone, they respond strongly to even the most basic incentives. The shoe polish incentive is particularly good because it also qualifies the prospect. The reward is tied very closely to the shoe buyer, and will be of no interest to bored kids looking for free gifts. Best of all, the cost of the reward is probably less than the cost of acquiring a similar name from a list broker.

THE LESSON: A relevant, simple gift gets you a qualified, interested e-mail address.

2) GIVE THEM A GOOD REASON

Tell customers exactly what you intend to do with their e-mail, and guarantee that you will not use it for any other purpose. Offer a strong benefit and you'll collect more address. Allen-Edmonds says "With your permission, we'll periodically contact you via e-mail with special offers, notify you about sale events and trunk shows, and keep you posted about our latest styles." You will always get a much higher response if the customer has a genuine reason to give you their e-mail. Look at your current site -- are you promising generic "special offers"? You'll do better with specifics.

THE LESSON: No one likes to hand out their e-mail for no reason. Give them a good one.

3) MAKE IT EASY FOR THEM

Customers at Allen-Edmonds give their e-mail on a simple, cheerful postcard at the register. The entire process can be completed in one minute -- giving them something to do while they wait to pay for their purchase. There are nine questions on the postcard, but only "name" and "e-mail" are required. Remember, if you require too much data, you are going to get incomplete forms or you'll get

garbage data, so leave it open. The other questions are related to shoe buying, such as size, style, and gender. Allen-Edmonds got it right: They ask only relevant questions that are appropriate to the purchase. Are your forms asking for too much personal information that may seem creepy to the customer?

THE LESSON: Keep it quick and relevant. If you ask sensible questions, you'll get good answers.

4) REASSURE THEM

Put a strong, solid privacy guarantee right on the sign-up form. If you're not going to give out their e-mail address you should tell them -- it's important to consumers. Allen-Edmonds gets it right three ways. First, they "promise never to share or rent your personal information." Second, they "promise never to send you frivolous e-mails and will allow you to opt-out from our list at any time." And third, they promised to e-mail a link to the full privacy policy, which they did do. Nothing will hurt your e-mail collection rates more than a fear that you might sell their e-mail -- so promise you will not do it.

THE LESSON: Privacy matters. Do the right thing and brag about it. Customers will appreciate it.

5) THANK THEM AND REMIND THEM

Allen-Edmonds remembered an important final step that most marketers forget -- they sent a thank-you e-mail. A week after signing up for the list, each subscriber gets a polite thank-you e-mail from the local store. The brief text e-mail includes generous thanks, a reminder that special offers will be coming in the near future, and a reinforcement of the privacy policy. This sort of e-mail increases the likelihood that customers will remember that they signed up for the list, that they will recognize the message when it comes, and that they will take the time to read it. It also reduces spam complaints by people who forgot that they signed up for a list.

THE LESSON: A good thank-you e-mail earns customer-relationship points for politeness, and it increases future response rates.