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The Data-Driven Congressional Office: Evaluating E-Newsletter Readership Trends to More Effectively Connect with Constituents

**Research Report
January 2011**

Overview

With the decline of traditional media, Members of Congress have had to rely increasingly on their own proactive outreach to constituents to get their messages heard. While they are doing this in myriad ways, one form of communication offers particular benefits in these budget-conscious times: the Congressional e-newsletter.

Compared to a traditional printed newsletter, which can consume tens of thousands of dollars of MRA money, an e-newsletter costs nothing to print and little to e-mail—just the costs of the recipient list and the service that handles the actual sending and tracking. With existing templates, e-newsletters are easy to design and produce. Furthermore, if an office is methodical in building an “opt-in” list of subscribers, it can reach out to those subscribers continually throughout the two-year term, including during the so-called “blackout” period prior to primary and general elections.

There is much to say about e-newsletters, and we covered the topic in some depth in a 2007 report, available at www.conginst.org (find the “Projects” tab on the homepage’s tool bar, and locate the report on websites and e-newsletters.) For this 2011 report, we focused on how to get e-newsletters from Members of Congress opened, as well as how to add new subscribers. We did not focus on the design and content of the e-newsletters, since we already researched that topic in 2007.

However, in focus groups that we conducted on December 28, 2010, a key message from 2007 was reinforced: Constituents want an e-newsletter that tells them what their Congressman has been doing recently, what he's working on currently, and what he will be working on in the coming month or two. Call it the "past-present-future" construct for e-newsletters.

Before we began researching this topic, we hypothesized that the massive amount of electronic data stored by firms that create and send e-newsletters for Members held in their archives a treasure trove of useful information to help Members become more effective e-newsletter publishers. Put another way, we believed that there might be a science to sending e-newsletters to constituents.

Now, after analyzing more than 4,000 different e-newsletters, comprising more than 55.7 million separate e-mail messages from 77 different Congressional offices¹ over the course of one year,² we firmly believe that there *is* a science to it, and have even discovered some practical "nuggets" of information Members and their staffs can easily apply to their e-newsletter processes.

What is the practical value of following the recommendations in this report? Put simply, it increases the efficiency and value of what you're currently doing. If you are already sending e-newsletters to 50,000 or 100,000 constituents, you can increase your open rate considerably, merely by following some of the advice below. For example, simply adjusting the day of the week when you send your e-newsletters can yield thousands of additional people to open them each time.

For the purposes of this report, we place a lot of value on "open rates," meaning the percentage of recipients who open an e-newsletter after it is received. Having a high open rate on an e-newsletter means you have a chance to tell your story to more constituents, since the recipient is at least viewing some part of the content.

While the benefits of increasing open rates are obvious, one of the advantages of email in the general is that even when they delete an email, constituents most likely read the sender's name and the subject line. That's another chance to inexpensively leave an impression, even if it's only fleeting.

"Click-through rates" are also important, as they demonstrate an additional measure of engagement with the e-newsletter once it is opened. Recipients want to know more about a particular subject, so they click on a hyperlink to get additional information. One thing to keep in mind, however: E-newsletters each embed different numbers of links in different spots on the page, so it is much more challenging to measure the overall effectiveness of a group of e-newsletters via the click-through rate, since there is no uniformity across them. Indeed, between very similar e-newsletters with equal numbers of embedded links in comparable locations, comparisons could be made—but that merits its own future research project.

¹ 53 Republicans; 24 Democrats

² Nov. 2009 to Nov. 2010

In order to undertake this current study, special thanks belong to Mark Strand, the President of the Congressional Institute. His ongoing commitment to cutting-edge research, combined with the generous support of the Congressional Institute's board of directors, is having a substantial impact on how well and how often Congress communicates with constituents.

We are also indebted to Ken Ward and Joshua Billigmeier at Fireside21 for their dedication to this project.

Summary of Key Findings

- 1) Stop guessing: You can now measure your e-newsletter effectiveness against that of other House offices
- 2) If you want constituents to open the e-newsletter, your best chance is to send it on Sunday; do *not* send it on a Wednesday
- 3) The best time of day to send a Congressional e-newsletter is in the afternoon; do *not* send it in the early morning
- 4) Subject lines of wildly differing lengths can generate high open rates. The real difference is the effect on click-through rates: Shorter subject lines generate much higher click-through rates than longer subject lines
- 5) Many offices failed to reach out via email to constituents during the period of highest interest in Congress's activities, losing an opportunity to build e-newsletter databases
- 6) Constituents expect *you* to advertise your e-newsletter, not require them to find it on their own
- 7) Constituents who have contacted an office in the past are two to three times more likely to mail back a reply postcard to receive that office's e-newsletter than constituents who have never contacted that office in the past

Best Practices

Following the key findings, this report concludes with a list of recommended "E-Newsletter Best Practices" to improve the effectiveness on multiple dimensions of Congressional e-newsletters. These "E-Newsletter Best Practices" are derived from raw data of 4,272 e-newsletters sent between November 1, 2009 and November 18, 2010.

Study Design and Methodology

Presentation Testing and Fireside21

Presentation Testing teamed up with Fireside21 (www.fireside21.com), one of DC's leading providers of technology services to Congressional offices, to evaluate 4,272 e-newsletters sent by Members of Congress to constituents between November 1, 2009, and

November 18, 2010. We analyzed the data from these e-newsletters in numerous ways to discover what characteristics the most effective ones had, in terms of open rates and click-through rates.

For several analyses, we looked at the entire set of 4,272 e-newsletters, which were produced by 77 different Congressional offices (53 Republicans and 24 Democrats). For the analysis related to which weeks had the best open rates, we looked at the e-newsletters sent between November 1, 2009, and October 31, 2010 (4,158 e-newsletters).

In our aggregate sample of 4,272 e-newsletters, there were more than 55.7 million email messages sent. Of those 4,272 e-newsletters, 53% had more than 1,000 recipients.

Our study initially intended to analyze “opt-ins”³ vs. “non-opt-ins”⁴ within the total universe of e-newsletter recipients. However, given the unique way the data in this study was categorized when generated, we chose not to proceed on that front. We anticipate that with some additional programming, this information will be more easily accessible for future research.

As part of this study, we also conducted two focus groups in suburban Philadelphia (Mt. Laurel, NJ). One group contained 12 moderate Republicans and the other 12 moderate Democrats. We probed them to determine how particular attributes of e-newsletters made them feel, as well as their perceived likeliness to open certain types of e-newsletters.

Finally, at the end of this report, we describe two unique studies focused on e-newsletters that were conducted by two House offices in mid-2010. Other offices can draw valuable, actionable conclusions from this research.

Congressional vs. commercial e-newsletters

In this report, we also compared e-newsletter “open rates” for Members to those for commercial marketers. This data was published by a firm called MailerMailer in Rockville, MD, that provides email marketing and e-newsletter services to a variety of firms in diverse industries. (Visit <http://www.mailermailer.com/about.rwp>).

The following is the methodology statement from the MailerMailer report we used for benchmarking: “We regularly analyze and report aggregate industry data based on our customers’ email use. The data for this report is based on email messages sent to 25 or

³ An “opt-in” recipient is defined as any person who has agreed to receive e-newsletters from that particular Member of Congress; basically, they’ve chosen to become a subscriber, or have agreed to receive regular updates of some kind from their Congressman.

⁴ Non-opt-ins are usually identified by offices in one of two ways: by renting lists of email addresses within the district, or by contacting those constituents who have reached out to the Member in the past but have not subscribed to an e-newsletter.

more recipients between January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2009, by a sampling of MailerMailer customers. Only industries that were represented by a significant number of unique customers and/or list members were reported independently in this report.”

A “client” of MailerMailer is some organization or company that uses their service to distribute e-mails. MailerMailer considers all recipients as opt-ins, since they have agreed to receive emails from a specific sender.

KEY FINDINGS

1) Stop guessing: You can now measure your e-newsletter effectiveness against that of other House offices

We analyzed e-newsletters sent between November 1, 2009, and November 18, 2010, and determined the average open rates for various audiences. Your e-newsletter can be deemed “effective” if you’re seeing open rates in your office that are higher than 13.0 percent, which is the average for all e-newsletters.

In order to determine whether these rates are respectable or not, we attempted to draw comparisons with commercial email. One prominent company in the e-newsletter field is called MailerMailer (www.mailermailer.com), and it produces a comprehensive report analyzing email open rate trends in various business sectors covering 900 million emails sent annually.

The good news is that Congressional e-newsletters appear to be performing better than emails sent to opt-ins in the commercial world. According to MailerMailer, the average open rate for commercial emails is 11.2 percent,⁵ compared to 13.0 percent for Congressional e-newsletters.

Significantly, this comparison is not truly “apples-to-apples,” and must be viewed accordingly. The issue is that the character of commercial opt-ins is different from Congressional recipients in at least two key respects:

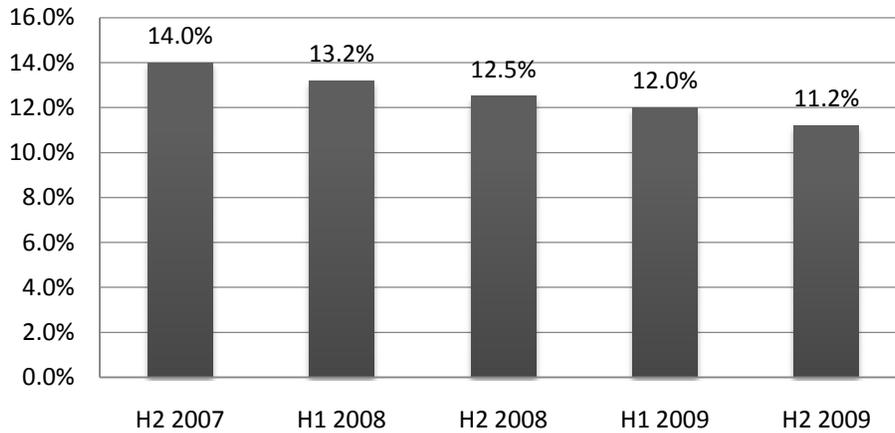
- A portion of commercial e-newsletter correspondence is sent in the business-to-business context. This is different from the business-to-consumer context that more closely resembles how Members of Congress reach out to constituents.
- The MailerMailer data is opt-in only, while the Congressional data contains both opt-in subscribers and non-opt-ins—and these two Congressional categories would likely generate very different open rates.

⁵ <http://www.mailermailer.com/resources/metrics/open-rates.rwp>

One other point to highlight: According to MailerMailer, in the commercial world, open rates have been steadily declining.

Here's the chart from MailerMailer's most recent report⁶:

MailerMailer: Open Rate Percentages Over Five Recent Half-Years



Source: <http://www.mailermailer.com/resources/metrics/open-rates.rwp>

MailerMailer indicates in their report that there are three main reasons why this decline is occurring: Image blocking (which makes it harder to track an e-newsletter when it is opened), increased use of handheld devices (the older ones of which cannot open images, and therefore cannot register an “open”), and list fatigue (just too much email sent too often to the same people).

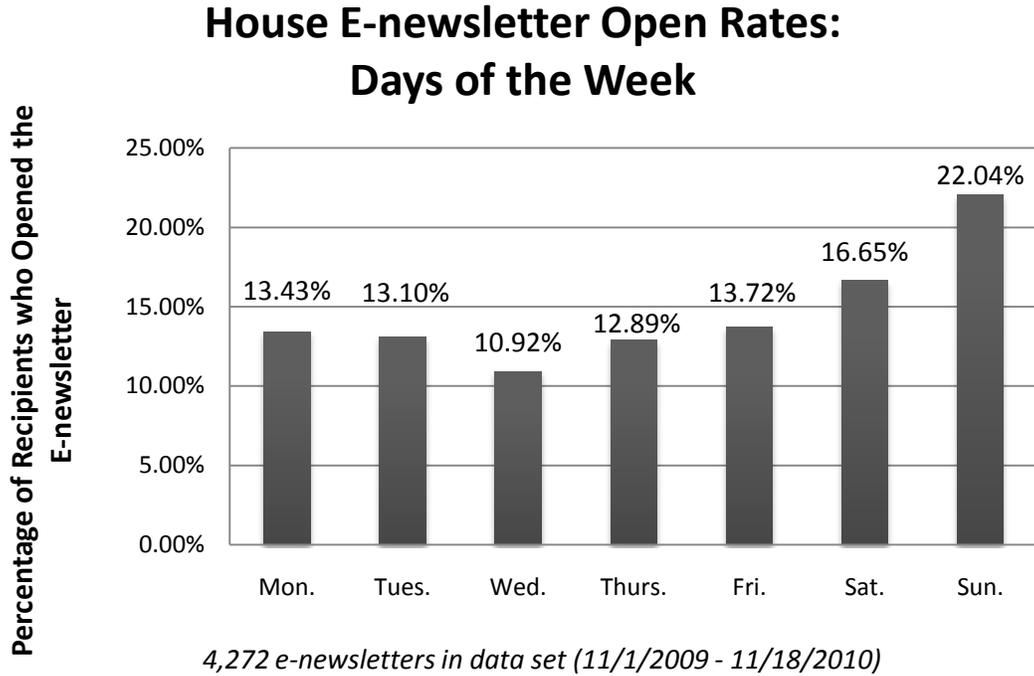
Whether this has been happening to Congressional offices is a subject we plan to study in future updates, and requires more historical analysis, particularly viewed over the two-year cycle of Congressional activity—not half-years as in the MailerMailer case above.

Another benchmark to consider, when comparing one's own e-newsletters to that of other Congressional offices, is the click-through rate. For all of the e-newsletters in this study, the average click-through rate was 16.2 percent. We could not compare this to MailerMailer's click-through rates for commercial mail, as their calculations are generated in an entirely different way.

⁶ <http://www.mailermailer.com/resources/metrics/open-rates.rwp>

2) If you want constituents to open your e-newsletter, your best chance is to send it on Sunday; do *not* send it on a Wednesday

Across the board, Sunday is by far the best day of the week to send an e-newsletter, as ones sent that day receive the highest open rates. Saturday is the next best day, followed by Friday. Wednesday should be avoided completely, as this chart shows:

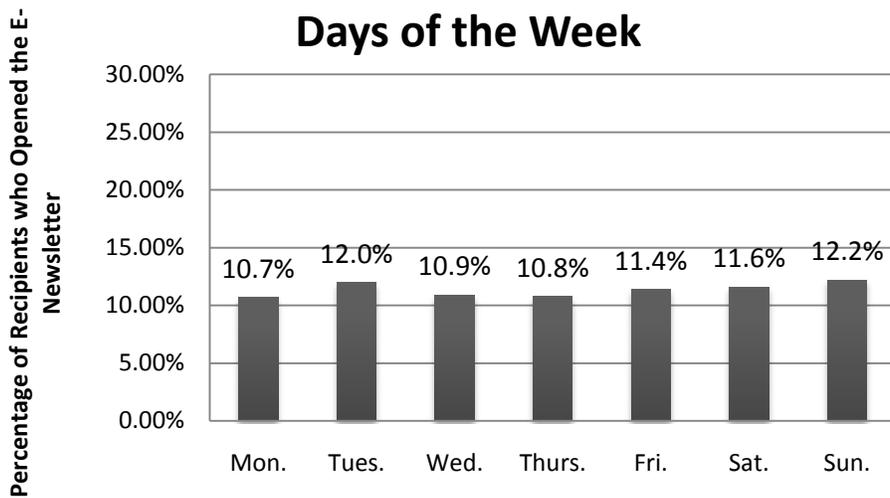


To put a fine point on the importance of sending Congressional email on Sunday as opposed to other days of the week, consider this: In our sample of 55.7 million total e-mails sent, 7.2 million were actually opened. If all of those emails had been sent on Sunday instead of the days they were actually sent, we estimate 12.3 million would have been opened (assuming consistent Sunday open rates). This difference of 5.1 million represents a tremendous lost opportunity to make a positive impression on large numbers of constituents.

In our sample, just two percent of all the emails sent were sent on a Sunday.

For comparison's sake, below are the open rates (from the second half of 2009) for opt-in commercial e-newsletters. This is derived from a report by MailerMailer, and shows that in the commercial sphere, Sunday is also the best day, but not nearly to the degree that it is for Congressional e-newsletters:

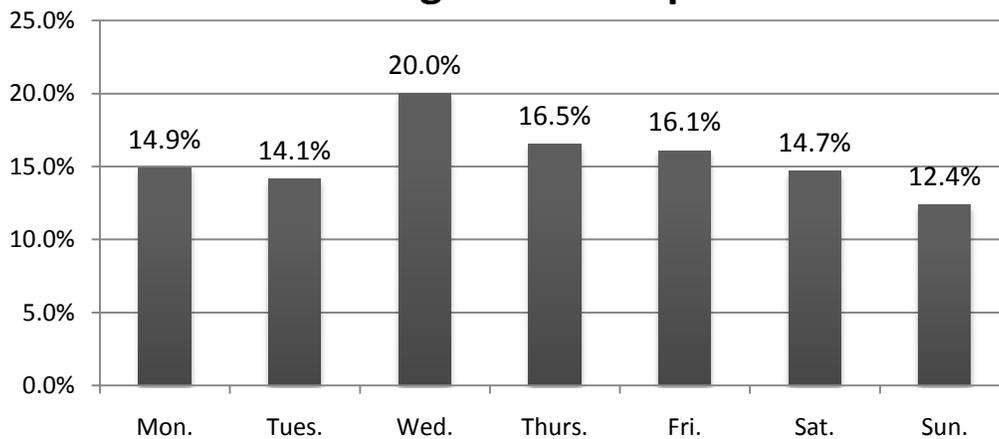
MailerMailer: Open Rate by Days of the Week



Source: <http://www.mailermailer.com/resources/metrics/open-rates.rwp>

Interestingly, while Wednesday tends to be the worst day to send out Congressional e-newsletters in terms of open rates, it is the best day to get the highest click-through rate (meaning that among recipients who open the e-newsletter, this is the percentage that clicks on at least one link in the e-publication). Conversely, Sunday (which is by far the best day for open rates) has the lowest click-through rate at 12.4 percent.

House E-newsletter Click-through Rates As Percentage of Total Opens



4,272 e-newsletters in data set (11/1/2009 - 11/18/2010)

Looking at the combined open rates and click-through rates, one might hypothesize that those who bother to open an email mid-week are more likely to actually read it in some depth (and click on the contents). Those who open it on weekends are perhaps ones who might otherwise have not bothered to do so on a weekday, so all that can be hoped is that they will take a quick look at the email, even if they don't click on a link.

Anecdotally we heard the following from our groups in suburban Philadelphia:

“For me it would be a weekend [when I'd open an email from a Congressman]. If I'm going to be on the computer, I'd tend to look for it, say on a Sunday afternoon.” –Marilyn, suburban Philadelphia

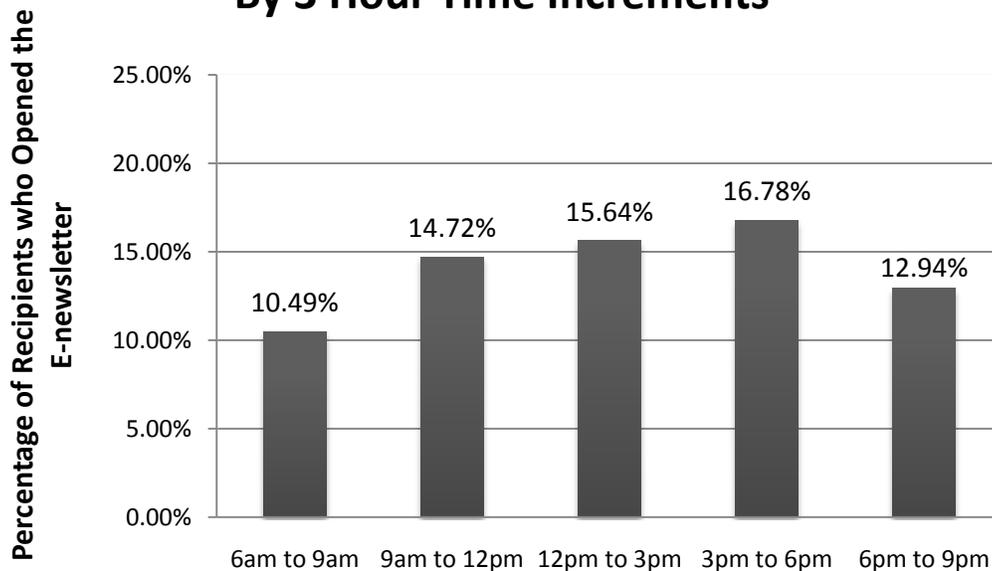
“On a weekend.” –Christopher, suburban Philadelphia

“On Sunday—that's my only day off.” –Helena, suburban Philadelphia

3) The best time of day to send a Congressional e-newsletter is in the afternoon; do *not* send it in the early morning

To increase the likelihood at a Congressional e-newsletter will be opened, Members should consider sending theirs in the afternoon, as opposed to the morning or evening.

House E-newsletter Open Rates: By 3 Hour Time Increments



3,986 e-newsletters that took less than two hours to send (11/1/2009 - 11/18/2010)

In our study, we needed to account for the fact that some large-scale e-newsletters take hours to send out in their entirety, due to technical constraints. For the purposes of this analysis, we looked solely at e-newsletters that were sent in their entirety within a two hour span or less. Here is what we found:

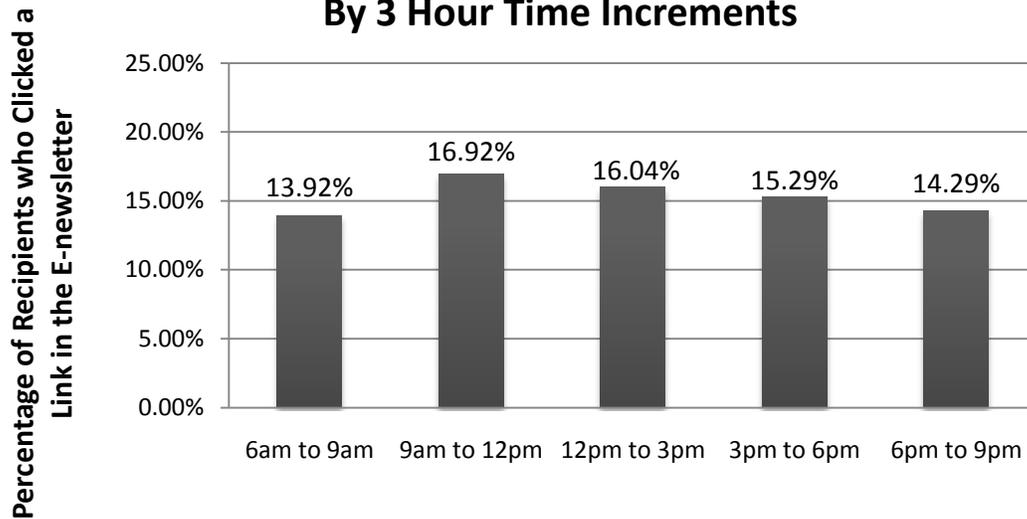
Open Rate

On an individual hour basis, the best times to send an e-newsletter are 1 p.m. (16.49%), 3 p.m. (17.59%), and 5 p.m. (17.53%). The worst times on an hour basis are 7 p.m. (14.26%) and 8 p.m. (11.58%). Looking at three-hour time frames, the best time to send an e-newsletter is between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. (16.78%), and the worst time is between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. (10.49%).

Click-through Rate

The click-through rate is highest for e-newsletters sent at 8 a.m. (18.93%), 9 a.m. (16.79%), and 11 a.m. (18.49%). It is lowest in the evening, at 5 p.m. (14.09%), 6 p.m. (15.30%), and 7 p.m. (10.53%). For three-hour time frames, the highest click-through rates occur between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m. (16.92%), with 12 p.m. to 3p.m. close behind (16.04%).

House E-newsletter Click-through Rates: By 3 Hour Time Increments



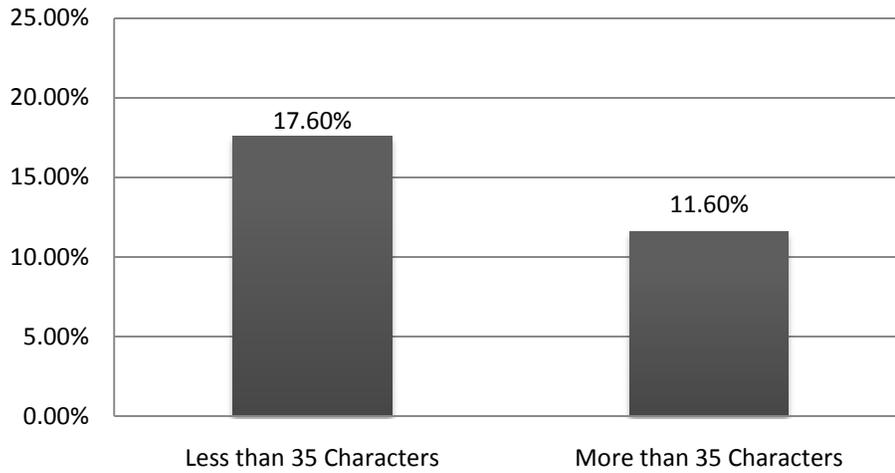
3,986 e-newsletters that took less than two hours to send (11/1/2009 - 11/18/2010)

Given the choice between sending e-newsletters in the mid-to-late morning to get a higher click-through rate, and in the afternoon to get a higher open rate, we generally advise to aim for the lower-hanging fruit—meaning merely getting the email opened. Note that the open rates and click-through rates are not so different between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. that the results will be wildly different. Perhaps the best advice here is related to what *not* to do, and that is to *not* send the e-newsletters in the early morning.

- 4) Subject lines of wildly differing lengths can generate high *open* rates. The real difference is the effect on *click-through* rates: Shorter subject lines generate much higher click-through rates than longer subject lines**

Our desire to study the length of subject lines was heightened by findings provided in MailerMailer's most recent report. They found a clear difference in open rates when subject lines were longer than when they were shorter:

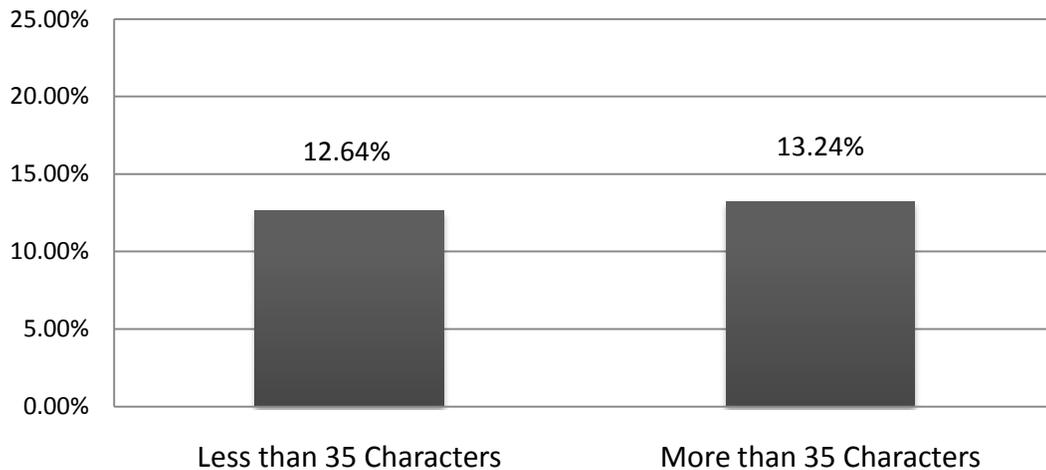
MailerMailer: Open Rates By Subject Line Length



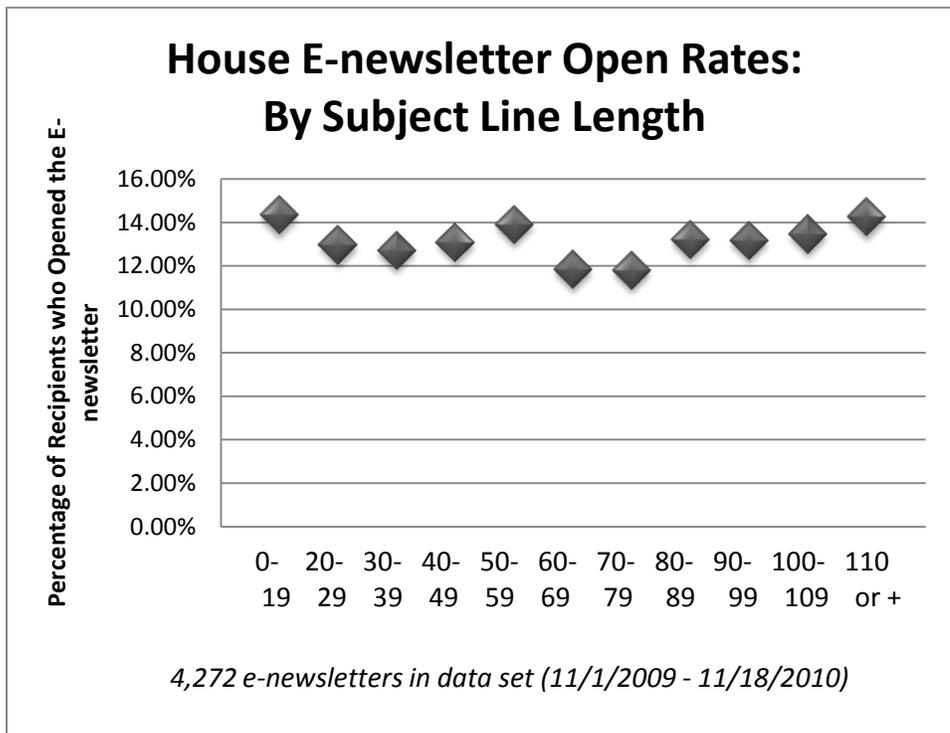
Source: <http://www.mailermailer.com/resources/metrics/open-rates.rwp>

We conducted a similar study. Interestingly, in the Congressional sphere, the difference between long vs. short was barely noticeable—six-tenths of a percentage point in the direction favoring *longer* subject lines:

Subject Line Length: By Characters 35 or less vs. greater than 35



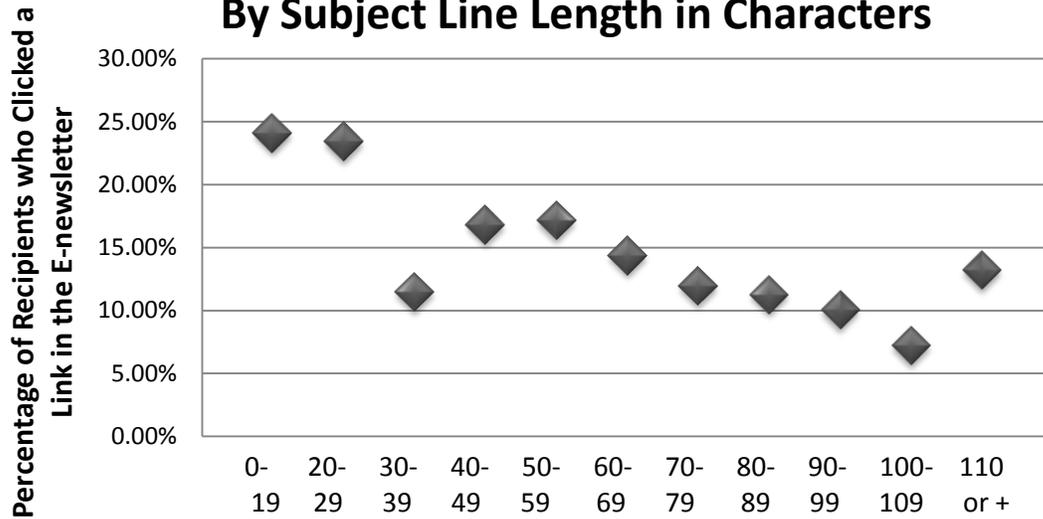
This would suggest *at first* that subject lengths don't have much of an effect on Congressional e-newsletter open rates. However, the story gets more complex: Breaking down the subject line lengths of Congressional e-newsletters into increments of 10 characters tells a more nuanced story:



The conclusion to draw from this chart is that there appear to be various categories of either e-newsletters or e-newsletter recipients who are animated to open an e-newsletter by either very long or very short subject lines.

So, how to decide what length to make your subject line? Look at this graph of click-through rates which points to the MailerMailer conclusion—keep it short (under 30 characters):

House E-newsletter Click-through Rates: By Subject Line Length in Characters

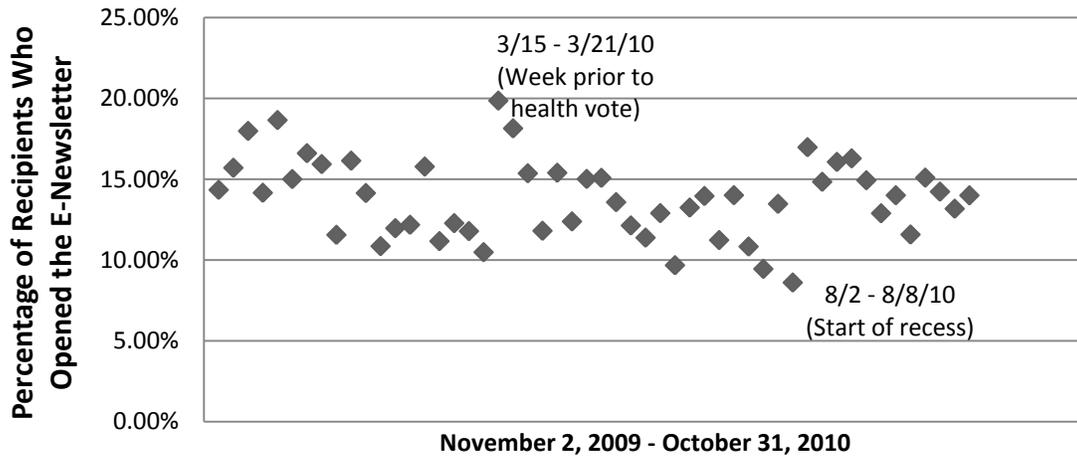


4,272 e-newsletters in data set (11/1/2009 - 11/18/2010)

5) Many offices failed to reach out via email to constituents during the period of highest interest in Congress’s activities, losing an opportunity to build e-newsletter databases

We conducted an analysis on an individual week-by-week basis from Nov. 2009 to Nov. 2010 to see if current events had any effect on e-newsletter open rates. Indeed they did; the period of highest open rates preceded the final House vote related to healthcare reform in March 2010:

House E-newsletter Open Rates: By Week



4,158 e-newsletters in data set

The final vote on healthcare reform took place at the end of the third week of March 2010. According to the Fireside21 data, that was the week when e-newsletters were the most likely to get opened within the one year span of our study. Fireside21 sent out e-newsletters on behalf of 46 Member offices that week—that’s 69% of the offices who were capable of using its e-newsletter service at that time.

Nearly one-third of the clients that were capable of sending e-newsletters that week failed to send a single one.

The good news is that those 46 offices sent out a lot of e-newsletters during that week in March (148 in total) and took advantage of the public’s heightened attention. That compares to 91 e-newsletters sent by 48 offices the first week in August—the week e-newsletters were least likely to get opened.

Click-through Rate

The highest click-through rates occurred during the weeks of June 14 through June 20 (33.19%) and December 28 through January 3 (31.73%). The lowest click-through rates occurred during the weeks of October 11 through October 17 (4.99%) and August 30 through September 5 (6.00%).

The take-away here, and it’s fairly intuitive, is to take advantage of times when constituents are ultra-engaged in politics generally to get them to read (and subscribe to) a Congressional e-newsletter. Unfortunately, the record shows many offices get caught up in legislative activity and fail to seize the moment to build their relationships with constituents—and build their e-newsletter databases.

6) Constituents expect *you* to advertise your e-newsletter, not require them to find it on their own

We conducted interesting discussions about Congressional communications with moderate Republican and moderate Democratic groups in suburban Philadelphia on December 28, 2010. Of the 24 participants, not one was actually signed up to receive an e-newsletter from their Member of Congress. When asked, most assumed that their Congressperson sends out an e-newsletter, but they were not firm in their assumptions.

We asked participants what they believe the key obstacle is to receive e-newsletters from their Member of Congress. Most said that they probably had to contact their Congressperson and supply their email address before they would be signed up for e-newsletters. Despite this realization, when asked whose responsibility it is to reach out to whom, our participants unanimously agreed that it is the Congressperson's responsibility to reach out to constituents and alert them to the existence of the newsletter—not the other way around.

We also asked participants how often they would like to hear from their Member of Congress. We heard responses ranging anywhere from monthly to quarterly. Many expect some sort of regular contact from their Member of Congress, and would want to be contacted when anything important is going on.

7) Constituents who have contacted a House office in the past are two to three times more likely to mail back a reply postcard to receive that office's e-newsletter than constituents who have never contacted that office in the past

Separate from the survey and focus groups we conducted for this report, we followed experiments generated by two enterprising Congressional offices during the summer of 2010. These are highly relevant to this discussion about Congressional e-newsletters.

The first office sent four different types of letters to a total of 2,000 different constituents. The office tracked the response rates for printed reply cards inserted with those letters and mailed back by constituents. The cards enabled the office to determine the constituents' interest areas, and to gather email addresses and street addresses from those constituents who filled in blank lines on the postcard where the Member requested that information.

There were four categories of mailings, each sent to 500 constituents:

Category 1: These were mail pieces sent in response to a constituent letter, phone call, or email to the office about a particular policy issue of concern to that constituent. A wide variety of issues were covered.

Category 2: These were mail pieces about the environment, sent to constituents about the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Recipients were constituents who had donated money to environmental causes.

Category 3: These were mailing pieces about abortion sent to constituents who, in the past, had signed a petition about that social issue—and had taken the same position on that issue as the Member. The petition was dropped off at the Member’s office.

Category 4: These were follow-up mail pieces sent to constituents who had previously written to the Member about the 2nd Amendment, and the Member had previously replied months earlier.

Here are the results:

Member Mail Piece	% of total recipients who mailed back card & provided <u>street address only</u>	% of total recipients who mailed back card & provided <u>e-mail and street address</u>
Category 1: Letter in response to a letter, call, or email from constituents on multiple topics	11.2%	4.8%
Category 2: Letter sent proactively on oil spill	2.6%	1.6%
Category 3: Letter sent proactively to petition signers	3.6%	1.2%
Category 4: Follow-up letter to previous writers on the 2 nd Amendment	10.0%	3.8%

There are certainly sizable differences in constituent intensity on various issues, and those could account for some of the variability in this chart. However, it appears that those constituents who have previously contacted a Congressional office are far more likely to accede to a Member’s request to provide their contact information so they can receive future information, such as an e-newsletter, than constituents who have not had that prior contact.

The second Congressional office conducted a somewhat similar experiment, but with one key difference—it sent three mail pieces to constituents without knowing whether those constituents had contacted their office in the past. The presumption is that most of these recipients had *not* contacted the Member previously.

The three pieces were a postcard to senior citizens that included a tear-off reply postcard; a letter on letterhead about fiscal issues that included a reply postcard; and another letter on letterhead related to environmental issues sent to donors to environmental causes—and it also included a reply card.

Here are the results:

Member Mail Piece	% of total recipients who mailed back card & provided <u>street address only</u>	% of total recipients who mailed back card & provided <u>e-mail and street address</u>
Category 5: Mailer to 52,452 seniors with tear-off reply postcard	1.8%	0.6%
Category 6: Letter about fiscal issues sent to 23,989 constituents	1.4%	0.5%
Category 7: Letter to 3,774 donors to environmental organizations	1.7%	0.9%

One observation in comparing the two experiments is that constituents in categories five through seven most resemble those in the first Member’s category #2—i.e., recipients receiving mail on a timely issue that should interest them, even if they had not written to the Member about it in the past. Clearly the first Member was more effective in generating a higher response rate than the second Member, and that could be due to a number of factors. These include the varying length of service for each Member in Congress and constituents’ familiarity with each Member’s positions, how often each Member reaches out to constituents in other media, the topic areas covered by each mailing, the format and design of each mailing, etc.

The takeaway from these two experiments is that unsolicited mail sent by House offices to constituents who do not have a prior relationship with the Member produces a fairly moderate numbers of new e-newsletter subscribers, and at a rate that requires very aggressive and consistent proactive snail-mailing over time.

Overall, an effective approach to building the opt-in e-newsletter database using snail mail entails the consistent execution of the following:

- mining one's existing database for previous correspondents to contact, as they are far likelier to subscribe than those who have never contacted the office;
- ensuring that every written reply sent in response to a constituent query also includes a reply card, as these generated the highest of all response rates to a Member request for constituents' email addresses;
- implementing an aggressive proactive mail campaign that includes a reply card with every outbound mailing.

What is most exciting about these findings is that they enable Congressional offices to reasonably estimate how many new e-newsletter subscribers they could generate under a variety of scenarios, and at projectable acquisition costs. On Capitol Hill, this type of projection has been difficult to make—until now.

E-newsletter Best Practices

BEST PRACTICES	<i>Do</i>	Don't
Measurement and benchmarking	<i>Make sure your open rate is at least 13%, and your click-through rate on e-newsletters that get opened is 16.2% or higher</i>	Ignore your open rate and click-through rate data!
Day of the week	<i>Send on Sunday</i>	Send on Wednesday
Time of day	<i>Send in mid-afternoon</i>	Send in early morning
Keep subject line to this length	<i>Use fewer than 30 characters</i>	Use more than 100 characters
Build your e-newsletter subscriber file	<i>Insert a pre-printed reply card into all outbound mail so constituents are invited to subscribe</i>	Miss any opportunity to promote your e-newsletter; you're a publisher, and you need to take advantage of every opportunity to promote your "product"