Surviving the Tabbed Inbox

How Apple's iOS update affects your email strategy

by: Jenna Miller, Emerald Strategic Marketing

It finally happened. Apple officially joined the tabbed inbox game in September 2024, following the lead of other email platforms like Gmail, Outlook and Yahoo. But why is Apple's latest iOS 18 update worth noting? Because according to email marketing platform Litmus, half of all emails are read using Apple devices. And, with emails being sorted automatically for recipients, it means your marketing emails have yet another obstacle to overcome before they are seen and opened.

It is more critical than ever to ensure that your business's communications, whether they are promotional campaigns or newsletters, land where they will be seen regularly. Let's break down what has changed, how it affects your business and how you can adapt.

How Are Emails Sorted?

With Apple's newest update, significant changes have been made to its Mail app that affect how emails are categorized and viewed by users. Emails will now be separated into four different tabs:

(1) Primary — Emails from recognized contacts or one-on-one correspondence land here, ensuring they get top priority. This is where you want your emails to land.

(2) Updates — This will feature newsletters, appointments and other subscription emails.

(3) Promotions — This is where special offers and deal emails are likely to land.

(4) Transactions — Reserved for transaction-related emails such as order confirmations, shipping updates and other automated notifications.

While Apple Mail's artificial intelligence (AI) sorting process is still a work in progress, we do know that likely factors for where your email will land are based on subject lines, sender reputation and email content. These tabs aim to declutter inboxes for users, but they pose a challenge for businesses: promotional emails may now be less visible, requiring extra effort to get noticed.
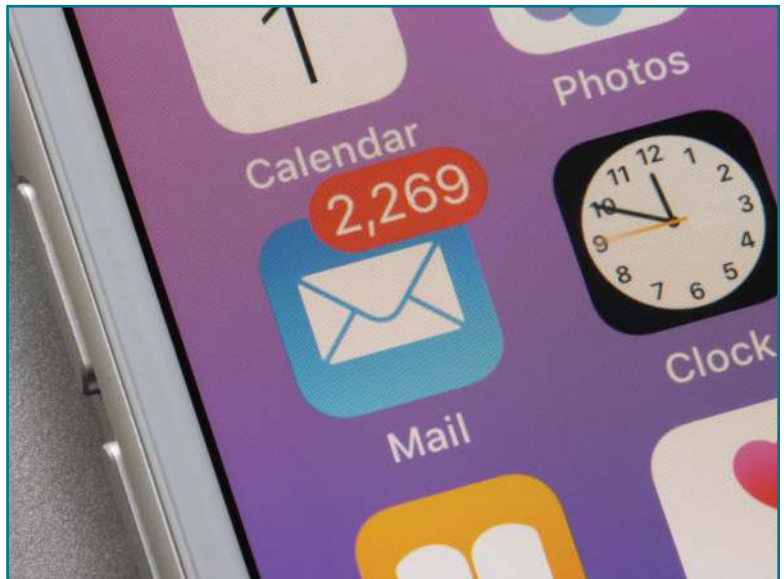
Why New Tabs Will Affect Your Marketing Efforts

Tabbed inboxes are likely to have an impact on your email marketing. The new Promotions tab is a particular hurdle, as it often relegates marketing emails — such as special offers and product announcements — to a less visible corner of the inbox.

But before you freak out, here is a helpful statistic to consider: For Gmail users currently using similar tabs, 79.7% check the promo tab at least once a week. So, while this may mean fewer eyes on your marketing emails, it is not the death of promotional emails. It does, however, mean you will need to adjust your strategy a bit.

Additionally, the enhanced privacy features in iOS 18 add another layer of complexity. Apple's Mail Privacy Protection limits tracking capabilities, making traditional metrics like open rates increasingly unreliable. Without accurate data, businesses must pivot to alternative performance indicators like click-through rates and conversions, while also refining their content to drive deeper engagement. These changes signal a fundamental shift, urging marketers to

go beyond inbox visibility and focus on delivering hyper-relevant, high-impact emails that resonate with recipients, no matter where they land.

Strategies to Adapt & Thrive

To navigate these challenges and stay competitive, businesses need to adjust their email marketing strategies. Here are four actionable steps to ensure your emails have the best chance at getting in the best tab and getting engagement:

(1) Focus on Deliverability — Improving your domain reputation is crucial to avoiding spam filters and ensuring your emails land in the Priority tab. This reputation is based on a few key metrics including trustworthiness, bounce rates, engagement and blacklists.

Start by using SPF, DKIM and DMARC protocols to verify your email. By setting up these protocols correctly, you will not only protect your domain from being misused by spammers, but also increase its trustworthiness for email clients.

Now it is time to reevaluate who your marketing emails are coming from. Instead of the sender line saying, "Company Name" or "marketing@company.com," move to a more personalized sender. For example, "Jenna at Emerald Marketing" or simply "Jenna Miller." This helps your chances of showing up in the Priority tab over the Promotions tab and it has been shown to have better deliverability in general.

Next, it is time to review and clean up your contact list. Use a tool like NeverBounce to ensure you are not sending to email addresses that are likely to bounce. Then focus on hypersegmented contact lists to provide personalized messages that resonate with your audience and encourage engagement. Do not forget to clean out your lists regularly; I recommend quarterly. This means removing unengaged contacts and those on the "bounced" list. Finally, ask contacts to whitelist you as a trusted domain (more on this in item three below).

(2) Prioritize Eye-Catching Subject Lines and Preheaders — No matter which new inbox tab you end up in, you want your subject line to stand out. It is the only chance you have to catch someone's attention and get your email opened. Keep your subject line to around 50 characters or less to avoid it getting cut off. Remember to keep it concise and personalized. And, no, we do not mean just adding their first name in there. Try something like, "Three Secrets of Top Performing (insert industry)."

Some additional tips include avoiding the word "free" so you do not go into the spam folder. While it is hotly debated among email experts as to whether using this word influences deliverability, we play it safe and avoid it.

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Do not forget to make your subject line intriguing but not misleading. Your email better deliver what you are offering in this line, otherwise you could end up with an unsubscribe or in the spam folder, which is not good for your domain reputation.

(3) Encourage Whitelisting — As we mentioned earlier, getting on the whitelist is ideal for deliverability. Encourage your audience to whitelist your domain to ensure critical emails always reach the Primary tab. The best way to do this is to include a step-by-step guide in your welcome email, on your website or on social media. Periodically remind recipients to add your email to their safe senders lists, especially when sending important updates.

(4) Create the Right Content — Now that you have gotten your email delivered and opened, you need to provide incredible content. Remember, Apple's AI will be sorting emails into tabs based on several factors — and your content and verbiage are two of them. Focus on providing value to your audience that is clear, concise and personalized, and do it in a human tone. Filters are getting better at detecting AI-generated content so you will want to review anything you have used AI for and make sure it is edited to come off in a human, conversational tone.

But high-value, conversational content is not enough. You need engagement. It is another key factor in not only what tab your email ends up in, but also deliverability itself. Having your recipient click a button is great, but your strategy needs to go further. You now need a one-on-one experience. Try using the words, "reply with" to encourage this. For example, "If you're wondering how well your cybersecurity provider is doing, reply with 'cyberchecklist' and I'll send over our comprehensive evaluation checklist."

In the end, this Apple iOS 18 update will not tank your email marketing like some have predicted, but it will need to be considered in your strategy. As we always say, focus on good email practices, valuable content and true human connection and you will be just fine. ■

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