

Subscription forms: list growth and sign-up language

By Mark Brownlow

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One newsletter publisher found that modifying the words used on their form's "submit" button changed sign-up rates by over 20%.

Which suggests we should pay more attention to those forms. Should, but largely don't.

We twiddle and tweak incessantly with content, offers, subject lines and button colors. Why not give due attention to the sign-up form, too?

Once you've covered the basic elements (like location, privacy links, indication of email frequency etc.), what are some issues you might look at more closely?

Here are three suggestions...

1. How do you actually describe the act of joining a list?

A quick browse across some top sites reveals how they describe the actual process of adding your address to their email list.

What word do they use in the form's copy and on the button that the would-be subscriber clicks to complete the submission process?

<u>Website</u>	<u>In form copy</u>	<u>In button</u>
Dilbert	Get	Sign me up
MarketingProfs	Get	Sign up
MarketingSherpa	Join	Join
eBags	Receive	Join now!
Gap	Receive	Submit
Apple	Receive	Subscribe
RedEnvelope	Sign up	Go
Crutchfield	Sign up	Sign me up
Overstock	Sign up	Sign up
Williams-Sonoma	Sign up	Sign up now
Which Test Won?	Sign up	Start
Staples	Sign up	Submit
Daily Candy	Sign up	Subscribe
Old Navy	Subscribe	Join now
Zappos	Subscribe	Sign up
ClickZ	Subscribe	Subscribe

Are they different because it doesn't matter, or are they different because they've tested to find the words that work best for their particular audience and list?

I suspect the latter.

There are three important elements to consider here.

First, **what do those words imply in the minds of your audience?** Does the word "subscribe" really carry the same subconscious meaning as "sign up" or "join"?

The dictionary definition of a "subscription" commonly mentions payment for a product or service. It implies some kind of investment. Does that emotional baggage lead to hesitation?

Would that change if you made it clear your emails are free? Does "subscribing" for free imply you get something of more value than if you just "sign-up" for free?

The dictionary definition of "join" typically talks about commitment, an association, a relationship. Again, is that asking too much of the user? Is the more passive "sign up" better suited to email lists?

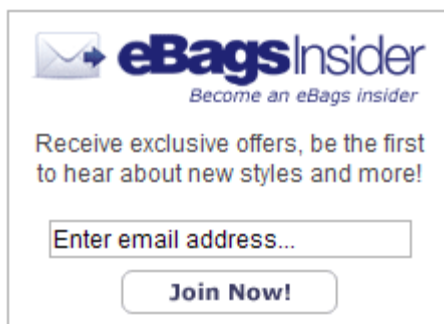
Second, there's the **copywriting aspect**. You're selling the value of handing over an email address, so persuasive copy has as much of a role here as on your sales pages.

Does "sign up!" or "sign up now" or "sign me up" work better than a simple "sign up" button?

When I modified my sign-up form and sign-up page copy, list growth quadrupled.

Third, how does the verb **interact with the kind of emails you're offering?**

My instinct would be to avoid the word "join" given the potential additional level of commitment it implies. But consider the eBags sign-up form:



The image shows a sign-up form for "eBags Insider". At the top left is an envelope icon with an arrow pointing right. To its right is the text "eBags Insider" in a bold, blue font, with the tagline "Become an eBags insider" in a smaller, italicized font below it. Below the header is the text "Receive exclusive offers, be the first to hear about new styles and more!". Underneath is a text input field with the placeholder text "Enter email address...". At the bottom is a rounded rectangular button with the text "Join Now!" in bold.

The suggestion is that signing up to the list provides access to an "insider" group. **Join** makes more sense here than it might with a simple "daily deals" list.

The same concept applies to the MarketingSherpa copy:

Improve your marketing

Join our thousands of weekly Case Study readers:

They're using join to reinforce the concept of social proof to drive list growth.

If you "join" a list that a large group of your peers have already joined, you can feel more certain that you made the right decision.

2. What do you call your emails?

There is more to what you call your list than the interplay between the name and the verb used in the sign-up copy. The name contributes to expectations and thus to an assessment of the likely value of joining the list.

The term "newsletter", for example, perhaps implies something more informational than promotional.

An "alert" implies time sensitive information/promotions. You wouldn't expect a "news alert" to contain just sales promotions. But you would expect that from a "deal alert".

The difference between the expectations created at sign-up and what you actually send is important, because it impacts subscriber remorse and how people respond to your campaigns or newsletters.

The safe alternative is, of course, to make it clear just what the emails contain. But if there's no space for that, consider how you name your list carefully.

And if your list has a unique name that is not intuitively email-related, make sure it can be recognized for what it is.

You know that the link to the "Acme Deal Dispatcher" goes to your email list sign-up page. But would a casual website visitor know that?

3. Replace jargon with words

Depress the input device after repositioning the cursor over this hyperlink. Or "click here" as we usually put it.

Email and online marketers have built up their own tribal language. We are very comfortable with certain terms and processes that might be unintelligible to the casual email user.

One principle in web design is to make desired actions (like submitting an email address) as intuitive as possible. And where it's not intuitive, ensure the associated explanatory text is easy to understand.

Get someone who isn't an email list junkie to find, use and interpret your

sign up form. You may be surprised by what they say.

With website real estate at a premium, sign-up forms found on every page are often pared down to the very bare essentials. Two common problems that might then arise:

1. Do site visitors know that the blank field is for them to input an email address?
2. Do they know what to click on to submit that email address? You may laugh, but you're not representative of the typical net user.

Some forms have no apparent submit button. You have to hit "enter" or click on that arrow at the end of the form field. How many people give up confused? Worth a small test, no?

Another problem is jargon. Especially if your form (and other administrative pages) were set up by IT or a disinterested ESP.

How many of these terms do you use that might cause confusion among those outside the email marketing tribe:

- Biweekly (every second week, but many people read that as twice a week)
- Opt-in / opt-out
- HTML version
- Mobile version
- Preference center
- Unsubscribe (I wonder how many people use the "report spam" button because they don't know that the unsubscribe link in an email is the way to get off a list)

I'm sure there are other words, too...

There are few golden rules here. But take a second look at the lowly sign-up form you designed four years ago and consider testing a few tweaks to see how that might accelerate the growth of your list.

View original blog post:

<http://www.email-marketing-reports.com/iland/2010/02/subscription-forms-list-growth-and-sign.html>