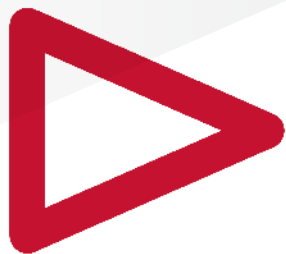# Rescue Me: The TINS Rate as an Indicator of Engagement

What it means for marketers and mailbox providers when consumers click "This is NOT Spam"

Nobody wants to receive spam complaints. They disrupt an email sender's deliverability rate, and depress response and revenue[1]. A TINS report (This Is Not Spam), however, is welcome—it actually improves the sender's deliverability by helping mailbox providers identify messages that people want.

Virtually all senders occasionally have messages delivered to the spam folder. A TINS report is what happens when recipients "rescue" those messages and notify their mailbox provider that this was a message they actually wanted to receive. It says, categorizing it as spam was an error, and future messages like it (from the same sender) should be delivered to the inbox.

We know that mailbox providers place high value on TINS reports (when they come from "real" subscribers). They will deliver future messages similar to those reported as TINS to the individual subscriber's inbox, and also to other subscribers' inboxes. For senders, TINS reports can dramatically improve overall deliverability and with it response and ROI.

One reason that mailbox providers give weight to TINS reports in determining the sending reputation of a domain and whether to deliver its email to the inbox, is that these endorsements of value are decidedly deliberate and relatively rare. Subscribers must go through at least two proactive steps (search spam folder, report TINS) to tell mailbox providers that they value the reported message.

For every 1,000 messages routed to the spam folder, on average there are less than two TINS reports made (0.17% of the messages in the spam folder). Of course, these are not the only messages that may be read from the spam folder, but only these are "rescued" by being reported to the mailbox provider.

TINS: The Relationship Indicator

Unlike other indicators, the TINS rate derives heavily from the mailer's relationship with subscribers, and how interested they are in the message. Poor deliverability can be due to technical factors and weak list hygiene, and can be fixed somewhat quickly without changing email content or other factors that subscribers see. The TINS rate, however, can only be improved by building a relationship that makes the recipient want to read the sender's messages, and that takes time.

Return Path looked at TINS in relation to other email metrics to determine whether the TINS rate actually reflects subscriber engagement with a sender's email. We also looked at what made the messages of those with higher TINS rate worth rescuing. Here's what we found:

Higher TINS Rates Mean Better Deliverability—and Vice-Versa

A TINS report indicates that the message is of value to the recipient. It is not surprising that the messages of senders with the best deliverability rates are rescued from the spam folder and reported not to be spam more often than the messages of senders with lower deliverability rates. While the TINS rate for the lowest deliverability rates (less than 88%) and the middle deliverability rates (88-97%) are very similar (0.17% and 0.15%) those with deliverability rates over 97.1% had TINS rates of at least 0.44%.

---

[1] The percentage of sent email delivered to the inbox – neither blocked nor delivered to the spam folder

Deliverability vs. TINS Rate All Brands

Not Delivered to Spam	TINS Rate
Less than 88%	0.17%
88% to 97%	0.15%
97.1% to 99%	0.44%
More than 99%	0.69%

Conversely, the lower a sender's TINS rate, the higher the percent of its messages delivered to the spam folder.

Deliverability vs. TINS, All Brands

TINS Rate	Delivered to Spam
less than 0.15%	18%
0.15%-0.50%	11%
0.50% and better	6%

Email from senders whose messages trigger complaints (that is, delivered mail where the "This is spam" button is clicked), also triggers "This is not spam" reports. That is, often the higher the spam rate, the higher the TINS rate. These senders are getting both negative and positive attention from recipients.

TINS vs. Complaints ALL BRANDS

This IS Spam Rate	TINS Rate
more than 0.10%	0.30%
0.04%-0.09%	0.19%
0.02%-0.03%	0.14%
less than 0.02%	0.06%

[1] The percentage of sent email delivered to the inbox – neither blocked nor delivered to the spam folder

What causes this seemingly contradictory result? Return Path experience suggests that subject lines that don't keep their promise have a lot to do with it. For example, some mailers have tested using "Re:" to preface their subject lines, hoping that recipients will be more likely to read it thinking it's a response to one of their messages. It might work, but some subscribers will inevitably feel misled, and these recipients will be more likely to click the spam button. The net effect on actual read rates and future deliverability rates is unpredictable; it is not a recommended practice. While this example is relatively clear, the search for effective subject lines pushes virtually every marketer to test recipients' tolerance for hyperbole and gimmickry. Big promises can create excitement, boost read rates, and even increase TINS reports, but those same promises can also raise consumers' suspicions and trigger complaints.

Higher TINS Rates Correlate with Other Indicators of Subscriber Engagement

Both read rate and forward rate are considered direct indicators of engagement, and both show positive correlation with the TINS rate. The greater the percentage of a sender's messages that get read, the greater the chance that its messages will be rescued from the spam folder. Domains with a read rate of less than 9% have a TINS rate of 0.14%, while those with a read rate of 22% or greater have a TINS rate more than six times as high.

Read Rate vs. TINS Rate, All Brands

Read Rates	TINS Rate
less than 9%	0.14%
9%-12.9%	0.29%
13%-17.9%	0.34%
18%-21.9%	0.48%
22% and better	0.97%

Looking at this relationship in the other direction, if a domain had a TINS rate of less that 0.15%, only 6% of its messages were read, compared with 19% for sending domains of 0.50% or higher.

In general the forward rate is even lower than the TINS rate. However, those senders who achieved the highest TINS rates had the highest forward rates, at 0.06%. Similar to read rate disparities between the best and the rest, mail from senders with high TINS rates was six times more likely to be forwarded.

TINS rate Compared with Forward Rate

TINS Rate	Forward Rate
less than 0.15%	0.01%
0.15%-0.50%	0.01%
0.50% and better	0.06%

How Senders Generate TINS Through High Engagement

We looked at the senders with the highest TINS rates to see what practices and content generate the kind of loyalty that will send recipients looking in their spam folder and making TINS reports. We found that a handful of common traits among these senders:
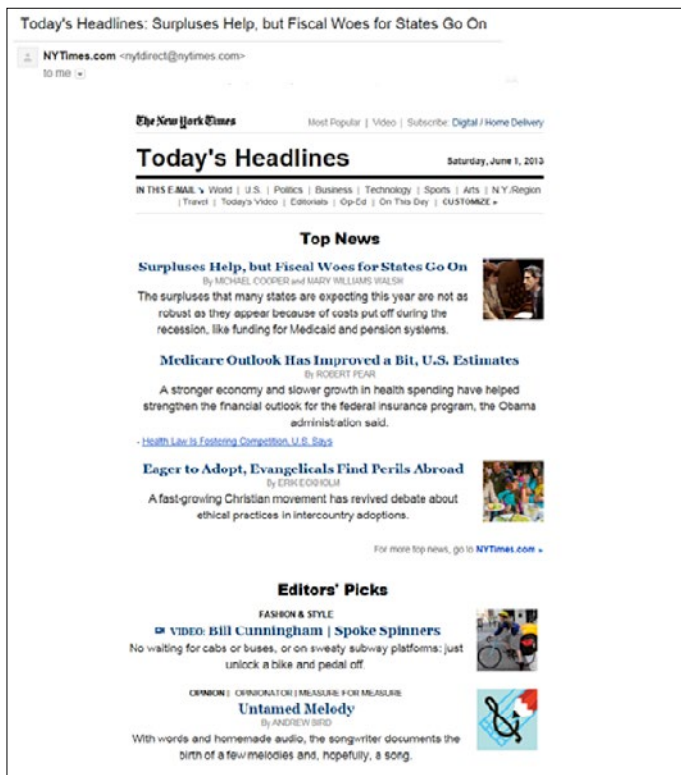

Being unmistakably themselves: All of these senders had clearly recognizable sending names; recipients would feel no risk when opening them.

Notice how Carnival Cruise Lines used the company's full name in the From line to ensure that subscribers instantly recognize them.

Subject: See the Caribbean and
a Whole Lot More

Sender Name: Carnival Cruise Lines

Email: <funships@carnivalfunmail.com>

Writing clear and compelling subject lines: Top performing senders used their unique voices to reinforce recognition, and often included an attractive offer to make the message enticing.

The New York Times includes actual news in its subject lines to grab the reader, clearly identifying contents and providing tangible value even before the message is read.

Subject: Today's Headlines: Surpluses Help,
but Fiscal Woes for States Go On

Sender Name: NY Times.com

Email: <nydirect@nytimes.com>
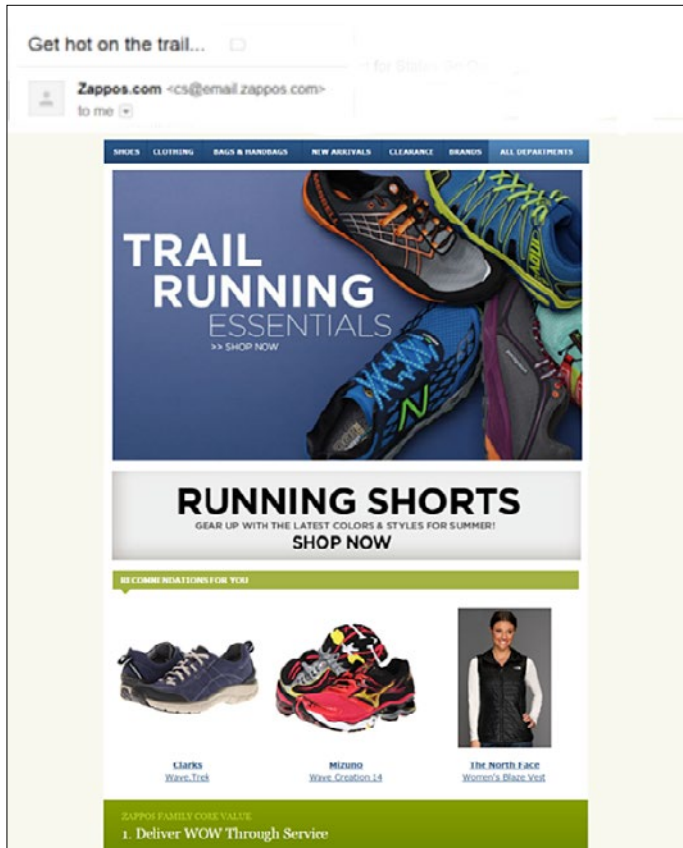
Keeping their promises: The senders' message content matched the subject lines, and their creative was distinct and consistent with their brands.

Zappos paid off its play on words with offers for trail running shoes and shorts. Subscribers knew what to expect before opening the message, which then delivered the products and the company's familiar tone.

Subject: Get hot on the trail…

Sender Name: Zappos.com

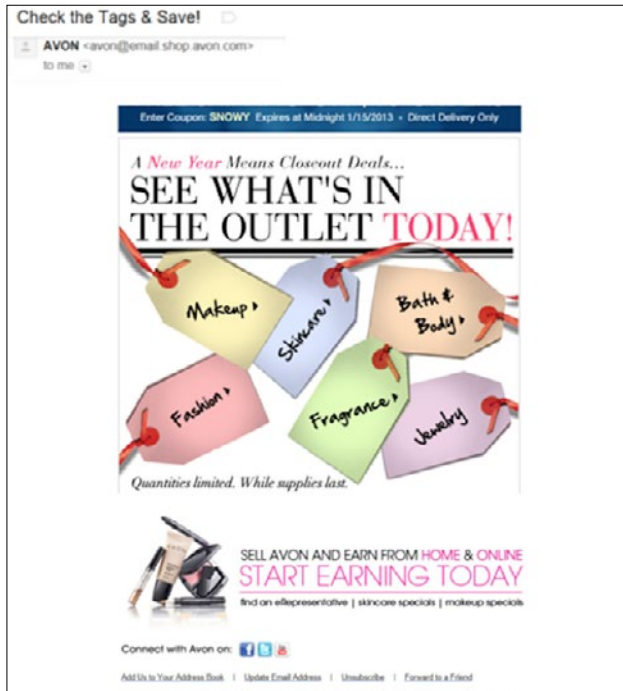Email: <cs@email.zappos.com>
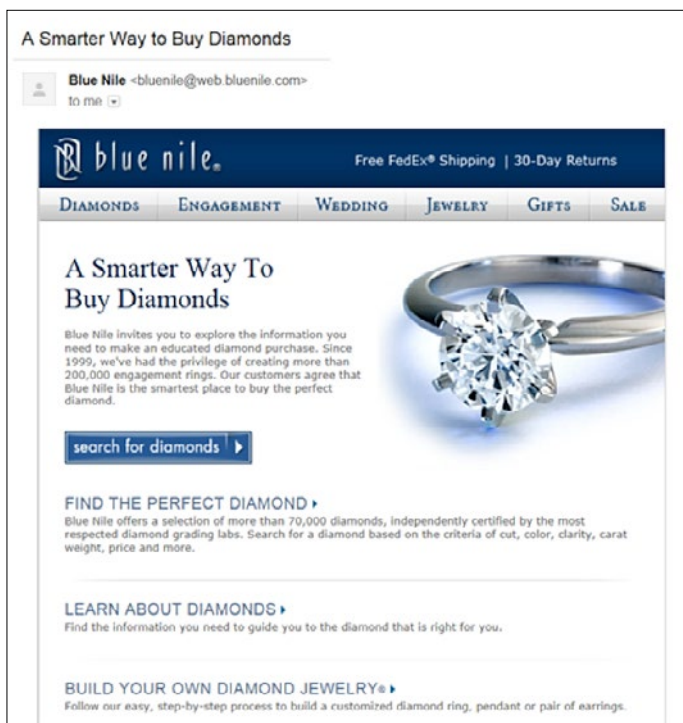
Creating engaging content: TINS winners added value with content that went beyond the offer.

Blue Nile included educational information that benefits subscribers whether or not they respond to the (prominent and clear) call to action.

Subject: A Smarter Way to Buy Diamonds

Sender Name: Blue Nile

Email: <bluenile@web.bluenile.com>

Building trust with an easy out: These senders made it easy to find the Unsubscribe button.

Avon's creative highlights links to user actions, including unsubscribe, above the rest of the message footer. Subscribers don't need to look hard to opt-out, helping Avon maintain a clean list and an engaged audience.

Subject: Click the Tags & Save!

Sender Name: AVON

Email: <avon@email.shop.avon.com>

Valued Verticals—Categories that Foster Engagement

Email from some industries was rescued from the spam folder more often than others, and some were rarely rescued. Financial and insurance senders had the highest TINS rates; retail and social media had the lowest.

While the TINS rate as a whole is 0.17%, recipients are much more likely to rescue messages sent from financial and insurance domains (0.59% TINS), probably because these are likely to be messages relating to their specific accounts. They are also notably more likely to rescue messages relating to travel, dating and jobs than to rescue the average message. Retailers and social media mailers have much lower TINS rates of 0.11% and 0.10% respectively, presumably due to their tendency toward high mailing frequencies, combined with recipients who often don't unsubscribe from messages they no longer want. They may be perfectly satisfied to leave these messages in the spam folder. Not so with airline boarding passes. Subscribers rescue messages they need…

…They also rescue messages they want, and the variations in TINS rate within each category, especially retail, reveals a lot about what subscribers want. Almost no one rescues electronics or cosmetics mailers from the spam folder, while messages from general retail, gifts and flowers, and sports retailers have rescue rates that are well above the category average. One of the largest and broadest subcategories, apparel has a modestly above-average rate. When it comes to content, recipients are more interested in rescuing emails in the hobby and enthusiast category, and from certain news providers, than emails from other types of content mailers. Airline messages are rescued more often than those from other travel categories, perhaps because more of them may be transactional, containing frequent flier account information or flight confirmations.

TINS by Category/Subcategory

Average TINS rate

ALL DOMAINS	0.17%
ALL RETAIL	0.11%
General Retail	0.60%
Home	0.30%
Gifts/Flowers	0.29%
Sporting Goods	0.27%
Apparel	0.22%
Shoes	0.17%
Department Stores	0.16%
Cosmetics	0.04%
Electronics	0.01%
ALL CONTENT	0.18%
Hobby/Enthusiast	0.30%
News	0.17%
General Interest	0.10%
ALL TRAVEL	0.28%
Airlines	0.69%
Price/Shopping Engines	0.28%
Hotels/Accommodations	0.27%
FINANCIAL/INSURANCE	0.59%
DATING	0.30%
JOBS	0.25%
DAILY DEAL	0.16%
SOCIAL	0.10%

Most-Rescued Brands: Top TINS Performers by Category

These senders' TINS rates were the highest in their categories. When their messages were delivered to the spam folder, each was at least three times more likely than the overall average to be rescued. These brands' deliverability and subscriber engagement were also exceptional during the period studied (Q1-2013).

Content, General Interest: AARP

Content, Hobby and Enthusiast: Smithsonian

Content, News: The New York Times

Dating: Match.com

Financial Services/Insurance: Allstate

Financial Services: Bank/Card Services: Citibank

Job Services: CareerBuilder

Retail, Apparel: Kohl's

Retail, Arts and Crafts: Etsy

Retail, Automotive: J&P Cycles

Retail, Books and Music: Barnes & Noble

Retail, Childrens: Gerber

Retail, Cosmetics: Avon

Retail, Department Store: Century 21 Department Stores

Retail, Dining: Dairy Queen

Retail, Drugstore: Walgreen

Retail, Electronics: Apple

Retail, Food: Kroger

Retail, Garden: Gardens Alive!

Retail, General: Target

Retail, Gifts/Flowers: Figis

Retail, Hardware: The Home Depot

Retail, Home: Pier 1 Imports

Retail, Jewelry: Blue Nile

Retail, Luggage/Accessories: Dooney and Bourke

Retail, Office Supply: Avery Dennison Corporation

Retail, Pets: 1-800-Pet Meds

Retail, Private Sales/Daily Deals: Modnique

Retail, Shoes: Zappos.com

Retail, Sporting Goods and Apparel: Altrec.com

Retail, Toys and Games: LeapFrog

Retail, Video: Netflix

Retail, Vitamins/Supplements: General Nutrition Corporation

Travel, Airline: United Airlines

Travel, Car Rental: Alamo Rent A Car

Travel, Cruise: Carnival Cruise Lines

Travel, Hotel/Accommodations: Hilton Worldwide

Travel, Price/Shopping Engine: KAYAK

Summary

The TINS rate cannot be "gamed" by changing sending settings, or adjusting your email list composition or hygiene. (Mailbox providers know the tricks; they're not so easily fooled.) The TINS rate can't be changed quickly. It can only be improved over time, by building better relationships with your subscribers so that they will want to read what you send.

That's why high TINS rates are a strong signal to mailbox providers that your subscribers are engaged and value your messages. That's also why TINS rates can give marketers an early indication of engagement problems that, if left unaddressed, can lead to long term reductions in deliverability and email revenue. Knowing your TINS rate, how it compares to other mailers within and beyond your category, and how it changes over time can give you a simple, clear measure of the health of your subscriber relationships and of your email program in general. Using TINS rates this way can protect email ROI and detect shifts in customer sentiment that affect other channels as well.

Methodology

Return Path used an unusually large dataset in conducting this analysis—over a billion messages sent to its panel of 3 million email users during Q1 2013. These are highly consistent data, derived from a single source, with clear definitions and distinctions. This gives us an extremely high degree of confidence in the data's reliability and accuracy, even when differences are relatively narrow.

To protect panelists' privacy, our calculations are not derived from individual activity. They are based on hourly snapshots of aggregations of messages' locations within the mailbox. We count all messages that have been delivered to the inbox, delivered to the spam folder, are in the trash, and have been moved.

Why Return Path

Return Path is the worldwide leader in email intelligence. We analyze more data about email than anyone else in the world and use that data to power products that ensure that only emails people want and expect reach the inbox. Our industry-leading email intelligence solutions utilize the world's most comprehensive set of data to maximize the performance and accountability of email, build trust across the entire email ecosystem and protect users from spam and other abuse. We help businesses build better relationships with their customers and improve their email ROI, and we help ISPs and other mailbox providers enhance network performance and drive customer retention.

▶ For more information, <u>contact us today</u> or use one of the email addresses to get in touch.

Global Offices

USA (Corporate Headquarters)
rpinfo@returnpath.com

Australia
rpinfo-australia@returnpath.com

Brazil
rpinfo-brazil@returnpath.com

Canada
rpinfo-canada@returnpath.com

France
rpinfo-france@returnpath.com

Germany
rpinfo-germany@returnpath.com

United Kingdom
rpinfo-uk@returnpath.com

returnpath.com

The Global Leader in Email Intelligence