iACQUIRE

QUANTIFYING OUTREACH

What We Learned From 300,000 Custom Outreach Emails

OVERVIEW

Behind every result for a competitive query listed on a search engine results page (SERP) lies a latticework of links propping up its visibility. Every Search Engine Optimization practitioner obtaining links is continually challenged and many take shortcuts, committing acts that are specifically against Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Therefore masterful and ethical link development is a skill that will continue to be in high demand as long as modern search engines rely on links as editorial votes of confidence when ranking web pages.

Outreach link building is difficult. Using your own or your client's content as bait (outward content marketing) you must convince a number of people that you have no prior relationship with to take a real world action that benefits you or your client. In the eyes of modern search engines link popularity and relevance are issues of quantity as well as quality.

At iAcquire we've developed a scalable software solution called iRank™ to aid in site prospecting, email outreach, tracking, and reporting. In 2011, we sent a total of 216,554 emails including 70,393 initial emails that resulted in the placement of 3,319 quality-assured links on behalf of our customers.

We sent 216,554 emails including 70,393 initial emails resulting in

3,319 QUALITY-ASSURED LINKS

We've reached out to the good people at Buzzstream who then contacted their customers to ensure it was okay to provide a few anonymized data points well within the restrictions of their privacy policy. This allowed for more diversified insights beyond our own otherwise highly regimented, scientific and surgical approach to holistic content marketing and link development.

iAcquire conducted this study on outreach link building practices to bring about standardized rates of return for the various features of outreach emails in hopes that link building specialists can optimize their own efforts.

This study was designed and written by Michael King, iAcquire's Director of Inbound Marketing and is the first in a series of outreach analyses that will delve deeper into different verticals and more granular features of outreach that were otherwise inconclusive due to the limitations spelled out herein. Should you or your team be interested in contributing your outreach link building data to subsequent studies please contact mike@iacquire.com.

INTRODUCTION

Outreach is an important and vital part of content marketing and a very effective way to build quality links. While many SEOs pontificate about best outreach practices, very few have brought the data to back up their often lofty claims.

On February 9th, 2012 James Agate of SkyRocket SEO did just that when he posted a study on SEOmoz entitled "Putting Guest Post Outreach Theories to the Test [With Some Real World Data]." His groundbreaking article examined how different features of outreach emails for link building performed based on a sample set of 400 emails. Skyrocket SEO's study spanned November 2011 to January 2012 and James arrived at some interesting albeit not definitive conclusions. We at iAcquire found the study both impressive and inspiring and took to our own iRank™ system to distill similar insights and go further by examining nearly 300,000 outreach emails from both our own system and Buzzstream's database for the entire year of 2011.

The iAcquire Link Building Process
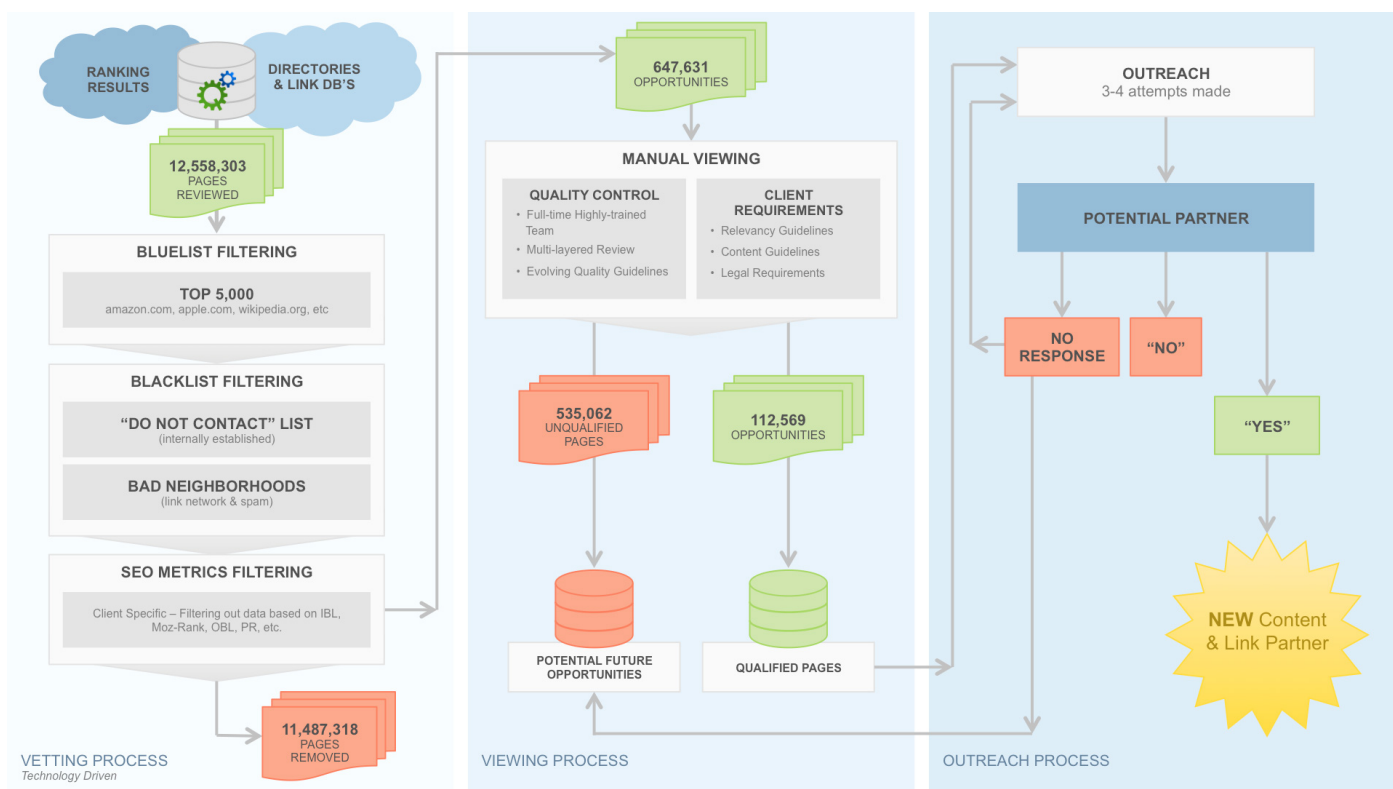
The iAcquire Link Building Process

In 2011 we used iRank™ to analyze 13 million pages of the "shallow web." Using SERPs, resource directories and backlink profiles, we algorithmically determined worth using a variety of automated filters of our own design.

First, websites listed within our extensive "blue list" of sites such as Wikipedia, Overstock, and Apple were immediately discarded since it is unrealistic to believe that our outreach efforts will lead to a link placement on those sites. Then, if those pages were on our blacklist of sites as defined by being members of paid networks, on our "DO NOT CONTACT" list or linked out to bad neighborhoods, those pages, too, were immediately discarded. Finally, at the campaign level pages are filtered by SEO metrics including number of outbound links (OBL) and inbound links (IBL) per page and root domain but largely centered around specific client requirements. For example, if a client requests non-blog sites with MozRank of 6 and Domain Authority 70 we can prepare a list of prospects to that specification.

The end result is that only 1.5 million of the original 13 million pages survived the scrutiny of iRank's algorithmic filtering system.

At this point pages are sent through our Quality Assurance team for manual review. These team members are tasked with staying abreast of industry trends and continually training our outreach division to spot pages that search engines would consider spam. This team reviews every prospect for relevance, client-specific metrics and legal requirements.

The aggregate result of manual filtering is that for every six prospects defined as qualified algorithmically only one made it through manual review by our Quality Assurance team. Ultimately, we were left with approximately 100,000 potential content partners with which we could reach out to and develop a new relationship for content distribution and link development.

Quality control continues to the end of the process. We have allocated a team of copywriters and editors to ensure that any guest posts or copy updates made to sites at the request of our outreach team meets brand quality requirements as well as SEO standards.

Finally, iRank™ crawls the pages featuring links that the team has built upfront and regularly to ensure that the link has not been modified or removed.

1.5 MILLION OF THE 13 MILLION PAGES SURVIVED

the scrutiny of iRank's algorithmic filtering system.

Diversification of Data Sources

We understand that our process is quite in-depth and that most link builders are not placing this amount of surgical precision into their outreach.

In efforts to diversify the insights of this study beyond those that can be determined based on our own data we have reached out to SaaS CRM software company Buzzstream to broaden the scope of what we could determine. Buzzstream is a celebrated Software-as-a-Service tool that allows easy management of email for link building outreach and public relations campaigns.

The users of Buzzstream employ a variety of different prospecting and outreach tactics and operate their link building campaigns in different time zones than that of the iAcquire team. Also while the iAcquire team adheres to somewhat strict formats formulas for outreach emails, Buzzstream users have no such guidelines and therefore this data gives us a sense of what link builders may accomplish when left to their own devices.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE / RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to achieve an in-depth understanding of what features of outreach link building emails perform best. Ideally, the insights herein will inform decisions throughout the entire outreach process including but not limited to the distribution of infographics, the need for social media based link building and email outreach schedule.

With those goals in mind we initially devised **twenty-eight** dream questions to examine the features of outreach emails. However due to the limitations of privacy policies, diversity of link building tactics and the way data is stored we were compelled to whittle those down to following **thirteen** philosophy-agnostic questions for the purposes of this study:

- Which gender performs best?
- How many emails (until a response or a close)?
- What time of day is best to send an email?
- What day of the week is best to send an email?
- How did email trust signals such as logos, phone numbers and links to profiles affect performance?
- How did emails with generic opening salutations perform?
- How did emails with specific opening salutations perform?
- When you don't have a name what works better a generic salutation with or without the site name?
- How do long emails perform (over 1000 characters)?
- How do short emails perform (under 1000 characters)?
- How did emails addressed to a specific person perform?
- How did emails not addressed to a specific person perform?
- How did correspondence that began from Twitter perform?

For each question we wanted to know:
- The number of emails that fit this criteria
- The rate of response
- The rate of link placement or close

ASSUMPTIONS

1. The dataset is large enough to make definitive and statistically significant conclusions unless otherwise specified.
2. Conclusions are made in a vacuum. That is to say that insights are derived as though the feature in question is not affected by the presence and absence of other features examined in this study unless otherwise specified.
3. Buzzstream's data represents varying link building practices and philosophies of people spread out across the globe working any day or time of the week.
4. The results of this study are correlations and correlation is not always necessarily causation.

ASSERTION

iRank's data represents a controlled and highly structured data-driven link building methodology implemented by a team working out of one office from 8AM-6PM PST Monday through Friday.

LIMITATIONS

iRank™ Reporting Limitations

There were certain components to this study which are not generally tracked within iRank™. Through the diligent efforts of Mike Bernardez, impressive data manipulation feats took place and we were able to wrangle many of the insights we sought. Other insights beyond our initial set also came to light during the process.

iRank's data features a margin of error of 1.88% in the classification of initial emails. That is to say we were not able to classify 1.88% of all emails properly because the iRank™ system marked them as initial emails, but on further investigation those emails had "Re:" in the subject line. This has not affected our ability to report on link building efforts to clients, but the issue has been fixed for subsequent studies.

Buzzstream Privacy Policy and User Type

Although BuzzStream was very eager to be a part of this study they (respectfully so) made it clear that anonymity was mandatory to maintain the faith of their user base. Therefore with Buzzstream

data we had no access to the email chain in order to keep within compliance of their privacy policy. We were very limited in what insights could extract.

While Buzzstream has many emails in its database it is unclear for many users whether they are only using the product for just link building or whether they are using it for PR efforts as well. Therefore their data was limited to that of users who explicitly use the tool for just link building. Due to the anonymity of the data all insights from Buzzstream are based on initial contacts and do not include close rates.

RESULTS

The forthcoming analysis is the result of our Outreach Link Building study formatted as follows:

- **Overview** is a succinct discussion of the question we were attempting to definitively answer and the criteria analyzed for emails that fit
- **Analysis** is the presentation of the data collected that fit those criteria
- **Insights** is the conclusion(s) that the data produced
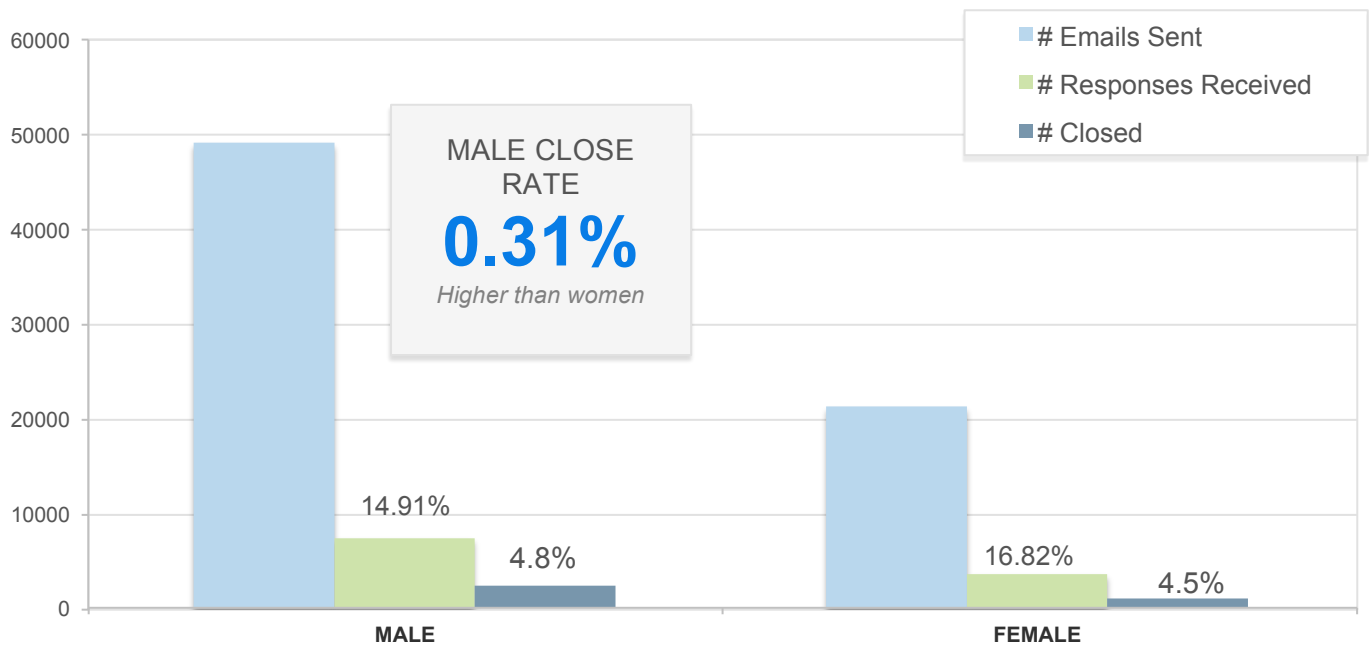- **Action** is the steps link builders should take to capitalize on these insights

And now that we are 10 pages deep, let's finally get into that data!

GENDER
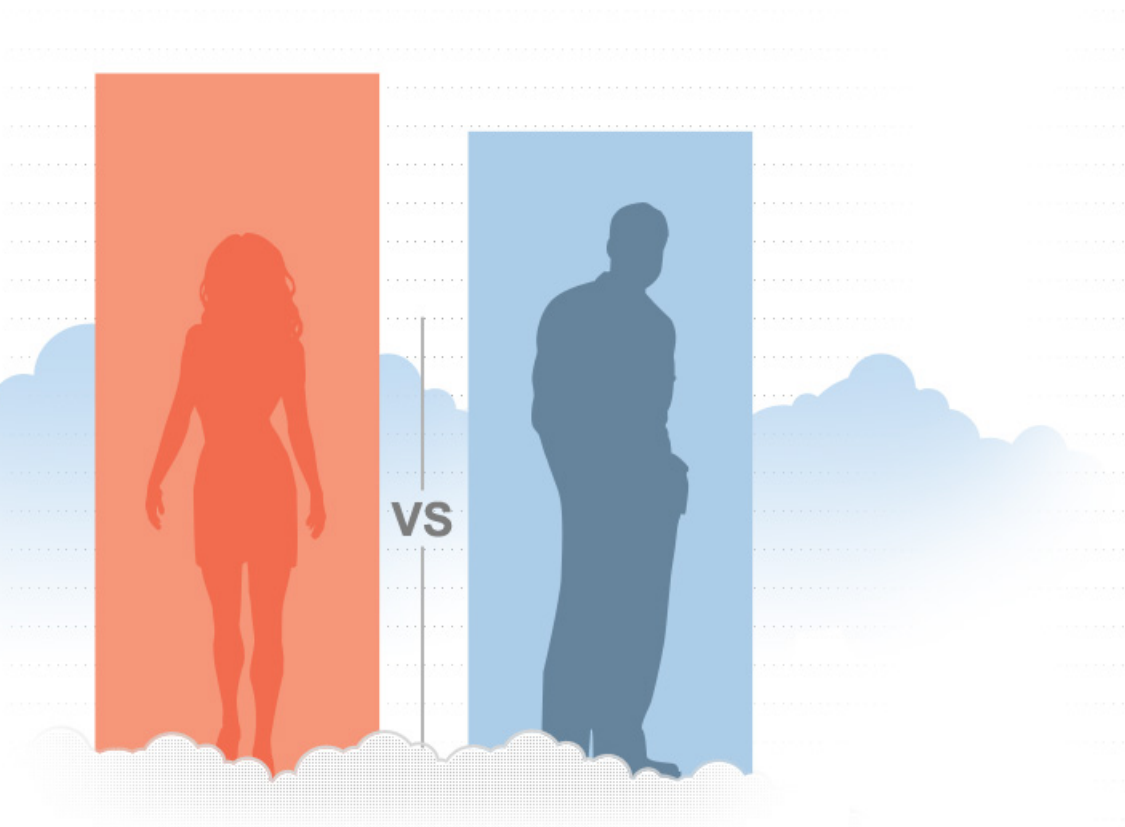
OVERVIEW

The accepted link building folklore is that women are far better performers at outreach link building and other cold calling based functions. We've set out to classify all emails by gender and definitively identify which sex truly does perform better.

Chart legend: # Emails Sent, # Responses Received, # Closed

MALE CLOSE RATE
0.31%
Higher than women

MALE: 14.91%, 4.8%
FEMALE: 16.82%, 4.5%

ANALYSIS

iRank™ data shows that while women do get a higher response rate than men (2.1% more responses for women) in outreach, the close rate is slightly in favor of men (men close 0.31% more links). Comparing this to the results from the Skyrocket SEO study we have disproved the large disparity between the performance of men and women.

INSIGHT

Hire outreach professionals based on their ability and the quality of their work rather than their gender as neither has an inherent advantage that affects the ROI of campaign significantly.

ACTION

Invest resources in equal hiring and/or training for link builders of either sex.

OPENING SALUTATION

Data Source: iRank™

OVERVIEW

Often, link builders reach out to prospects without knowing the name of the party they are contacting. The problem is that many spam emails feature the same type of generic salutation in the place of a person's name. We set out to discover what actually performs better a personal salutation ("Hi Mike"), or a generic salutation ("Aloha").
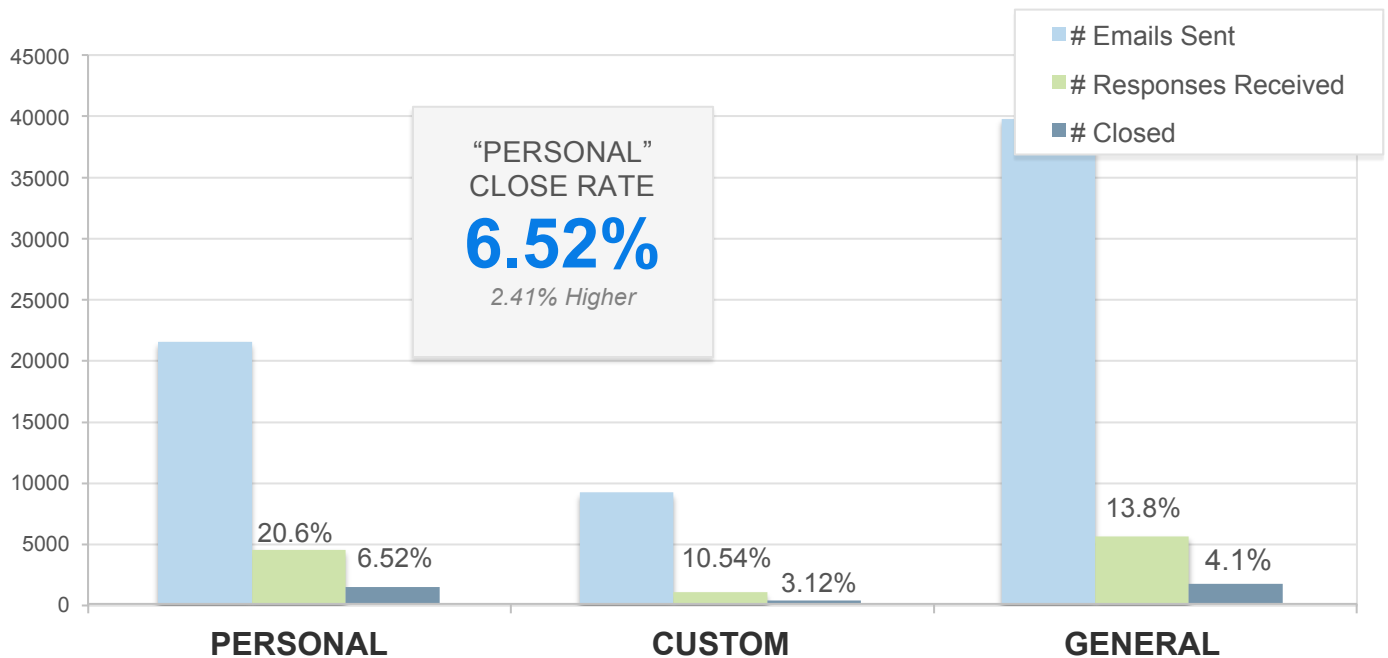
ANALYSIS

The response and close rate was substantially higher for emails that were addressed directly to a person. If that's not available a general salutation such as a "Hello" performs best. The next section will discuss the performance of the different types of general salutations.

INSIGHT

Expend the extra effort to find out the name attached to the prospect.
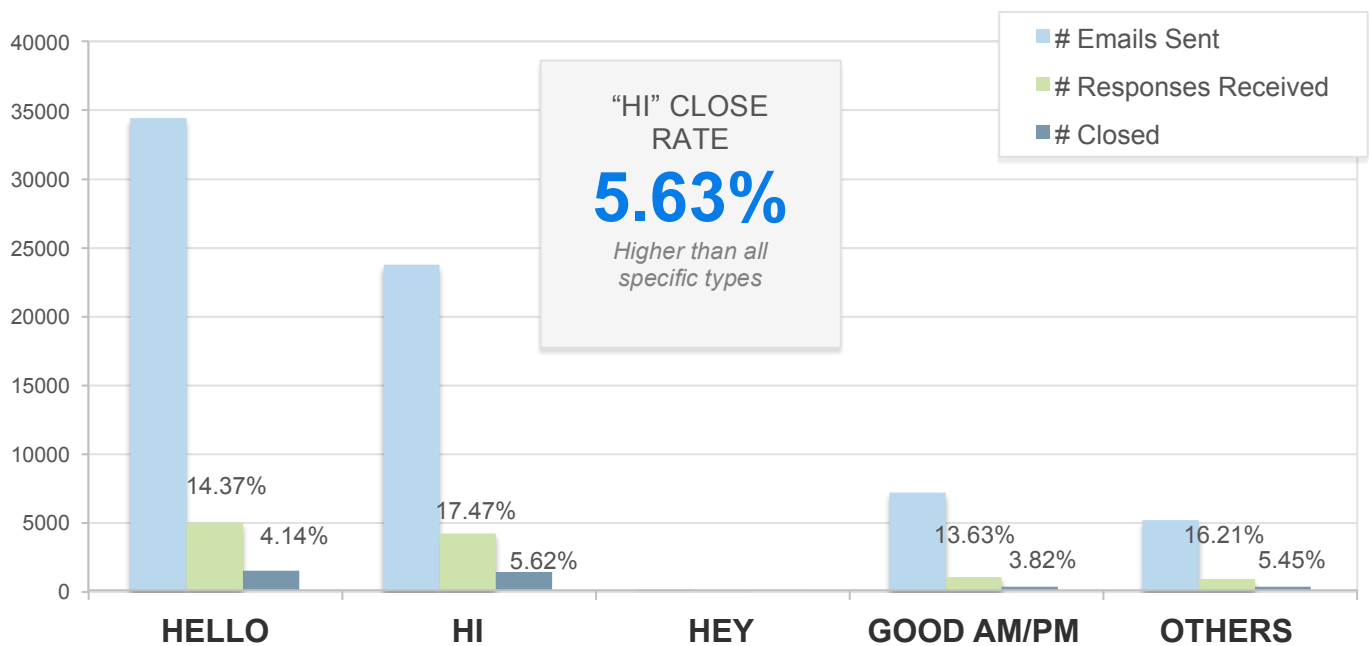
ACTION

Use a tool such as Rapportive or RapLeaf to find out more info on the prospect. With Rapportive you get all of a given users social information in the right pane within Gmail.

GENERIC SALUTATIONS

Data Source: iRank™

OVERVIEW

Oftentimes link builders reach out to prospects without knowing the name of the party they are contacting. The problem is that many spam emails feature the same type of generic salutation in the place of a person's name. We set out to discover what actually performs better a personal salutation ("Hi Mike"), or a generic salutation ("Aloha").

ANALYSIS

The response rate was substantially higher for emails that were addressed directly to a person. If that's not available a general salutation such as a "Hello" performs best. Of those general salutations "Hey" yielded the best results however due to the lack of volume "Hi" is the winning general salutation.
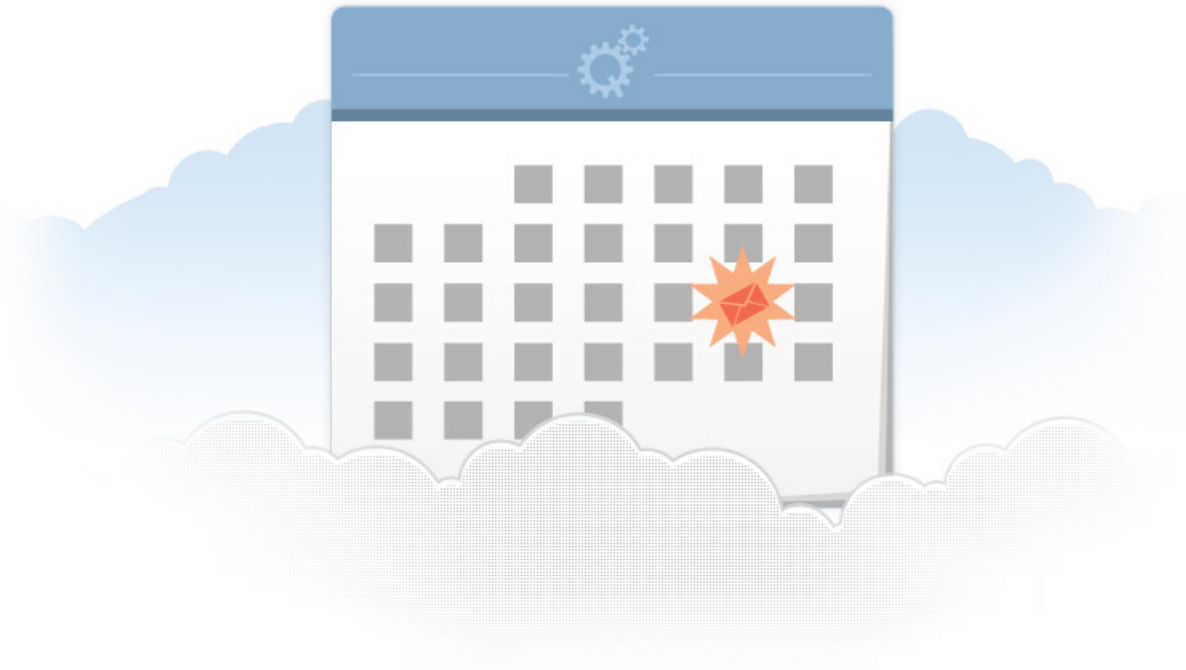
INSIGHT

Expend the extra effort to find out the name attached to the prospect.

ACTION

Use a tool such as Rapportive or RapLeaf to find out more info on the prospect. With Rapportive you get all of a given users social information in the right pane within Gmail.

DAY OF THE WEEK

Data Source: iRank™ & Buzzstream
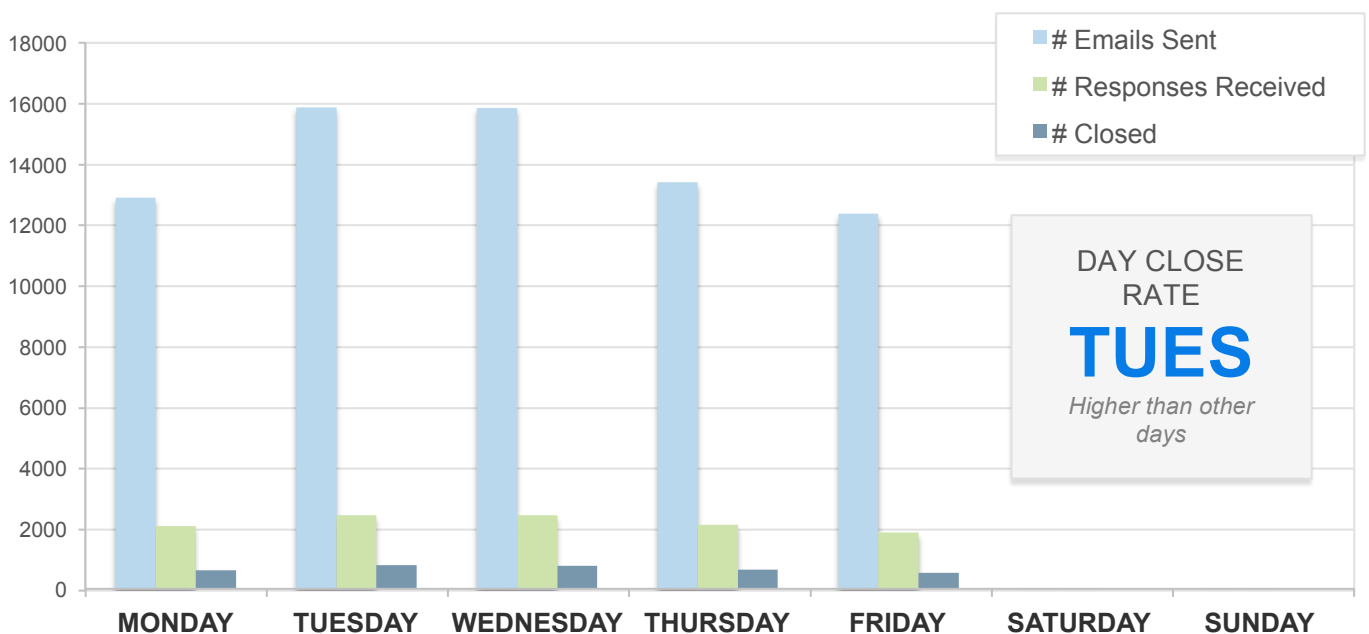

OVERVIEW

While the day an email is sent is not necessarily indicative of when it was read, it is no less valid that determining what day is the most effective to publish a Tweet. As such we set out to determine which day(s) of the week resulted in the highest responses and link activations.

DAY CLOSE RATE

TUES

Higher than other days

iRank™ Day of Week data

Buzzstream Day of Week data
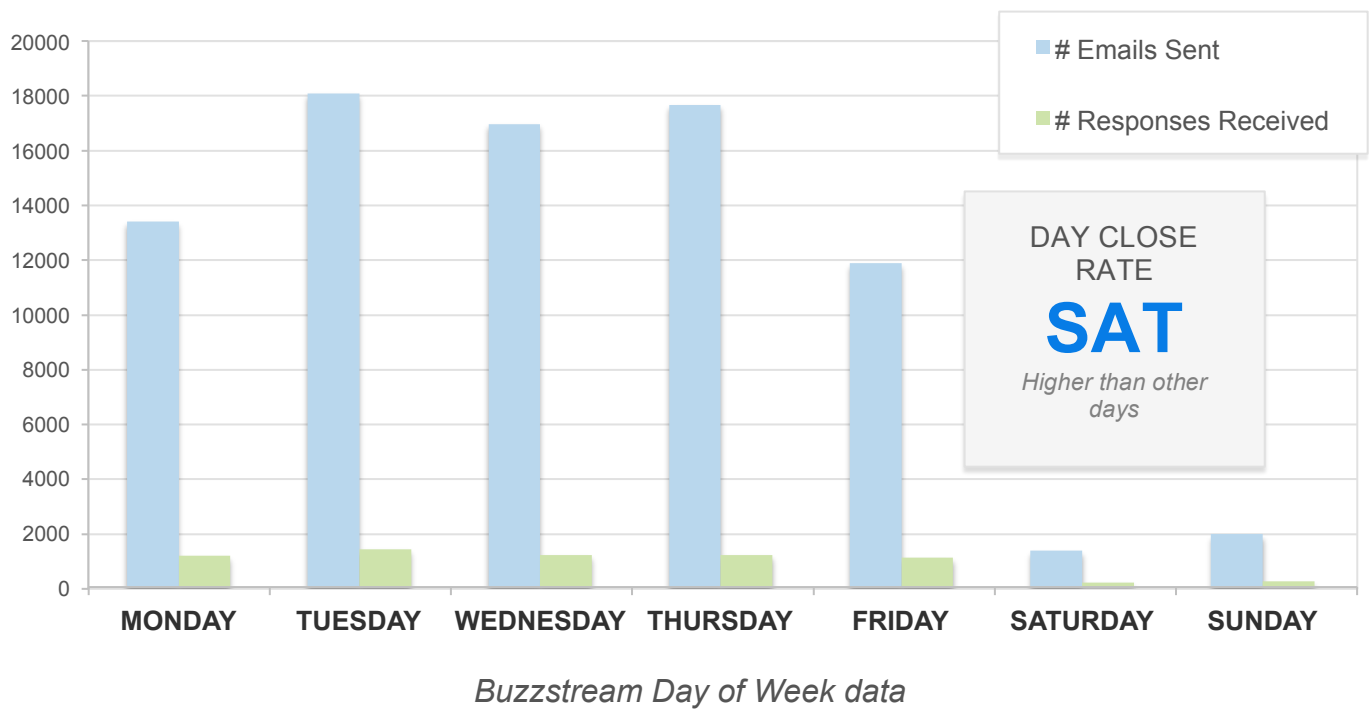
ANALYSIS

As noted the Buzzstream data represents a more varied dataset and the iRank™ data represents a more controlled dataset. While we were not able to analyze close rates we *were* able to determine that Saturday resulted in the highest response rate followed by Sunday and Friday for the Buzzstream data.

The iRank™ data technically correlates with Buzzstream somewhat in that Sunday yielded the highest response and close rates. However the volume of outreach is so low since the weekends are outside of the iAcquire work hours and we are essentially not comparing apples to apples. Therefore we've found that the iRank™ data shows emails sent on Monday have the highest rate of response, followed by Thursday with Tuesday and Wednesday tied for third. Initial emails sent on Tuesdays yielded the highest rate of activated links, followed by a tie for Monday and Wednesday.

INSIGHT

The volume of overall email lower on the weekend and therefore it is simply easier for an email sent on the weekend to be seen. Therefore in this case we believe that Buzzstream's data is more definitive.

ACTION

Outreach specialists should schedule initial link building emails during the weekend with a tool such as Boomerang for Gmail to ensure the best chance at a response. Integrating Buzzstream with Gmail allows you to use Boomerang for this as well.
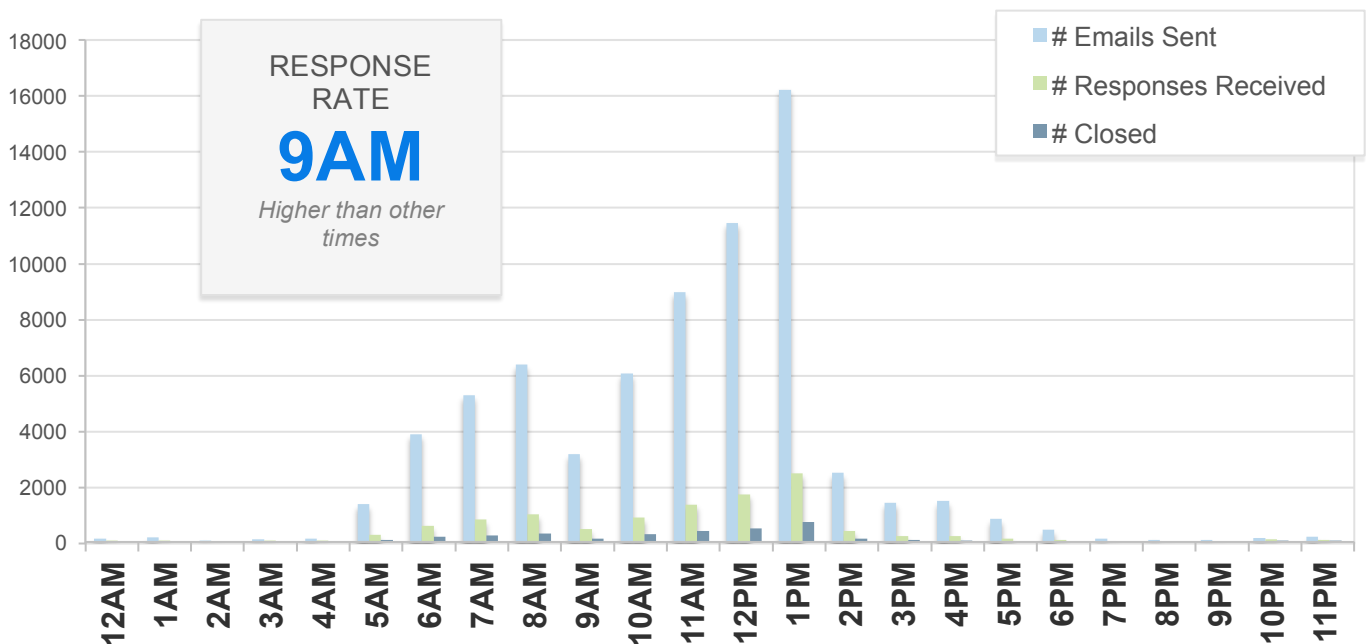
HOUR OF THE DAY

Data Source: iRank™ & Buzzstream

OVERVIEW

Similar to the day of the week analysis, although the time an email is sent is not necessarily indicative of when it was read, it is no less valid that determining what day is the most effective to publish a Tweet. As such we set out to determine which time of the day resulted in the highest responses and link activations. All times have been normalized to EST.

RESPONSE RATE

9AM

Higher than other times

Legend:
- # Emails Sent
- # Responses Received
- # Closed

Buzzstream Day of the Week Data

RESPONSE
RATE

2AM

Higher than other times

Emails Sent
Responses Received

8000
7000
6000
5000
4000
3000
2000
1000
0

12AM 1AM 2AM 3AM 4AM 5AM 6AM 7AM 8AM 9AM 10AM 11AM 12PM 1PM 2PM 3PM 4PM 5PM 6PM 7PM 8PM 9PM 10PM 11PM
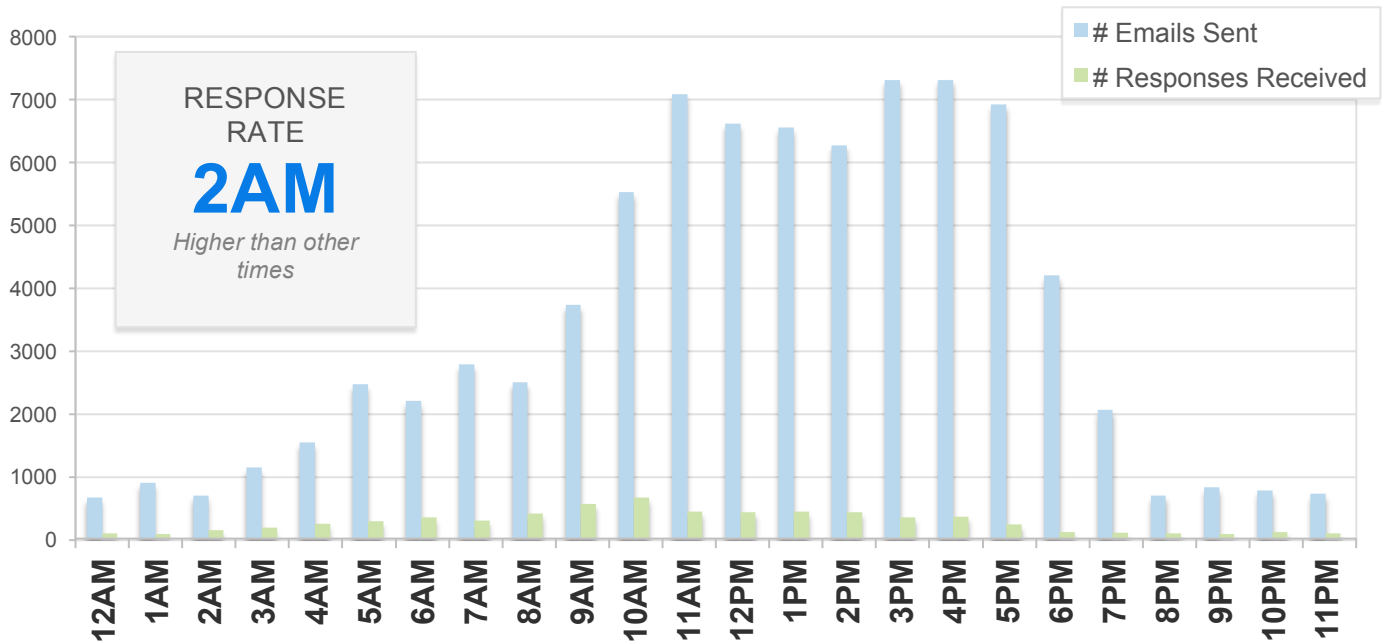
iRank™ Day of the Week data

ANALYSIS

Buzzstream's data shows that sending emails at 1AM, 10PM and 2AM EST result in the highest responses.

Conversely iRank™ data shows that 4AM, 9AM and 6AM EST return the highest rate of response and emails sent at 9AM, 4AM and 5AM EST return the highest rate of link activations.

INSIGHT

It's hard to draw a definitive conclusion as to what the perfect hour is to send outreach emails from the two datasets because the results skew across the late night and early morning hours. However since all these times fall within the 10PM and 9AM range the insight is that the volume of email is lower throughout the night than during the day and therefore prospects come across these emails first thing in the morning before "email fatigue" sets in.

ACTION

Schedule emails to send within between 10PM and 9AM EST to using a tool such as a Boomerang or hire a link building team that operates at those times within the targets time zone.

NUMBER OF MAILS

OVERVIEW

We wanted to determine how many emails does it take to close a link and how much effort is worth expanding to close a link. Typically the iAcquire team stops following up after 4 emails, but in some cases they've gone beyond that. We wanted to know what value is doing so and what the sweet spot is.

MALE CLOSE RATE

0.31%

Higher than women
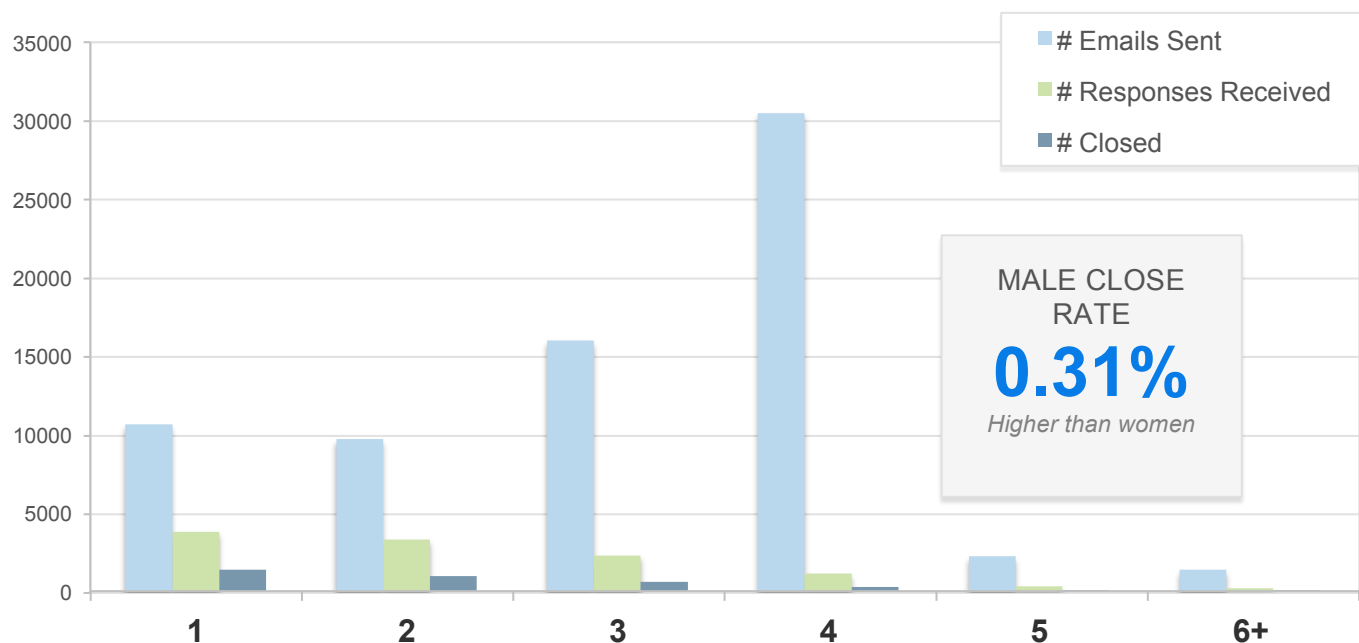
ANALYSIS

As with most cold calling practices it's generally understood that relentless persistence is what gets the best results. This is actually proven to be true. Outreaches that continued to 6 emails and beyond proved to do substantially better than those that stopped at the standard 4th email. Most importantly, we found that we achieved 60% more responses by sending a second and third email.

INSIGHT

Be persistent until the prospect explicitly says no without abusing someone's inbox.

ACTION

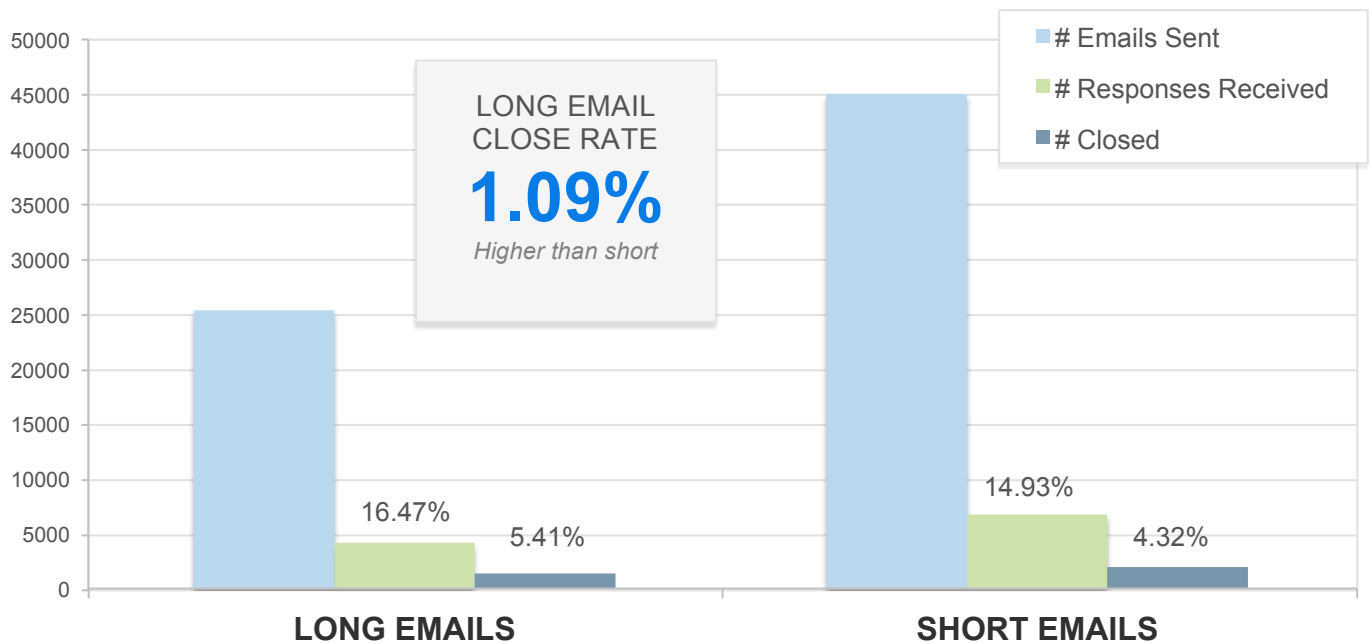Schedule follow-up emails with a tool such as Boomerang.

EMAIL LENGTH

Data Source: iRank™ & Buzzstream

OVERVIEW

We wanted to determine what performed best short emails (as defined by emails with bodies of less than a thousand characters) or long emails as defined by emails bodies containing one thousand or more characters.

LONG EMAIL
CLOSE RATE

1.09%

Higher than short

- # Emails Sent
- # Responses Received
- # Closed

	LONG EMAILS	SHORT EMAILS
	16.47% 5.41%	14.93% 4.32%

Email length data

ANALYSIS

Short initial emails resulted in 1.54% more responses than long emails however long emails converted at 1.09% higher rate.

INSIGHT

Longer emails typically resulted in more personalization and more detail specific to the content partnership opportunity.

ACTION

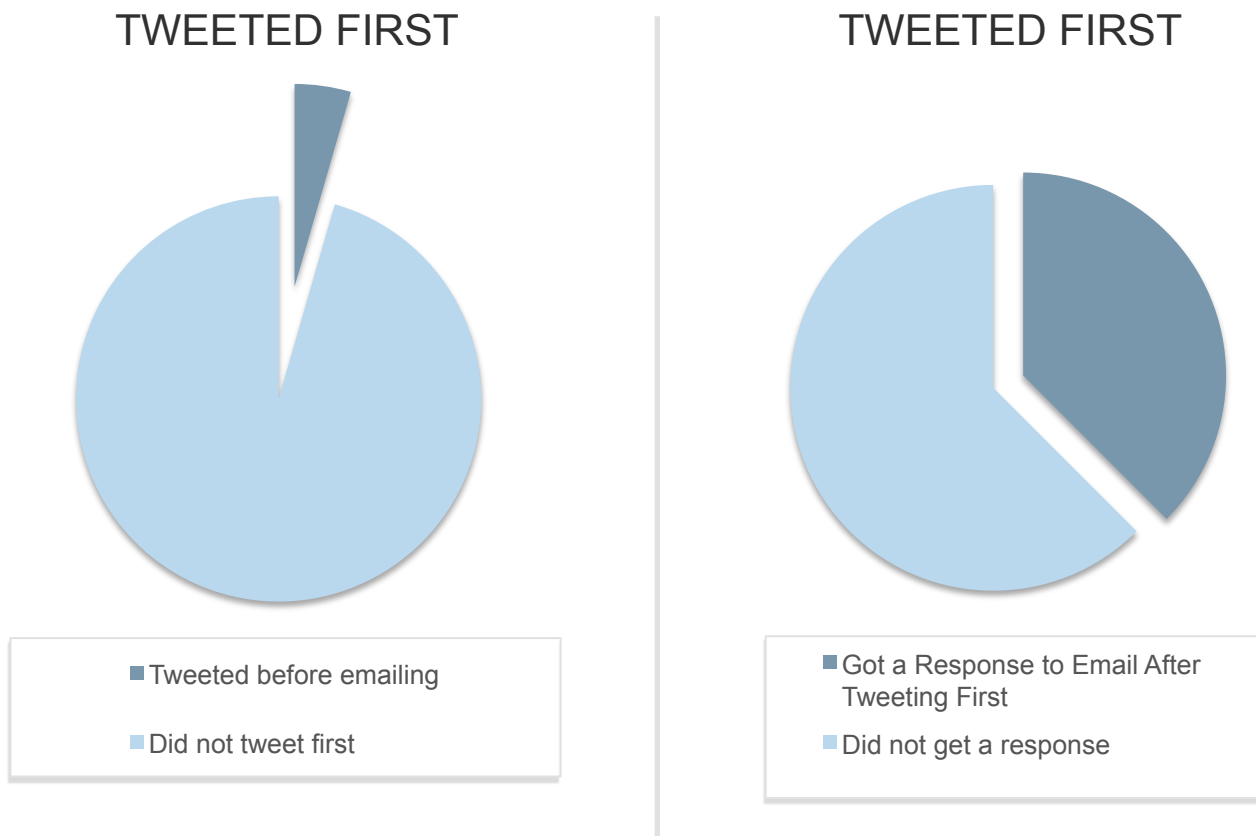Throw away your form letters and write more personalized emails.

FIRST TOUCH ON TWITTER

Data Source: Buzzstream™

OVERVIEW

It is accepted practice that reaching out to users on twitter allows link builders to jump into a conversation in a place where the prospect is potentially already disarmed. We wanted to see if the rate of response and close was higher for users that tweeted at prospects before emailing them.

TWEETED FIRST

- Tweeted before emailing
- Did not tweet first

TWEETED FIRST

- Got a Response to Email After Tweeting First
- Did not get a response

ANALYSIS

The data describing whether first touch via Twitter is effective is not statistically significant. There were not enough Buzzstream users that have connected their link building efforts to Twitter to make a definitive determination of the effectiveness. This is largely indicative of a missed opportunity to create context and rapport with users rather than relying solely on the cold-calling tactic that is email outreach.

In 2011, **347** emails were sent from users on Buzzstream that have a Twitter account attached. Of those users there were **16** emails sent after initial contact was made via Twitter. Of those **6** elicited responses.

INSIGHT

Again, while the figures are not statistically significant within the scope of this study, the **37.5% response rate** is worthy of further investigation. Expect iAcquire to delve deeper into the effectiveness of social link building in future studies.

ACTION

Build relationships using Twitter to engage prospects with contextually relevant information that benefits them.
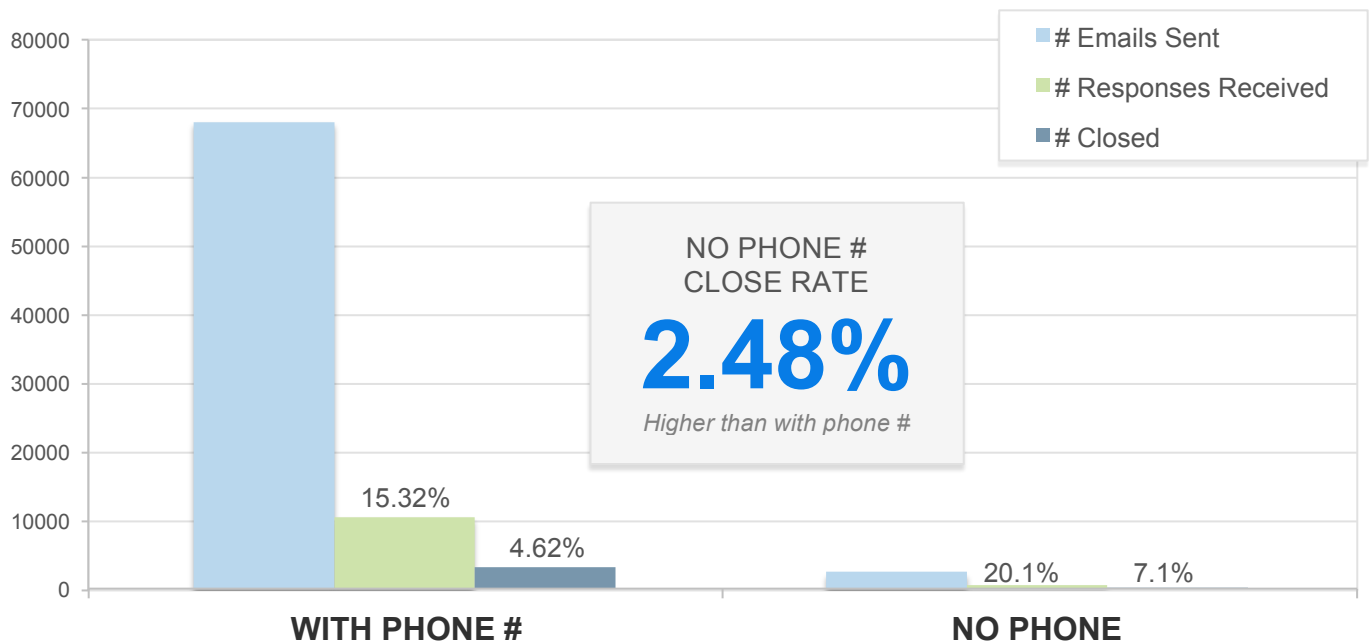
EMAIL TRUST SIGNALS

Data Source: iRank™
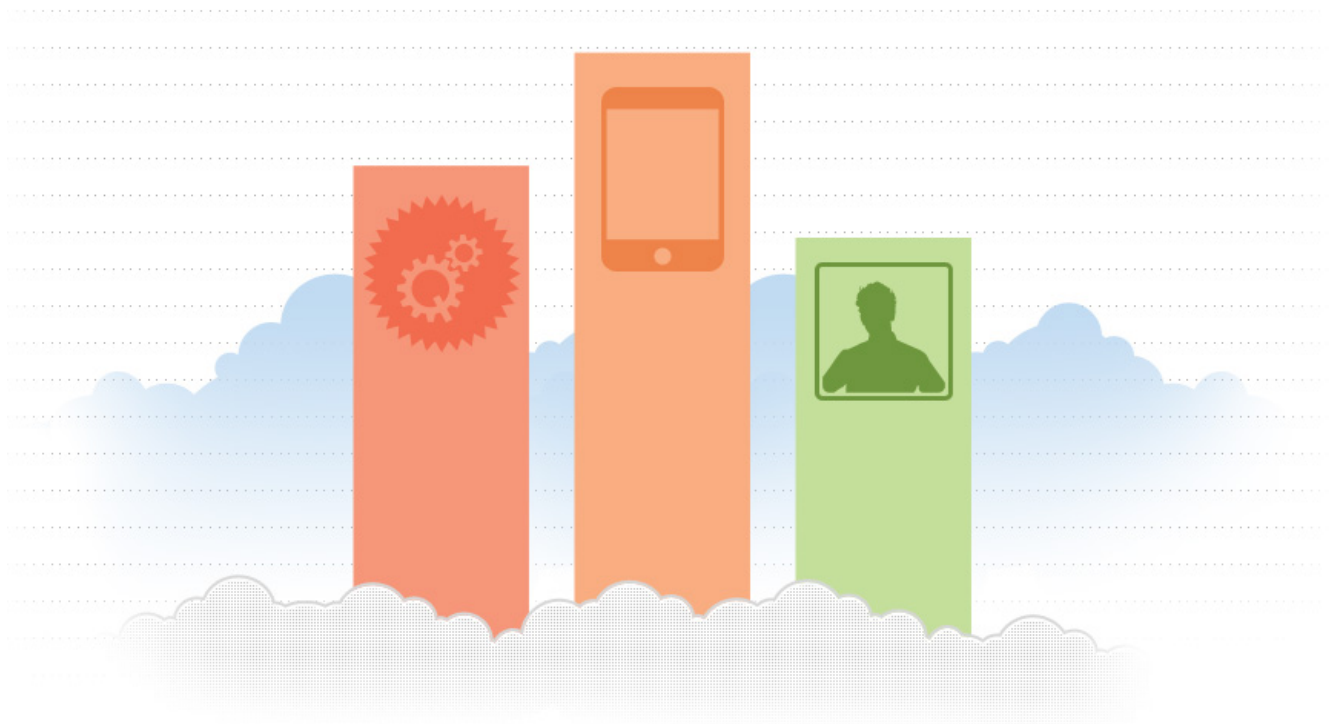
OVERVIEW

We wanted to see how including trust signals that prove the link builder is a real person such as a phone number, logo or a linked profile page affected the performance of link builders.

Legend:
- # Emails Sent
- # Responses Received
- # Closed

WITH PHONE #: 15.32% / 4.62%

NO PHONE: 20.1% / 7.1%

NO PHONE #
CLOSE RATE
2.48%
Higher than with phone #

*iRank™ Phone Number Trust Signal data*

ANALYSIS

Emails without phone numbers got 4.78% more responses and 2.48% more link closes.

INSIGHT

Prospects may correlate the appearance of a phone number in an unsolicited email with those of famous email scams.

ACTION

Remove phone numbers from initial outreach emails and only provide a phone number should a prospect explicitly ask for it.
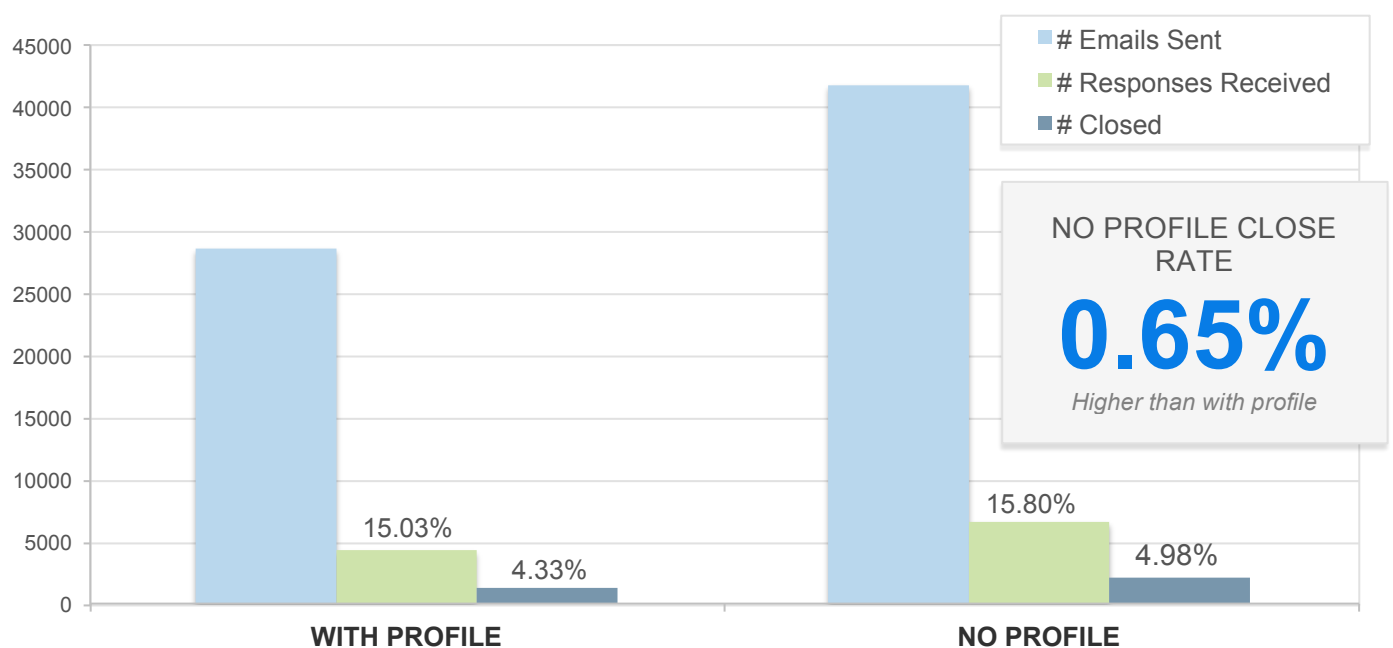
iRank™ Linked Profile Trust Signal data

ANALYSIS

Link builders performing outreach without a linked profile in their footer closed 4.98% of the prospects they reached out to while those with linked profiles closed 4.33% of their prospects. The difference in response is similarly negligible at 0.77%.

INSIGHT

The difference in effectiveness is negligible enough that it does not weigh too heavily on performance whether a linked profile is present or absent.

ACTION

Link builders should not scramble to add or delete any linked profiles when sending outreach emails. However if a 0.65% increase in closes will make or break a given campaign it is wise to remove them.

iRank™ Logo Trust Signal data
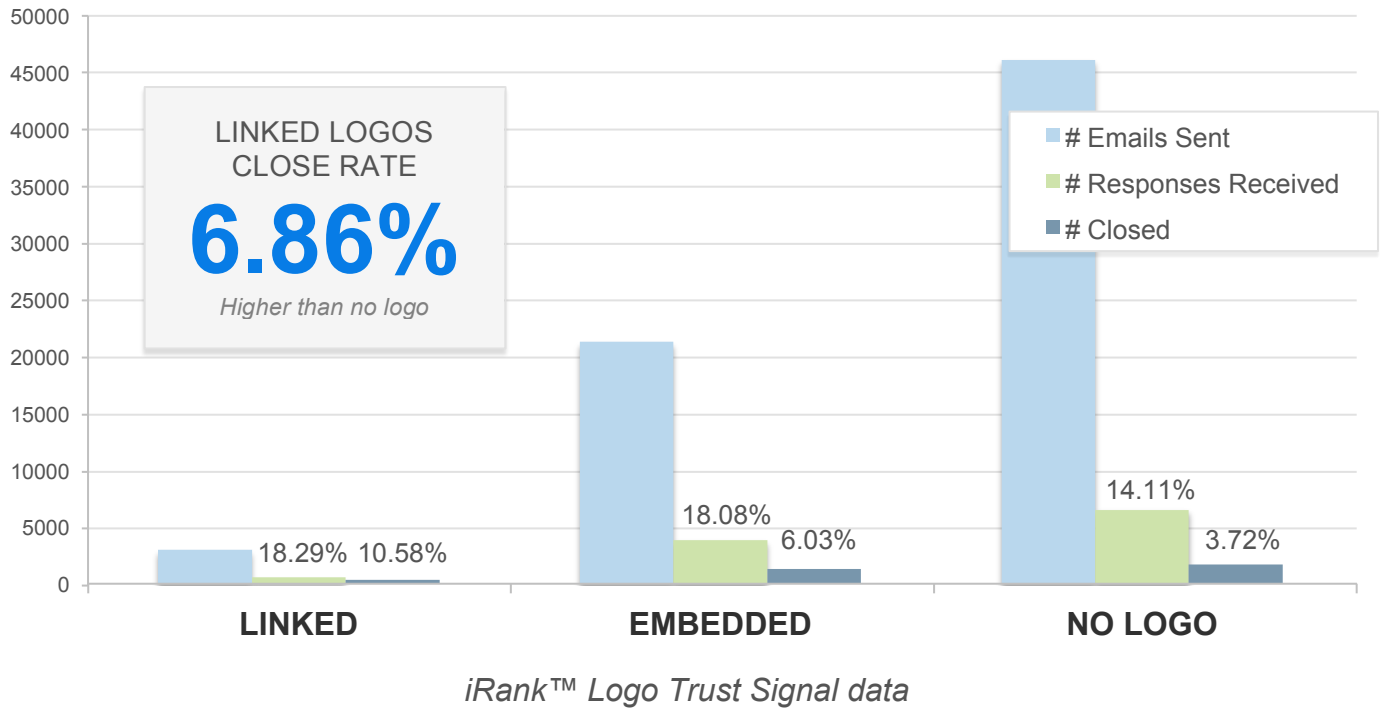
ANALYSIS

Linked logos have the highest rate of close at 10.58% with embedded logos coming in strong at number two with a close rate of 6.03%. Emails with no logos close at 3.72%.

INSIGHT

Including logos in outreach emails is a trust signal that leads to a drastic increase in link closes.

ACTION

Link builders should put a brand behind their link building efforts and include the logo for that brand in every outreach email.

CONCLUSIONS

The key takeaways from this study are:

- Social-based Link Building has yet to be largely adopted and therefore continues to be an opportunity for link builders that are ahead of the curve.

- A large portion of the web is not worth link building efforts because they do not pass intense algorithmic or manual review. Choose your prospects wisely based on the metrics available to you through tools like Open Site Explorer and actually visiting the site.

- Female Link Builders get better response rates, but male link builders get slightly better close rates. SEO teams should invest more resources in quality training for both genders.

- Longer emails perform result in more link activations than shorter emails. Keep your outreach contextual and specific to the prospect.

- A logo is a trust signal to invest in. Phone numbers and profiles are not.

- Friday, Saturday, and Sunday prove to be the best days to send initial outreach emails. Use Boomerang to schedule.

- The late night hours are the best times to send initial outreach emails. Use Boomerang to schedule.

- Using someone's name is far more effective than not. Use Rapportive so you can find out who the person is on the other end of that email address.

- Using a generic salutation is more effective than addressing the website if you don't have a name, but again a specific salutation significantly trumps both.

- Be persistent to close links. The majority of closed links happen after the 2nd email. However if you continue on beyond the 4th your chances increase tremendously. Use Boomerang to schedule follow ups.

METHODOLOGY

Instruments

iRank™ data

Buzzstream data

MySQL Workbench

Microsoft Excel

Procedure

In efforts to encourage other link builders to measure their own effectiveness we offer our process for recreation. While our nomenclature may differ from that of other link building teams, all fields are easily translatable into the features of other link building systems

Outreach link building emails are classified based on their features and then quantified based on the performance of these features.

For the iRank™ dataset, outreach emails were classified by the following different features:

- **Website_link_id** – The ID of the prospect in the iRank™ system.
- **Time_to_respond** – The length of time it took for the prospect to respond.
- **Gender** – The gender of the link builder
- **Responded** – A Boolean determination of true or false as to whether the prospect responded or not.
- **Activated** – A Boolean determination of true or false as to whether the link was placed
- **Timestamp_activated** – The timestamp for when the link was discovered as active
- **Time_to_close** – The time it took from the initial email until the link was activated
- **Is_processed** – A Boolean determination of true or false as to whether the page has been processed through algorithmic filtering.
- **Timestamp_sent -** The timestamp on the email being sent our received
- **Type –** An indication of the type of outreach email. This can be initial, followup or response.
- **Subject –** The subject of the email
- **Message_length** – The length in characters of the email
- **Day_of_week – The day of the week the email was sent**
- **Hour_of_day** – The hour of the day the email was sent

- **Email_from** – The email address from which the message was sent
- **Email_to** – The email address to which the message was sent
- **First_line** – The first line of the email which typically which contained the salutation based on filtering
- **Body** – The entire body of the message

For the Buzzstream dataset, outreach emails were classified by:
- **Group ID_rand** – To ensure there was little overlap in the determination of who was emailed by whom, Buzzstream provided us with a fake value to delineate which group the user belonged to.
- **Emails Sent** – The number of emails sent to the prospect. Since there were cases when users may contact a prospect more than once over time this data was not used.
- **Responses Received** – The number of responses received. Just as with the Emails Sent field, this data was not used.
- **Tweets Sent** – The number of tweets sent to a prospect.
- **Email Length** – The length in characters of the body of the email.
- **First Tweet** – The date and timestamp of when the first tweet was sent to the prospect.
- **First Email** – The date and timestamp of when the initial outreach email is sent to the prospect.
- **Tweeted First** – A Boolean determination of true or false as to whether the link builder tweeted at the prospect before the initial email.
- **Responded** – A Boolean determination of true or false as to whether the prospect responded to the initial email.

All metrics are examined against their rate of response and, if available, by their rate of close or link activation.

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iAcquire is a global leader in digital brand strategy and solutions for SEO, reputation management, content marketing, digital public relations, and social media marketing.

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