How To Build An Exceptional
B2B Newsletter

Hi there,

A company's marketing says a lot about them. Stock photos say, "We haven't defined our brand." Retracted emails say, "We aren't very careful." And a blog that hasn't been updated in months says, "Warning: The team here is a bit of a revolving door."

Nowhere are these signals more apparent than in a company's newsletter.

Newsletters are among the last owned audiences and marketers can say, do, and be anything. They can use sarcastic GIFs and expletives if that's what readers like. Yet most newsletter marketers squander the opportunity.

We signed up for 100 B2B newsletters (a form on their blog) over three months and rated the emails we received on design, writing, and utility in an effort to improve our own. Here is what we learned.

Cheers!

Chris Gillespie, Founder, Find A Way Media

Fast Facts

5.8 EMAILS PER MONTH

11% USED VIDEOS OR GIFS

3

273 WORDS PER EMAIL

8% USED PERSONALIZATION
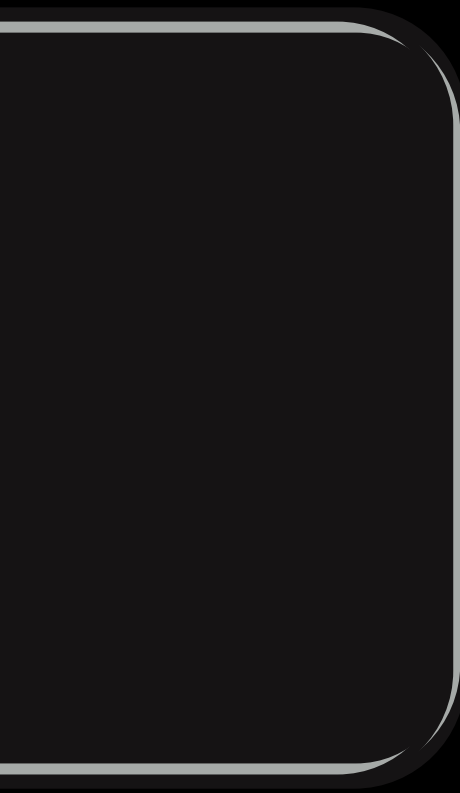
22% of companies never emailed anything at all.

4

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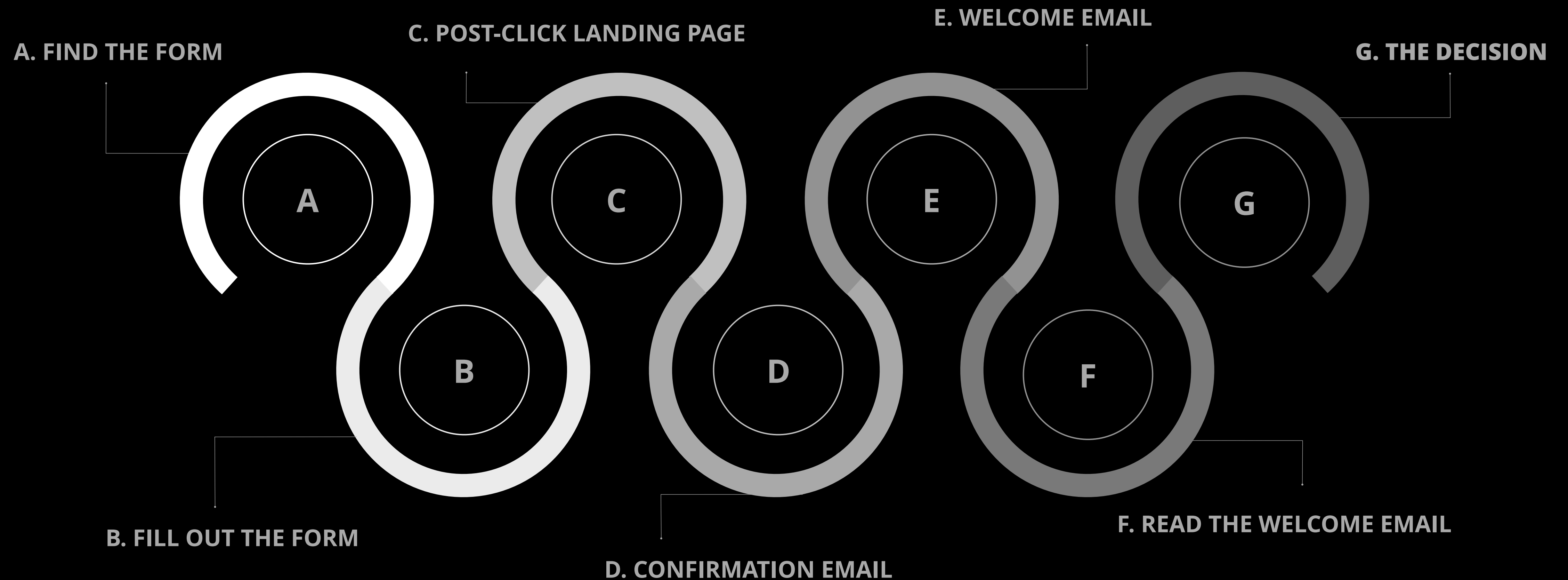**1**

The Newsletter Sign-Up Journey

The Newsletter Sign-Up Journey

Few marketers seem to have signed up for their own newsletter. If they had, we imagine studying them wouldn't have felt like such a comedy of errors. We hunted for forms, gave our information to companies that never used it, and waited for emails that never came.

Newsletters, like any purchase, have a customer journey. Unlike purchases, newsletters seem to have been neglected.

We've broken the sign-up journey into seven stages, with recommendations for each.

The Newsletter Sign-Up Journey

A. FIND THE FORM

C. POST-CLICK LANDING PAGE

E. WELCOME EMAIL

G. THE DECISION

A

C

E

G

B

D

F

B. FILL OUT THE FORM

D. CONFIRMATION EMAIL

F. READ THE WELCOME EMAIL

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A. Find The Form

## PUT IT IN AN OBVIOUS PLACE

As a website visitor, it seems like you're bombarded with calls to action (CTAs) to subscribe until you actually want them. Then, they're hard to find. This is because there are no generally accepted conventions. Everyone places theirs in a different spot such as the side menu, top menu, or at the bottom of the page.
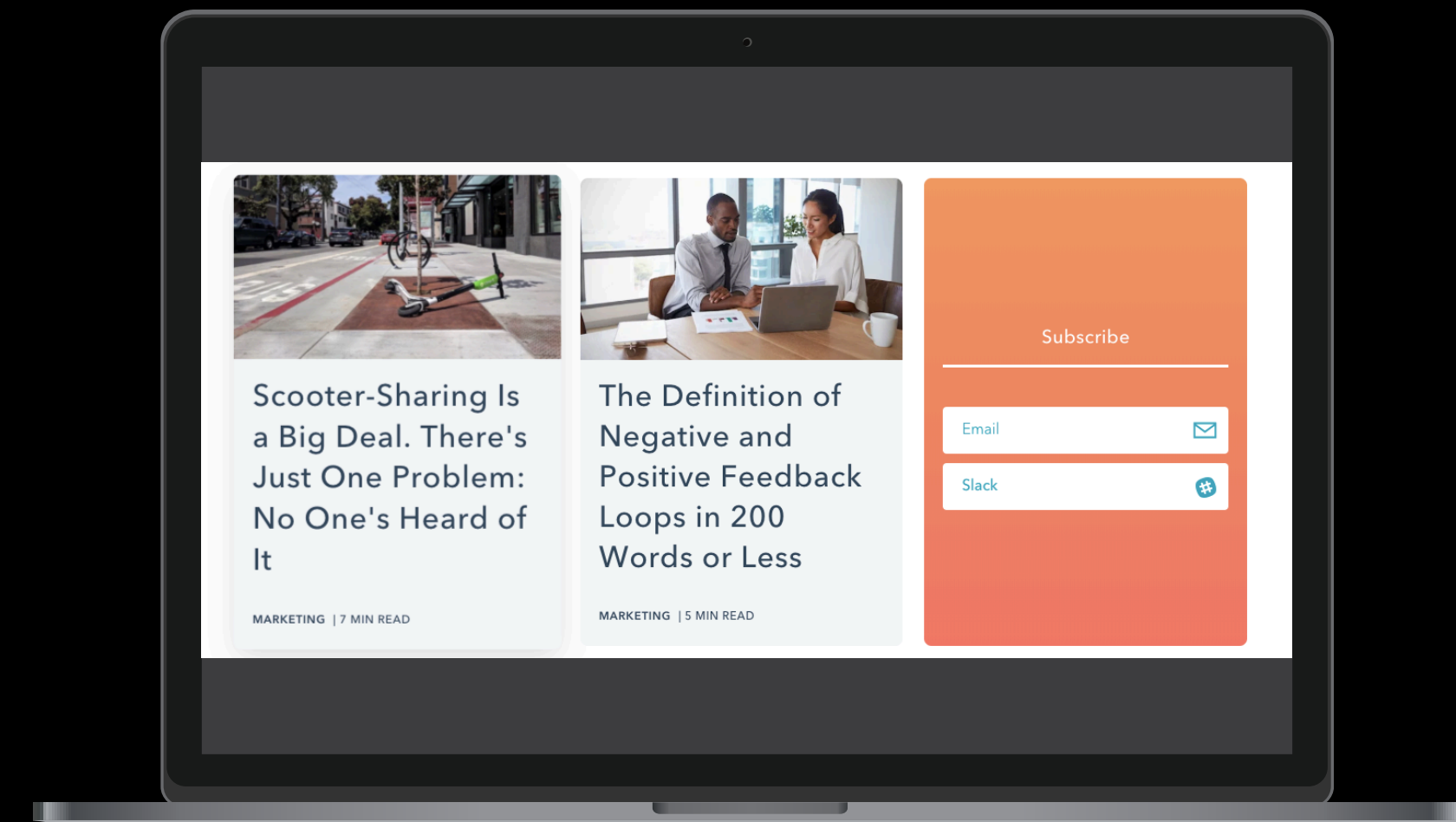
Many sites used pop-ups, but most were wordy and didn't make the benefit clear. One quarter of sites that used pop-ups implored us to "subscribe now" before the page loaded – that is, before we, the readers, had any idea what the company does.

Wherever you place your form, it should be abundantly obvious, but not aggressive. Companies like HubSpot and Uberflip are winners here – their forms sit as big, brightly colored content blocks within their blogs. When HubSpot displayed a popup, it was only after we'd scrolled, had read headlines, and understood the value.
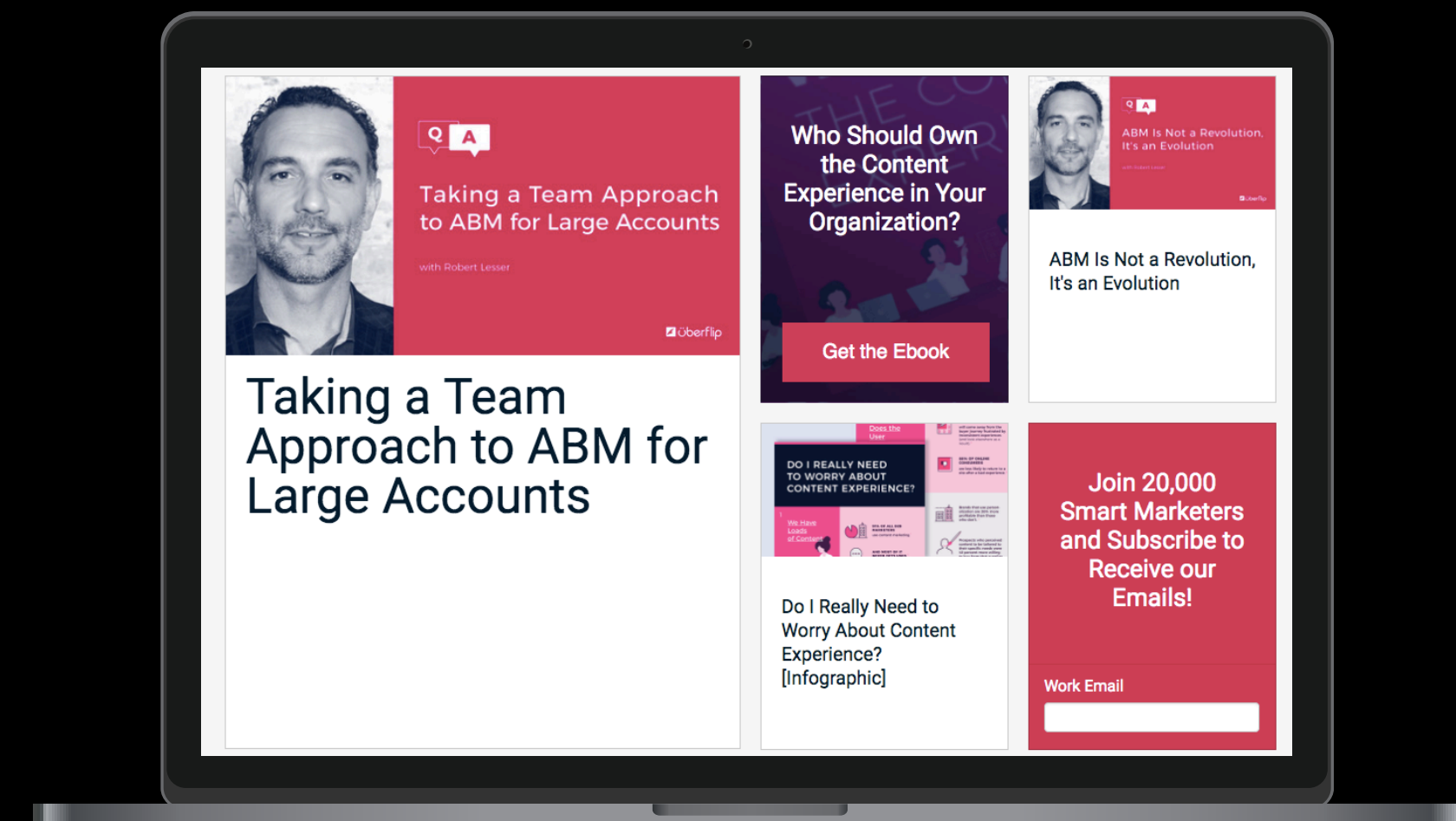
B. Fill Out The Form

FEWER FIELDS = FASTER AND BETTER

Users tend to give up on forms with too many fields, an effect known as form fatigue. This played out in our experience. The longer forms were, the more we found ourselves giving false answers just to get through, which brings into question the value of gating content too heavily – what good is more data if it's wrong?

Most companies understood the value of brevity and required an average of 2.1 fields (name and email). But those that didn't, tended to go off the deep end.
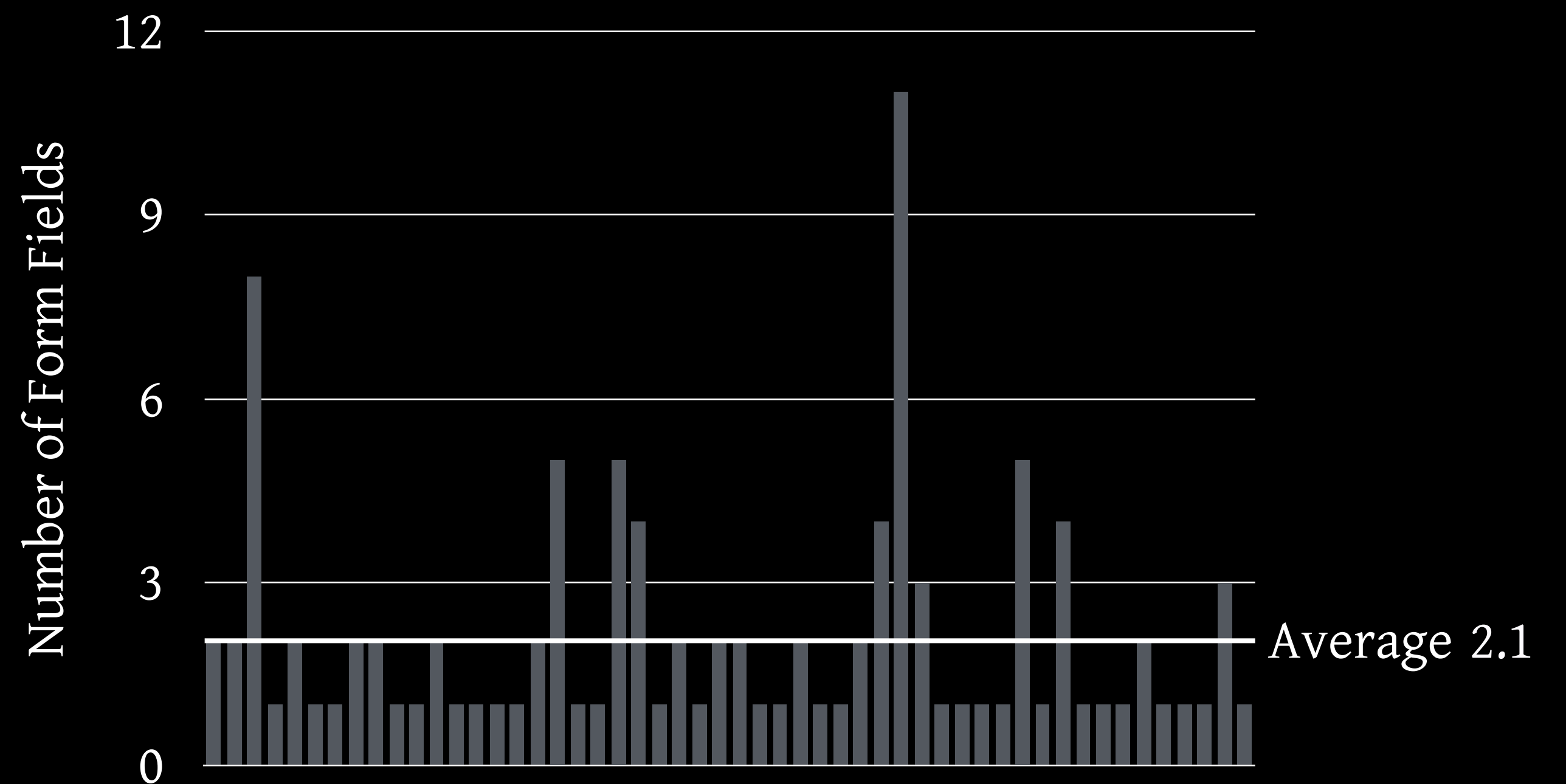
What Good Is More Data If It's Wrong?

B. Fill Out The Form

FEWER FIELDS = FASTER AND BETTER

We counted all the fields from all the forms in the study and added them together. One-third came from just five forms. SaaStr had the most with 11. As far as we could tell, not once out of the 13 times SaaStr emailed each month did they use any of that information to personalize the subject line or text. If we received a newsletter fitted to our persona, we didn't notice.

The top performing newsletters featured shorter forms, with an average of 1.8 fields, and a median of just one (email).

Number of Form Fields

12

9

6

3

0

Average 2.1

C. Post-Click Landing Page

Newsletter marketers face a similar design challenge to advertisers: What happens after someone clicks? Only, most appear not to have given this much thought. Kissmetrics, for example, sends readers to a splash page that thanks them, but offers no links or navigation menu. They're just left sitting there. That's a huge missed opportunity.

Awesome! You are now subscribed to the Kissmetrics Blog.
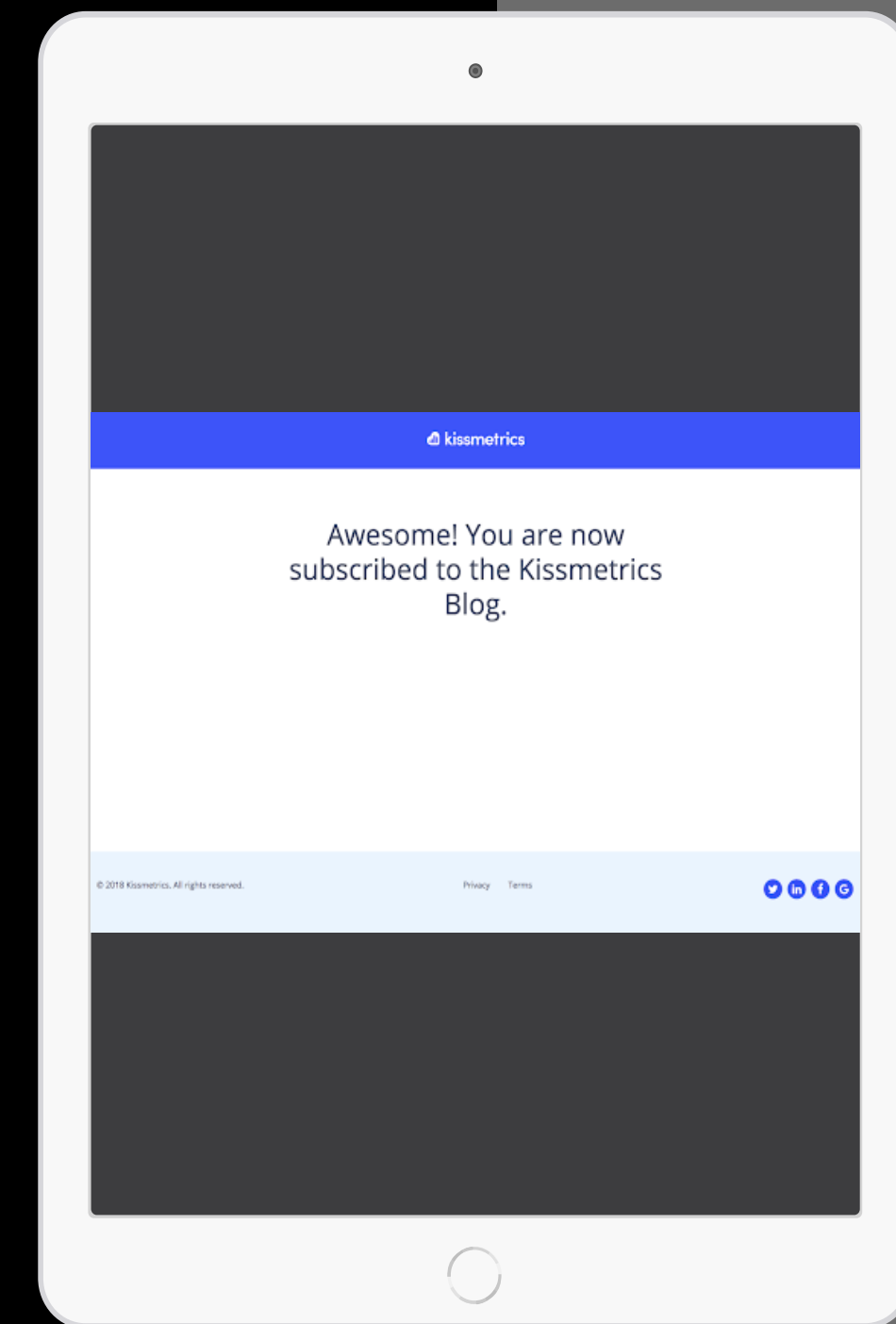
C. Post-Click Landing Page

DIRECT READERS BACK TO THE BLOG
AFTER THEY CLICK "SUBMIT"

Others were better. The business card printer MOO thanked us, briefly explained what was to happen next – that we'd need to confirm our email – and displayed a CTA button that invited us to "Get Inspired" which led back to their blog and closed the loop. Others like Jeff Bullas and Glassdoor had similarly well-planned experiences that didn't interrupt our flow and kept us reading.

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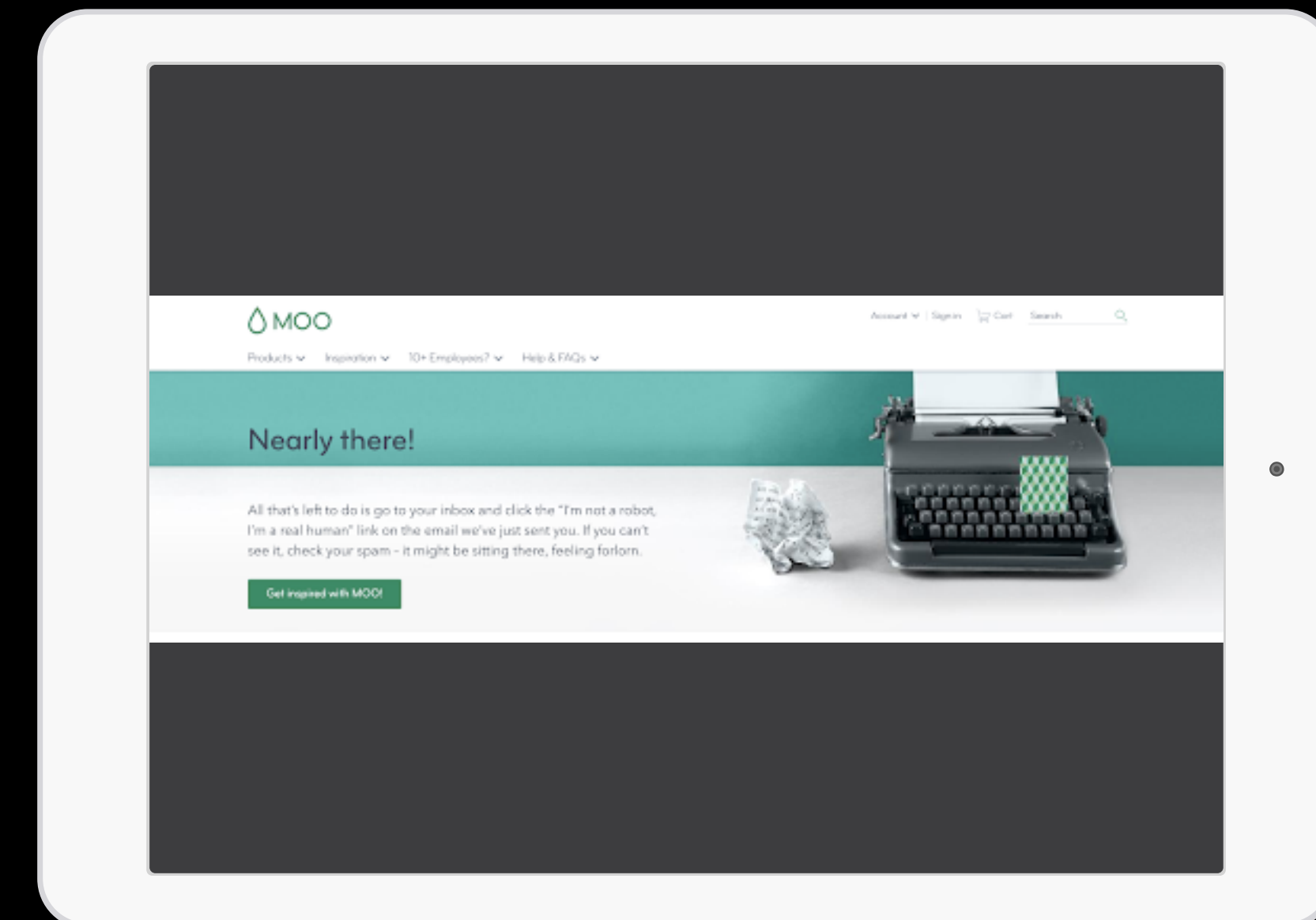
D. Confirmation Email

CUSTOMIZE YOUR CONFIRMATION EMAIL TO KICKSTART THE RELATIONSHIP

Here's where the wheels come off the cart for most newsletters. Few marketers did anything interesting with that confirmation email. It's difficult to believe marketers would publish a blog post every day for years in hopes of earning subscribers but then do nothing special with their first email, but that's what's happening.

Leave it to a design-driven company to get it right. MOO's confirmation email was the best of all. They sent a "MOOsLETTER confirmation" with a discount code from the send name "Little MOO | Print Robot." It was weird, endearing, and memorable, but MOO's exceptionalism was rare.
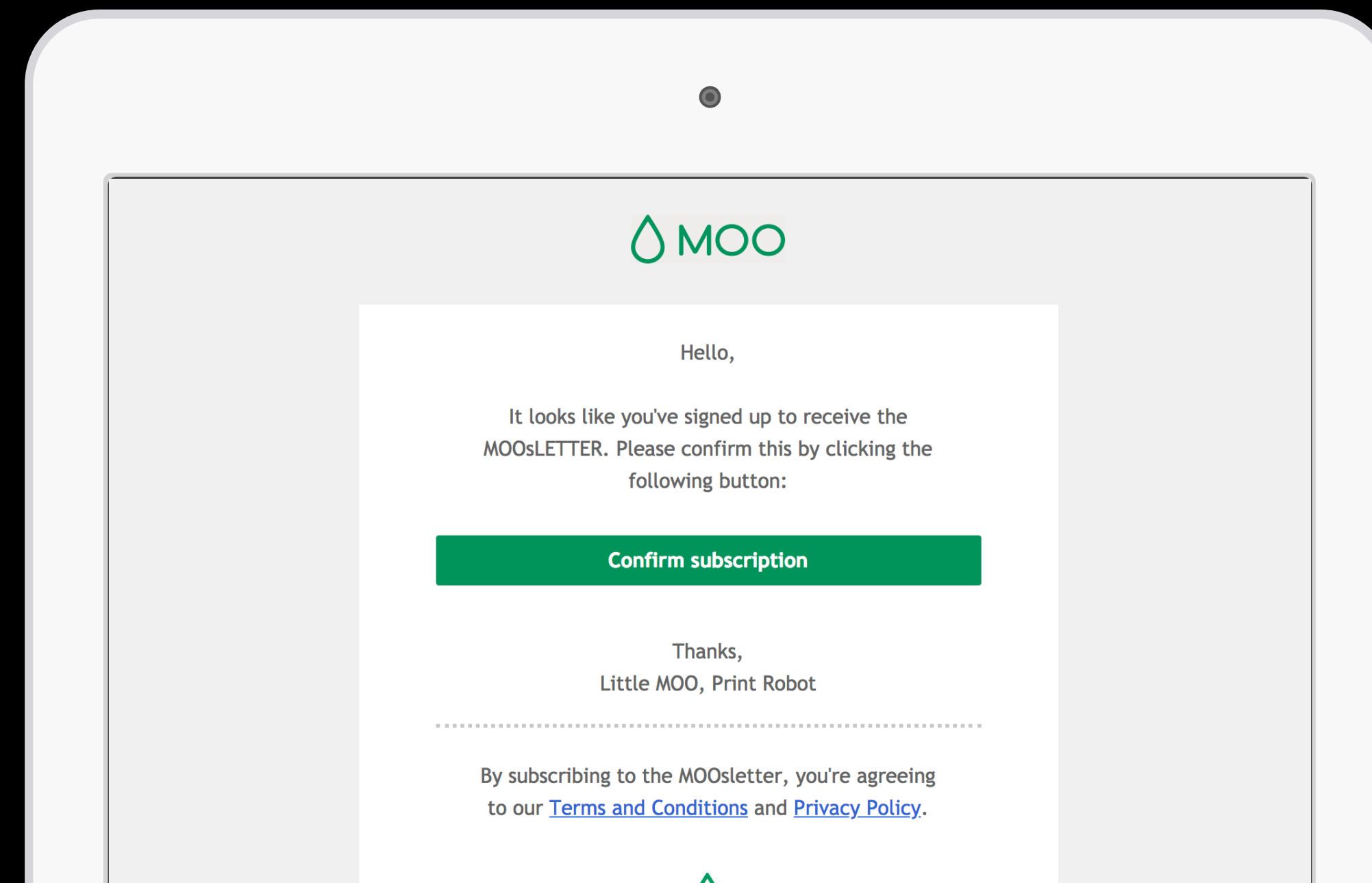
D. Confirmation Email

CUSTOMIZE YOUR CONFIRMATION EMAIL TO KICKSTART THE RELATIONSHIP

MOO's confirmation email made us smile.

D. Confirmation Email

CUSTOMIZE YOUR CONFIRMATION EMAIL TO KICKSTART THE RELATIONSHIP

Over half of companies sent a rote, "please click here to confirm" email and nothing more. Those that bothered to customize the template merely congratulated us on what a great job we had done subscribing. Some welcomed us to their community and a few highlighted the benefits of being subscribed, which was important because some emails took so long to arrive, we had forgotten all about them.

CLICK HERE
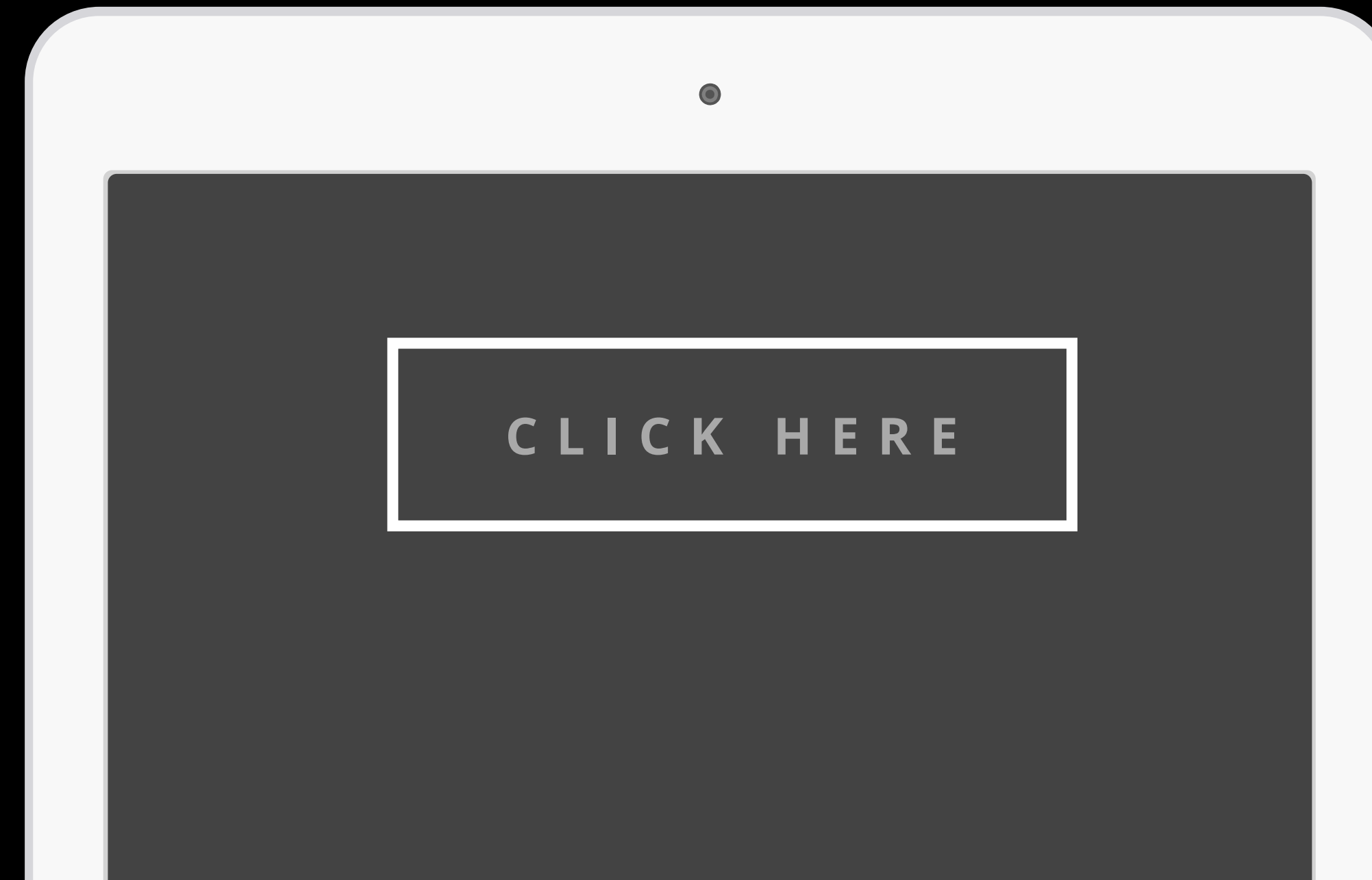
E. Welcome Email

SEND A WELCOME NOTE RIGHT AWAY

We clicked all confirmation emails immediately, but only a trickle of welcome notes followed. We tallied it up and a little under one-half of companies immediately welcomed us and got us started on the journey with useful links to resources. As a new user, we want guidance. Keep feeding readers things you think they'll be hungry for.

Companies that didn't send a welcome email left us feeling used – we'd given away our email and got nothing in return. It was like buying a car from a salesman who was too busy high-fiving buddies to remember to hand us the keys.

Welcome

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F. Read The Welcome Email

DON'T SEND EMAILS THAT ARE PAINFUL TO LOOK AT

Confirmation and welcome emails are your inbox first impressions. If the first thing readers think is, 'These guys have no idea how to format an email' you're setting yourself back needlessly. If your first email isn't easy to read and digest, why would your readers think the ones to follow will be any better?

Newsletters may be for business, but readers are human and they'll enjoy your mailings more if they're attractive and simple. That means breaking up blocks of text, using negative space to help readers skim, and selecting images that enhance the viewer's understanding.

F. Read The Welcome Email

DON'T SEND EMAILS THAT ARE PAINFUL TO LOOK AT

Of all the newsletters, those of analyst firms <u>Gartner</u> and <u>Forrester</u> featured the poorest design. Gartner's newsletters included a grainy hero image that, at first, looks like a still from *The Matrix*, but upon review, is a candlestick chart. Forrester chose a lime green background, royal blue buttons, and as many right angles as possible.
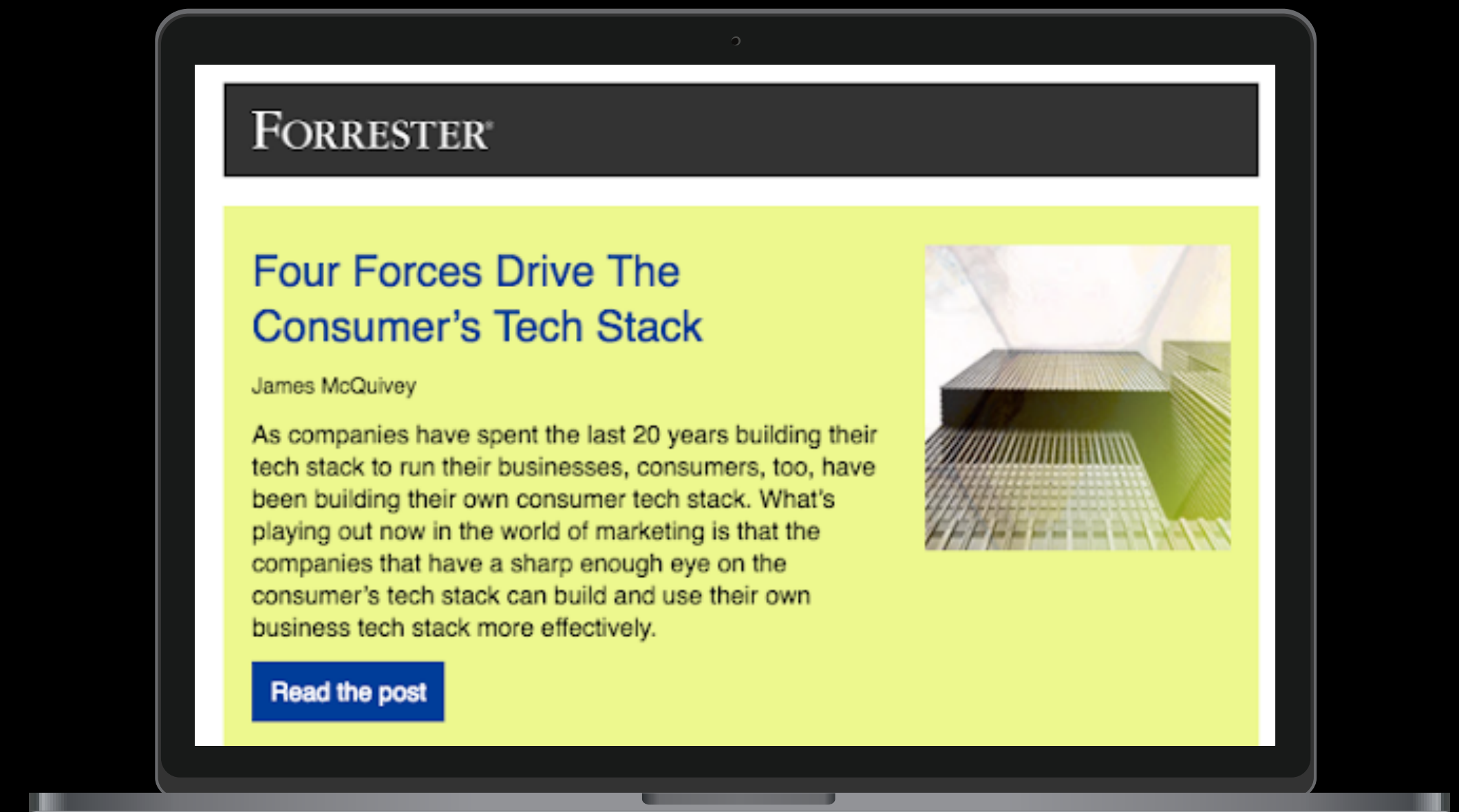
G. The Decision

MAKE SURE SUBSCRIBERS KNOW WHY THEY'VE SUBSCRIBED

When a subscriber gets your newsletter, the first thing they're thinking is, <u>what's in it for me?</u> Why should I care? Give them a reason.

We picked most of the newsletters in our study because we were at least somewhat interested. But after being redirected to dead-ends, waiting for welcomes, and suffering eye-straining technicolor, we trusted them less. If these companies can't get the basics right, how can we be certain that they're going to put any more effort into the content?

Companies that don't respect our time and our inbox will merely erode whatever initial trust we had, and that's only the start. After newsletters began to stream in, the opportunities for improvement multiplied.

2

Build A Great Newsletter

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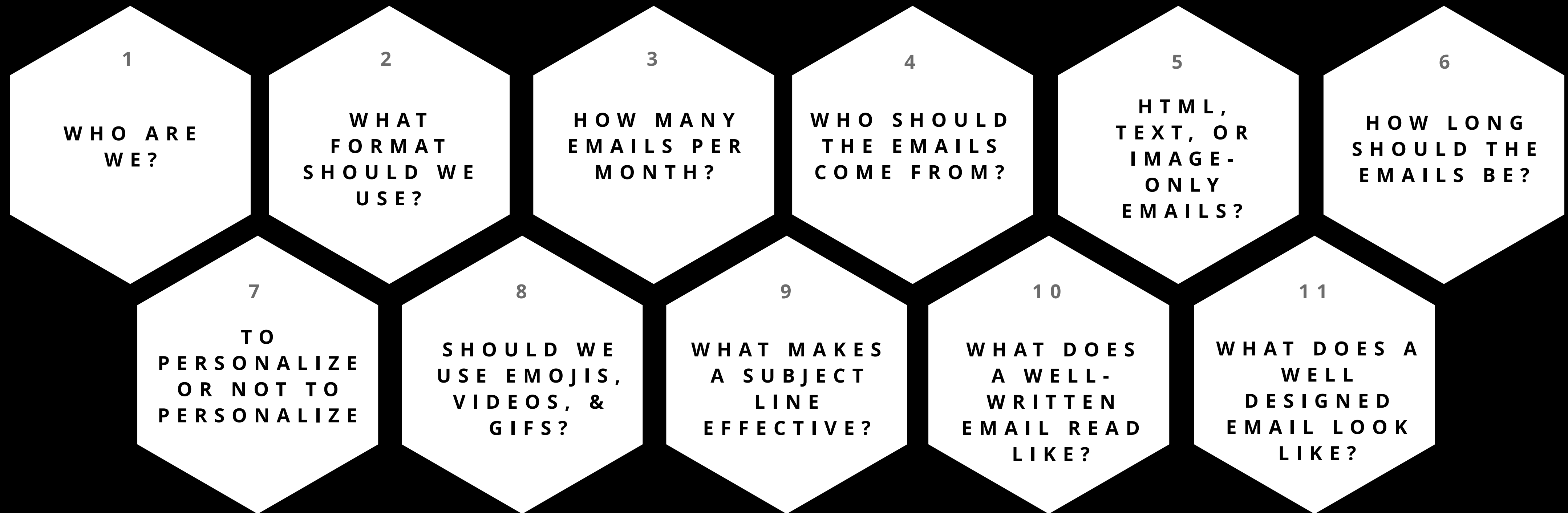
Build A Great Newsletter

During the three months we received emails, we had plenty of time to ponder the nature of nurture. What's the point? What are companies trying to accomplish by sending messages? It seemed many businesses were unsure. They fired off emails with uninspired headlines full of links to articles without additional context. Sometimes, daily.

Most didn't hold our attention, but some did.

Build A Great Newsletter

Based on our learnings, we've developed 11 questions any marketer can ask themselves to tighten up their newsletter experience.

1 WHO ARE WE?

2 WHAT FORMAT SHOULD WE USE?

3 HOW MANY EMAILS PER MONTH?

4 WHO SHOULD THE EMAILS COME FROM?

5 HTML, TEXT, OR IMAGE-ONLY EMAILS?

6 HOW LONG SHOULD THE EMAILS BE?

7 TO PERSONALIZE OR NOT TO PERSONALIZE

8 SHOULD WE USE EMOJIS, VIDEOS, & GIFS?

9 WHAT MAKES A SUBJECT LINE EFFECTIVE?

10 WHAT DOES A WELL-WRITTEN EMAIL READ LIKE?

11 WHAT DOES A WELL DESIGNED EMAIL LOOK LIKE?

1. Who Are We?

As is often said, if marketing is what you say, <u>branding is who you are</u>. You can't market until you brand. Many companies with newsletters haven't figured out their brand. That means that we, as readers, can't build a relationship with them.

With some newsletters, the lack of self-awareness was rather obvious. It was clear that different people wrote different parts of Glassdoor's Employer Solutions newsletters, for example. The post-click message was icy: "You will need to confirm your email before you can receive updates." The confirmation email then bubbled with joy and the welcome email struck a balance. But even then, the welcome email header read, "Get hired: Love your job!" Someone had clearly copied a consumer template.

Other newsletters brimmed with personality that matched the tone of their marketing. <u>Contently</u>'s newsletter, for instance, featured the same cerulean blue header, sans-serif font, and humorously skeptical tone of their website. It was immediately recognizable.

"Marketing is what you say, branding is who you are.
You can't market until you brand."

E V E   L E W I S
P R I N C I P A L ,   C U L T I V A T E   C R E A T I V E

Find A Way Media

1. Who Are We?

We asked the author of the Contently newsletter, Tallie Gabriel, if she had any advice beyond using an internal style guide.

Tallie Gabriel

WRITER AND SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR, CONTENTLY

"When building a newsletter, it's important to keep your brand voice clear and recognizable. Don't overwhelm your audience with text. Ask yourself, 'How can I address my point as clearly and concisely as possible while keeping with my brand's tone of voice?' If you can throw in some humor or exciting data to keep your audience engaged, even better."
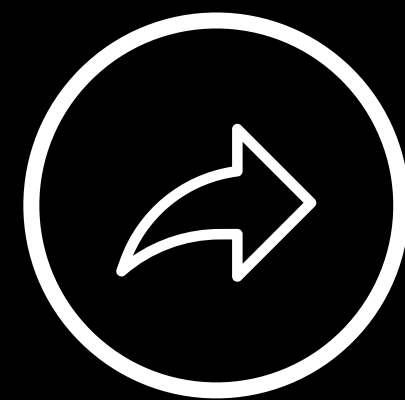
2. What Format Should We Use?

Here's the million dollar question: Why are you sending emails to subscribers? Any answer that ties back to revenue is probably okay, but know what you want to achieve so you can align your newsletter with that outcome.

A sharp-elbowed sales track, for example, is fine if the goal is to convert leads, but not if subscribers joined on the promise of being nurtured. Sending daily links to your blog could be great, but not if subscribers think they're going to receive exclusive commentary. Whatever your signup form promises, be consistent.

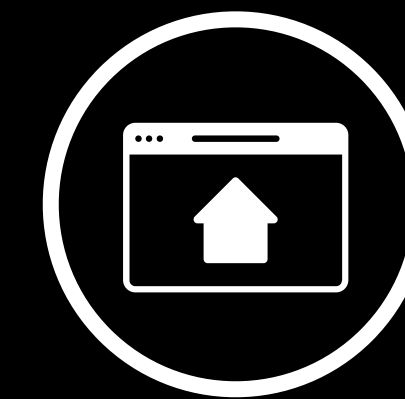We've grouped the newsletters we received into four categories:
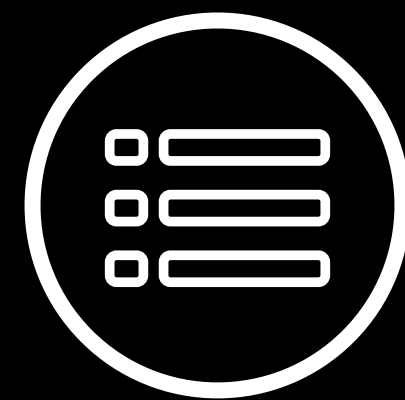
**THE FORWARDER**   **THE SUMMARIZER**   **THE HARD SELL**   **THE HOMEPAGE**

2. What Format Should We Use?

We also rated all newsletters based on the quality of their design, calibre of their writing, and overall utility so we could tease out the differences between the top 10 percent and the average newsletter. We'll cover those differences in detail later on.

Popularity of Newsletter Formats

The Forwarder
5%

The Homepage
8%

The Hard Sell
18%

The Summarizer
69%
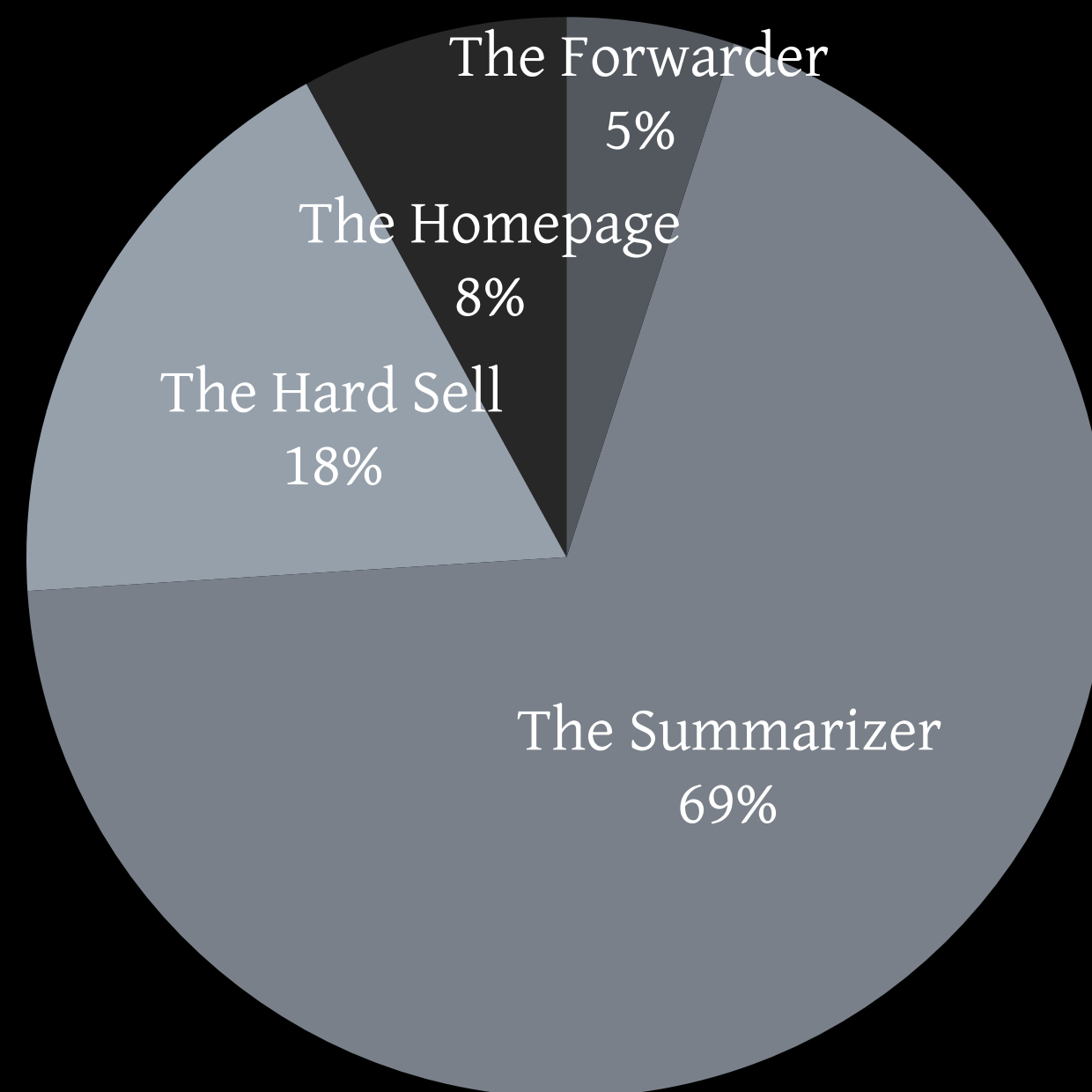
Popularity Among the Top 10%

The Summarizer
40%

The Homepage
60%

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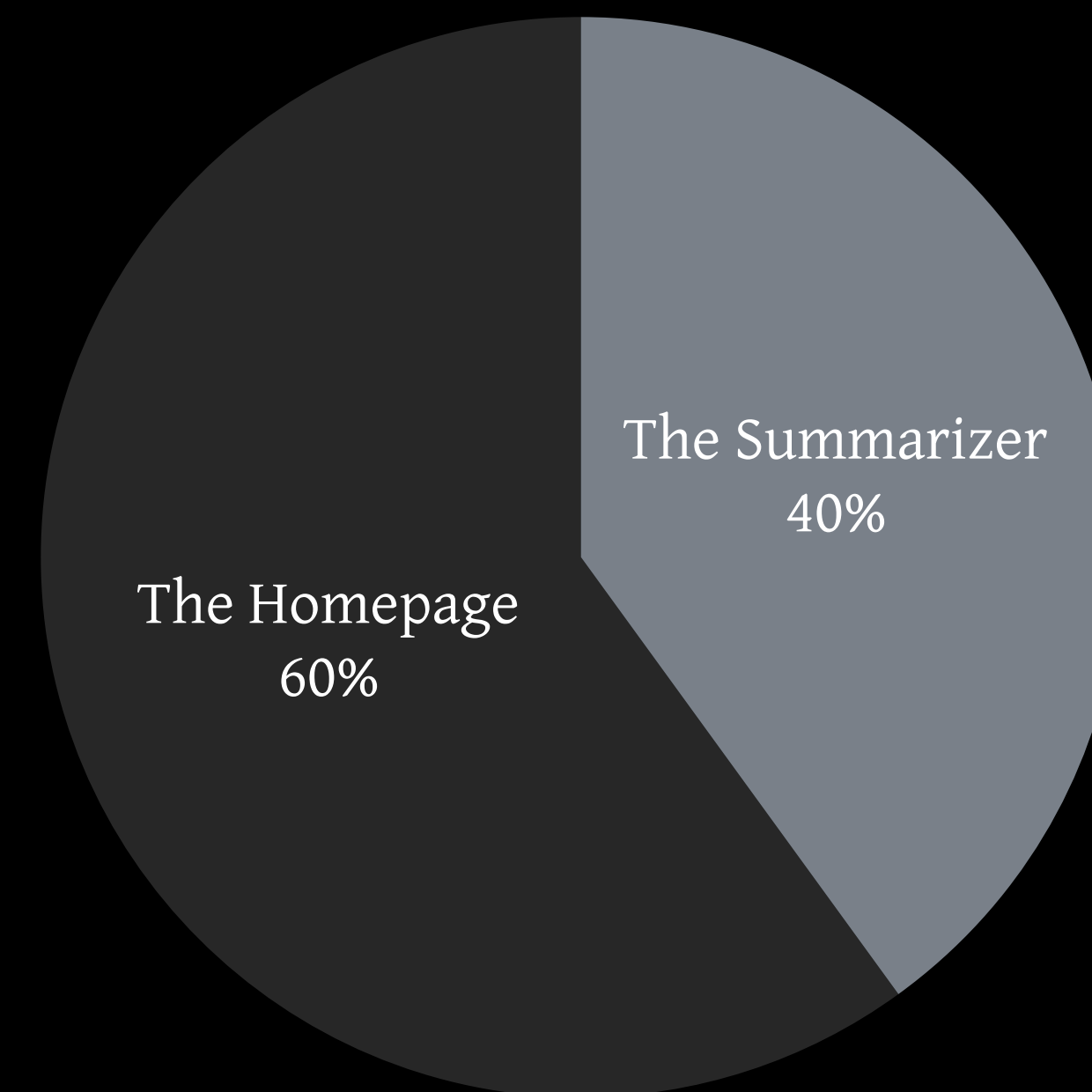
The Forwarder

5% OF NEWSLETTERS

Some companies sent the day's blog post with literally no context. One marketing automation brand did this. It felt like they were just slipping articles under our door. The subject lines were the titles of the blog posts and the email bodies were simply the text from the articles. There was no mention of the author. We do recognize that some of these companies offer a subscription center with multiple options, but this was the default, so we'll treat it like any other clueless customer might.

Not one newsletter that scored in the top 10 percent used the Forwarder format. Unless subscribers know they have signed up for a no-frills blog syndication service, it's probably better to offer context.
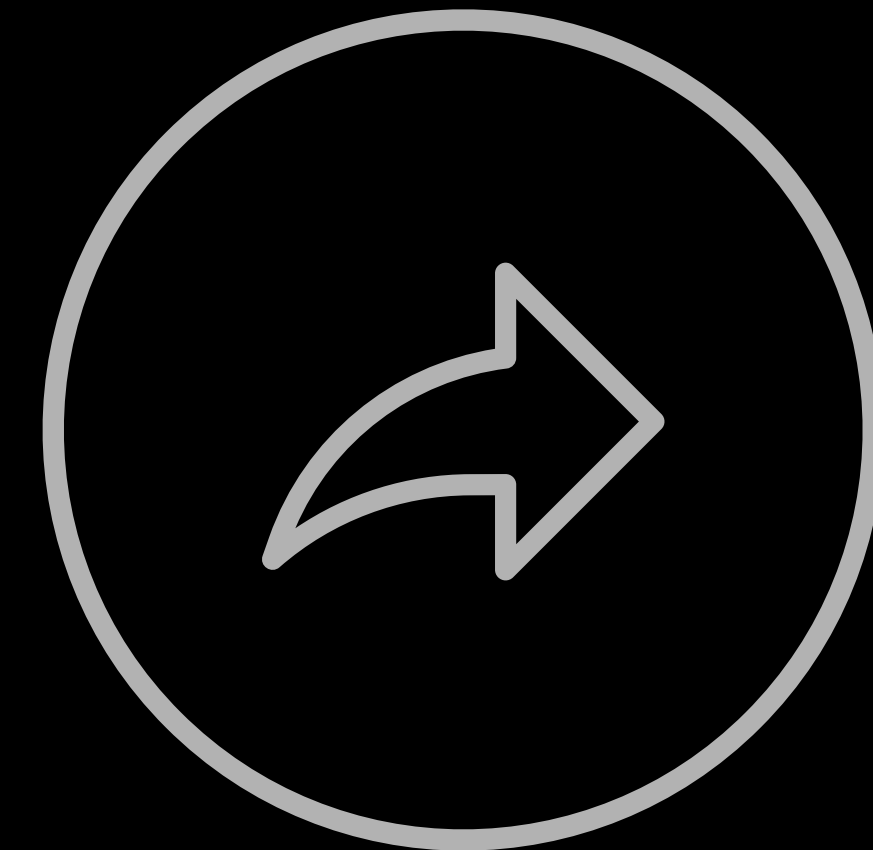
The Summarizer

69% OF NEWSLETTERS

The majority of companies in our study sent emails with links to articles replete with thumbnails and snippets. The key to doing this well is curation – the best ones were thoughtful, the authors had clearly spent time developing the titles, and they linked to multiple content formats such as video. But plenty of others simply posted links to their latest articles.

Of all the Summarizers, the design software firm InVision seemed the most engaging. Their emails were just a little longer than average – 308 words compared to 273 words – but they were snappy, fun, beautiful to look at, and felt much shorter.

Newsletters in the top 10 percent of performance were more than twice as likely to use this format.
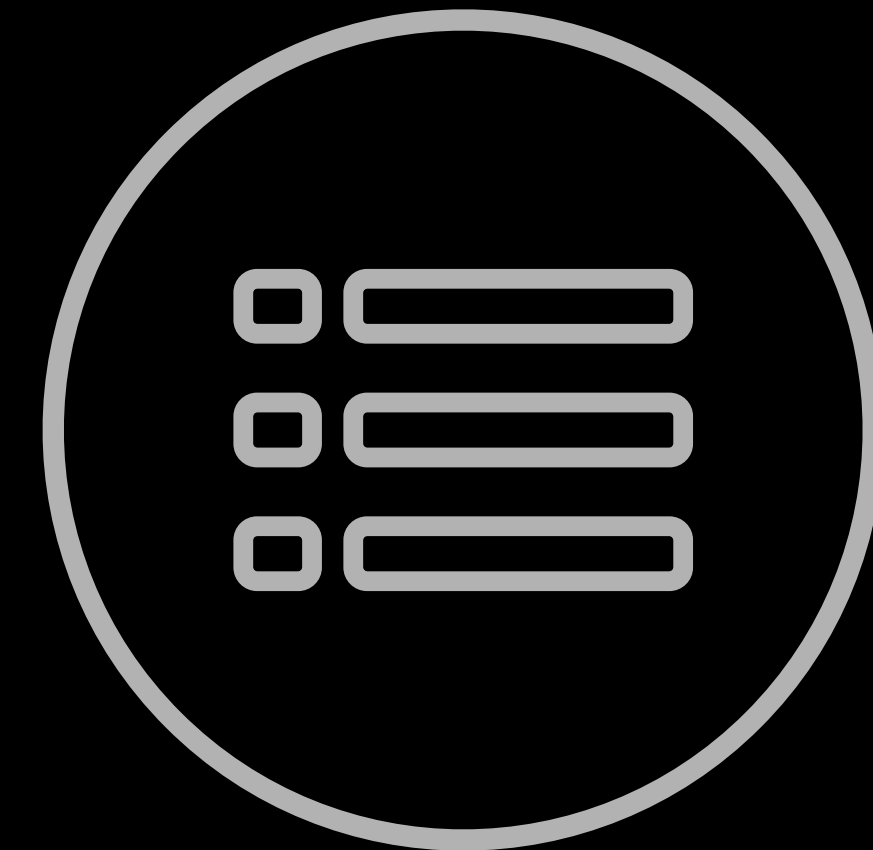
The Hard Sell

18% OF NEWSLETTERS

Some newsletters used our inbox as a soapbox to sell. After an initial email with a roundup of the month's posts, none of which we recall clicking on, Wistia, unable to help itself, fell into a hard sell nosedive and never pulled out. Every subsequent email peddled a different feature and the CTA implored us to begin a trial. Wistia got points for its well-designed emails, but there was no added value and we stopped opening them.

None of the companies in the top 10 percent used this format. Perhaps it's antithetical to building an audience – some readers may buy, but most will eventually tire and unsubscribe.

The Homepage
8% OF NEWSLETTERS

Some say the newsletter is the new homepage. We believe it. Newsletters are on a meteoric rise and big media companies like *The New York Times*, Hearst, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Condé Nast regard them as a serious source of revenue.

What makes a newsletter a Homepage? It's a source of links to different types of content, curated in a way that adds value beyond what a web visitor could find. Where a Summarizer simply shares articles, a Homepage wraps them in commentary, context, and analysis.

Gallup, for example, provided links to lots of different types of content such as articles, white papers, research, webinars, and events. The text was absolutely minimal, but explained why each item was important and offered a sense that we were getting a summation of everything we'd have to trawl through Gallup's website to find.

The Homepage

8% OF NEWSLETTERS

For a glimpse at the epitome of what a Homepage newsletter can and should be, B2B marketers can look to consumer media companies. The Atlantic and The New York Times, for instance, excel at short, pithy newsletters that provide commentary on the day's news and serve as a guide to the world. Any marketer could do a lot worse than provide a similar guide to their industry.

Only 8 percent of newsletters used the Homepage format, but 60 percent of high-performers used it.
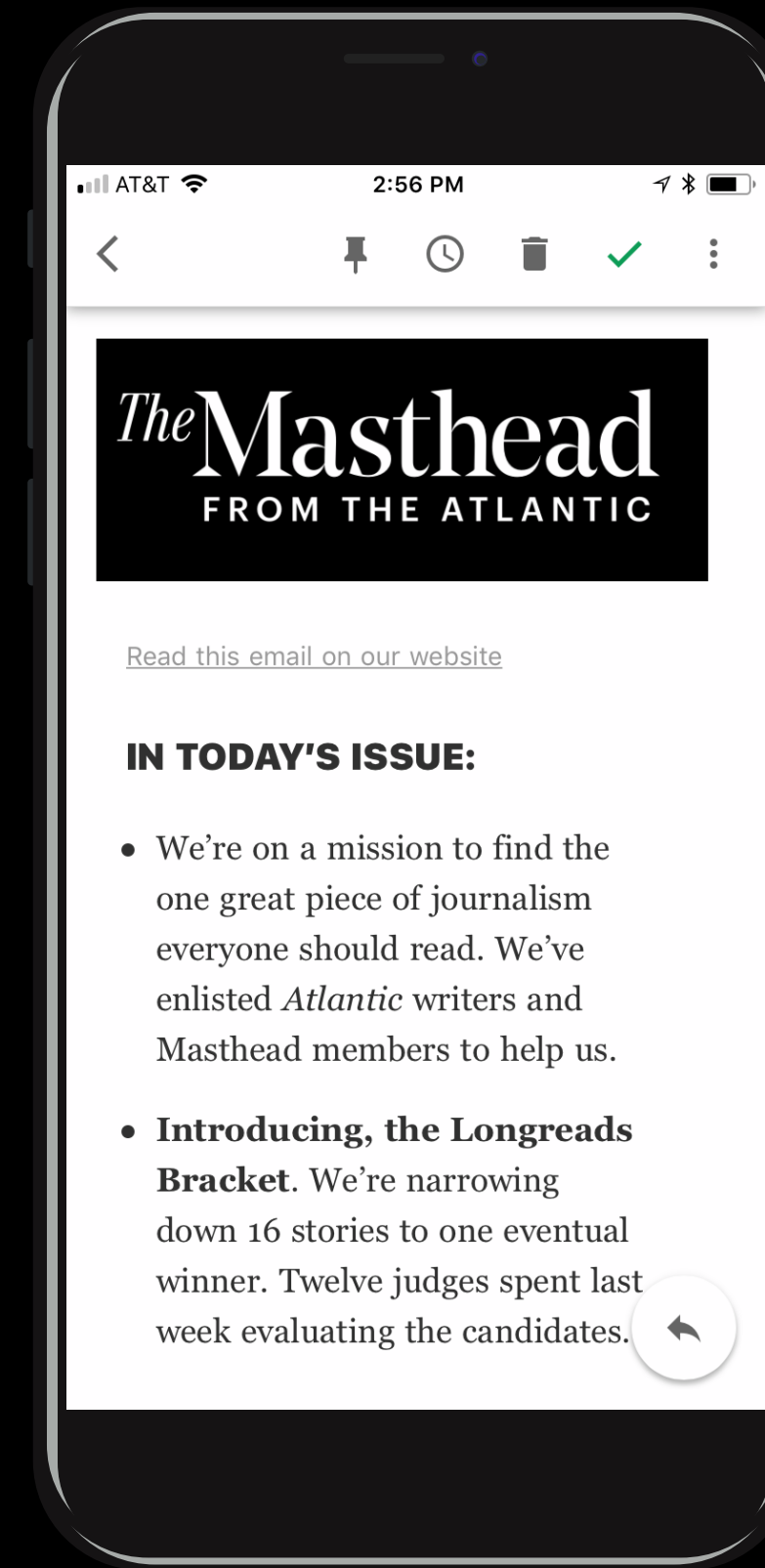
3. How Many Emails Per Month?

For a newsletter to remain enjoyable, one email per week is probably fine. Companies sent, on average, 5.8 emails per month with a median number of five. Others, however, dropped our team into a perplexing batch-and-blast cannon that we never would have stood for had we not been conducting a study.

Jeff Bullas, for instance, sent such a fusillade of impersonal-sounding "Hi friend!" emails it felt like he was hacking at our inbox with an ax. He was only topped by CUToday, a tiny credit union publication that sent an astonishing 28 emails in May – sometimes twice per day.
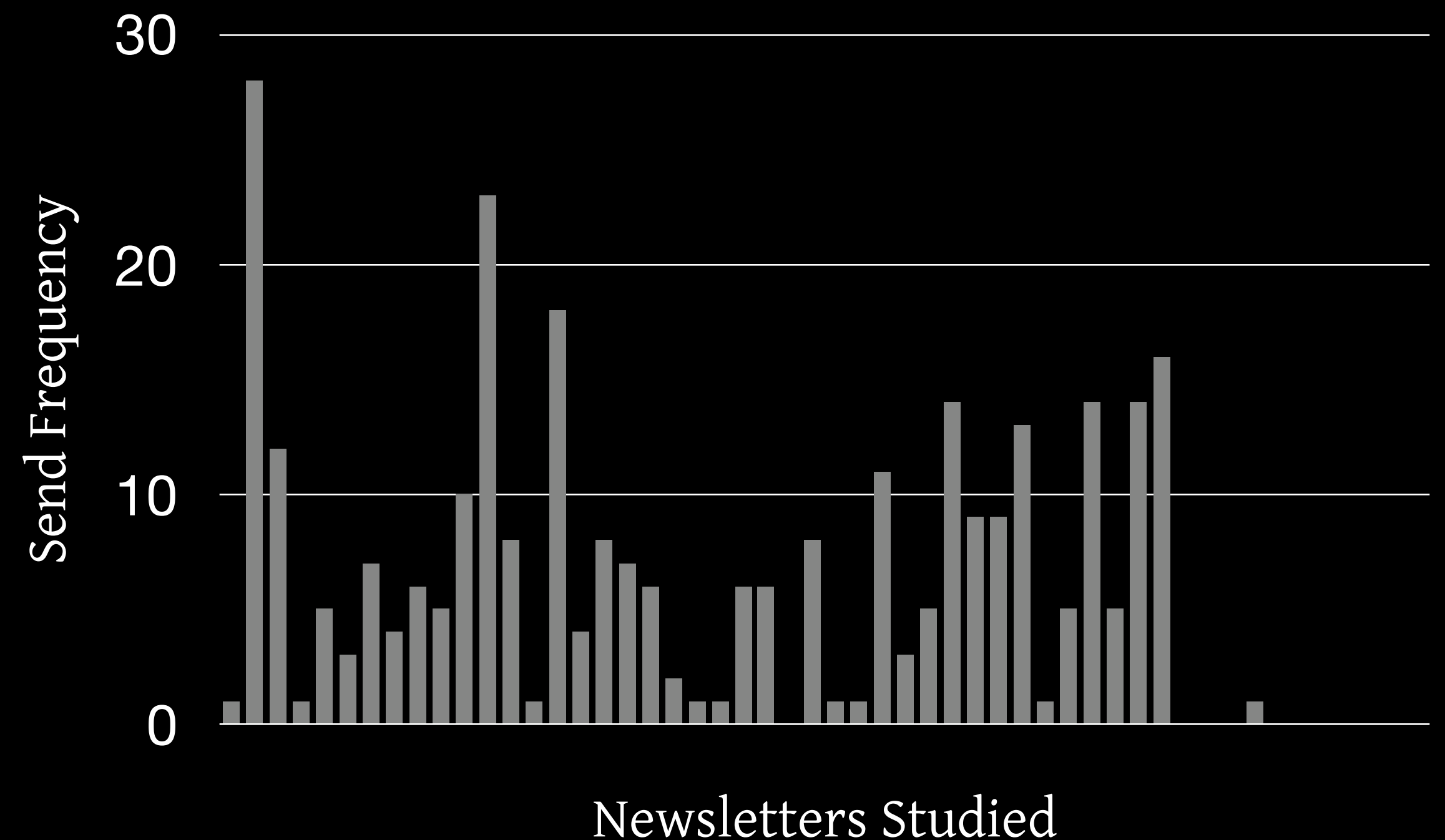
3. How Many Emails Per Month?

Perhaps counterintuitively, the top 10 percent of performers sent many more emails than most, with an average of 10.8 per month. Yet this didn't seem to deter us from liking them. The content was good, designs pretty, and insights welcome. But we think most marketers should abstain from mimicking them. An email every other day is a lot, and until your subscribers demand it, we recommend adhering to the average.

As a final note, it should go without saying that the emails should, in fact, arrive. But 13 percent of the newsletters had at least some of their emails end up in spam. For some, it was only a few. For others, such as the social media software Oktopost, it was 100 percent. If anyone reading this knows someone at Oktopost, please text them.

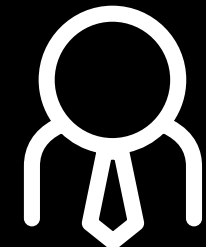13 % OF COMPANIES SENT SOME EMAILS TO SPAM

4. Who Should The Email Come From?

We received emails from four types of email sender. Which is best? It may be a matter of preference, but if companies are trying to build a relationship with subscribers, consistency is important and context helps.
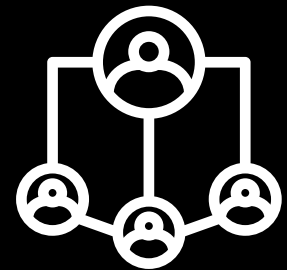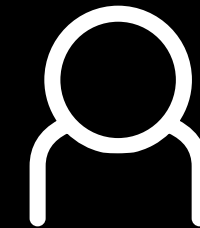
THE COMPANY

A PERSON AT THE COMPANY
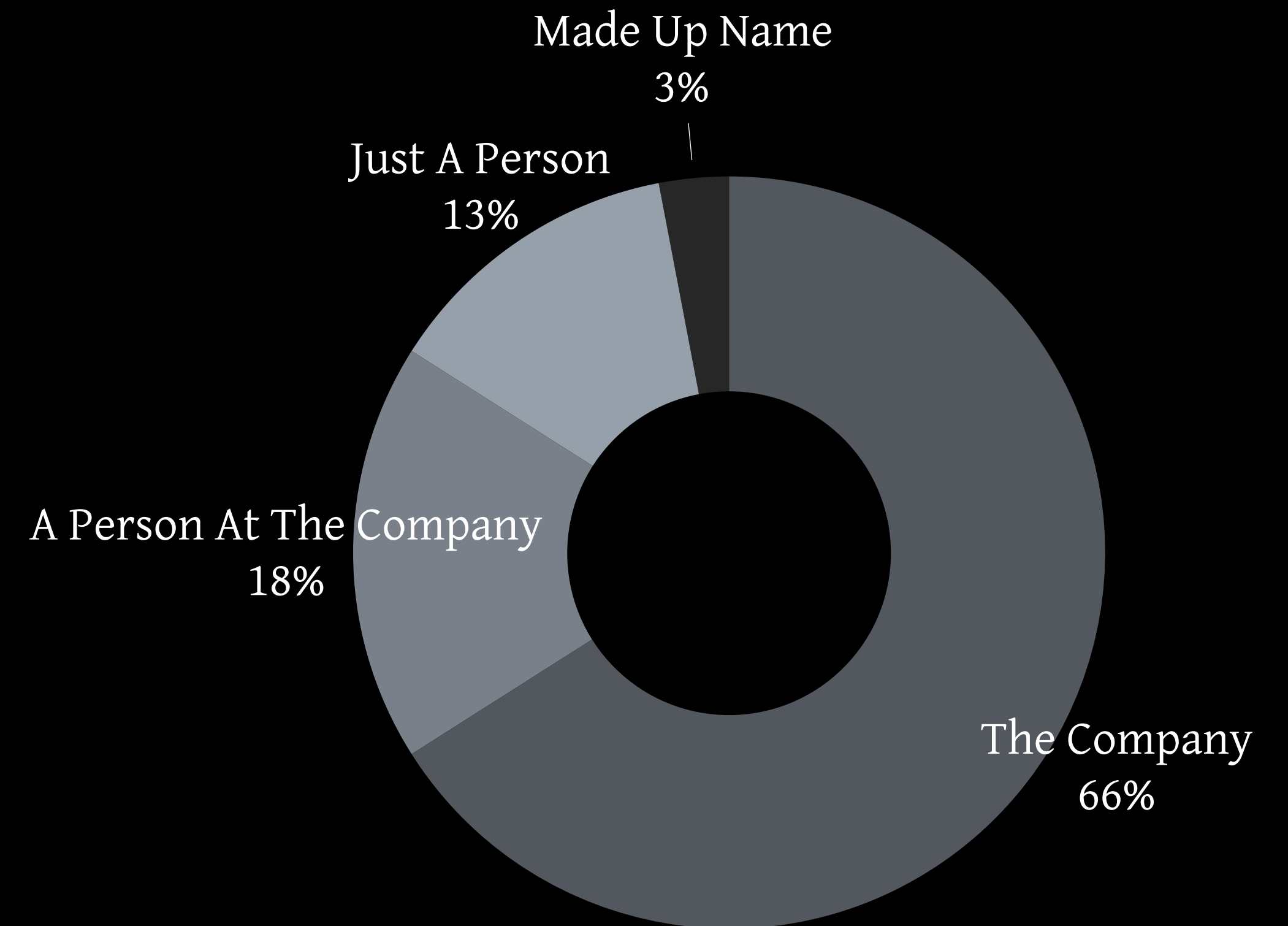
JUST A PERSON

A MADE UP NAME, LIKE 'LITTLE MOO'

4. Who Should The Email Come From?

Getting a random name in our inbox set off our spam senses. For instance, we signed up for Oktopost and were surprised to get emails from Nina Zoukelman. If you want to use just a name, know that there will be a comprehension gap and people may unsubscribe simply because they don't recognize that they're getting what they asked for.

Companies that sent emails from the company name, such as Litmus or YouTube, were at least immediately recognizable. But you can have the best of both worlds: Send your emails from someone's first name "at" the company, like Ash at Buffer or the Team @ SaaStr.

SENDER POPULARITY

Made Up Name
3%

Just A Person
13%

A Person At The Company
18%

The Company
66%

Find A Way Media
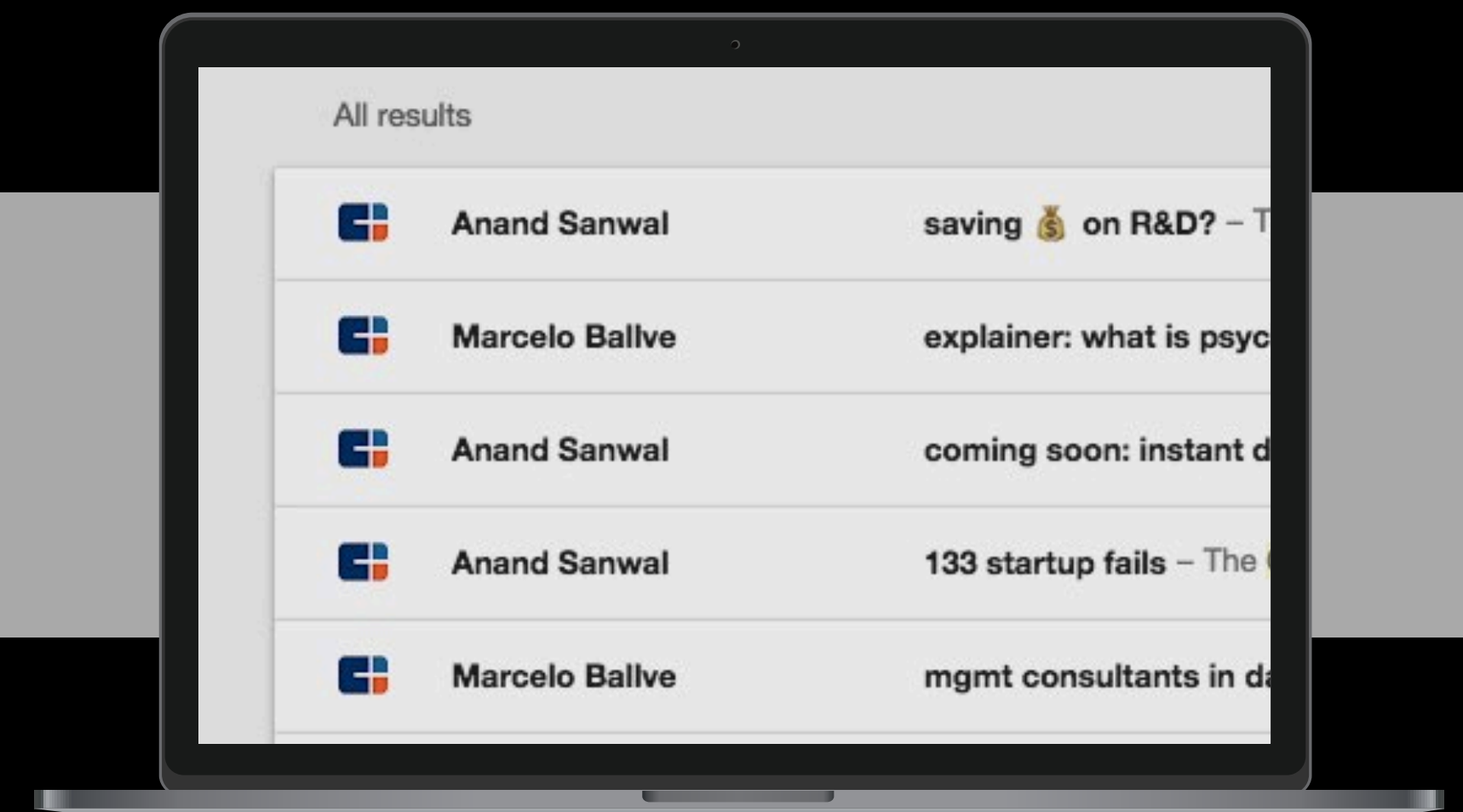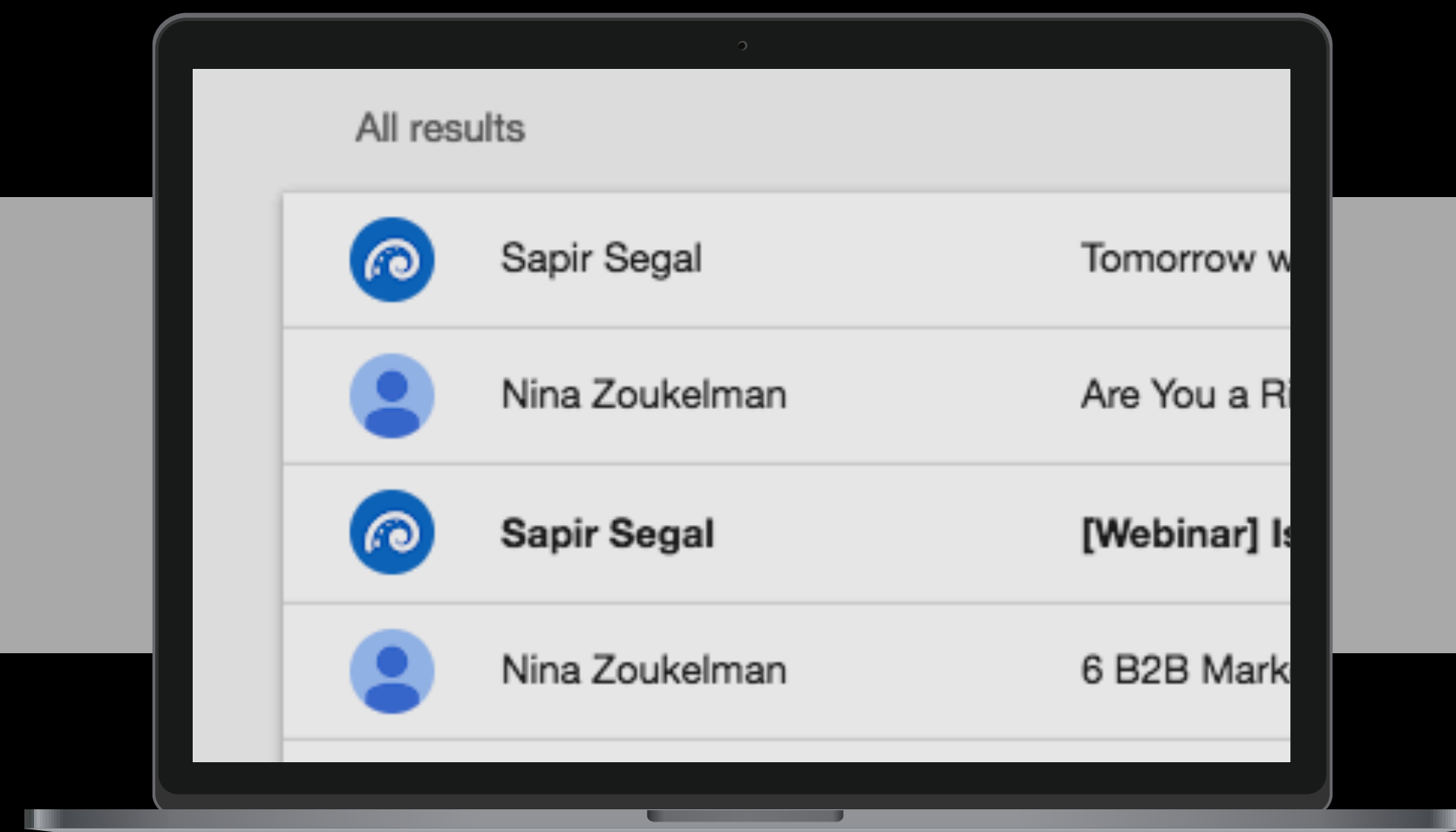
4. Who Should The Email Come From?

Now, another point on consistency. If readers are already rattled by one random name, why send the newsletter from three different people? About one-third of companies rotated the names they used, which only deepened our confusion. If you're going to do that, at least make sure their profile pictures are all of the company logo.

5. HTML, Text, Or Image-Only Emails?

Only one company used text-only emails while all others used HTML. Either format performed just fine. Text emails came across as more personal, whereas HTML emails had some obvious versatility in that senders could include images and GIFs. Neither was more likely than the other to be flagged as spam.

A few of those using HTML embedded the text within images, such as <u>Pantone</u> and <u>Think with Google</u>. This makes for a very clean desktop appearance, but a difficult mobile one, because the text is quite small. In a few instances, we wanted to copy and paste parts of the text, but couldn't.
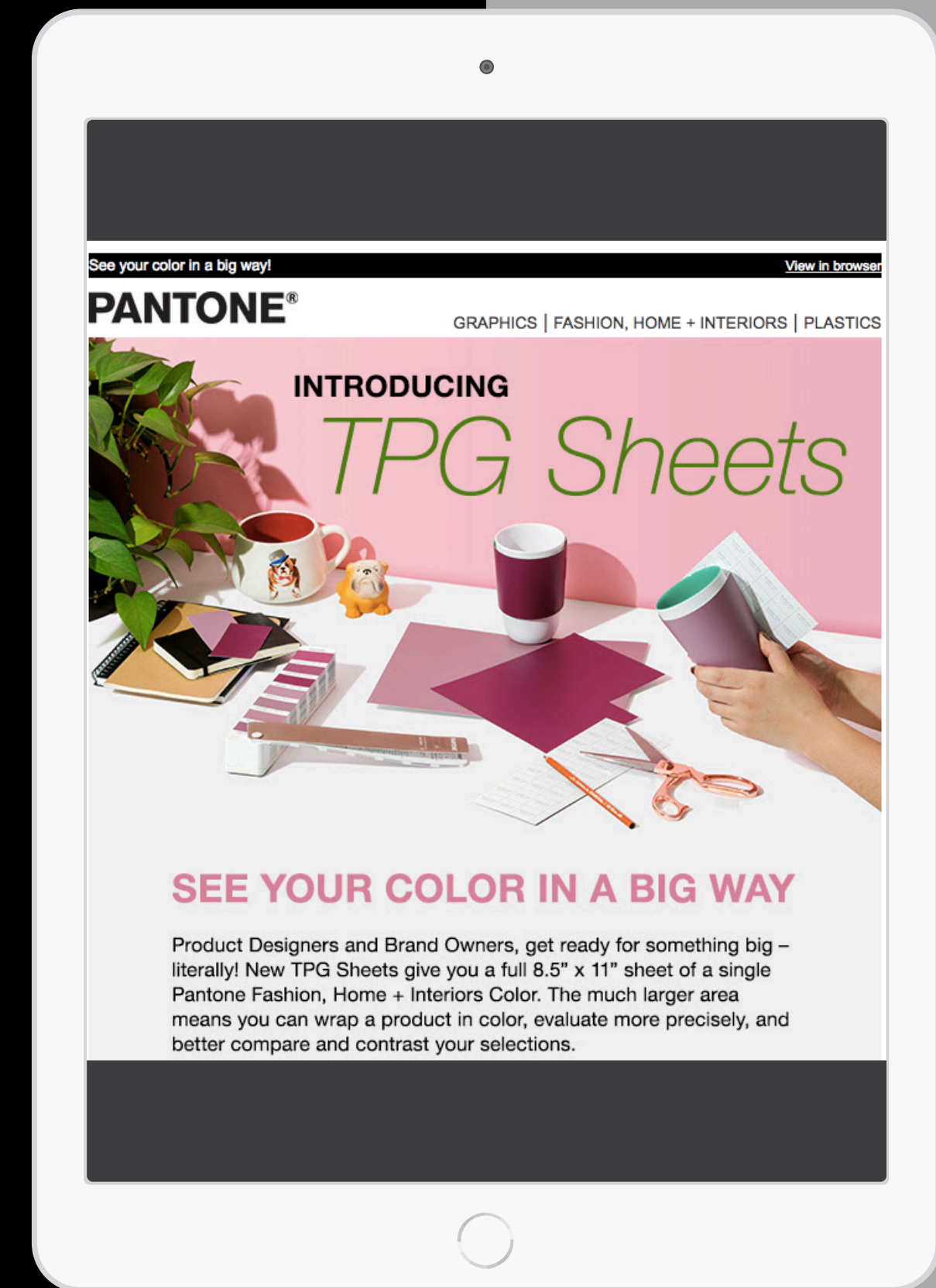
6. How Long Should Emails Be?

Emails, on the whole, were quite short, which was heartening. The average length was 273 words and the average length for newsletters in the top 10 percent was 241 words.

Shorter emails appear to be strongly correlated with better email design. The best designed emails were all under 300 words, neutral designs were around 500 or less, and though the worst designed emails varied, they tended to be longer.

Emails Studied

Design Score →
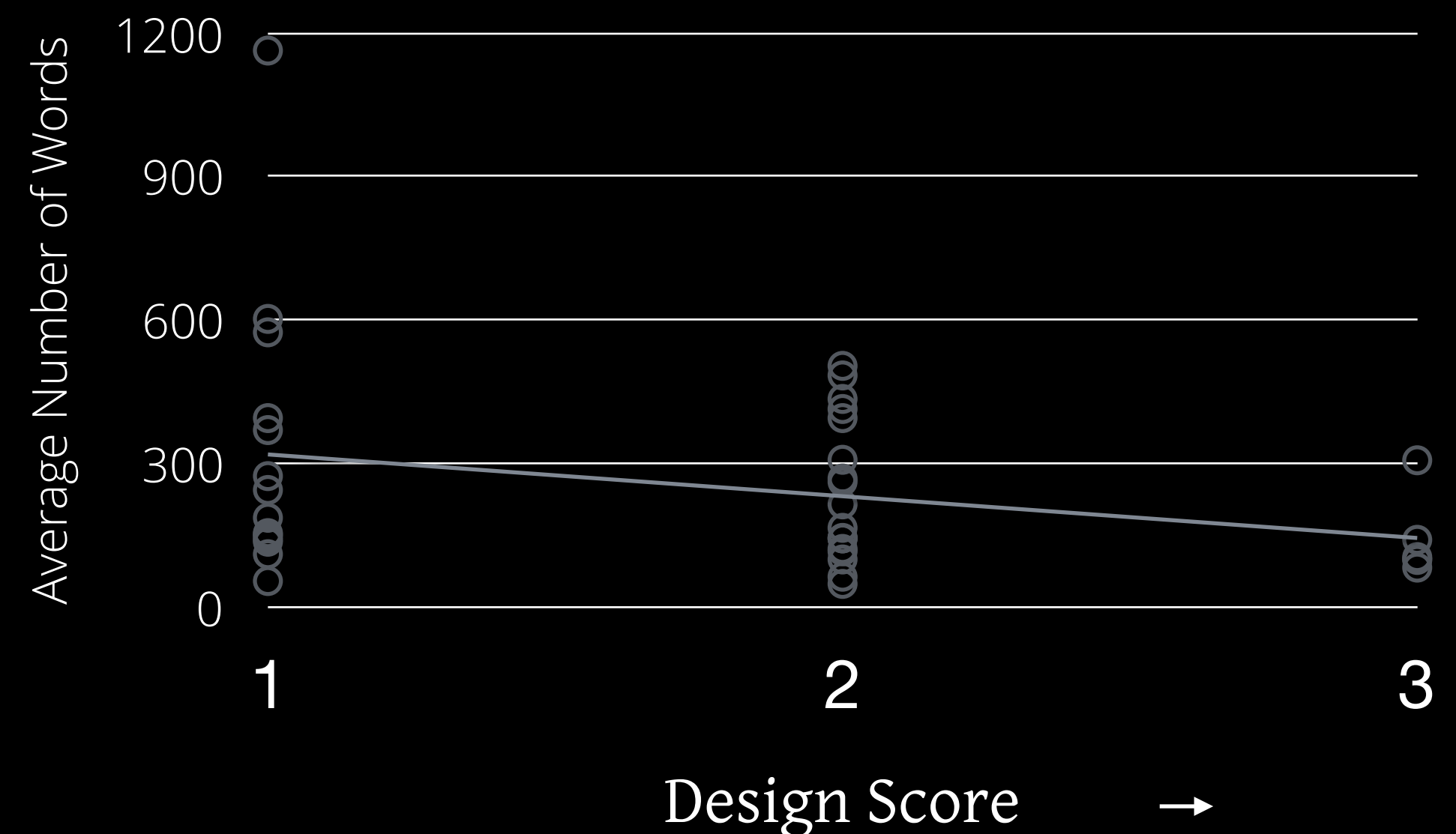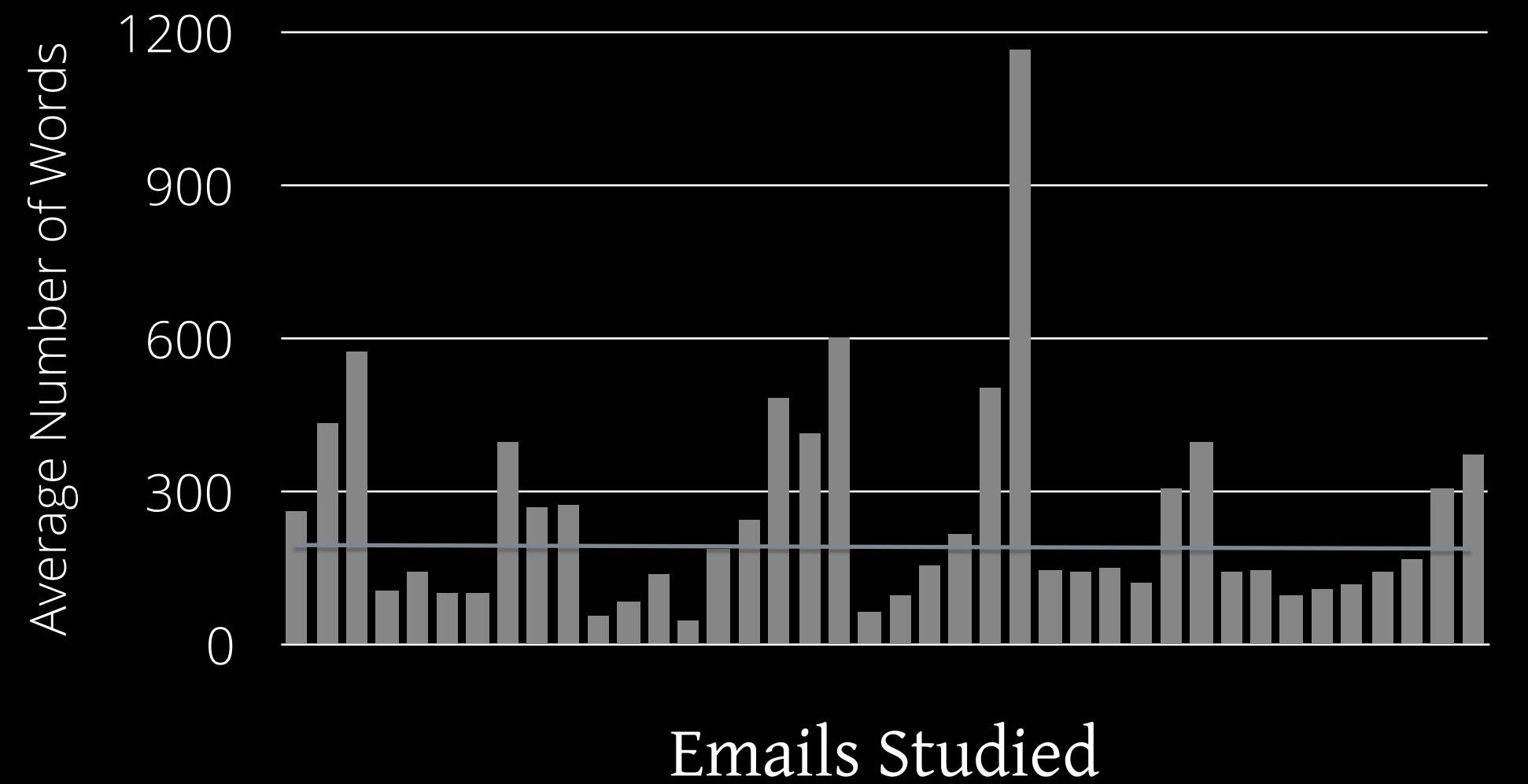
7. To Personalize Or Not To Personalize?

Only 8 percent of companies personalized their subject lines or email bodies. None of the top 10 percent did. It's possible that some emails were personalized by persona, and that we received a different email from other subscribers, but we were unable to verify.

This lack of personalization seems to fly in the face of conventional wisdom, and there isn't an email provider out there that doesn't provide this feature – some of them were even included in the study. It's either the case that marketers have the tools but lack the time, or that personalization doesn't make a tremendous difference in newsletters because they are already personal. Individuals who find your company and want to hear from you weekly are a fairly self-selecting group. If you write for your audience, the content is, in a sense, already targeted.

The personalization we saw from a few companies in the study was not very advanced, and probably wasn't to their advantage. A few inserted our first name into otherwise droll subject lines and some inserted our first name into the introduction. One newsletter used the same introduction in every single email – "Hi Chris," – and while we tallied it up as personalization, it felt not at all personal.

8% USED PERSONALIZATION

0% IN TOP 10% USED PERSONALIZATION

8. Emojis, Videos, And GIFs?

Only one-fifth of companies – 20 percent – used emojis and emoticons in their emails. Some of these added value. For example, <u>Campaign Monitor</u> ended every subject line with a relevant emoji and we came to expect it. It gave them greater inbox presence. Others, like <u>OpenView</u>, peppered their poorly-designed and mostly text-based emails with emojis in random places and it detracted from our comprehension.
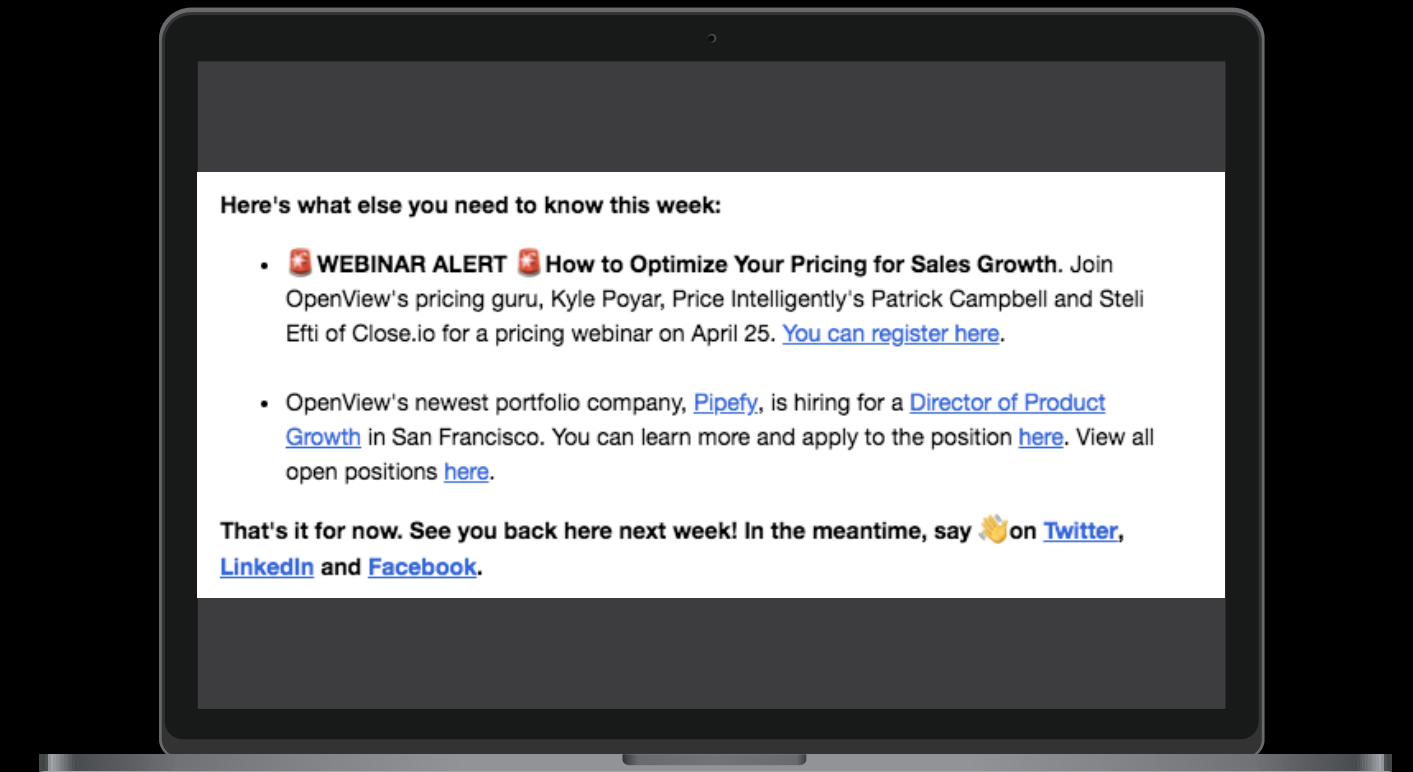
"Campaign Monitor ended every subject line with a relevant emoji and we came to expect it. It gave them greater inbox presence."

Just one in ten companies – 11 percent – used GIFs or videos. This seems like a huge missed opportunity, given that GIFs as hero images disproportionally attracted our attention, and that videos in emails, or even just the word "video" in a subject line, <u>boosts open rates 40 percent</u>, according to the video marketing software company Vidyard.
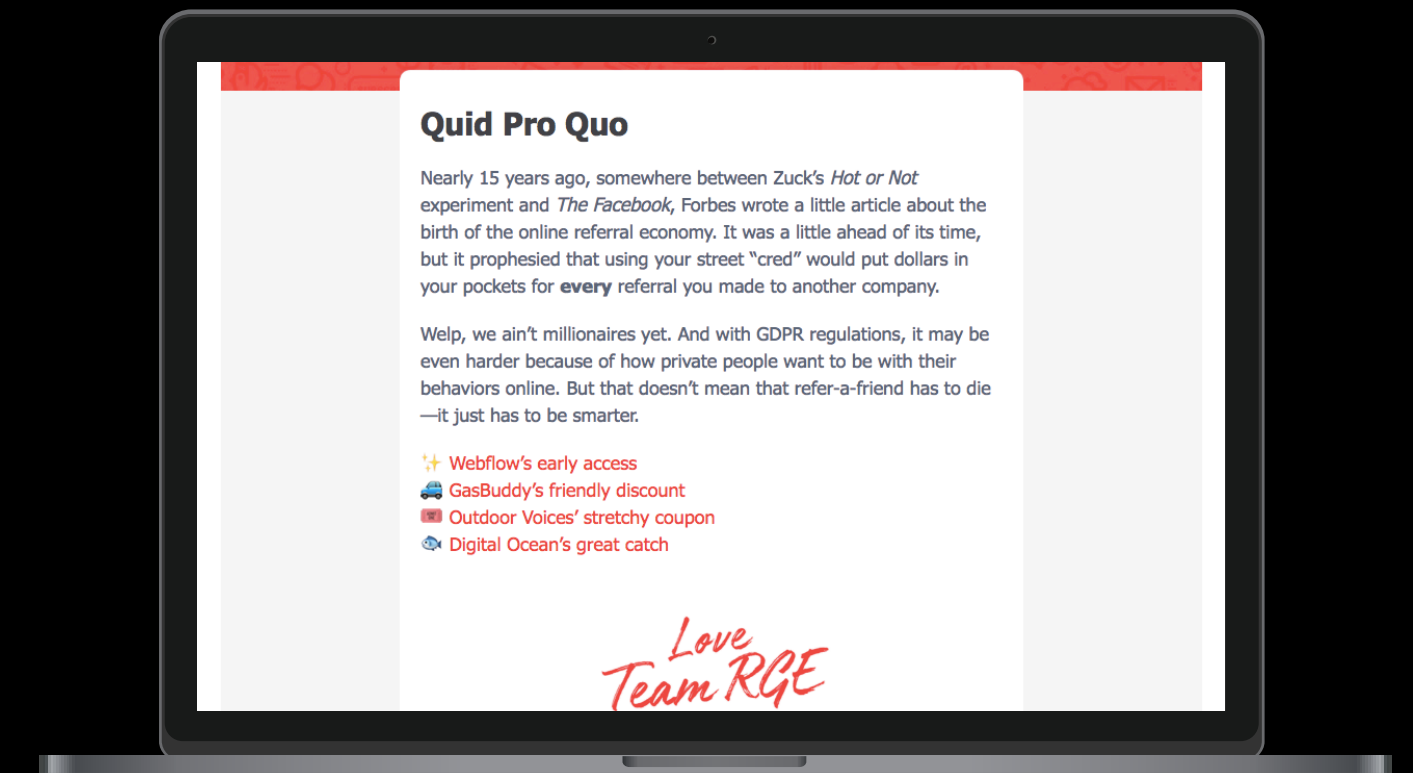
9. What Makes A Subject Line Effective?

Effective subject lines fall on a spectrum. On the positive end, the best ones meet their only real goal: get readers to open. That's it. Wit is helpful, but not necessary – they just need to be intriguing, and emotion-laden words seem to help.

On the other end of the spectrum, subject lines fail because they beg for attention, are clichéd, or offer no value.

Here is our gauge:

LITERAL

UNINTERESTING
INTERESTING

LEADING
CLEVER

BETTER

BAD
BEST

CLOYING
INTRIGUING
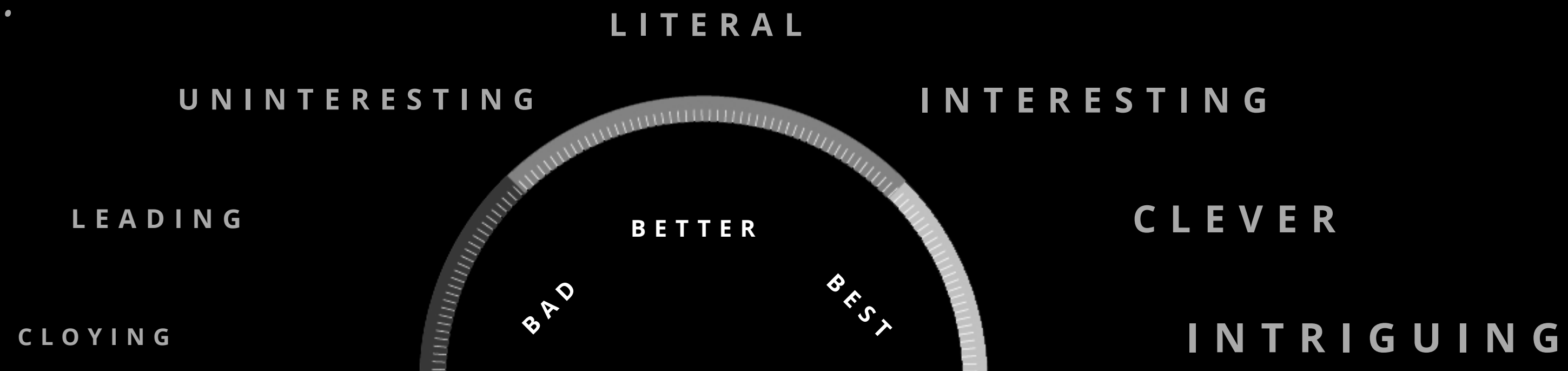
The Bad Subject Lines

LEADING

- 13 surprising social media insights
- 5 amazing landing page examples + 2 more posts
- Hi there, have you considered this method of lead qualification?
- 4 Social Media Misconceptions Hurting Your Company

CLOYING

- 3 more ways you're throwing your money away!
- Last chance for this...
- Is Facebook dead for B2B marketers?
- this is pure gold!
- Stop losing your best employees now

UNINTERESTING

- Don't let ABM just be a buzzword.
- Reaching Diverse Markets Through Strategic Branch Design
- organize your social media strategy (+ template)
- Five Key Steps to Keep Your Brand Safe in a Complex Media Ecosystem
- Nail Your Next Meeting With the Right...colors?
- Chip fallback authorization strategies to reduce fraud impact...

The Better Subject Lines

LITERAL

- This Morning's News Headlines from CUToday.info
- Hi there, here's your weekly thought-starter
- Top 5 ways to streamline your email workflow
- Applying Journalism Ethics to Content Marketing

INTERESTING

- Can your side gig fund retirement? (CUInsight)
- Amazon's A9 algo + Google as scraper and spinner (Moz)
- Forrester Blogs: CX for IT; Quantum computing; Too fast to fail (Forrester)
- Unlocking the magic of negative churn 🦄 (OpenView)

The Best Subject Lines

CLEVER

- Themes legit (InVision)

- Think or swim (InVision)

- Give AmEx's new logo some credit 💳 (InVision)

INTRIGUING

- clueless CEO sells company (CB Insights)

- How to Build an Empire From Your Spare Bedroom (Contently)

- UX that belongs in a museum (InVision)

- how many subscribers do you need to succeed? (Jeff Bullas)

- Bezos says no (CB Insights)

- Well, this is awkward... 😅 (Really Good Emails)

- wow: terrible emails (CB Insights)

- It's been a while (Optimist)

9. What Makes A Subject Line Effective?

CB Insights is such a clear subject line winner it's not even funny. (They also happen to be quite funny.) CB Insights rarely uses more than five short, evocative words, and as if that wasn't enough, they go for a victory lap and customize their email preview text to summarize what's inside the email with interesting keywords. We highly recommend subscribing to them.

Another CB Insights quirk: They don't capitalize the first letter of the first word of the subject line, which makes the emails feel informal, like someone at the company jotted off their personal thoughts. This stood in high contrast to emails that capitalized every word of the subject line, which smacked of merge fields.

THE BEST SUBJECT LINES

✓   Front-loaded keywords

✓   Were short

✓   Related to the email content

✓   Made more sense upon reading

✓   Used emotionally evocative words

✓   Used unusual words

✓   Asked questions

✓   Accompanied by custom preview text

9. What Makes a Subject Line Effective?

Here are a few subject lines from CB Insights.
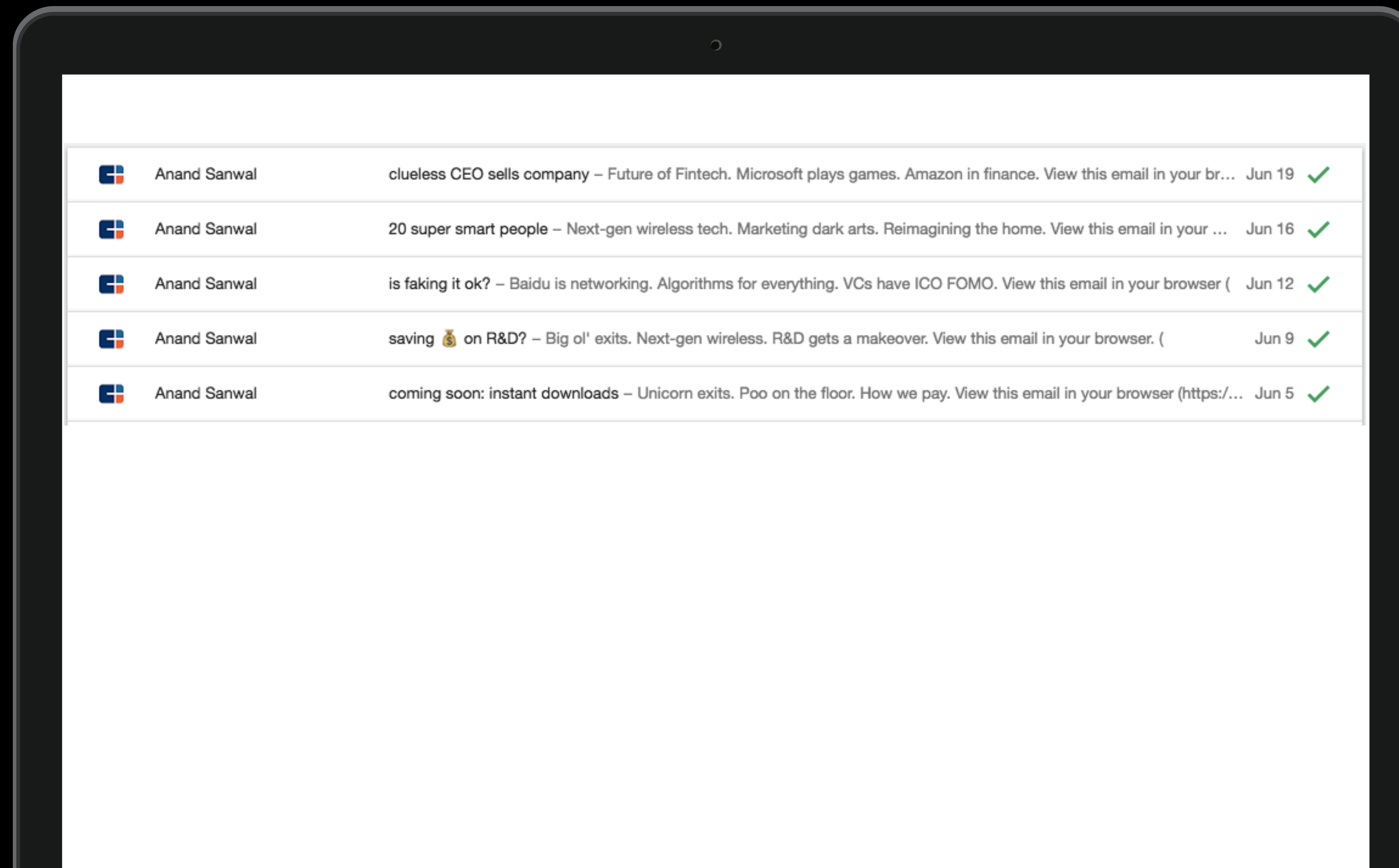
Email Introductions

Effective introductions, or ledes, draw readers in, and they're no different in newsletters than they are in articles. Plenty has been written about them elsewhere, so here's a quick rule of thumb: When in doubt, begin with an interesting fact, ask a question, put the reader into the story, or start with a calendar date. Do not begin emails with jargon, buzzwords, passive voice, the phrase "according to," or wax philosophical in run-on sentences that use all of the above.

For example, don't begin with, "According to experts, digital transformation is a crucial iterative process where one must be data-driven." Start with "Seventy-eight percent of experts agree that transformation is crucial," or "How important is transformation?"

If you want to learn to write more interesting emails, read Everybody Writes by Ann Handley.

Email Introductions

OUR TOP 3 LEDE PICKS

CB INSIGHTS

Hi there,

On April 17, 2017, my dad died.

And so for the last 13 months, I've been working at CB Insights while also running his chemical manufacturing company based in India.

CONTENTLY

Every once in a while, the universe throws you a curveball that no amount of time management skills can overcome.

REALLY GOOD EMAILS

Bristles. Man fur. Facial locks. We all know that inside every clean-shaven man, there's a beard screaming to be let out.

10. What Does A Well-Written Email Read Like?

It is notoriously difficult to measure the quality of writing. We considered using an algorithm like the Flesch-Kincaid score, but while it can approximate reading ease, it has nothing to say about character, substance, humor, or the email's utility to the reader. So, we used people.

We asked volunteers to rate writing samples from each company on a scale of 1-5, where 3 was neutral. An email with a score of 1 was difficult to comprehend, provided insufficient context for a non-expert, used imprecise language, made unsupportable claims, featured an off-putting tone, and didn't make them want to read more. 5 was all things good: Easy to comprehend, provided sufficient context, used precise language, supported its claims, had an inviting tone, and made them sad when it was over.

Find A Way Media

OUR GRADING SCALE FOR NEWSLETTER WRITING

5 — Outstanding. Would happily share.

4 — Good. Worth reading.

3 — Neutral. Simply functional writing.

2 — Bad but there's some value.

1 — Offensively bad. Would unsubscribe immediately.

10. What Does A Well-Written Email Read Like?

3.14 average writing score

The average company received a writing score of 3.14 out of 5; slightly above neutral. Only 8 percent of companies received a perfect score of 5. Among them, two companies that offer writing services: Contently, a content marketing software, and Optimist, a content marketing agency. Newsletters in the top 10 percent earned an average of 4.8.

Interestingly, analyst agencies, despite their infamously cluttered writing, scored an average of 2 – not good, but not the worst – because buried under all that passive babble, they make valuable points.

The great thing about newsletters is they're public-facing. If you're curious about what good writing reads like, you can sign up for anyone's.

WE RECOMMEND FOLLOWING:

- **CB INSIGHTS**
- **CONTENTLY**
- **OPTIMIST**
- **INVISION**
- **MOO**

The Secret to A Well-Written Newsletter

We reached out to Tyler Hakes, the writer behind the Optimist newsletter, and he shared his writing process.

Tyler Hakes

STRATEGY DIRECTOR AND PRINCIPAL, OPTIMIST

When it comes to writing, I think it's all about style, tone, and layout – How the reader will consume the content. Whenever I sit down to write an email to our subscribers, I try to think about the story behind the post that I'm sharing. I want to lead the reader into naturally wanting to click the link and finish the story, almost like a "read more" button.

It's also really important to me to give a lot of thought about how that content is useful or what problems it may help the reader solve. It's easy to summarize what is covered in the post, but I want to go beyond that – really frame the article as a useful resource that will help you if you've been in X scenario or you're trying to solve Y problem.

Find A Way Media

It helps a lot that I am also a practitioner myself, so I have a deep understanding of the pain points and the process. I can empathize with our readers and then offer them the solution that I've found.

You'll also notice that our 'newsletter' isn't like many others. I only send out emails periodically, whenever we have new content. I introduce a new article and that's it.

I think focusing on that single call-to-action and being able to build the entire email around one link or one article is very helpful. Most newsletters have a quick one-sentence blurb about a post and then a link. But I really try to build up the story and the context around the one link that I'm sharing that day.

In general, I think sharing fewer pieces per email also makes it easier for the reader. There's a paradox when it comes to choice — if you overwhelm people with too many options, they're more likely to just do nothing. But if you give them one clear action to take, it becomes much simpler for the reader.

Tyler Hakes

STRATEGY DIRECTOR AND PRINCIPAL, OPTIMIST

Find A Way Media

11. What Does A Well-Designed Email Look Like?

Visuals might be even more important than writing when it comes to being understood. Consider how much more approachable a wall of text becomes when a designer breaks it up with big quotes. Or better yet, turns it into an infographic.
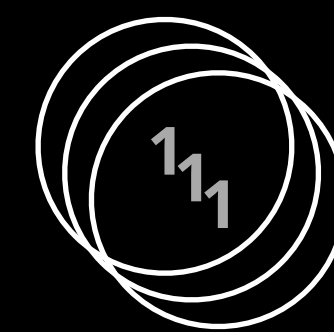
We scored designs on a scale of 1-3. A 1 was difficult to understand quickly. 3 was easy, 2 was neutral.

54

3 Easy to understand quickly.

2 Neutral. Neither easy nor difficult.

1 1 1 Difficult to understand quickly.

11. What Does A Well-Designed Email Look Like?

1.83
average design score

The average newsletter scored 1.83 out of 3 – just below average – whereas newsletters in the top 10 percent scored 2.6. Only 20 percent of companies received top marks.

The top email newsletters were simple, visually appealing, and guided the reader's attention through the email. InVision seemed to have planned its newsletter's optical journey from click to close because whatever topic it mentioned in its subject line wasn't the first thing that appeared in the newsletter – it was the second or third item. We found ourselves hunting for it, and we believe it caused us to read for longer.

The lowest scoring email newsletters were cluttered, poorly formatted, and featured several different nested headers, many columns, and a disorienting amount of text.

WE RECOMMEND FOLLOWING:

• MOO

• PANTONE

• INVISION

• SIEGEL+GALE

• CAMPAIGN MONITOR

But that's easier said than done. Thankfully, personalization is here to help. A well-planned personalized email campaign can help you turn visitors into loyal readers that stand by you for the long haul.

Today, we're going to talk about why you should be customizing your email campaigns, as well as a few ways you can go about doing it.

READ ON

most often used in the context of the service...

Who Don't Even Exist

kly and take new, and even old, approaches...

ork Ramping Up Speedy Payments

Gainsight

Best Practices & Events
View as a webpage

Gainsight

Customer Success Beat
Gainsight April Newsletter

CUSTOMER SUCCESS BEAT

In This Issue

- Q2 Crowd Grid for Customer Success

This week at InVision   JUN 11 - JUN 15, 2018
View in browser

DesignBetter.Co

DesignOps Handbook

SCALING PRODUCT DESIGN TEAMS WITH EFFICIENCY

DesignOps Handbook: Now on DesignBetter.Co

The world of digital product design gets more complex by the day. *DesignOps Handbook* is your guide to understanding how

THE INTEGRATE BLOG
Content to Master Demand Marketing
INTEGRATE

The Beginner's Guide to Influencer Marketing
By Molly Clark, 6/7/18 9:16 AM

Social media has become an unavoidable presence in our technology-driven, hyper-connected world. And, with the advent of social networking sites came drastic changes to the way marketers do their job. For the first time ever, both industry experts and regular people were given a new and easy way to connect with millions of like-minded users. Thus, influencer marketing was born.

If you've worked in marketing for any period of time, you're familiar with influencer marketing. But, is it just another dying trend or is it a marketing tactic worth exploring? We say, it all depends on your strategy.

Read more »

Will the Revenue Marketers Please Stand Up?
By Triniti Burton, 6/5/18 7:54 AM

Contently

The Content Strategist

Daily digest for June 14, 2018

ROI

Sign in

Video metrics? We've got a glossary for that.

Video Marketing | Jenny Mudarri

No two channels are the same. Learn how to compare metrics like "views" and "engagement" across platforms in this epic guide.

Learn more

Forward to a Friend ✉
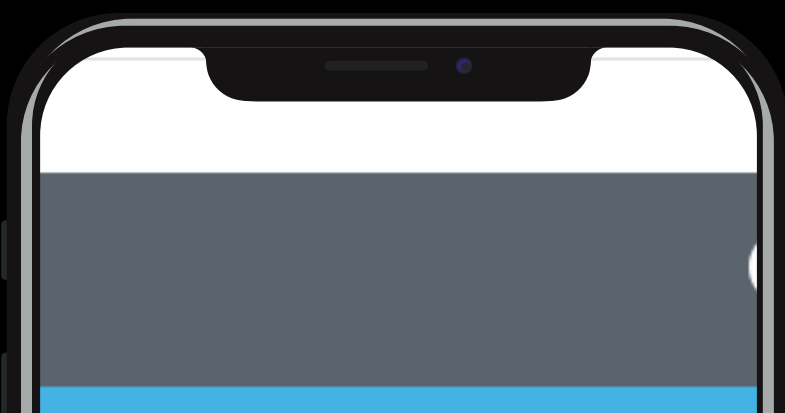
ough for retirement?

OVANNI

Campaign

How to Convert Visitors into Daily Readers Through Personalized Email Campaigns

Publishers in digital media know engagement is essential. You need eyes on

your
lue

11. What Does A Well-Designed Email Look Like?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, great writing and great design are correlated. Companies that have good copy also have good design instincts and vice versa.

3

Keep Readers Coming Back

Keep Readers Coming Back

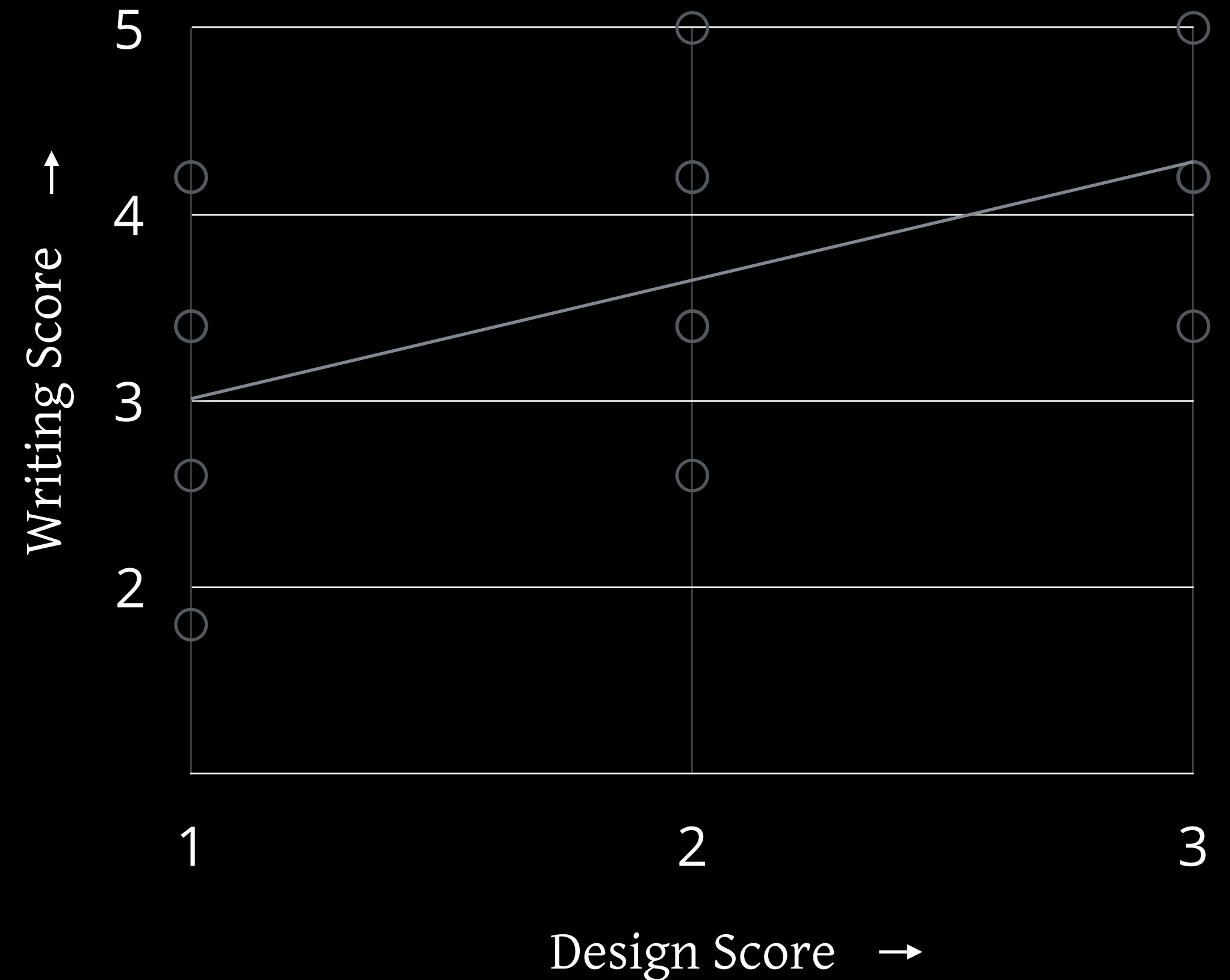After all this, who would we still subscribe to? Just the top 10 percent, and even then, not all. Attention is a limited resource and we, just like any subscriber, will eventually settle on the one or two newsletters that deliver clear value and help us do our jobs. But when refining our own newsletter, here are the takeaways we plan to apply:

Keep Readers Coming Back

1. TEST YOUR OWN NEWSLETTER JOURNEY

Is it easy to subscribe? Is it welcoming? Does it make the most of every touchpoint and direct readers to things they'll like?

2. DISCOVER YOUR PURPOSE

Why send a newsletter? Who is your audience and what do they care about? Can you articulate how the newsletter delivers value to them? If not, you may only be writing for an audience of one. Conduct competitive research, interview potential users, and get branding help.

Keep Readers Coming Back

3. SELECT YOUR FORMAT

Follow the top 10 percent of newsletters and use the Homepage format. Otherwise, fall back on the the Summarizer. Provide context and, if you want to make friends, don't hard sell.

WHEN DESIGNING THE NEWSLETTER JOURNEY:

✓ Don't require more than two or three form fields (name and email).

✓ Don't send more than five emails per month unless your audience demands it.

✓ Send from "Name at company," as opposed to just a name or just the company.

✓ Keep emails under 250 words.

✓ Use rich media like videos, GIFs, and emojis.

✓ If you collect information, personalize.

✓ Subject lines: Intriguing is best, but being literal is better than seeming manipulative or cloying.

✓ Spend time crafting strong headlines and ledes.

Keep Readers Coming Back

4. HIRE A SKILLED WRITER

Good newsletter writing is easy to comprehend, provides sufficient context for a non-expert, uses precise language, supports its claims, has an inviting tone, and makes readers crave more. Marketers can figure this out on their own, but a good writer comes prepared with these skills.

Look at these companies for examples of great writing:

- CB Insights
- Contently
- Optimist
- InVision
- MOO

5. HIRE A SKILLED DESIGNER

Good design uses visual communication techniques to guide readers and increase their comprehension. It's also pretty to look at. Go beyond the templates offered by your marketing automation software and get input from a graphic designer.

Look at these companies for examples of great design:

- MOO
- Pantone
- InVision
- Siegel + Gale
- Campaign Monitor

Now, go build an exceptional newsletter!

That's about it. Best of luck with your newsletter! If you found this helpful, send us examples of the newsletter you're building at chris@findaway.media – we'd love to see your work in action.

Also, how'd we do? Please send feedback.

Find A Way Media

Bonus Insight:

How CB Insights Earned 500,000 Subscribers

ACCORDING TO

Anand Sanwal

CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, CB INSIGHTS

Bonus Insight:

HOW CB INSIGHTS EARNED 500,000 SUBSCRIBERS

1. IT REQUIRES GRINDING IT OUT AND DOING THE WORK

This means being consistent in your voice and the frequency with which you write. The CB Insights newsletter will hit 500,000 subscribers later this month making it the largest in tech, but we launched it with just 489 subscribers eight years ago in July 2010. It took us almost 2.5 years to get to 10k. The growth was slow and there were times when we wondered if the investment of time in the newsletter made sense.

Here is our subscriber growth through the end of 2017.
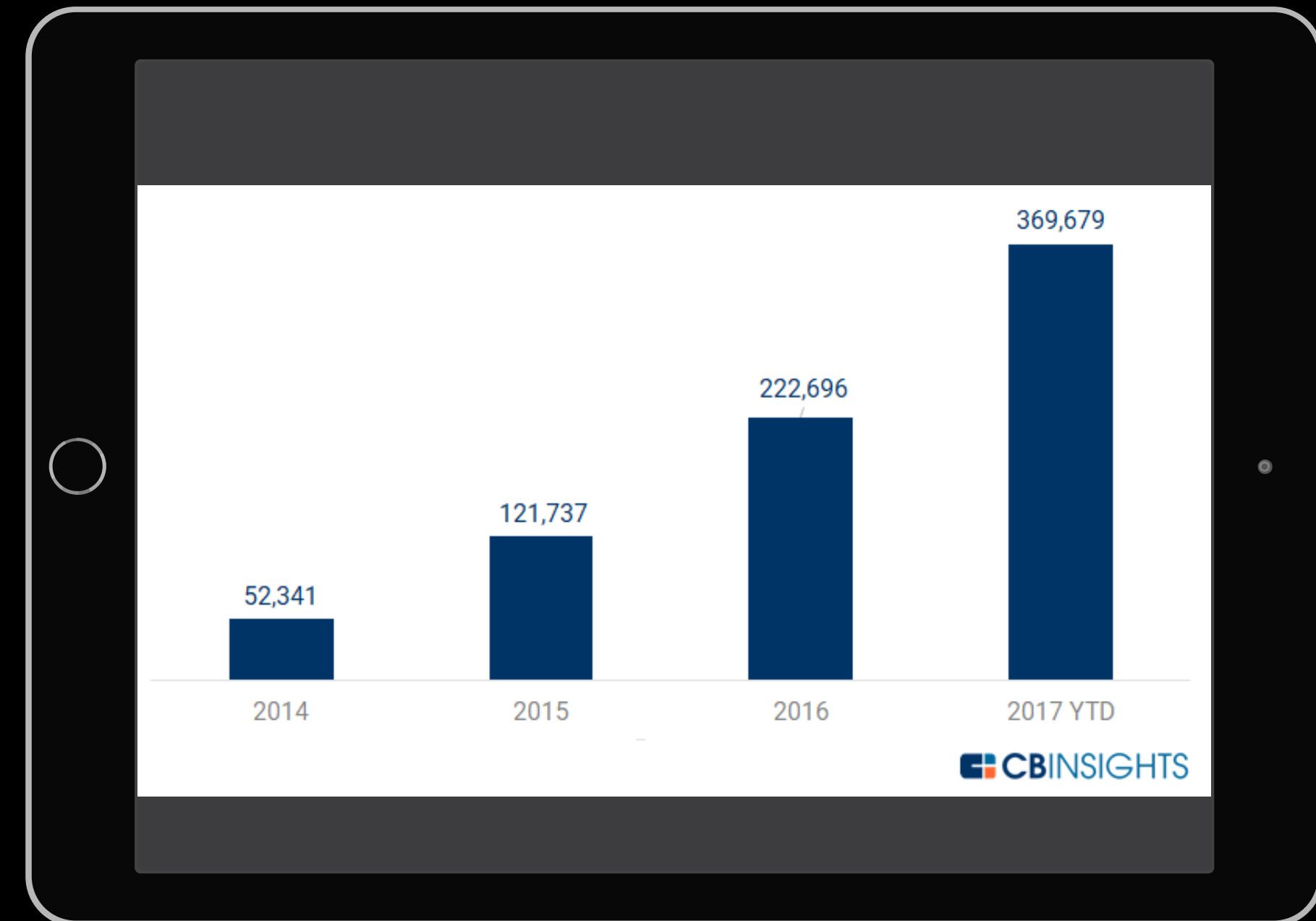
Bonus Insight:

HOW CB INSIGHTS EARNED 500,000 SUBSCRIBERS

2. DON'T BE BORING, ESPECIALLY IN B2B.

You don't want to be boring ever but in B2B, the bar is so immensely low that if you're not boring, you will stand out. The reality is most B2B newsletters are self-promotional, jargon-infested drivel. And that is because people think that in B2B, you need to be boring, serious, and buttoned up. Most B2B newsletters forget that people reading their content want to be educated but also like to be entertained.

Bonus Insight:

HOW CB INSIGHTS EARNED 500,000 SUBSCRIBERS

3. DOUBLE DOWN ON THE THINGS THAT WORK

When you find a theme that works, flood the zone and do more of it. People responded favorably when CB Insights shared bad data visualizations or nonsensical pie charts or when we made fun of management consultant frameworks that were gibberish. So we did more of those. Once you find things that work, do more of them.

Anand Sanwal

CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, CB INSIGHTS

More Praise From Marketing Leaders Who We Asked For Comment

"Sorry, what's this for, again?" - Glassdoor

"Never heard of you guys." - Gartner

"There's no way you're going to get a quote for your e-book." - Forrester

About Find A Way Media

If we met at a mixer, we'd call ourselves a content marketing agency. But that doesn't do us justice. We're really more of an incubator for abnormally talented (read: torturously gifted, obscenely accomplished, heinously humble) writers with a nagging nonfiction tendency.

Our writing thrills readers and makes our B2B clients money because attention is scarce and exceptional writing is an advantage that transcends age, device, and channel.

Want to master marketing? Start with words. Let's chat.

Our Methodology

We signed up for the email newsletters of 100 companies for April through June of 2018. Companies were selected for fit from a list submitted by partners and readers of Find A Way Media's publication, <u>The Beat</u>. Only 78 of the companies we reviewed actually sent a newsletter and these were the only companies included in the study. None of the companies studied were alerted to the study until after it was complete. After being notified, a few volunteered to be interviewed and it had no impact on their score.

None of the companies in the study are customers and nobody paid us to adjust their score. If you are interested in paying us to adjust your score, let's talk. (Kidding. Don't call us.)

Companies in the study were measured on 17 factors, including design quality, writing quality, and utility to the reader, which were judged by human volunteers who were as impartial as we could threaten and cajole them into being.

The results of the study are not statistically significant for any particular sample of B2B companies. They do not represent all B2B companies, of which there are tens of thousands. Be realistic. There are only a few of us. We're doing the best we can.

Writing And Reporting by

Find A Way Media

Design By Anthony Espino

THANKS!