INTOUCH
S O L U T I O N S ®

POV: HOW GMAIL's INBOX APP WILL
IMPACT EMAIL ENGAGEMENT

DECEMBER 2014

GMAIL LAUNCHES INBOX, PRESENTING NEW CHALLENGES IN EVALUATING EMAIL DESIGN, RESPONSE RATES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Google Gmail recently shifted its focus to mobile with the launch of Inbox — Gmail's newest email app.

+ Ongoing changes to Gmail design, delivery algorithms and now a mobile-first app design continue to pose challenges to email marketers looking to maximize visibility for and engagement with promotional content.
+ Inbox does not replace Gmail or even the native Gmail app, but rather is an invitation-only pilot, minimizing the impact of this initial introduction on pharmaceutical marketing.
+ If the app performs well and subsequently launches in full as expected, marketers can expect Gmail open rates to decline, making relevant content more important than ever.

This POV provides an overview of the new Inbox app, as well as the potential impact on — and recommendations for — email marketers in the pharma industry.

BACKGROUND

The Gmail team has been busy with enhancements — including several radical changes — over the last 18 months. In May 2013, Google announced a **new Gmail inbox design** which categorized email content into three tabs: Primary, Social and Promotions. Ten months later, Gmail announced a test of a **more visual, Pinterest-style email layout** in the Promotions tab.
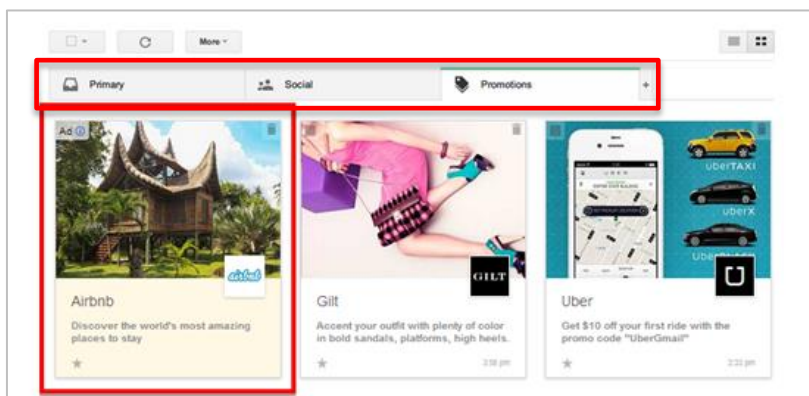
And now, Google has shifted its focus to the mobile inbox, entering the realm of third-party Gmail apps with the launch of Inbox by Gmail.
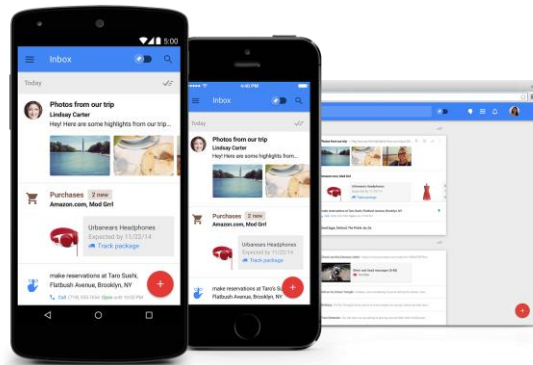
AN OVERVIEW OF INBOX BY GMAIL

It's important to understand that Inbox does not replace Gmail. Currently in beta and invitation-only, it is an email app for Gmail that is available for Google Chrome, iOS and Android.

Announced Oct. 22 on the **official Google blog**, Inbox was created to assist Gmail users in combatting the daily email deluge and focusing on the content that really matters. "For many of us," Google's announcement states, "dealing with email has become a daily chore that distracts from what we really need to do — rather than helping us get those things done."

So how does Inbox deliver that?

1. **Customization** — Inbox allows the user to set up custom delivery preferences so that email is delivered as specified, with the option of immediate, once-per-day or weekly delivery. For example, if a user only wants to look at Promotions on the weekend, they may opt for all of their Promotions emails to be delivered on Saturdays at 6:00 a.m.
2. **Bundles** — Gmail takes its tab-inspired email grouping a step further with Bundles. The tabs/bundles are expanded with the predefined categories of Promotions, Updates, Purchases, Finance, Forums, Travel and Social email groups. Users can choose to customize or turn off Bundles altogether.
3. **Highlights and Assists** — Inbox also incorporates Highlights to extend visual engagement of content, providing the opportunity to showcase email content under the name and

pre-header and allow interaction with content without even opening the email. Some emails are even enhanced with Assists that incorporate useful information that wasn't even in the email. For instance, an emailed flight itinerary displays a clickable link that allows you to check in to the flight right from the Inbox.

THE IMPACT OF INBOX ON EMAIL MARKETING

Inbox has some current limitations. Because it is in beta and invitation-only, the audience viewing Gmail through Inbox is very small. Also, the app does not currently support Exchange, Yahoo!, Outlook, IMAP or POPmail. This is a substantial barrier to users who actively work across multiple email addresses since they will be required to access non-Gmail emails through another app, thereby negating the simplicity Inbox sets out to achieve.

But, as we expect usage to grow over the coming months, there are a number of Inbox implications of which email marketers should be aware:

+ In looking at email engagement metrics, marketers should accommodate for longer lead time, as some subscribers will opt for weekly email delivery.
+ Because users can click on email content without opening the email, marketers should be prepared to see declining Gmail open rates, though click-through could actually rise.
+ Inbox does not support responsive email design and will strip out the CSS.
+ We expect Bundles will bury campaigns that are achieving only negligible engagement metrics, making content relevance more important than ever. Marketers should take a step back and determine what subscribers really want and ensure they are delivering it.

There are some golden opportunities offered through Inbox as well, including:

+ Subscribers can save emails, extending the life of emails beyond the first open.
+ Inbox users will have the ability to create and integrate Reminders as a working to-do list, which could translate to more time spent in the email inbox and a greater opportunity for an email to get noticed.
+ Marketers can utilize schema to maximize images and help drive opens through Highlights. Most marketers fail to make use of this snippet content, and Inbox is doing it automatically.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BRANDS

The limited initial user base for Inbox by Gmail should not deter marketers from optimizing email design for open rates ahead of a full rollout. However, no two email subscriber lists are the same. Marketers should regularly review their subscribers' preferences and behaviors to fully evaluate the need to make changes to a specific list. In general, in order to design for the Inbox app, pharma marketers should consider the following recommendations:

+ As always, marketers should make the case for investment in data to drive personalization, meaningful segmentation and content relevance.

+ Emails should utilize mobile-first design (e.g., large type, big clickable buttons, etc.) to compensate for the lack of CSS/responsive support in Inbox.

+ Make the most of visual content by utilizing schema markup to make images appear in Highlights, giving the user another reason to open. Pharma marketers should ensure that images follow FDA regulations for brand/indication mentions.

+ There is one line of visible pre-header text, so make subject lines count by providing strong content that drives opens.

+ Continued use of bulletproof buttons is recommended, even though images in Inbox will render automatically. Many email clients default to display images, so best practice still utilizes ALT text, background colors, and a balance of image and live text.

+ To optimize email opens, the sending company should secure a verified Google+ page with an approved logo, as that logo will be displayed as the sender image in Inbox. Google+ pages, however, are generally not embraced as a viable social engagement channel for pharma brands and should be hidden to avoid the appearance of an empty Google+ presence.
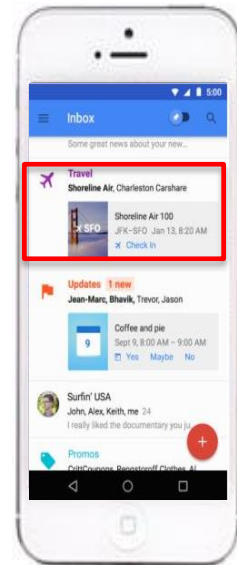
Despite current shortcomings, if the Inbox app performs well and launches in full as predicted, marketers can expect Gmail open rates to decline. Savvy pharma marketers will be watching and begin planning now for the changes to come. Above all, relevant content remains at the forefront of any solid email content strategy.

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