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Don't Believe the Hype: Email marketing, style guides & useful-ish advice

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Abstract Email marketing style guides are examples of professionals talking to professionals. The guides both promote and proscribe writing in a certain way. But they are also examples of self-promotion for the authors, who often also offer consulting services. This article investigates and categorizes the advice given in style guides, then uses a corpus of email marketing texts to research how close actual email marketing texts adhere to the advice of style guides. The study also offers a practical approach that marketers can take when they are presented with advice on how to write better.

The research shows that the style guides offer some advice that cannot in practice be followed, such as avoiding adjectives and adverbs. The guides offer advice which email marketers can adapt to suit their audience, such as being concise and conversational. Finally, the style guides offer guidance on "power words," which are presented as explicit pieces of advice, but are vague enough to be applied broadly according to the product being marketed. The advice on power words also covertly works as a marketing tactic to promote the author and/or publisher of the style guide.

Keywords computer-mediated communication, marketing, advertising, email, style, email marketing, language

1. Introduction

The proliferation of online resources devoted to developing the skill of copywriting shows how highly it is valued by marketers. These marketing style guides promise to take copywriting "to the next level" (Dimitriou 2020) and to make it "fun" to craft a marketing email (SendGrid 2019). Some of the advice in these guides, however, is vague, while some seems impossible to follow. Thus, there is a question about what is offered by the guides and for whom they are intended. Many of them are published by marketing consultants, which means readers can both take the author's advice and purchase their services. The style guides are examples of professionals talking to other professionals about marketing. They are also promotional texts for the authors and the publishers of the style guides.

A subsection of online style guides is devoted specifically to email marketing. This gives us the opportunity to compare their advice to real world

marketing emails. The advice in email marketing style guides offers both approvals and proscriptions. Mostly, the authors of the guides celebrate email marketing. But they also forbid some words and linguistic features, often in a normative fashion similar to traditional style guides (Straaijer 2017: 24–27).

This comparative study seeks to answer two main research questions about email marketing style guides. First, what types of linguistic advice can be found in style guides for email marketers? This question is approached from a qualitative point of view. The advice in the style guides is categorized and used as a basis to answer the second research question: Does the language in email marketing texts reflect advice given in the guides? If the email marketing texts reflect the guides' advice, it would indicate that copywriters are following the style guides. If, however, the email marketing texts do not reflect the advice, that would suggest that the style guides are not reaching their intended audience.

The study shows that the linguistic advice given in the style guides is occasionally constrained by the product on offer. Companies can write longer marketing texts if they are offering an experience or selling a product with which customers identify. Conversely, marketing texts tend to contain less written text when the price point of the product is paramount. The results also show that the style guides are vaguely written, which allows for copywriters to decide how to best apply the advice. For example, the advice to "Be concise" is given without any specific definition of conciseness. Finally, the marketing emails strongly follow standard written norms, which is in concordance with the style guide advice. The two exceptions to this normative behavior are exclamation points and writing in ALL CAPS, two styles of writing which are prominently used in marketing. These exceptions bear relevance on previous studies in computer-mediated communication (CMC), which have found that ALL CAPS and exclamation points are confrontational (Turnage 2008: 53). In email marketing texts, however, exclamation points and ALL CAPS serve different functions than obeying normative practices or displaying aggression.

This study aims to offer the field of linguistics a deeper understanding of the relatively understudied microgenre of email marketing, as well as an analysis of the linguistic advice that influences the creation of email marketing texts. For marketers, the relevance is a deeper linguistic understanding of

marketing emails. It also provides copywriters with analytical tools that can be used to conduct structural research on the language in email marketing texts.

In Section 2, I will give a background of marketing as a genre, linguistic research into marketing texts, and research on the language used in email. I will also contextualize the email marketing style guides and how they compare to similar texts. Section 3 will describe my data sets: the corpus of email marketing style guides and the corpus of email marketing style guides. In this section I will also describe my methodologies for categorizing the advice given in the style guides and for how I recognized each feature in the email marketing texts. My analysis of the email marketing corpus appears in Section 5 and it includes figures and examples from the corpus. I discuss the results from the analysis in Section 6 and I explain the reasons why the style guides give the advice that they do, how the advice is interpreted by the targeted audience of the style guides. I also describe how the linguistic features found in the corpus both contradict the advice in the corpus, but also conform to the norms of the marketing and email genres. In Section 7, I conclude my main points of the article and offer some suggestions for future research.

2. Background

Earlier studies on email marketing have mainly focused exclusively on personal and professional email communication (Abbasian & Tahririan 2008; Baron 2002, 2008; Crystal 2006; Hastings 2009; Herring 2007; Rygg 2021). Goddard and Geesin (2011: 30) have noted that texts which are written for a wider audience tend to be more formal and follow standardized norms more closely, but also that marketing may buck this trend in its pursuit to reach audience members on a personal level. More recent work – mostly from economists and computer scientists – has focused on how well the language of an email marketing campaign can predict its success. Conceição and Gama (2019: 148–149) developed a classification algorithm to predict whether a marketing email campaign would be a success or a failure based on features such as keywords and subject line length, while Jaidka *et al.* (2018: 180) found that different words and phrases are correlated with success in

marketing emails from companies different industries. Others have focused on the personalization strategies used in subject lines (Defau & Zauner 2023; Sahni *et al.* 2018; McVeigh forthcoming), a topic which will also be addressed in this article. McVeigh (2020) presents a genre analysis of email marketing texts and shows that the microgenre of email marketing exists between the macrogenres of email and direct marketing, sharing neither a communicative purpose nor a genre antecedent with personal and professional emails.

In general, promotion in marketing is related to the notion of persuasion. Marketing uses a variety of devices, such as statistical evidence, narratives, and linguistic descriptions of the product, to persuade audience members into interpreting its premise in a certain way (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2004: 30–34). Marketing texts use both rational and emotional forms of persuasion in appealing to potential customers. Metaphors are common, but so is hard data. Essentially, anything that can be used to persuade an audience to purchase a product can be a tool for a marketer.

The linguistic structure and vocabulary of marketing texts has also been shown to be highly repetitive. Cook (2001: 152) describes how repetition adds cohesion to marketing texts, but also warns that the excessive borrowing found in the genre threatens to diminish its identity (Myers 1994: 34). Email marketing in particular has been shown to be hyper-repetitive both visually and lexically, suggesting that marketers work from a template and reuse words and phrases across their emails (McVeigh 2018: 233–236), while other studies suggest that readers can recognize marketing texts just on the layout of the elements alone since the layout is repeated so frequently (Clark *et al.* 2008).

Previous linguistic research on marketing has shown that the genre is dynamic and creative. Bhatia (2006: 63) describes how marketing texts use innovative lexico-grammatical and discoursal forms, as well as rhetorical strategies. The innovation found in marketing texts, along with the borrowing, can be argued to create hybrid genres which blur the boundaries between marketing and other genres (Deng *et al.* 2021: 32), such as in the case of so-called advertorials, which are a cross between journalistic and promotional texts. Marketers are highly adaptive and willing to use any resource of language to promote their products (Goddard 1998: 3).

Email marketing style guides are similar to traditional usage guides in English, such as Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and its subsequent updated versions, in how they both discuss aspects of punctuation, vocabulary and formality. Usage guides and email marketing style guides are also generally proscriptive and correctional in nature – they aim to tell readers what to do, rather than offer a descriptive approach to their subject matter. The two types of guides are also similar in that the advice in both is determined by the preference of the author (Straaijer 2017: 24). This means that variation exists in the contents of the style guides since each guide includes topics which the author deems worthy of being discussed. The authors position themselves as authorities and therefore external sources are not used in choosing the topics.

Email marketing style guides, however, have a narrower scope than traditional usage guides. They mainly give writing advice that is designed to increase sales. In addition, they have a specific audience (email marketing copywriters) and give advice about a specific genre (email marketing). For these reasons, the term *style guide* is used here over *usage guide*, which still can be defined as a general-purpose reference work, even when transmitted online (Lukač 2017: 113).

3. Materials and Data

The writing advice in the study comes from sixteen email marketing style guides. The guides are all written in English and offer advice about marketing in English. The guides were chosen because they come from large companies in the field of email marketing in the US (SendGrid, Campaign Monitor), or are published on the websites of major email marketing companies (such as Constant Contact and HubSpot). The books were chosen so that not all of the guides would be online resources. In addition, each piece of advice in this research is recommended by at least two style guides to secure against the possibility that the advice was not just the preference of one author. Table 1 gives details of the style guides. Some of the webpage guides have been updated since their original publication date.

Table 1. Information on each style guide investigated in this research.

Title	Author(s)	Type	Year
29 Email Marketing Best Practices That Drive Results	Dimitriou, Nick	Webpage	2020
What is a Good Email Subject Line?	Paquet, Miranda	Webpage	2020
24 Email Marketing Best Practices Tips for 2020	SendGrid	Webpage	2020
Awesome Email Copywriting: A How To (With Examples)	SendGrid	Webpage	2019
Email Marketing Subject Line Best Practices	Bernius, Kelsey (SendGrid)	Webpage	2018
How to Write a Persuasive Marketing Email	Charest, Dave	Webpage	2018
23 Simple Email Marketing Tips to Improve Your Open and Clickthrough Rates	Kolowich Cox, Lindsay	Webpage	2018/2020
Data-Backed Strategies For More Effective Email Marketing Copywriting	Smith, Jillian	Webpage	2018
Email Essentials: How to Write Effective Emails and Build Great Relationships One Message at a Time	Taylor, Shirley	Book	2017
Big List of Marketing Words to Improve Email Campaigns	Campaign Monitor	Webpage	2019a
How to Write Copy That Sells: The Step-by-step System for More Sales, to More Customers, More Often	Edwards, Ray	Book	2016
Understanding Digital Marketing	Ryan, Damian	Book	2016
Busted: The worst email subject lines, ever!	Vertical response	Webpage	2014/2017
37 Tips for Writing Emails that Get Opened, Read, and Clicked	Henneke	Webpage	2013
The Top 10 Email Marketing Power Words and Language Pitfalls	Talavera, Karen	Webpage	2010
What to Write in Your Emails	Montesa, Monica & Elisabeth Willits	Booklet	No date

Each style guide in the analysis focuses primarily on linguistic advice to copywriters, rather than layout and visual elements, although some of them

mention these elements. In addition, the guides under investigation are either primarily or exclusively about email marketing. Advice about email newsletters, social media ads, or print advertising was excluded as irrelevant in scope.

For the email marketing texts in this study, the companies are divided into industries from public to personal services so that comparisons can be made between companies with similar customers. I did not divide the industries for the analysis, but rather adopted a division made by a prominent email marketing firm (Constant Contact 2020). A list of the top email marketing campaigns from a leading email marketing firm was chosen to make the company selection more objective (Campaign Monitor 2019b). The original list did not, however, include all industries, and thus leading companies in the missing industries were chosen. Some companies failed to send enough emails to qualify for inclusion in this study, which is why there are industries with only one company in the analysis. Although an inner-industry comparison is not the focus here, there are enough industries with several companies to permit some general claims. The data contains 40 companies and I selected 5 consecutive emails from each company for a total of 200 emails in the corpus. The corpus size is 34,809 words (tokens), but as described in the end of Section 5, total size and the type/token ratio of the corpus is not the focus of this study or the analysis. The emails themselves were sent between October and November of 2019. The collection time was chosen to avoid being near a major commercial holiday, such as Christmas, which could have heavily influenced the language. For example, since Christmas is the largest commercial holiday in the United States, the emails are dominated by language around Christmas, such as *tree*, *season*, and *merry*. Such emails perhaps deserve a study on their own, but the focus here is to capture a more general view of marketing emails. The industries and companies are listed in Table 2. The color codes for the industries will be used in the analysis in Section 5.

Table 2. Industries and companies used in the analysis.

Industry	Companies
Publishing	Alibris, Harper Collins, Hachette, Macmillan, Penguin, Simon & Schuster
Salon, Spa, Barber	Birchbox, FCHair, LaMer, philosophy
Restaurant, Bar, Cafe, Caterer	Longhorn, SommSelect, Starbucks, Stumptown, T2Tea, Texas Roadhouse
Personal Services	Chatbooks, LegacyBox, Maids
Home & Building Services	DeWalt, Home Depot, Makita
Fitness Center, Sports, Recreation	Gold's, Red Bull, RS Offers
Automotive Services	Diamondback
Art, Culture, Entertainment	House, Smithsonian
Animal Services	Petco
Accommodations	Hilton, IHG
Travel and Tourism	Delta
Retail	B&H, Chrome, CVS, FedEx, O'Neill, Speck, UPS, Walgreens

4. Methods

Nine categories of advice are analyzed in the study (Tables 3 and 6). Some of the advice are about textual features, while others are about the stylistic level of the emails. The categories are drawn directly from the style guides, and they represent advice that is either recommended or proscribed. Table 3 shows the three categories of recommended advice and their sources.

Table 3. Categories of advice recommended by the style guides; + indicates that the guide recommends the advice, - means that the guide does not mention the advice.

Style guides		Recommended		
Author(s)	**Year**	**Be concise**	**Power words**	**Be conversational**
Dimitriou	2020	-	-	+
Paquet	2020	-	-	-
SendGrid	2020	-	-	+
SendGrid	2019?	+	+	+

Bernius	2018	-	+	-
Charest	2018	+	-	+
Kolowich Cox	2018/2020	+	+	+
Smith	2018	+	-	+
Taylor	2017	+	+	+
Campaign Monitor	2019a	+	+	-
Edwards	2016	-	-	+
Ryan	2016	+	-	+
Vertical response	2014/2017	-	-	-
Henneke	2013	+	+	+
Talavera	2010	-	+	-
Montesa & Willits	No date	+	-	+
Total		9	7	11

A qualitative method was used for analyzing the style guides. A manual reading allowed for the linguistic and stylistic advice to be categorized and compared, and then used as a basis for the analysis of the email marketing texts. The validity of the categorization method was confirmed through intra-coding. The guides were coded three times over four years. The categories were created and named based on overt language in the guides. For example, the recommended advice is explicitly written out, as the following direct quotes from the guides show.

Table 4. Categories of recommended advice from the email marketing style guides and example quotes of each category

Be concise	Keep your emails concise. (Charest 2018)
	Keep your emails concise. (Kolowich 2018/2020)
	To stand out, keep your emails concise (Montesa & Willits n.d.)
Power words	While you're writing, remember that action words and verbs, much like subject lines, will always serve you well. (SendGrid 2019)
	try to use action verbs that resonate with your audience as much as possible (Bernius 2018)
	Use power words. (Henneke 2013)
Be conversational	You want to start a conversation with your audience (Dimitriou 2020)
	Use a friendly conversational style (Taylor 2017)
	Keep things light and conversational (Ryan 2016)

Recognizing the categories was not difficult, since the guides were explicit in their claims. Quantifying the "Be concise" category meant performing a relatively straightforward corpus linguistic analysis of counting the words in the emails (Section 5.1.1) and then describing the differences between the companies and the meaning behind the advice (Section 6.1). Quantifying the other two categories of advice proved more challenging. For example, none of the guides are clear on what constitutes a "power word". In the examples that they give, the power words mostly appear as verbs in clauses in the imperative mood, but the imperative is not what makes them power words, as the analysis will show. Power words (also called "action verbs" by some guides) are described as keeping the copy "clean and succinct so there's no confusion for [the] reader" (SendGrid 2019). Another description of power words comes from Henneke (2013), who says that they are "sensory and emotional words" which "attract attention, and make your subject lines stand out in crowded inboxes".

Power words have been analyzed in two ways. First, the emails were analyzed for verbs in the infinitive form, since the base form of verbs in the imperative mood is the same as the infinitive form. Second, the emails were compared to two lists of power words. One of these lists, the SB list (Morrow 2018), was linked to by a style guide and has 596 power words. The other list

comes from the style guide itself (Campaign Monitor 2019a) and has 84 power words (hereafter the CM list).

For the conversational category, some guides discuss infusing the "personality" of the business (Charest 2018), while others recommend using "a specific vernacular, or slang" that will "resonate" with a company's customers more than with other demographics (SendGrid 2020)[1]. Therefore, emails were recognized as being conversational based on the few specifics that the style guides give for this category:

Table 5. List of features which mark an email as being conversational according to the style guides.

Conversational features
My name
Narrative/story
Jokes
Contractions
Regionalisms
Atypical features

Narratives include quotes from customers about the product and descriptions of a product which are told in a narrative form. For example, a book description that lists other books by the same writer is not considered a narrative, but a description that summarizes the plot is considered as telling a narrative. Regionalisms are words or phrases which index a geographical variety and are not part of standardized written US English. The only example of this that occurred in the emails was the word *y'all*, which was not counted as a contraction.

1 Formality has been measured with other genres by researching a range of linguistic features (Biber 1988; Halliday 1989), but such analyses are beyond the scope of this article. In addition, the statistical methods used by Biber (1988) and Halliday (1989) require texts of at least 400 continuous words, while most of the emails in this analysis contain fewer than 200 total words and even fewer continuous words as they are broken into different marketing frames. This does not mean that the features from those previous methods would not be found in the emails, but rather that the statistical methods used in those studies is not particularly applicable here.

The six categories proscribed by the style guides are also drawn from explicit statements (Table 6). Email marketing style guides emphasize the spontaneity and playfulness of language on the internet, but strongly proscribe any deviation from the norms of standard written English. Hence the proscriptions against writing in ALL CAPS, no caps, and using exclamation points all look like proscriptions against features of CMC genres (Abbasian & Tahririan 2008: 15; Baron 2000: 193; Boland & Queen 2016; Herring 2022: 2). Adjectives and adverbs are not proscribed outright, but both of these categories are described as "redundant" in the style guides (SendGrid 2019; Henneke 2013).

Table 6. Categories of advice proscribed by the style guides; + indicates proscription by the guide, - indicates that the guide does not mention the advice, +/- indicates that the guide offers conflicting advice.

Style guides		Proscribed					
Author(s)	**Year**	**Adjectives**	**Adverbs**	**Atypical**	**ALL CAPS**	**no caps**	**Exclamation points**
Dimitriou	2020	-	-	-	-	-	-
Paquet	2020	-	-	-	+	-	+
SendGrid	2020	-	-	-	-	-	-
SendGrid	2019	+	+	+	+	+	-
Bernius	2018	-	-	+	+	-	+
Charest	2018	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kolowich Cox	2018/2020	-	-	-	-	-	-
Smith	2018	-	+/-	-	+/-	-	-
Taylor	2017	-	-	+	+	+	-
Campaign Monitor	2019a	-	-	-	-	-	-
Edwards	2016	-	-	-	+	-	+
Ryan	2016	-	-	+	-	-	-
Vertical response	2014/2017	-	-	+	+	-	+
Henneke	2013	+	+	-	-	-	-
Talavera	2010	+	-	+	+	-	+
Montesa & Willits	No date	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total		3	2	6	7	2	5

Email marketing subject lines have been shown to contain fewer non-standard features than other marketing frames (McVeigh 2017). Importantly, however, "non-standard" is a debatable term, as writing in one medium will not (and perhaps should not) follow the same norms as writing in another medium. The guides seem to understand this in an abstract sense, but they use the term "grammar" interchangeably with "spelling" and "punctuation", with one guide calling deviations from the standard "frills" (Bernius 2018). I will therefore use the term "atypical" to refer to these linguistic features that the guides proscribe, so as to not make any confusion with the term "non-standard" and as to not imply that these features are not part of CMC genres. The atypical category includes all atypical features besides ALL CAPS, no caps and exclamation points. Atypical features are proscribed by saying that the spelling and grammar in the emails should be "correct" (Sendgrid 2019) or "accurate" (Ryan 2016), but in some cases a style guide will give examples of atypical features and say "often these tactics lose or agitate the recipient" (Bernius 2018). With these comments, the style guides mimic online comment threads about CMC language (Squires 2010: 475–476). In an extreme case, but one that is indicative of the style guides' traditionalist view of grammar, Taylor (2017: 38, 75) devotes a good amount of space to grammar, but gives outdated and incorrect definitions for the terms "sentence" and "passive voice." Table 7 shows the proscribed categories and examples from some of the style guides.

Table 7. Categories of proscribed advice from the email marketing style guides and example quotes of each category.

Adjectives	And while you're editing, remove all unnecessary words such as adjectives (SendGrid 2019)
	"Exaggerated modifiers" are listed as a "language pitfall" (Talavera 2010)
Adverbs	Adverbs should be avoided when possible! (SendGrid 2019)
Atypical features	Ensure that grammar, punctuation, and spelling and links are correct (SendGrid 2019)
	Don't: Overdo it with !!!!, ALL CAPS, and other frills (Bernius 2018)

ALL CAPS	Let your copywriting skills, not your caps lock, convey the importance of your message. The same goes for wAckY CApS — Don't go CRazAY. (Vertical Response 2014/2017)
	You should avoid loud punctuation like all caps (Paquet 2020)
	We can use capitals to emphasize important sections of our email messages. Please don't. Apart from being more difficult to read, capital letters imply shouting and aggression. SO DON'T USE CAPITALS FOR ANY PART OF YOUR MESSAGE! (Taylor 2017: 62)
no caps	At the other extreme, some people cannot be bothered with capital letters at all, and this can be very frustrating (Taylor 2017: 62)
Exclamation points	You should avoid loud punctuation like all caps and multiple exclamation points (Paquet 2020)

The categorization of the advice in the style guides has proved that both a qualitative and quantitative analysis is necessary for investigating the email marketing texts. A quantitative analysis has been used for the categories that could be counted: the number of marketing frames; whether the text included a power word or a clause that started with a verb in the imperative mood; the number of linguistic features in each text (adjectives, adverbs, atypical features, ALL CAPS, no caps, exclamation points) in each text; and whether an email uses my name, tells a story, or makes a joke. Other categories have benefited from a manual reading in order to interpret the results better: whether the email could be considered "concise"; which power word(s) were in the texts; whether the language counted as conversational; and which adjectives, adverbs atypical features and power words are used.

The figures for each category are reported per marketing frame. Marketing frames are one of the four frames of a marketing email recognized in McVeigh (2020). The frames are visually delineated from one another and there can be multiple marketing frames in an email (see Figure 1). Marketing frames (MF) are a foundational layer of the marketing email and they can vary in shape, size, color, and other visual ways. MFs serve as a place to introduce a product to the reader, and they are used in analyzing marketing emails because they differentiate between the generic sections of a marketing email and allow for comparison between emails from different companies. The number of products on offer in a marketing email, and therefore the number of marketing frames, can vary widely. Analyzing the categories per marketing frame will show how frequently each feature is used in marketing a product.

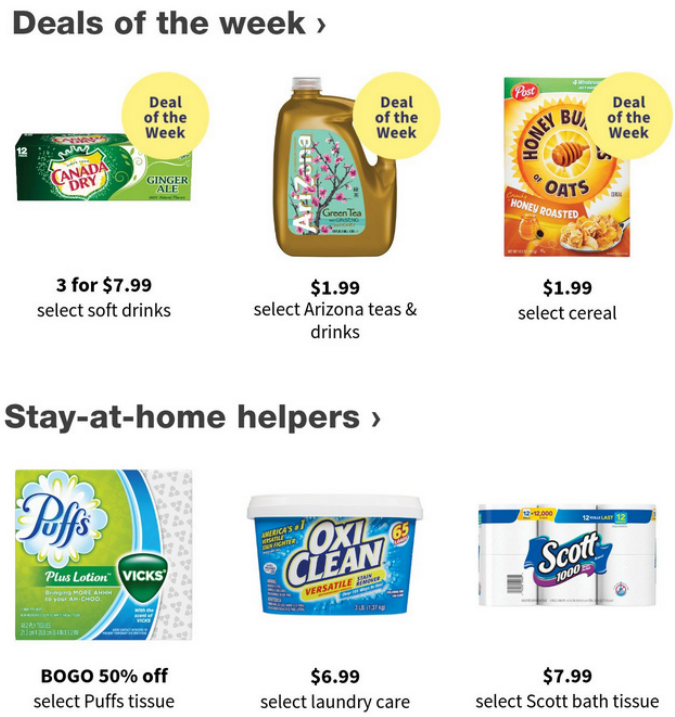


Figure 1. Examples of marketing frames from a Walgreens email. The example shows six marketing frames delineated visually.

The guides tend to recommend more than proscribe, but in some cases the guides offer conflicting advice. Instances of two of the recommended categories are more covert and found through qualitative manual reading of the emails (Be concise and Be conversational). The proscribed categories have one which is qualitative: atypical features. The remaining categories are not subjective in nature. They are overt and either appear in the emails or they do not. For example, a word or phrase either is written in ALL CAPS or it is not, a power word either appears in a marketing frame or it does not, etc.

5 Analysis

5.1. Recommended Language

5.1.1. Conciseness

Seeing the average word counts per MF is the first way of seeing how concise the emails are (Figure 3). This shows how much text the companies devote

to each product in their emails. Two publishing companies (Macmillan and Harper Collins), one retail company (Chrome) and one recreation company (RS Offers) stand out as being long. SommSelect devotes the longest text to each product, a result of their emails looking like blog post snippets. Four of the five emails from SommSelect have only one MF, and each looks like the start of a blog post, including a "Read More" tag (Figure 2 below).

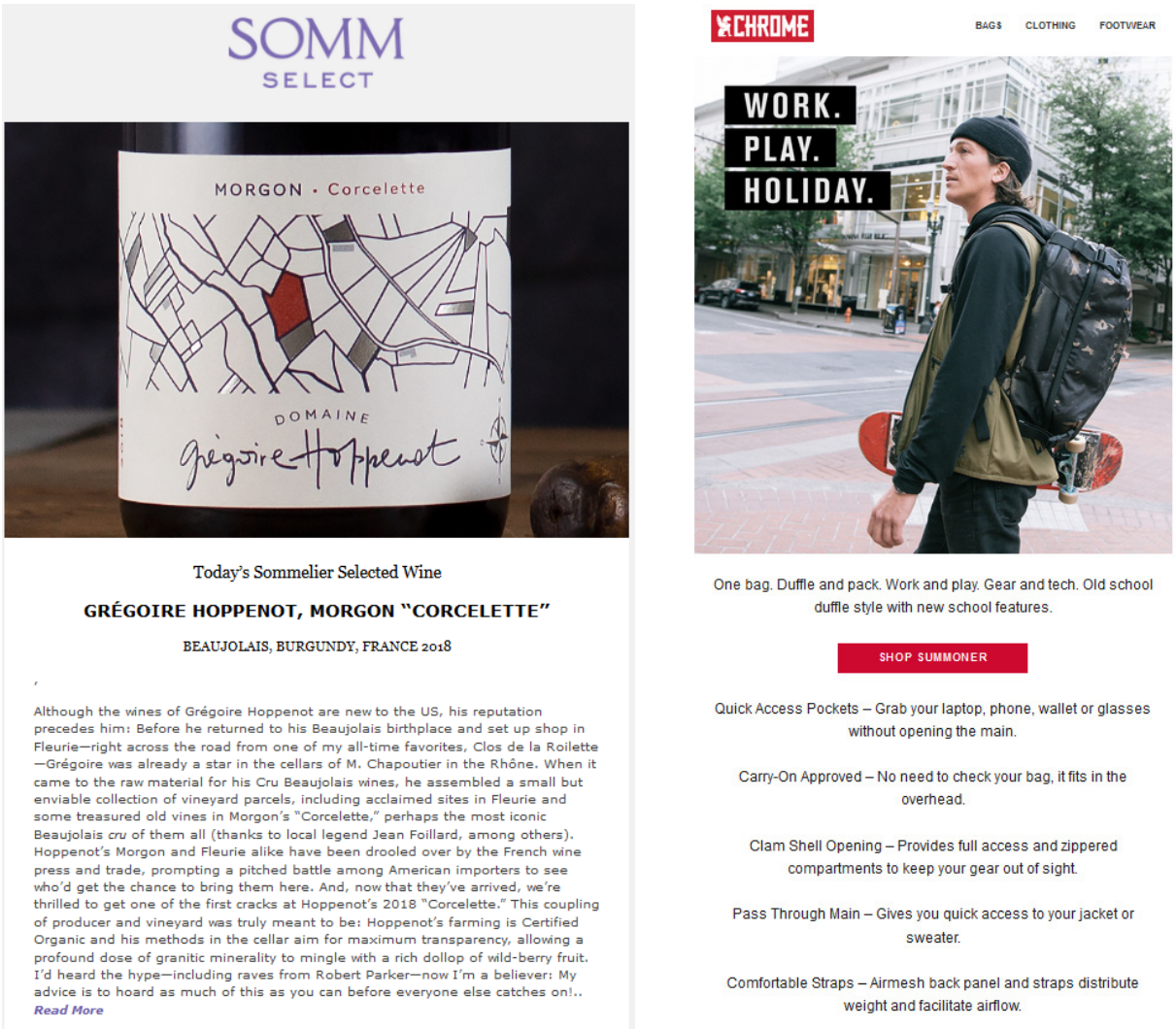


Figure 2. Marketing frames from SommSelect and Chrome Industries showing the language is devoted to one product.

Chrome is similar in having few MFs per email, but a good amount of text for each product. Whereas SommSelect has a narrative text to promote the product, Chrome lists technical features of their bags (Figure 2 above).

Twenty-one companies use less than 30 words on average to promote the product. There are also companies with few MFs and few words per MF

(Figure 3), such as Alibris, which averages 12.33 words per MF. Four of the emails from Alibris have only one MF, while the fifth has two. Alibris offers a general sale on books and other products in one marketing frame, while the other publishing companies tend to promote a specific book with one MF and to give synopses and blurbs about each book, in addition to including many marketing frames in each of their emails.

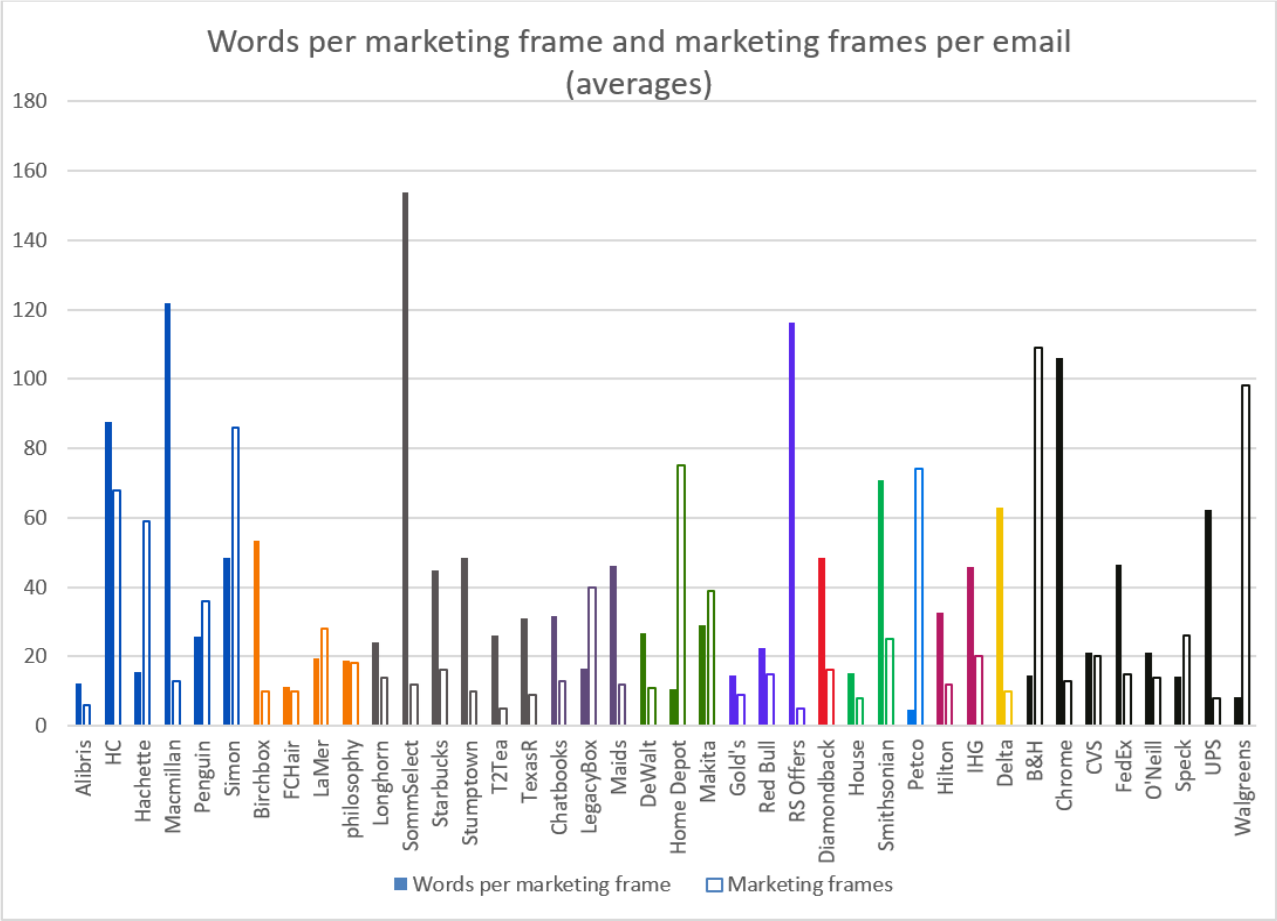


Figure 3. Average number of words per marketing frame (solid bars) and average number of marketing frame per email (hollow bars).

5.1.2. Power Words

There were 167 power words from the SB list in the emails at least once. The most frequent of these were *free*, *savings* and *gift*. The rest of the words from this list appeared less than 50 times in the emails. From the CM list, which was 84 words long, there were 63 power words in the emails. The words *now*, *free*, *new* and *save* occurred most frequently in the emails (Table 8).

Table 8. Most frequent power words from each list in the emails.

SB Power word	Frequency	Norm. freq. ptw	CM Power word	Frequency	Norm. freq. ptw
free	164	4.71	**now**	239	6.87
savings	117	3.36	**free**	164	4.71
gift	76	2.18	**new**	156	4.48
best	45	1.29	**save**	127	3.65
love	42	1.21	**instant**	94	2.70
noble	27	0.78	**today**	90	2.59
perfect	24	0.69	**select**	80	2.30
win	22	0.63	**gift**	76	2.18
cash	15	0.43	**learn**	71	2.04
discount	14	0.40	**only**	63	1.81

Every company had at least one power word from each list. When combined with imperative clauses and clause which contain infinitive verbs, Macmillan and Delta have the highest rates of power words to MFs. RSOffers, FedEx, IHG, and SommSelect also have high rates (Figure 4).

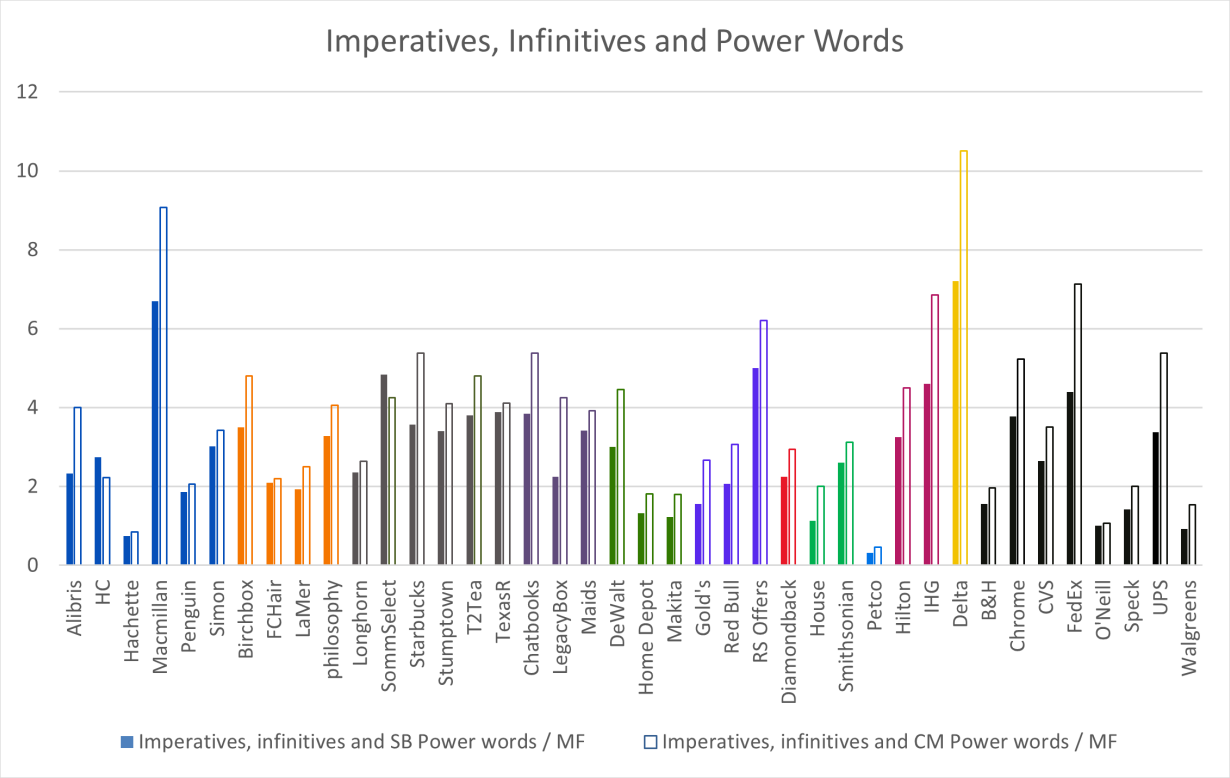


Figure 4. Rates of imperatives, infinitives and power words per marketing frame in the emails.

The imperatives in the data look like typical marketing language. Alibris directs readers to "SAVE UP TO $20," while B&H has commands such as "Save: $15.00" and "BUY NOW". But there are others which are less overtly directing readers to purchase the product. For example, (1) shows an email from Macmillan which offers a softer approach, while (2) represents an email from FedEx that gives helpful instructions.

1. Sit back.
   Crack a book.
   And breathe. (Macmillan_399)

2. Make an easy return.
   Drop off your prepackaged returns at Walgreens, select Dollar General locations, select grocery stores and more. (FedEx_12)

5.1.3. Conversational Tone

Four companies use more than one conversational feature per MF: Chrome, RS Offers, Macmillan, and Diamondback (see Table 5 for the conversational features). Chrome (a company which sells backpacks) seems the most conversational because they use contractions in all of their MFs. RS Offers tell a narrative six times in their 5 total MFs. Macmillan and Diamondback have high rates of conversational markers because they tell stories and use contractions. My name is used only once in all of the emails and jokes are similarly rare – only Makita gives a kind of pun ("245 FT. LBS OF NUT-BUSTING TORQUE" when describing an impact wrench tool). Regionalisms are used twice in the emails – but both are the word *y'all* used by the company Stumptown.

Of the companies with more than one conversational feature per MF, six of them include a narrative in the email. These are in the form of quotes from customers or reviewers, or narratives about the products.

1. OUR FRIEND AND HERO.
   On May 14, 2007, Omar Avila was serving in Iraq as a gunner when his Humvee drove over an IED and was sent six feet into the air by over 200 lbs. of explosives. […] (Diamondback)

2. In 2015 Manoush Zomorodi, creator of WNYC's popular podcast and radio show Note to Self, led tens of thousands of listeners through an experiment to help them unplug from their devices, get bored, jump-start their creativity, and change their lives. […] (Plot description for the book *Bored and Brilliant*, Macmillan)

3. Hey , it's Kella here from Birchbox!
   So I don't know if you're shopping for yourself or for others, but I thought you might like an insider's take on what Birchbox has to offer right now.
   […]
   Davines Oi All-in-One Milk is a must-have for hair. As soon as I get out of the shower, I spray it on to detangle hair and make it feel supersoft. Plus, it smells amazing. (Birchbox)

4. JACK O'NEILL OPENED THE WORLD'S FIRST SURF SHOP IN 1952 OUT OF A GARAGE OFF THE GREAT HIGHWAY, SAN FRANCISCO. HE STARTED OUT SHAPING BOARDS AND SELLING WAX, EVENTUALLY EXPERIMENTING WITH INSULATED SURF VESTS TO EXTEND SESSIONS IN THE FRIGID WATERS OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. […] (O'Neill)

Today's Sommelier Selected Wine

RENZO SEGHESIO, LANGHE NEBBIOLO "RURI"

PIEDMONT, ITALY 2015

,

Devotees of Barolo wine know the "Ginestra" vineyard as one of the most acclaimed *crus* in the region, made famous by luminaries like Domenico Clerico, Elio Grasso, and today's featured producer, Renzo Seghesio. In fact, Seghesio may have the deepest connection to Ginestra of all: His family has lived atop the vineyard for generations, and his Barolo from the site is a reference-point in this star-studded appellation. Today we're offering Seghesio's Langhe Nebbiolo, sourced entirely from Ginestra, which at $29 represents one of the best Italian wine values I've ever seen. As Italian wine fans know, wines labeled Langhe Nebbiolo are meant to be "baby" Barolos—released to the market much sooner, with softer tannins and less oak influence than their Barolo big brothers. Except some Langhe Nebbiolos break that mold and deliver Barolo-level complexity and structure at a fraction of the typical Barolo price. This is one of those wines, and I'm hard-pressed to name another Langhe Nebbiolo that can match its vineyard pedigree. This is a wonderfully complete Nebbiolo experience from the generous 2015 vintage—seriously impressive wine that drinks way above its price point. And it'll make a perfect house red as winter approaches, so stock up if you can!.. ***Read More***

"Renzo Seghesio was the mayor of Monforte d'Alba for 25 years, and his family has lived atop the famed "Ginestra" vineyard for generations. It should come as no surprise that this Langhe Nebbiolo is an exceptionally grown-up 'baby Barolo' at an amazing price."

VIEW THIS OFFER

David Lynch, Sommelier & Editorial Director

Like Tweet Forward

Figure 5. Example of the narratives in SommSelect emails.

Nine companies do not have any conversational features: Alibris, B&H, FCHair, Gold's, Home Depot, House, Petco, philosophy and T2Tea. This does not mean that these companies do not sound conversational. Rather, marketers know how to speak to their customers. Their appropriate conversational style may not show up in an analysis which is not sensitive to its features. The conversational markers in this analysis are not the only ways to sound conversational, a point which is elaborated on in the Discussion.

5.2. Proscribed Language

5.2.1. Adjectives and Adverbs

Although these two parts of speech are proscribed by the style guides, there are 3,213 adjectives in the emails and 1,719 adverbs (9% and 4.9% respectively of the total word count). Table 9 lists the most common adjectives and adverbs.

Table 9. Most frequent adjectives and adverbs in the emails.

Adjective	Frequency		Adverb	Frequency
free	158		now	235
new	105		more	93
instant	91		to	92
select	75		up	92
audible	63		today	81
only	60		up	54
final	52		originally	52
bestselling	43		here	40
favorite	40		out	36
best	38		most	35
great	29		off	34
other	29		just	33
digital	26		how	31
exclusive	25		more	23
special	25		ever	21
perfect	24		when	21
available	23		home	20
black	23		back	18
american	21		down	18
good	20		online	18

Every company uses adjectives and adverbs in their emails. For adjectives, it seems that the companies which use the least words per MF (Alibris, B&H, FCHair, Gold's, Hachette, Home Depot, Petco, Walgreens) also use the least amount of adjectives. There are 8 emails in the corpus which do not have adjectives. Twenty-four of the companies average over two adjectives per MF (Figure 6). The rates in Figures 6 and 7 crucially depend on the number of marketing frames used by companies, as well as how much text they include. Some of the companies have quite high counts of adjectives and low counts of MFs. For example, there are 539 adjectives in the Harper Collins emails spread across 68 MFs for an average of 7.93 adjectives per MF. Similarly, Rolling Stone Offers has 73 adjectives in only 5 MFs for an average of 14.6. On the other hand, Home Depot has 120 adjectives in their email, but they also have 75 MFs, so their average is only 1.6 adjectives per MF. MFs can be very different across companies in the amount of text they include, but they are of similar lengths inside the emails of one company. Companies have a vested interest in making their emails look the same, so when one company has MFs with differing amounts of text, it is because the company uses multiple templates in their emails, i.e. there will be other emails with MFs of similar lengths.

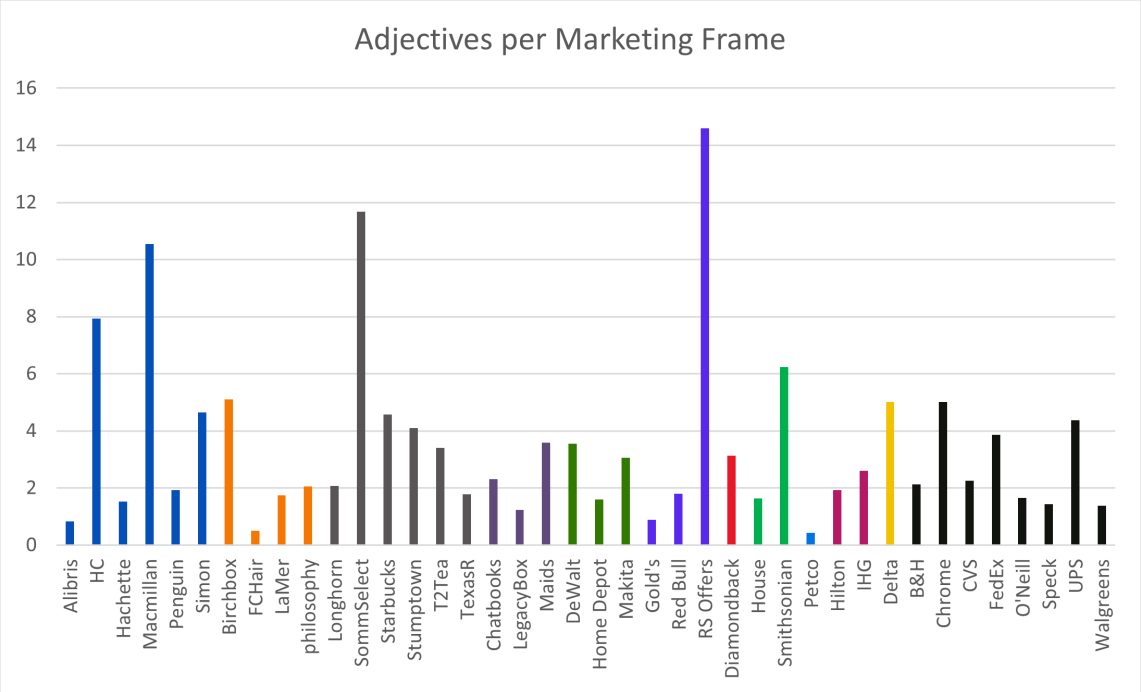


Figure 6. Raw counts for the average number of adjectives per marketing frame. Total number of adjectives for each company divided by the number of marketing frames for that company.

Adverbs do not follow the number of words per MF as closely as the adjectives, perhaps since adverbs have freer placement in clauses (Figure 7). There are 5 emails which do not have adverbs. Twenty-nine companies average at least one adverb per MF.

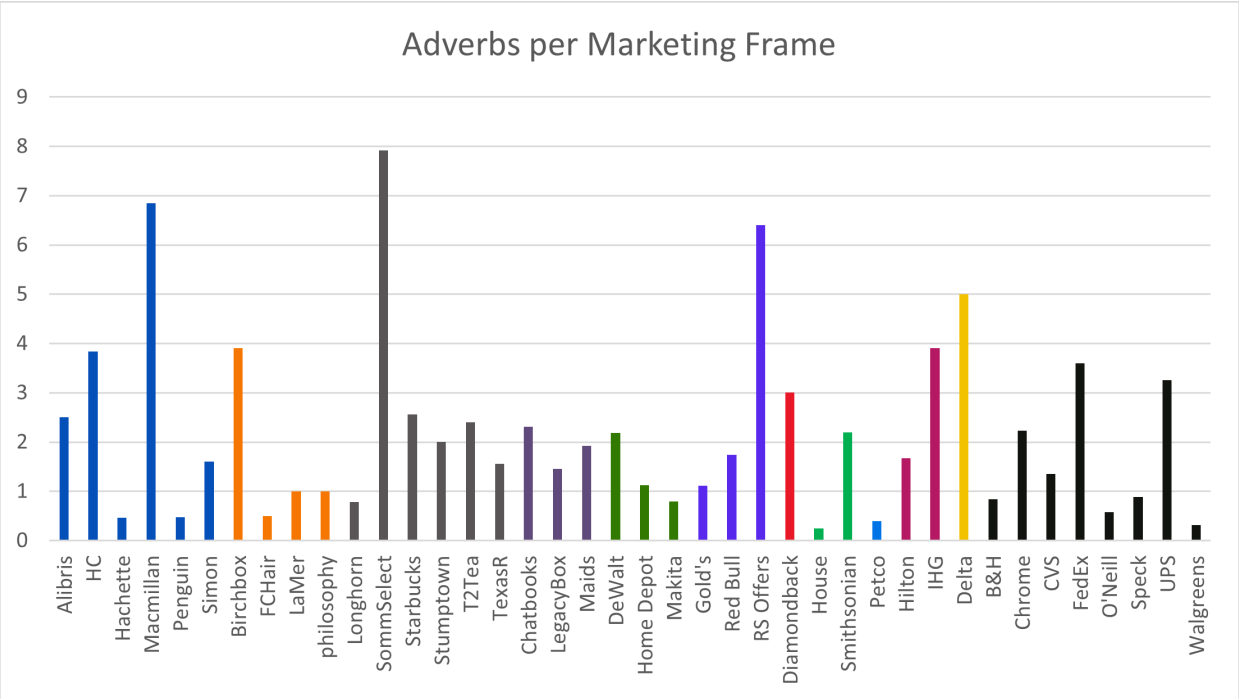


Figure 7. Raw counts for the average number of adverbs per marketing frame. Total number of adverbs for each company divided by the number of marketing frames for that company.

5.2.2. Atypical Features

Atypical features are rare in the emails. They occur only 9 times and in the emails of only seven companies (Table 10). The three emoji were the only emoji in the corpus, and the one from Birchbox should probably be considered an emoticon.

Table 10. Atypical linguistic features in the corpus.

Company	Atypical feature
Birchbox	;-)
Chrome	Chrome Gear Fitters know and ride the #$%@ out of our gear.
CVS	Save s'more on cards!

HC	Life is stressful as f*ck. […] And remember: it's not worth holding onto that sh*t. [from the book description]
Penguin	For the aunt you're pretttttty sure is a spy
Stumptown	🤙Emoji (twice) Y'all know how much we love you.
Texas Roadhouse	We ❤️our Community

5.2.3. ALL CAPS

Figure 8. Examples of ALL CAPS used in the emails alongside typical sentence capitalization.

ALL CAPS, however, are very common in the emails. There are 1,250 instances of words or full clauses written in ALL CAPS (Figure 9). This number does not include the emails from O'Neill because all the writing in their emails is in ALL CAPS. There are only 17 emails which do not have a word or phrase in ALL CAPS, five of which are the emails from IHG, the only company which does not use ALL CAPS at all in their emails.

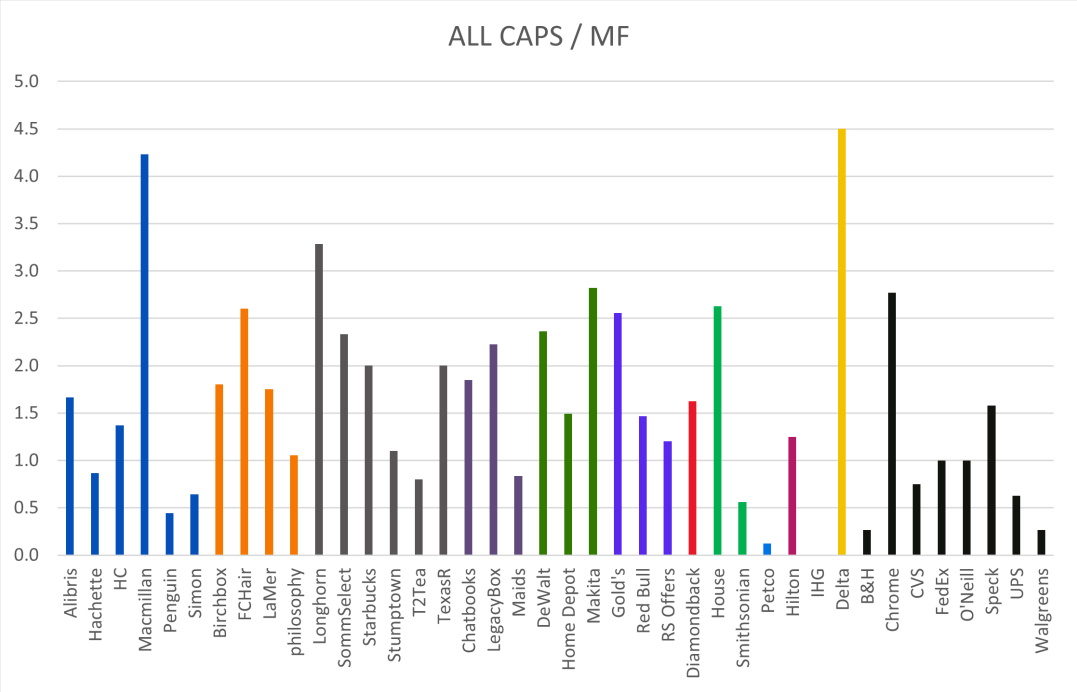


Figure 9. Frequency of ALL CAPS per marketing frame in the emails.

5.2.4. No caps

Five companies have entire clauses written in no caps: Hilton, philosophy, Birchbox (4), LegacyBox and Walgreens (3 each). Despite being a feature of some CMC genres (Abbasian & Tahririan 2008: 15; Herring 2022: 2), this feature is not used by 35 of the companies in my corpus. There were 74 clauses written in no caps: 45 from the company philosophy and 19 from Hilton.

5.2.5. Exclamation Points

Exclamation points are somewhat more frequent than no caps in the emails. There are 177 exclamation points across the emails, but this needs to be interpreted by two important factors. First, the exclamation points are used by only 23 companies, meaning 17 companies do not use any exclamation points in their emails. Second, in accordance with the style guides, there are no instances of multiple exclamation points in the emails.

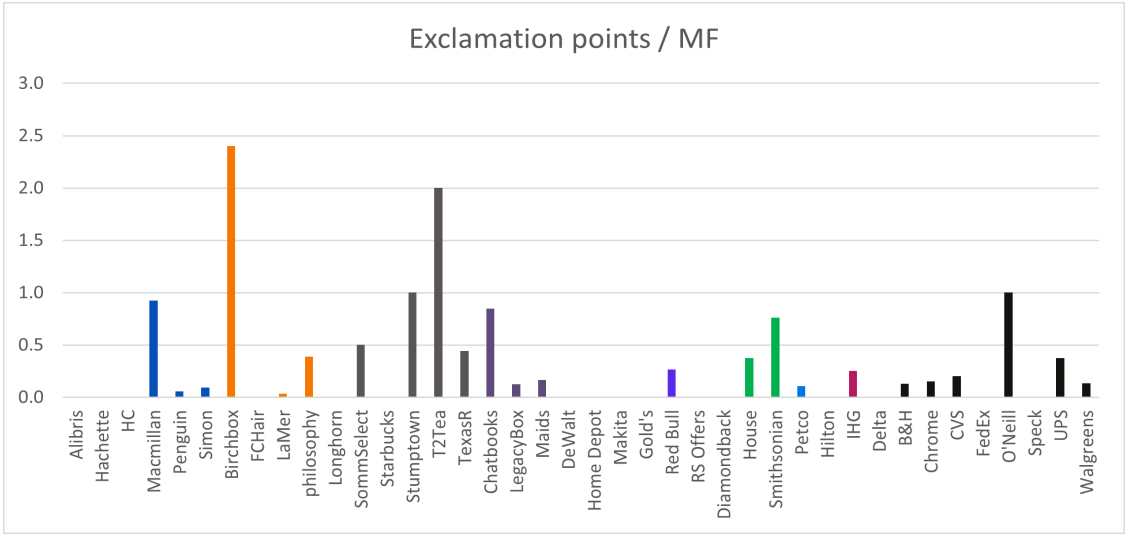


Figure 10. Use of exclamation points in the emails.

6. Discussion

6.1. Be Concise

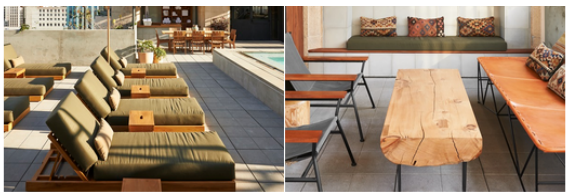
INDONESIA JAVA GARUT

Year Partnered: 2018
Growing Region: West Java
Varieties: Typica, Catimor, Ateng Super, Gayo

This coffee comes from Klasik Beans Cooperative, established in 2010 in West Java and now 2,000 members strong. We were introduced to the cooperative through its two founders – Eko Purnomowidi and Dadang Hendarsyah. These two are true pioneers of specialty coffee and ecologically sustainable production in this origin.

Aromatic green tea frames buttery, balanced ripe black cherry and tart cranberry in this syrupy cup.

Shop



An Absolute Hip Kid Clubhouse in Downtown Los Angeles

Ace Hotel Downtown Los Angeles
929 S Broadway, Los Angeles, CA
Trendy, $$
www.acehotel.com/losangeles/

Why Stay Here?

The Theatre at Ace Hotel

Originally built in 1927 in a Spanish Gothic style, the theatre has been carefully restored holding concerts, premieres, private screenings, conferences, seminars, performances and creative gatherings. The overall effect is a warm, lushly appointed feast for the eyes, rife with history and creative spirit.

Rooms

The 182 rooms are inspired by Rudolf Schindler's residence in West Hollywood (The Austrian architect who created many buildings in L.A. between 1920 and 1953). A great deal of attention is place d on efficiency - there's a place for everything, and an outlet at hand no matter where you are.

Food + Drink

Best Girl is helmed by Michelin starred chef Michael Cimarusti serving a menu inspired by the vibrant city of Los Angeles. **Upstairs**, the sky - high urban oasis atop the hotel, serves a curated menu of Best Girl fare and handcrafted cocktails inspired by cinematic kismet.

Figure 11. Examples of the coffee company Stumptown and the entertainment magazine RSOffers selling an experience more than a product.

Even though the advice to be concise seems straightforward, the results show that this will not work with every customer. Some of the companies have marketing texts that are written to elicit an emotional response. These texts often include some sort of narrative. For example, the emails from SommSelect (Figure 5), a wine company, all look like the start of a blog post. This is because their customers want or expect a story about the wines on offer. They care more about the idea of the product than the price of the product. The customers are members of the wine drinker community instead of consumers looking for the best financial deal. This is a practice that happens also in wine reviews (Hommerberg 2011: 241–242). It makes intuitive sense to use a narrative when the product on offer is wine, as compared to pet food, iPhone cases, or toiletry products.

The coffee company Stumptown resembles the wine company (Figure 11). People who are signed up for Stumptown emails are invested in the stories of the coffees – where they come from, the kinds of beans, etc. The readers consider "coffee drinker" as part of their identity in the same way SommSelect readers consider themselves part of the wine drinker community. Similarly, RS Offers advertises hotels and resorts. These are expensive products, and so they come with long descriptions of the amenities, such as bars and restaurants, nearby shopping districts and the pools in the hotels. RS Offers is selling an experience, rather than just a cheaper hotel room, and so the customer expects a description of what that experience will be like. Likewise, Delta is selling a better travel experience, not something that a reader can physically hold in their hands. These companies offer a sort of holistic experience – drinking the wine from SommSelect or the coffee from Stumptown makes the customers part of the narrative that the companies promote in their marketing. The readers can clearly draw the line from grape/bean grower to wine/coffee company to themselves as experiencer.

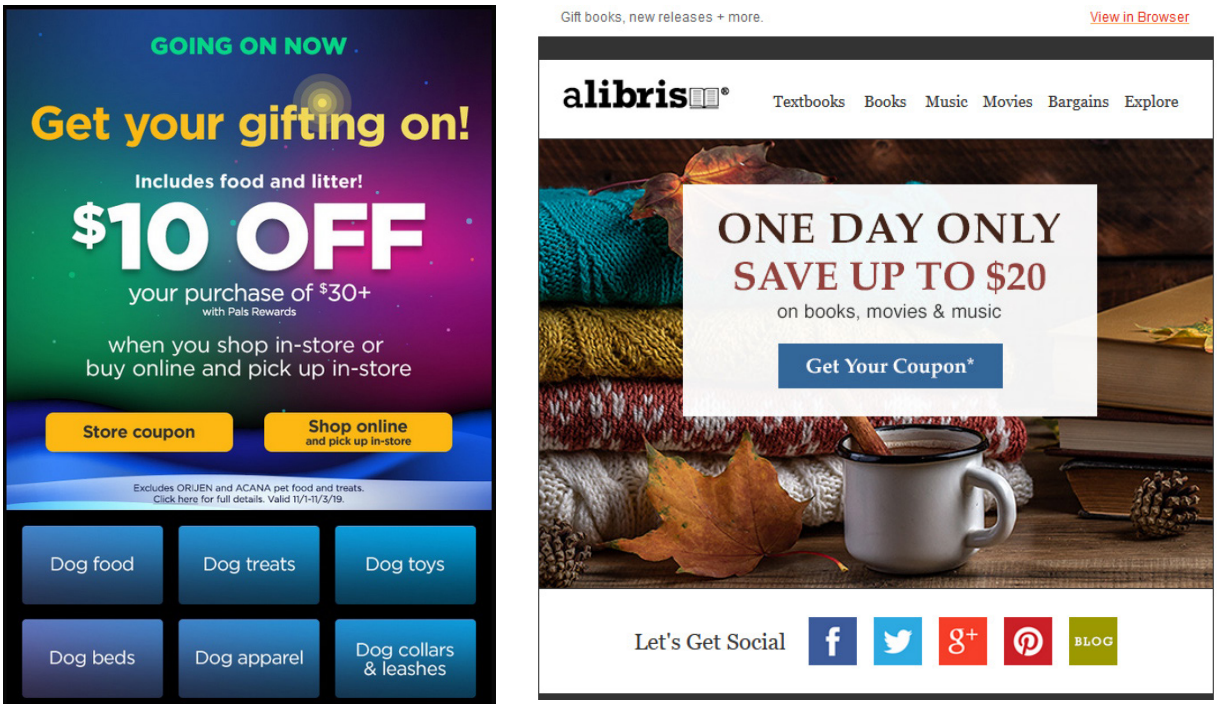


Figure 12. Example of a concise emails from Petco and Alibris.

On the other hand, being concise is the best option for some companies. Many of the most concise marketing emails are advertising deals on products rather than experiences or relationships between the company and the customer. For example, Petco was the most concise email marketer. Their emails featured many marketing frames, each of which were usually direct and straightforward, sometimes including only two-word phrases ("Cat toys", "Dog food"; see Figure 12). The reader does not feel any strong connection with the company Petco or the story behind their products. They only want to be directed to the place where they can buy products for their pet. If they have a dog, for example, they are uninterested in products for cats and birds. The other companies which were concise (or had under 25 words per marketing frame) are similar. Walgreens offers products which can be bought in many stores, such as sodas, toilet paper and laundry detergent. Readers do not feel an affinity for buying these products at Walgreens over any other store, but rather would like to know whether they are cheaper at Walgreens. Thus the ads feature a picture of the product and concise text, such as "$5.99 + $1 coupon select paper products".

The cosmetics companies La Mer and philosophy are almost equally concise, but they represent a contradiction. La Mer is a luxury cosmetics

brand, one that could easily be seen as selling an experience, yet its marketing language is as concise as the more generic cosmetics brand philosophy and the other companies in which the price point is more important than the experience of the buying and owning the product (Figure 13). La Mer therefore does not rely on a narrative in the way that StumpTown or SommSelect do, but instead it seems that they are certain that potential customers will already be familiar with the experience of their product.

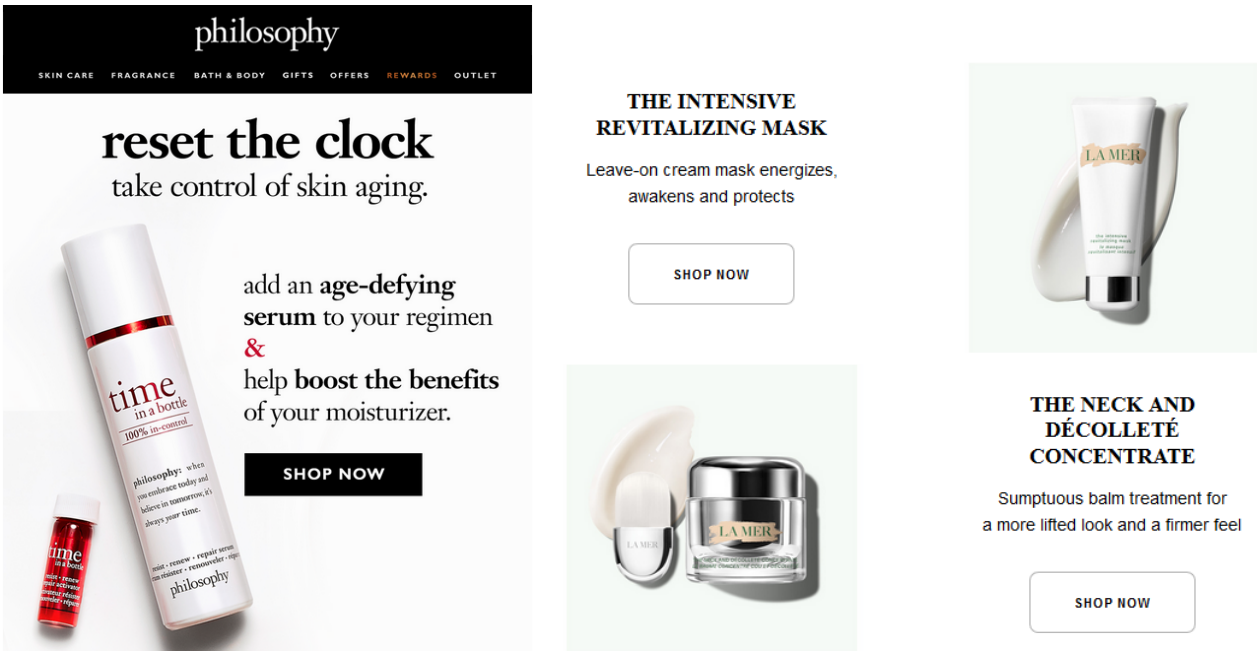


Figure 13. Examples of concise emails from the cosmetics companies La Mer (left) and philosophy (right).

The online bookseller Alibris is the only publishing company with fewer than 25 words per marketing frame because their customers are looking for deals on books and not specific books. Where Macmillan (121.69 words per MF) might spend a paragraph describing their latest bestseller, Alibris acts as the bargain bin in the bookstore with a straightforward 14-word sign reading "ONE DAY ONLY / SAVE UP TO $20 on books, movies & music / Get Your Coupon" (Figure 12). The language of marketing texts is determined by the products offered.

6.2. Be Conversational

The analysis of conversational features seemed to show that the emails do not quantitatively look conversational, but this needs to be contextualized. The style guides recommend that email marketers should be conversational, while simultaneously proscribing writing in ways that people associate with spoken language, such as using the atypical features ALL CAPS and no caps. The advice that guides do give on being conversational seems vague, but there is a specific reason for this. The authors of the style guides are writing for marketing professionals and they trust that the marketers will know how write in a conversational way to their specific audiences. Indeed, companies which were lower on the ranking of conversational markers still have emails with language that could be considered conversational (Table 11).

Table 11. Examples of conversational language (in bold) that does not feature the conversational markers.

DeWalt	**INCREASE REACH. REDUCE DOWNTIME.** **The new 20V MAX Cordless Pole Saw extends for a total reach of 15 feet. With up to 96 cuts per charge and the auto-oiling chain, you can save time on the job.**
Maids	Give the Gift of Clean Read our latest blog, "Three Reasons Why a Gift Certificate for The Maids Makes the Perfect Valentine's Day Gift," and show us some love by following us on social.
FedEx	**The holidays are a busy season — from the parties to the shopping, to getting everything ready for celebrating with your loved ones.** Luckily, there's a FedEx location near you. Conveniently pack, ship and pick up packages in your neighborhood. Find the option that best fits your needs below.

The interplay between the style guides and the email marketers is the reason that the guides can be vague when recommending a conversational style. The authors of the style guides are writing for marketing professionals and they recognize that there are many ways to be conversational. The authors of the guides trust that the marketers will know how write in a conversational matter to their specific audiences. The guides are also able to reach a wider audience of marketers by recommending a conversational style but leaving the specifics of how to do so up to the marketers.

The conversational advice from the style guides also contradicts their recommendation on following the conventions of standard written English. Again, there is a specific reason for this. Following the conventions of standard written English would mean using mostly (or only) full sentences and/or finite clauses. Spoken conversation, however, has more non-finite and verbless clauses than standard written English. So when the style guides recommend being conversational, they allow marketers to write in a way that seems more like spoken language. And as the results showed all of the companies used non-finite, verbless, or nominal clauses at least once per marketing frame (which also allows them to be more concise).

A final factor influencing the conversational analysis is the template nature of email marketing (McVeigh 2017). Since marketers use a template in creating their emails, linguistic and stylistic features are likely to reoccur across a company's emails (McVeigh 2018: 231–235). When one email has features that would mark it as conversational, then all of the emails from that company are likely to have those features (see Figure 14).

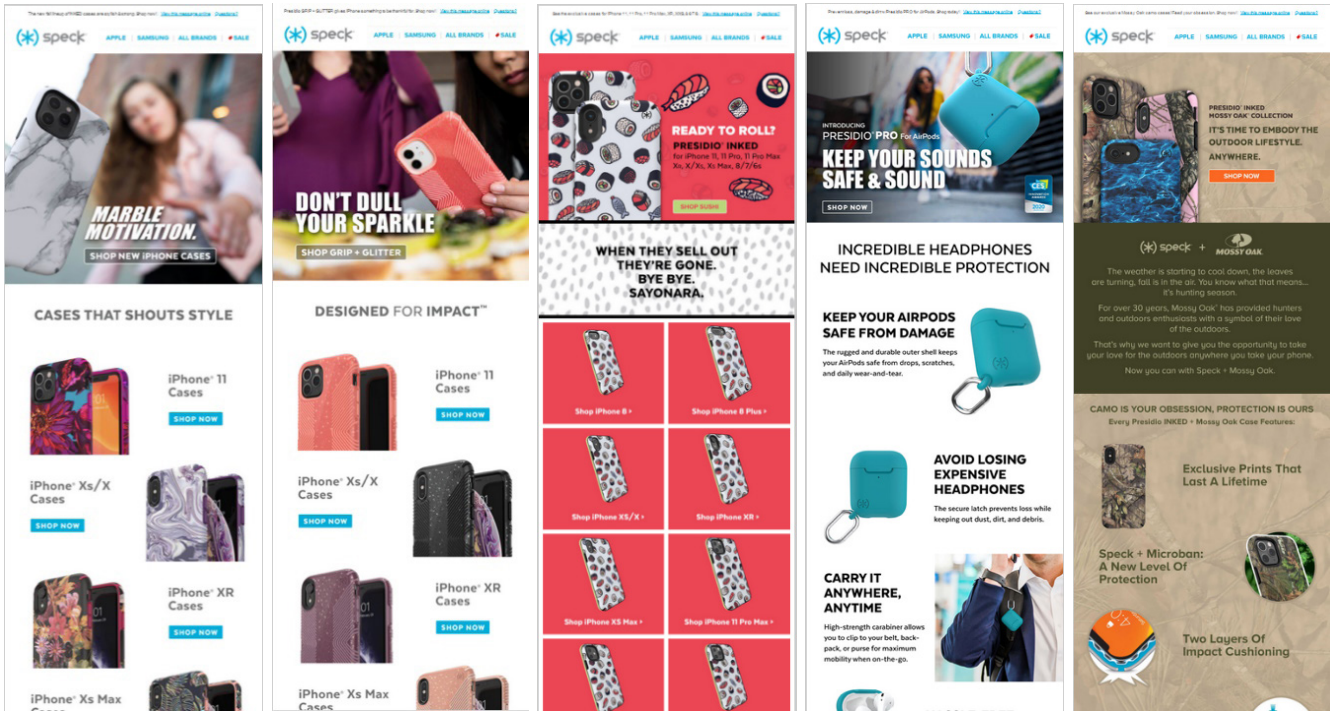


Figure 14. Comparison of emails from Speck showing the template nature of the texts.

6.3. Linguistic Features

The proscription on parts of speech cannot realistically be followed. For example, adjectives and adverbs naturally occurred frequently in the emails because it would be almost impossible to describe a product or say when a sale happens without using these parts of speech. But the email marketing style guides are similar to other guides on writing when they proscribe adjectives and adverbs (Hyper Usage Guide of English 2014; Straaijer 2017: 25; Tieken-Boon Van Ostade 2010: 14). And like these other sources, the style guides appear to advise using these parts of speech as infrequently as possible. Perhaps because of this advice, the adjectives and adverbs that are most frequent in the emails are essentially indispensable, especially when promoting a sale which has a deadline: *now*, *soon*, *today*, *free*, *new* and *off*.

The analysis of power words showed that they are problematic for marketers for two reasons. First, the category "power words" is too vague to be useful to marketers. Adjectives were on both lists of power words, but so were verbs, nouns, and adverbs. So it is unclear what constitutes a power word and what does not. Second, the lists provided are either too obscure or general. One of the lists was almost 600 words long and included such inexplicable terms as *jackass*, *lust*, and *full of shit*. The other list was much shorter and included such common words as *simple* and *new*. Thus the advice on power words is not actionable for marketers. The template nature of the emails also restricts the variety of words used in them (McVeigh 2020).

The power words are included in the style guides because they seem to offer a tangible piece of advice. Despite the fact that "power word" is not clearly defined, power words are a way for the style guides to offer their readers specific actions to take. The advice on them serves a specific purpose for the style guides. Whereas the advice on being conversational is intentionally vague, the guides can point to lists of specific words to use, even if some of these are likely to be used in marketing anyway (such as *new* and *soon*).

It is natural that atypical features were not used frequently in the emails. The advice from the style guides leans toward being conservative and email marketing texts are produced by many people. Unlike other genres of CMC, including some forms of email, the language in marketing emails goes through several revisions and edits. The combination of conservative advice, slow production and the asynchronous offline nature is unlikely to

produce atypical features at the rates seen in other forms of CMC which are more quickly produced and sent. However, several style guides recommend using atypical features, such as ALL CAPS, no caps and exclamation points. The low rates of atypical features in this research could also be related to the companies chosen. If the companies are trying to reach a wide audience, they may be less inclined to write clauses in ALL CAPS or no caps because it might (as the style guides suggest) alienate potential customers. For example, older customers may not be aware of the use of ALL CAPS as a form of emphasizing a word or phrase and they may take it as an example of yelling. Other customers may not be aware of the practice of not capitalizing the first letter of a sentence in CMC and so they may deem the email marketing to be poorly edited.

Nevertheless, ALL CAPS is a feature of marketing texts, and one that is very commonplace in email marketing (and probably all other forms of written marketing). With no caps, it seems that some companies are able to adopt this feature as an identity marker. For example, the company that is named "philosophy" does not capitalize their brand name and uses no caps the most compared to the other companies. ALL CAPS would look like yelling in other genres (or look like a "spoken" feature adopted by CMC), but it doesn't look like that in marketing. And it is so common as to be almost unremarkable.

The final point to make is that the analysis showed (through the color coding of the charts) that there exists variation among the industries. The companies of the same industry, such as publishing, did not use the linguistic features at the same rate. This result can also be at least partly explained by the template nature of email marketing. The templates within industries are not the same, so the linguistic features within the industries will not be the same.

7. Conclusion

The research in this article has shown that while style guides advise marketers to be concise, this advice is constrained by the product being marketed. Some companies have an obligation to write long emails because readers expect them. These companies include those selling an experience and those selling products which align with their customers' identities, such as the wine

company SommSelect and the coffee company Stumptown. Other companies can (or perhaps must) be concise – these are the companies selling common household products, where the price point is the most important aspect of the product's ad. In addition, part of the reason that there are longer emails from companies selling an experience seems to be that they are triggering emotional responses and appealing to their customers' identities (as wine drinkers, travelers, etc.). Marketers should use their knowledge of what their customers expect when applying this advice and deciding how concise to be.

Another important finding from this research is that there are specific reasons for the vague advice offered by the style guides. The advice to "Be conversational" simultaneously lets the guides appeal to more marketers and lets the marketers decide how to follow the advice. Marketers should be aware that these style guides are also forms of marketing for the authors. In addition, marketers know how conversational they can be toward their customers and they should exercise this knowledge when following the vague advice to "Be conversational". Some typical linguistic features of a more conversational style, based on research in genres of CMC, were not evident in the emails. The marketers seem to follow the advice of the style guides by not using atypical linguistic features, such as no caps, multiple exclamation points, spellings which meant to mimic speech, and emoji. The major exception to this was the emails' use of ALL CAPS. This typographical feature was so common, however, that it should be considered a feature of marketing language. Like other forms of CMC, though, ALL CAPS can be used by the marketers to emphasize a certain word or phrase.

The analysis of power words revealed that the advice was not useful. Power words were either words that are generally common in English, words that we would expect to find in marketing, or highly obscure terms for marketing language. The use of the term *power words* in the style guides seems to be a marketing tactic. By giving readers a list of words, the guides seem to offer their audience something to act on. But the advice on power words can also be seen as a form of self-marketing by the authors of the style guides.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the style guides are used by email marketers. The style guides are clearly written for professionals in the field of email marketing, but they also serve to promote either the company on whose website the style guide premieres, or the author(s) of the

style guide themselves. However, email marketing texts are a collaborative work and each text will have been created and edited by several copywriters. Knowledge of how to write better marketing texts is an advantage in the field of marketing, which in turn is an obvious reason why the style guides exist and are frequently published. If no one was reading the style guides and if they had no effect on the field of marketing, then the authors would not write them. The proliferation of these style guides online shows that they are important to the email marketing community.

Further research should look into the function of ALL CAPS in marketing. Intuitively, it seems to be very common in marketing, but its use beyond emphasizing some word or phrase is unclear. Another area for further linguistic research into email marketing is considering whether a marketing frame is the best unit of measurement. This research showed that companies vary quite a bit in the length of text that they include in a marketing frame. This article and previous ones (McVeigh 2018: 236; McVeigh 2020) have shown that email marketers use a template in creating their emails and these templates can constrict the amount of language in each marketing frame. So perhaps another measurement such as the mean ratio of items of interest against all items would be another useful way of visualizing and comparing the language of email marketing. N

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