

Six fundamentals that decide whether your campaign reaches the inbox. Run this for your process and add the pre-send items to every deployment.

1. Authentication

- SPF is published and passing for your sending domain
- DKIM is enabled and signing your mail
- DMARC is published and aligned with SPF and/or DKIM

Why it matters: Gmail, Yahoo, and Microsoft now reject — not just filter — unauthenticated mail from higher-volume senders. If these fail, the campaign never arrives.

2. Sender Reputation

- DMARC monitoring is in place and reviewed regularly
- Spam-complaint rate is tracked and held under 0.10% (never approaching 0.30%)
- Sending volume is consistent — no sudden spikes from a cold domain or IP

Why it matters: Reputation behaves like a credit score: slow to build, quick to damage, and it decides Primary inbox vs. Promotions tab vs. spam.

3. Engagement

- Primary KPIs are clicks, conversions, and replies — not open rate alone
- Engagement is reviewed by audience segment, not just program-wide averages
- Re-engagement or sunset flow exists for declining subscribers

Why it matters: Mailbox providers place mail based on real engagement, so engagement is now a deliverability signal. Open rates are unreliable due to privacy and AI inbox behavior.

4. List Quality

- Invalid and bounced addresses are removed on a regular cadence
- Chronically unengaged contacts are suppressed or sunset
- Lists are segmented by real activity, not just by static fields

Why it matters: Mailing inactive or invalid contacts drags down deliverability for your entire list — including the subscribers who do want to hear from you

5. Designing for the AI Inbox

- Emails are written so the core message survives being summarized to one or two lines
- The single most call to action is unmistakable and not buried among several links
- Plain-text and accessible structure are prioritized so AI assistants can parse the content
- Performance is reviewed with assumption that open rate will keep degrading as metric

Why it matters: Gmail, Outlook, and Apple are putting AI between your email and your reader. Increasingly, an assistant reads the message first and tells the human what it says. If your email only makes sense when read top to bottom by a person, it loses meaning the moment it's summarized. Writing for the AI inbox is quickly becoming part of writing for deliverability.

6. Pre-Send Check (every deployment)

- Subject line stands on its own and leads with the email's primary value
- Key message lands in the first few sentences
- Real text used instead of text embedded in images; alt text in place
- Clean preheader set. Top of the email isn't stuffed with legal text, nav, or "view online" links
- Semantic structure used: headings, short paragraphs, scannable layout
- AI-summary preview reviewed. Confirm the AI-generated summary would represent the message well

Why it matters: AI-generated inbox summaries can replace your preview text, and AI decides which content matters most. Structure and a strong subject line carry the message.

Sources & further reading

- [Google - Email sender guidelines](#)
- [Microsoft - Outlook requirements for high-volume senders](#)
- [Validity - Microsoft's new bulk email rules, explained](#)
- [Salesforce - State of Marketing report](#)
- [Litmus - Guide to AI in email marketing](#)

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