Plaintext

The Plaintext Deliverability Checklist

Set up cold email so it reaches the inbox, stays legal and does not damage your main domain.

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BY YAN MOUKOURY

How to use this checklist

Work through it top to bottom before your first send, then again any time reply rates drop without a clear reason. Each item has a box to tick, a short reason and, where it helps, the exact thing to check.

This is general guidance, not legal advice. Rules differ by country. If you email people outside the United States, check the local law (for example, GDPR and PECR in the UK and EU, or CASL in Canada) before you send.

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1. Domains

- [ ] **Send cold email from a separate domain, not your main one.** If the outbound domain gets a bad reputation, your invoices and client email on the main domain keep working. Example: main site `acme.com`, outbound `tryacme.com` or `acmehq.com`.
- [ ] **Make the outbound domain clearly yours.** Same company name, a simple website or a redirect to your main site. Lookalike domains meant to confuse people are a bad idea.
- [ ] **Let a new domain age before heavy use.** Register it, set up DNS, and warm the inboxes for two to four weeks before sending real volume.
- [ ] **Use two or three inboxes per outbound domain at most.** Spreading volume keeps each inbox inside safe limits.

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2. Authentication (SPF, DKIM, DMARC)

Google and Yahoo have required authentication for bulk senders since February 2024, and Microsoft added similar rules for Outlook.com in 2025. Even below the bulk thresholds, unauthenticated mail is far more likely to be filtered.

- [ ] **SPF record exists and includes your sending service.** One TXT record on the root domain starting with `v=spf1`. Only one SPF record per domain.

```
v=spf1 include:_spf.google.com ~all
```

- [ ] **SPF stays under 10 DNS lookups.** Each `include:` counts. Too many and SPF fails silently.

- [ ] **DKIM is turned on** in your email provider (Google Workspace, Microsoft 365 or your sending tool) and the TXT record is published at the selector it gives you, for example `google._domainkey`.
- [ ] **DMARC record exists** at `_dmarc.yourdomain.com`.

```
v=DMARC1; p=none; rua=mailto:dmarc@yourdomain.com
```

- [ ] **Move DMARC from `p=none` to `p=quarantine`** once reports show your real mail passing for a few weeks. `p=none` monitors only.
- [ ] **The From domain matches the authenticated domain** (alignment). If you send from `you@tryacme.com`, SPF or DKIM must pass for `tryacme.com`.
- [ ] **Run the Plaintext DNS Check** (free) on every sending domain to confirm SPF and DMARC are present.

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3. Inboxes and warmup

- [ ] **Real names on every inbox.** `yan@` beats `sales@` for cold email.
- [ ] **Profile photo and a plain signature** (name, title, company, address). No images in the signature.
- [ ] **Warm new inboxes gradually.** Start with a handful of real conversations a day and increase over two to four weeks. Warmup tools can help, but real replies are the best signal.
- [ ] **Daily cap per inbox.** A conservative ceiling is 30 to 50 cold emails per inbox per day, lower for new inboxes. More inboxes is safer than more volume per inbox.
- [ ] **Spread sends through the working day** instead of sending everything at 9:00 AM.

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4. The list

- [ ] **Every contact has a reason to be on the list** you could explain in one sentence.
- [ ] **Verify email addresses before sending.** Bounce rates above about 2% hurt your reputation quickly.
- [ ] **Remove role addresses** such as `info@`, `support@` and `careers@` from cold campaigns.
- [ ] **Keep a suppression list** of everyone who unsubscribed, bounced or asked not to be contacted, and check every new list against it.

- [ ] **Do not buy random lists.** Build from sources you can explain.

5. Content

- [ ] **Plain text, no images, no attachments** on the first email.
- [ ] **No link, or at most one, in the first email.** Ask if they want the link instead.
- [ ] **Turn off open tracking for cold email.** Tracking pixels add an image to plain text and are increasingly unreliable.
- [ ] **No link shorteners.** They are a common spam signal.
- [ ] **Under 90 words** for the first email, under 60 for follow-ups.
- [ ] **Avoid spam-trigger phrasing:** "guaranteed," "risk free," "act now," "100% free," all caps, many exclamation points, money amounts in the subject.
- [ ] **Read it aloud.** If it sounds like an ad, rewrite it.

6. The law (United States, CAN-SPAM basics)

The FTC's CAN-SPAM rules apply to commercial email, including B2B cold email. The basics:

- [ ] **Honest From name and address.** The sender must be identifiable.
- [ ] **Subject line is not misleading.** No fake "Re:" or "Fwd:" on a first email.
- [ ] **Your valid physical postal address is in the email.** A street address, a registered PO box or a private mailbox works.
- [ ] **A clear way to opt out.** A plain line works: "If you would rather not hear from me, reply 'no thanks' and I will not email again."
- [ ] **Honor opt-outs within 10 business days.** Same day is better. Do not make people pay, log in or give more information to opt out.
- [ ] **You are responsible for anyone sending on your behalf,** including agencies and freelancers.

For Gmail, Yahoo and Outlook bulk senders (around 5,000 or more messages a day to their users), there are extra rules: one-click unsubscribe headers for marketing mail and a spam complaint rate kept under 0.3%. Most cold senders should stay well below that volume per domain anyway.

7. Monitoring

- [ ] **Google Postmaster Tools** set up for each sending domain (free) to watch spam rate and domain reputation once volume is high enough to show data.
- [ ] **Read DMARC reports** or use a free DMARC report viewer.
- [ ] **Track replies, not opens.** Reply rate is the honest metric for cold email.
- [ ] **Pause and investigate** if bounces pass 2%, if spam complaints appear, or if replies drop sharply in one week.

8. Before every new campaign

- [ ] DNS check passed for the sending domain
- [ ] List verified and checked against the suppression list
- [ ] First email under 90 words, plain text, no tracking
- [ ] Opt-out line and physical address present
- [ ] Daily caps set per inbox
- [ ] Someone other than you has read the first email

Want templates to go with it?

The full **Plaintext Outbound Kit** includes 24 cold email sequences with the reasoning behind every line, a Google Sheets pipeline tracker and a founder-led sales playbook. This checklist is the free part of the kit.

Written by Yan Moukoury, who has 15 years in marketing and tech, with Chicago agency experience. General guidance only, not legal advice. Following this checklist improves your odds; it does not guarantee inbox placement.

Plaintext. Free to share with credit.