



## Gmail Inbox Tabs Could Be a Positive Development for Email Marketing

Those who use Gmail have, by this point, probably started to see their inboxes organized into tabs. Google began rolling out the new tabbed layout on May 29, and users have, over the past several months, been logging in to find the new filtering system in place for them.

Gmail now divides emails into three categories: Primary, Social and Promotions. Two additional tabs, Updates and Forums, can be added using the Configure settings from within the inbox. Google claims that the service will help users see what has landed in their inbox quickly, giving them the ability to deal with certain types of email on their own schedule. From a user's perspective, the new inbox view does provide a much greater sense of workday calm. Important emails – those that actually need to be tended to quickly – are no longer mixed within a long list of messages that do not need to be opened on any sort of schedule. You can focus on what requires focus, on your own time.

News of the change quickly sent a wave of alarm through the email marketing community. Many asked how they could get their emails out of the Promotions tab and into the Primary tab. Because Google is really very good at what they do, trying to get into the Primary tab is simply a waste of time and energy. A better strategy is to look at user habits and adjust to use the new Gmail structure to your advantage.

### Will the Change Affect User Habits?

Email list service provider Mailchimp performed a study of open rates in June to see what was happening with their own Gmail users. Looking at a three week period after the introduction of tabs, they saw a decline of between a half and a full percentage point in their open rates. Since open rates before then change had not dipped below 13 percent – with the exception of holidays and weekends – they believe the change to be statistically significant. It is a small decrease, but one they are willing to attribute to the new inbox structure.

However, Matthew Grove, who wrote the blog post explaining the results, said that he is still taking a wait-and-see approach. Since Google has been implementing the new features over time, some marketers are estimating that it will take a year to a year and a half to fully see any affect the tabbed layout has on readership and conversion. And others, while they may be seeing an initial decline, believe the effect of the change will ultimately be positive.

Companies who track their email marketing efforts understand that users already filter their messages. They may be using their own system, but the likelihood that anyone reads every email as it hits their inbox is extremely low.





The goal has always been to get past your readers' filters, and the best way to do that is by providing something they actually want to read. The Promotions tab does not change this fundamental equation. The people who were already reading your emails are those who are most likely to take the time to find them and continue reading.

A quick read of the comments on the Mailchimp blog post reveals a split in sentiment about the change. Some marketers appeared to be taking the change almost personally – saying that they have worked too hard to build a quality newsletter for Google to cheat them out of readers. Some think that people will use the tabs as a default spam system, never taking the time to read messages that are not delivered to their Primary inbox. Others who use the Gmail service said they were actually more apt to read email newsletters within the new configuration. With all the emails grouped together, commenters claimed, they would often open an email just to delete it and get it out of the way. With it out of the way by default, they do not have to delete it immediately, but can instead take the time to come back and read it later.

### What is the Takeaway?

Change is inevitable in the world of SEO and marketing, and panic-based, instant reactions to such change are almost always a bad idea. Take some time to monitor results. In the meantime, remember:

1. People still want to read relevant, quality content. Email is one of the most effective ways to reach a target audience, and Gmail's tabs do not change this. People with whom you have built a relationship of trust will take the time to click over to Promotions and read your newsletter. They may, as some commenters indicated, actually spend more time with it since it is not cluttering their mental (or virtual) space during the times they need to focus on other things.
2. Users may be more receptive to less intrusive email promotions. The Primary tab is a user's sanctuary. Do not try to force your way in. Google allows users to move messages from tab to tab within the inbox by simply dragging and dropping. When a message is moved, the user is asked if they would like all emails from that sender to be delivered to the new tab. If, for example, you get a newsletter you really want in your Primary tab, you can place it there and ask Gmail to continue placing it there in the future. This must be done at the user's discretion. Some companies are already sending out emails with words like "Urgent" in the title telling people to move their emails to Primary. Or, they are trying other ways to trick the system. This can backfire, as messages that don't belong in Primary may be seen as an unwanted intrusion and deleted more frequently.
3. Organization helps mobile users. The growing segment of the population that checks their email on a mobile device will benefit from increased organization. Filtering is essential for a mobile inbox. Commuters, for example, may want to look at all of their Social or Promotional emails on the train on the way home. If Google gives them an easy way to do this, they may be more open to reading your email.





4. Lower open rates do not necessarily mean lower conversion. Some people already open your emails because they want to read them. Some, unfortunately, open them just to delete them. You may lose those opens. But they are not opens with which you should be concerned. The people who actually read your emails – those who are more likely to convert – are the opens you want. A decline in the open rate might only lead to a higher-value readership.

Of course, speculation can always be proven wrong, so it is important that you continue to monitor your email statistics to see how changes may be affecting your marketing. Understanding how your readers are reacting is the best way to gauge whether you will need to adjust your approach.

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