

# How to Build an Opt-In Elist of Customers and Prospects

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The following excerpt is from Robert W. Bly's [The Content Marketing Handbook](#). Buy it now from [Amazon](#) | [Barnes & Noble](#)

If you want to ramp up your online marketing program, your first step should be to build a large, opt-in elist of customers and prospects (unless you already have one).

That's because without a significant online "house file" (list of opt-in subscribers), you can only reach prospects in your niche by renting other marketers' opt-in elists, which is hardly cost-effective: Each time you want to send another message, you have to rent the list again — and that can easily cost you hundreds of dollars for every thousand names on the list.

Some marketers buy databases containing the email addresses of business prospects in their niche market. This can work if you're sending highly targeted emails on extremely relevant topics. But when you send email messages to people who haven't opted in, you're mostly asking for trouble. The CAN-SPAM Act, which established the rules for commercial email in 2003, doesn't prohibit these messages. But people on these lists are much more likely to register spam complaints — and far less likely to buy from you.

The best online strategy for marketers is to build your own list of subscribers. This eliminates the cost of renting lists and prevents the spam complaints and lower response rates typical of non-opt-in lists.

When you own an opt-in elist covering a sizable percentage of your target market, you can communicate with your prospects and customers as often as you think is appropriate at minimal cost. And by using a double opt-in process that requires new subscribers to verify their identity before being added to your elist, you help minimize spam complaints and bounce-backs. In double opt-in, recipients subscribe using an online form. A pop-up window then appears, telling them to watch for a confirmation email asking them to confirm their opt-in. If they don't confirm, they're not added to the list. This prevents companies from registering other people for the list without their knowledge.

## **Building Your Elist**

There are many online marketing options for building your elist, including pay-per-click advertising, postcard marketing, banner advertising, online ads in other marketers' newsletters, B2B co-registration deals, video marketing, viral marketing, editorial mentions in trade publications, online article marketing, affiliate marketing and social media — to name just a few.

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With the staggering number of free newsletters competing for attention on the internet, however, it's not enough to have a simple sign-up box on your homepage. You should offer a bribe (typically known as a lead-gen) to get visitors to subscribe. The best bribe is a free downloadable special report in exchange for opting into your elist.

For instance, if you sell supply chain management software and publish an newsletter called *The Strategic SCM Partner*, offer a short bonus report called *7 Steps to Improving Supply Chain Management in Your Enterprise* as a premium for new subscribers.

Drive traffic not to your home page or a standard subscription form, but to a special *free-on-free name squeeze page*—a separate landing page highlighting this offer. We call it a “name squeeze page” because it extracts or “squeezes” new names for your list from web traffic. “Free-on-free” means you’re offering free content (the report) to get people to accept your primary free offer (the subscription).

Also, put in place one or more mechanisms for capturing the email addresses of site visitors who don’t buy a product, download a demo, subscribe to your online newsletter, or take other actions that opt them into your elist.

For example, when they attempt to leave the site without purchasing or registering, have a window pop up to capture their email address with the headline “Wait! Don’t leave without claiming your free special report!”