



ARE POST-MPP OPEN RATES MEANINGLESS?

Newsletters after Apple Mail's privacy changes

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When Apple Mail implemented its Mail Privacy Protection framework blocking email senders from collecting certain user data in 2021, one of the most important – and straightforward – email metrics got a little more muddy.

Apple [announced in July 2021](#) that its MPP framework would prevent email senders from collecting user activity data by way of hidden pixels that [transmit information back to the sender](#) once they are loaded, conveying not just that an email was opened, but also information about when, where and how it was viewed. Those pixels are what historically allowed calculation of open rates, a key metric for quantifying the impact of email marketing

The upshot of the MPP change for marketers – and the platforms they use to reach inboxes – is that ORs are far less reliable than they used to be if Apple Mail users are in the mix. Any OR calculation that counts Apple Mail users is likely to be inflated, and sometimes dramatically so because [any email that lands in an inbox where MPP is turned on registers as an open](#).

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Although marketers and email service providers have adapted in various ways, consensus around how OR should be measured and interpreted remains elusive. Here's how the team at Future B2B, where 300-plus newsletters are powered by the purpose-built SmartBrief email engine, thinks about the issue ... and the upshot for marketers, however they get their message to inboxes.

To count or not to count

Whatever your email service provider tells you about your open rate, if Apple Mail users are included, it's a safe assumption that your open rate is inflated.

The question is: **by how much?**

For lists that include a small percentage of Apple Mail users, you can assume your OR may be only slightly inflated beyond the true OR – which reflects only real opens by a real user – and that MPP poses little to no issue.

But most lists – including many Future B2B lists – include a large percentage of Apple Mail users. If you have this information for any list you use, it is an essential consideration for determining how to proceed.

Some options:

1

REMOVE ALL APPLE MAIL USERS FROM YOUR OPEN RATE CALCULATION

This may be your best bet for getting as close as possible to a true OR. Since it is a safe bet that Apple Mail opens are inflated, taking them out of the mix removes a major source of error. If Apple Mail users open emails at the same rate as other users (an assumption that may or may not hold true), you are simply reducing the sample size for your OR calculation.

2

RETAIN ALL APPLE MAIL USERS IN YOUR OPEN RATE CALCULATION

An OR that includes Apple Mail users looks wonderfully robust. Publishers with massive lists that report open rates well over 50% likely count all Apple Mail opens. The number stacks up well against other publishers (especially those that filter Apple Mail opens out) and makes the team feel good. The problems only become apparent when other metrics are checked. If the gap between your OR and CTR widens ... if the expected engagement with ads falls well below expectations, given your expected impressions ... or if everything else starts to look disappointing, your inflated OR may be why.



3

MEET IN THE MIDDLE

A hybrid approach extrapolates OR from non-Apple Mail users to those affected by MPP. If you know how many Apple Mail users you have, you may be able to apply the non-MPP OR to the MPP cohort and gain a fuller picture of email views. Note that this is only worthwhile where an accurate measurement of impressions is needed.

In our experience at Future B2B, most ESPs include Apple Mail in their OR calculation. No approach is perfect, so what's important for marketers is to know how their OR is calculated, so they can interpret it correctly.

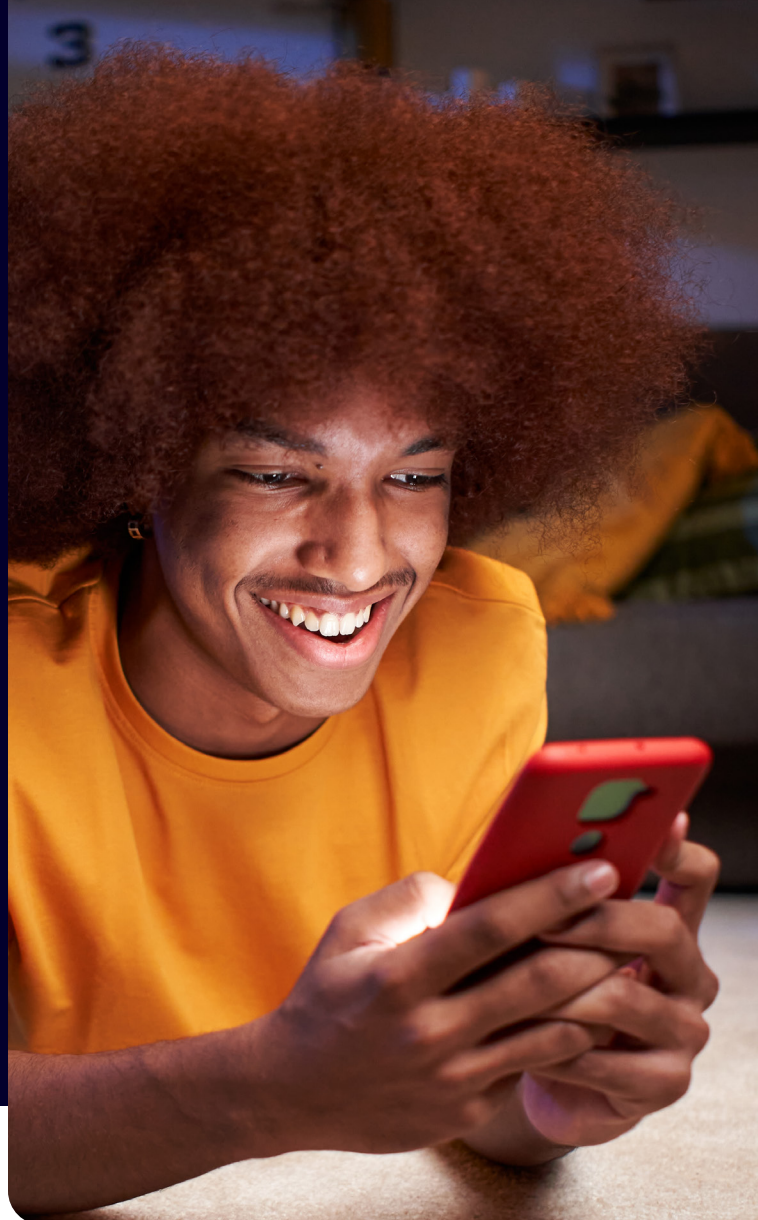
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Interpreting open rates

Whether your OR includes or excludes Apple Mail users, there are implications for your choice. Retaining Apple Mail users means your OR is likely to appear strong yet be inflated. Meanwhile, filtering out Apple Mail users is likely to give you a more accurate perception of OR, but it limits your ability to understand and account for something such as differences in engagement based on email client or device.

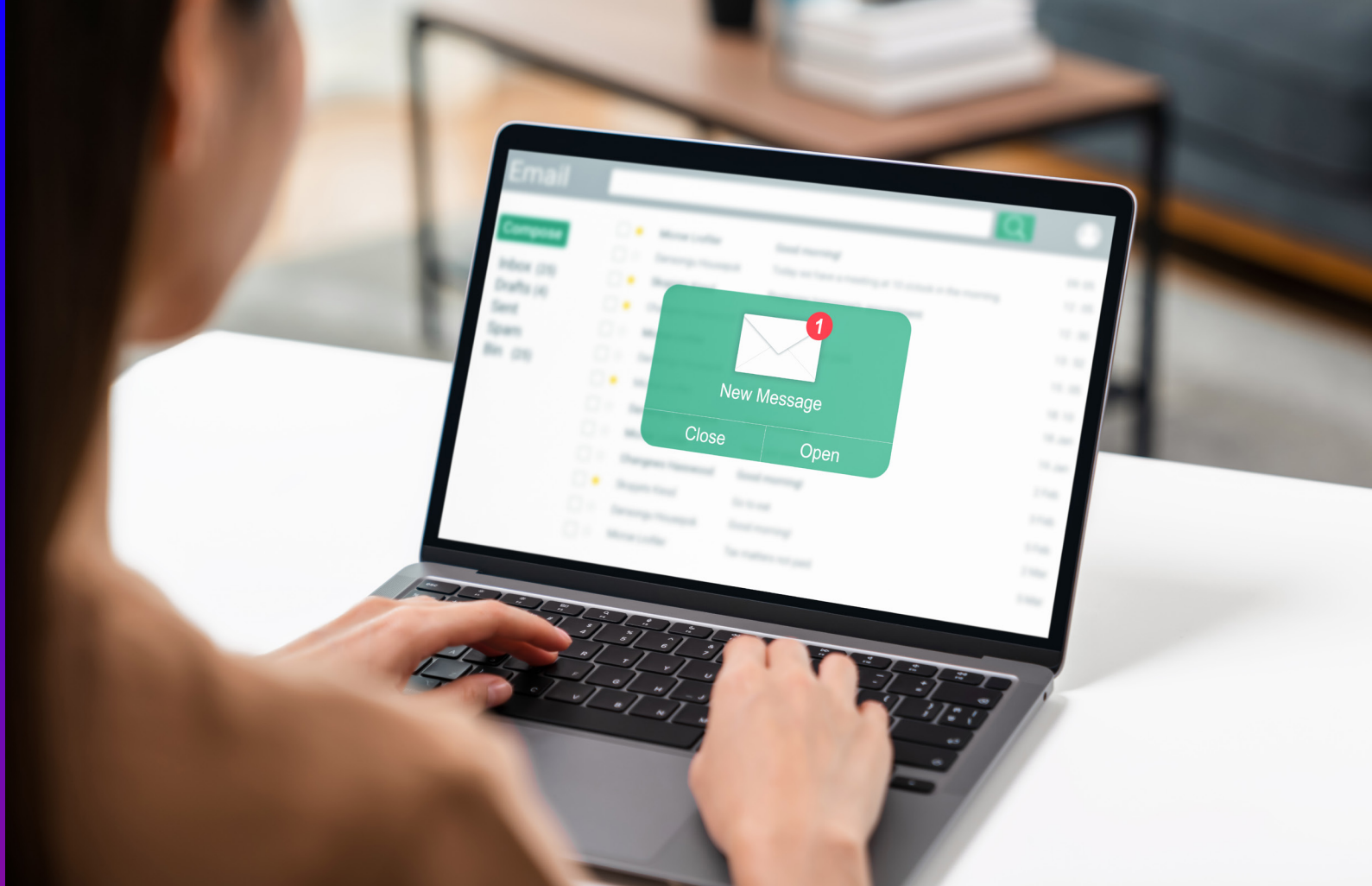
Consider that Apple Mail users might skew differently than users of other email clients (say Hotmail or Outlook) in terms of age, income, education and other variables. If those variables, in turn, translate to a difference in email behavior, your MPP-free OR may not be as on-target as you would like, because filtering them out assumes no difference in behavior.

Ultimately, open rates should be interpreted cautiously and in context. While a given OR might not reflect an objectively true level of opens, a change in OR over time is a signal to pay attention to – as long as the formula remains consistent.



Seeing your OR rise by 10% could mean your emails are gaining traction, while a 10% decrease may mean fewer people are interested. Other factors such as a change in audience acquisition tactics may also be at play, so consider additional possibilities before making a change in your content.

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MPP and list hygiene

A longtime best practice for email marketing involves keeping lists clean by removing inactive users. MPP complicates this work, because Apple Mail opens mask this information. Marketers can simply assume all Apple Mail users are active, but it's unlikely the case, and engagement is likely to suffer over time as inactive users languish on lists, accounting for an increasingly large share of total audience.

One helpful tactic Future B2B has employed involves increasing emphasis on clicks. When an Apple Mail user clicks, it becomes clear that they are engaged. Innovative content and features like polls that encourage clicks from people who might otherwise be passive readers can help differentiate true opens from MPP opens. And marketers who lean on these tactics will achieve benefits beyond distinguishing true user engagement. Future B2B has found that a click in a given email boosts the odds that a user will open the next email. Good for managing the impact of MPP and optimizing engagement overall.

How Future B2B calculates OR

Future B2B has a long history of taking a conservative approach to metrics, and that has not changed in the post-MPP world. For us, that means removing Apple Mail users from our OR calculation. In addition, the standard Future B2B OR reflects distinct opens, not total opens, meaning a subscriber who opens a given email repeatedly is counted only once.



DISTINCT OPENS

TRACKABLE EMAIL SENDS

Taking a conservative approach to these metrics is helpful for not over-estimating the impact of email content decisions, and for setting realistic expectations for other metrics. However, in a world where total opens are championed and Apple Mail users are often retained in OR calculations, we spend a lot of time putting our OR into context and explaining how we compare with other publishers.

We have also shifted to a more holistic approach to email metrics. We keep an eye on OR but have stepped up emphasis on other metrics. For example, the curation model that drives many of our newsletters

has long meant editorial CTR was not necessarily a metric to optimize, although advertising CTR is a different consideration and has always had our intensive focus. Now, CTR matters across the board.

That's because we have discovered a critical link between editorial CTR and OR. A reader who clicks today is about 20% more likely to open tomorrow. In addition, prompting any user to click helps distinguish between auto-opens and true opens. When an Apple Mail user clicks, it becomes clear that they really opened the email, helping clarify the picture muddled by MPP.

So, do open rates still matter?

The short answer for Future B2B is yes, open rates matter. The more nuanced answer is that open rates must be understood in context, and that was true long before MPP. OR calculations differ, and choices about how to measure it are business decisions. Any calculation carries complexity, and longitudinal changes in OR are likely more informative than OR as an independent metric. What matters most is consistent calculations – and ensuring stakeholders are educated about how to interpret them.

For marketers, the answer is likely similar. Wherever you reach audiences by email, OR is a metric to track, but it's important to understand how it is measured and to interpret with that in mind. If you are tracking OR through a variety of channels, ensure any comparisons you make account for differences in OR calculation and handling of Apple Mail users. Compare apples with apples when possible, and define other metrics that matter to your team, then track accordingly.



A silver lining of MPP

Like any major shift, MPP caused a lot of concern, and rightly so. But it also forced marketers, ESPs and others who use and track email as a means of disseminating content to think differently. For Future B2B, MPP prompted new and interesting questions, as well as a wave of innovation as we sought to understand and measure audience behavior and ensure our lists are clean, strong – and as engaged as possible.

The metrics, defined

Every organization handles and defines these metrics a little differently. Here's a brief guide to the Future B2B approach:

Trackable email sends

Subscribers minus Apple Mail auto-opens

Total opens

Total number of opens minus Apple Mail auto-opens

Distinct opens

Total number of unique opens minus Apple Mail auto-opens

Total clicks

The total number of clicks for a send regardless of email client

Open rate

Distinct opens divided by trackable email sends

Click-through rate

Total clicks divided by total sends



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