ACTA UNIVERSITATIS LODZIENSIS
FOLIA LITTERARIA POLONICA 5(43) 2017

http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1505-9057.43.11

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Strategies for organising the attention of receivers in e-mail marketing

Intrigue the receiver – introduction

The task of drawing the receiver's attention is a major element of the process of advertising communication. The creators of advertising content utilise diverse methods of presenting their offer to persuade the addressees to become actual receivers. Researchers stress that "the problem of presentation becomes valid in the context of social communication as the multitude of content currently bombarding receivers is treated as information noise until they themselves identify specific messages which they find interesting"[1]. The problem also applies to e-mail communication and its marketing side: e-mail marketing.

E-mail communication in marketing is highly significant. According to the forecasts of the authors of the study entitled: *Email Statistics Report, 2013–2017* [2], in the next few years, e-mail contact with clients in business will remain the main communication channel: "Email remains the predominant form of communication in the business space"[3]. The goal of a message in e-mail marketing is to convince the receiver to learn about a company's products. That, however, requires her/him to be coerced into clicking on the appropriate field and opening the message while today's receivers live in a world saturated with information, including advertising content. That has been confirmed by numerous research studies into the modes of reading and related observations: "We do this [read – A.F.B.] very fast, as we search for things we might spend more time on. We don't read by looking

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[1] A. Awdiejew, "Sytuacja komunikacyjna w procesie ideacji", in: "Sytuacja komunikacyjna i jej parametry. Sytuacje – komunikacja – konteksty", G. Sawicka (ed.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2010, p. 17.

[2] S. Radicati, J. Levenstein, "Email Statistics Report, 2013–2017", http://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Email-Statistics-Report-2013-2017-Executive-Summary.pdf [accessed on: 15.12.2016].

[3] Ibid., p. 3.

at the letters as a child does; we read by recognising words and sometimes groups of several words in one go"[4], usually with the goal of avoiding any contact with it (e.g. the phenomenon of zapping in relation to television shows[5]). A similar situation occurs in internet communication with a potential receiver of advertising content. E-mail inboxes are often filled with advertising messages. The users identify some effortlessly as advertising content. They also remove them easily from their e-mail inboxes, without the need to engage their attention. Others, however, require more careful consideration as they do not reveal their commercial provenance, or even force users to open them.

Attention as a controllable object – assumptions

The aim of the article is to conduct a preliminary study into the mechanisms used by the senders of e-mail advertisements in order to draw the attention of the receivers and persuade them to open the messages. The methodology was based on communication studies the interdisciplinary nature of which requires one to consider various perspectives, i.a. of linguistics and psychology. This a well-known approach in the traditions of studies on persuasion.

The study applied only to the elements of an e-mail visible to the receivers prior to clicking on a message, i.e. the name of the sender and the topic of the message, as those are the elements with which the receivers come into contact first and their forms often determine the decision whether to interact with the received message or not. I collected the study material in my own e-mail inbox between March 2014 and March 2016, and I selected it considering the techniques they utilised. As a result, I extracted 300 examples which used the strategies discussed herein. The indicated time frame might be significant as the specificity of advertising communication changes in time, and is influenced by trends, which is why one must consider the historical value of the study.

Based on the assumptions of perception psychology[6], I applied the assumption that the attention of receivers of e-mail communication can be controlled. It raised the study question: how should one shape advertising content in e-mail communication to draw the receivers' attention? To answer that, I used the concept of a strategy. It is a term utilised in various areas. In general, it is a pre-

[4] R. Heath, "Seducing the Subconscious. The Psychology of Emotional Influence in Advertising", Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2012, p. 192.

[5] Cf. A. Ching Biu Tse, R.P.W. Lee, "Zapping Behaviour during Commercial Breaks", *Journal of Advertising Research* 2001, Issue 41 (3), pp. 25–29.

[6] Vide: A. Falkowski, T. Tyszka, "Psychologia zachowań konsumenckich", Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdansk 2009, pp. 15–45.

determined plan of operation focussed on achieving an intended result. For the purpose of this study, its meaning should be specified further. The strategy of organising the attention of receivers entails engaging within a communication space in planned activities, in which one utilises the verbal and visual tools available in a given communication channel in order to draw the attention of receivers to a message. The term *planned* is particularly important as it indicates the underlying assumption that all strategic activities are controlled through the specific intentions of a sender. That statement introduces the extremely important issue of the responsibility of the senders of advertising content for engaging in the activity. However, to consider it fully, one would need to assume a different research perspective, and therefore it will not be discussed herein.

I identified two main strategies of organising the attention of the receivers of e-mail marketing: the first based on the intention to highlight a given offer among other messages, and the second leading in the opposite direction: to conceal its marketing nature. In the article, I discuss both from the perspective of a linguist, and I propose explanations of the mechanisms of their operation based on the knowledge regarding selected psychological mechanisms. I also indicated the operating tactics utilised within each strategy.

Highlight strategy

Guidebooks on e-mail advertising[7] emphasise that by highlighting an offer among a multitude of other offers and drawing the customers' attention is the main goal of such content. The receivers' attention can be drawn in various ways, e.g. using the highlight strategy. An e-mail message constructed in this way can often be identified as advertising content at the very first contact. The aim of its author is for the receivers to focus exactly on them and not the other items included in their e-mail inboxes. The mechanism of the strategy is based on the practical application of the figure-ground configuration theory. Andrzej Falkowski and Tadeusz Tyszka note:

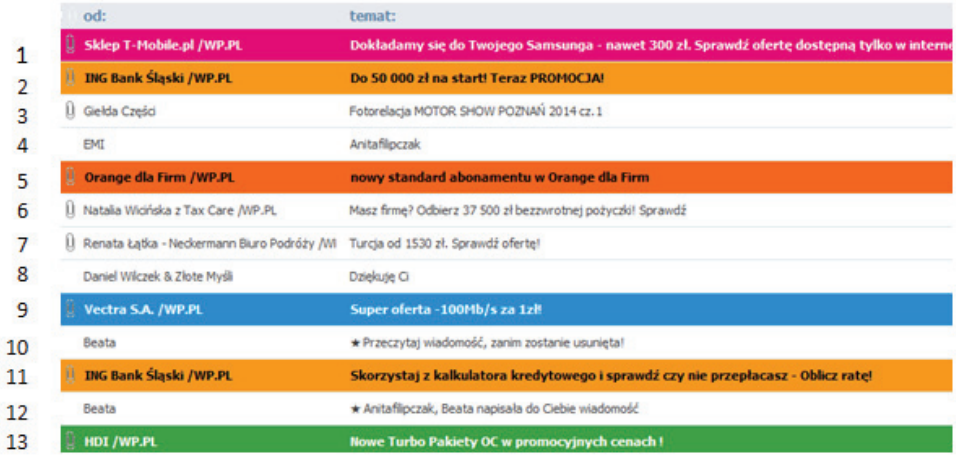
> The practical problem with which the creators of advertising content are faced is how to make an advertisement so that it stands out among numerous other stimuli which reach us, i.e. for it to become a figure in front of the background. In other words, how to direct selective filtering attention to meaningful stimuli?[8]

[7] Cf. M. Dutko, "Copywriting internetowy", PWN, Warsaw 2010, also: J. Wrycza-Bekier, "Webwriting", Helion, Gliwice 2010.

[8] A. Falkowski, T. Tyszka, op. cit., p. 35.

Usually, advertising messages constitute only the background for factual communication in which receivers are interested – the information noise indicated at the beginning of the article. In this case, due to the utilisation of the natural human inclination for picking up that which is different, which stands out, that order becomes distorted. Based on the figure-ground arrangement, advertisements created via the highlight strategy constitute the figure while other messages function as the background. Various techniques are used for achieving that goal, however, the most emphatic example of that device is the tactic of applying a different, often associated with the brand being advertised, colour scheme in the post line. The phenomenon is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The influence of the colour post line on directing receivers' attention



	od:	temat:
1	Sklep T-Mobile.pl /WP.PL	Dokładamy się do Twojego Samsunga - nawet 300 zł. Sprawdź ofertę dostępną tylko w interne
2	ING Bank Śląski /WP.PL	Do 50 000 zł na start! Teraz PROMOCJA!
3	Giełda Części	Fotorelacja MOTOR SHOW POZNAŃ 2014 cz. 1
4	EMI	Anitafilipczak
5	Orange dla Firm /WP.PL	nowy standard abonamentu w Orange dla Firm
6	Natalia Wicińska z Tax Care /WP.PL	Masz firmę? Odbierz 37 500 zł bezzwrotnej pożyczki! Sprawdź
7	Renata Łątka - Neckermann Biuro Podróży /WI	Turcja od 1530 zł. Sprawdź ofertę!
8	Daniel Wilczek & Złote Myśli	Dziękuję Ci
9	Vectra S.A. /WP.PL	Super oferta -100Mb/s za 1zł!
10	Beata	★ Przeczytaj wiadomość, zanim zostanie usunięta!
11	ING Bank Śląski /WP.PL	Skorzystaj z kalkulatora kredytowego i sprawdź czy nie przepłacasz - Oblicz ratę!
12	Beata	★ Anitafilipczak, Beata napisała do Ciebie wiadomość
13	HDI /WP.PL	Nowe Turbo Pakiety OC w promocyjnych cenach !

Source: own study.

Even at a glance, the example list of posts leads to a conclusion that the colour lines (examples 1, 2, 5, 9, 11, 13) draw the receivers' attention the most. The remaining messages (examples 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12), which retain the e-mail inbox settings, constitute the background – regardless of their possible factual content, it is advertisements that first dominate the receivers' attention. The reading of the messages which constitute the background requires some cognitive effort on the part of the receivers, who must strive to ignore the aggressive colour message. That, in turn, evokes irritation in the receivers' cognitive processes, and it interferes with their communication habits as usually they wish to focus on factually valid content, not on advertisements.

Another tactic, a bit less aggressive yet also enabling messages to stand out against the background of other messages, is the use of special graphic signs. The phenomenon was illustrated by the messages in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The function of special graphic signs in e-mail marketing

	od:	temat:
14	Nowość	____dla Ciebie____2 nowe pożyczki____
15	Groupon Travel	❀ Eko-hotel na Podhalu ❤ Weekend w Janowcu ≈≈ Uzdrowisko w Nałęczowie
16	Groupon Travel	✈ Super Last Minute! All Inclusive w Bułgarii ≈≈ Mazury z Bliskimi ❤ Romantyczny Toruń
17	Księgarnia Dobre-Książki.pl	Kwietniowe nowości ✿ ✿ ✿
18	Groupon Travel	❤ Walentynki: Paryż | Wenecja | Londyn | Sopot | Kazimierz Dolny
19	Gloria A	►►► Utrata wagi po Świętach
20	Arboretum /WP.PL	Czy widziałeś lepszą okazję w Łodzi?

Source: own study.

The application of special graphic signs, an option available in some e-mail programs, is intended to highlight an e-mail in a list of posts. Those are not only decorative. In e-mail marketing they serve a specific communicative function. The triangle, which is the iconic representation of the *play* command, constitutes a non-verbally expressed call-to-action type verb. Call-to-action messages are aimed at triggering specific actions, i.e. they show the receiver what she/he can do next with a received message – click and initialise the opening of the e-mail. Special graphic signs often iconically refer to the verbally expressed topic of an e-mail, e.g. the association of the sign with the season (a symbol of flowers in April – example 17) or a special date in the calendar (the symbol of a heart in an offer designated for Valentine's Day – example 18) using the receivers' natural sensitivity to specific content. The function of highlighting is also fulfilled by the use of emoticons or lines (example 14), as well as the symbol of a message attachment (example 20) accompanying a message, which suggests factual content in an e-mail and encourages one to open it.

Another manner of highlighting an e-mail in a list of posts is the capitalisation of selected words in the topic of a message. That phenomenon is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Strategy of using all caps in e-mail marketing

	od:	temat:
21	Monika Wędrocha	PILNE otwórz!
22	Julia G.	Anitafilipczak ! OSTRZEŻENIE !!!
23	RR Biuro	★★ GRATULUJEMY !!! PL-HRY-Anitafilipczak-9937 ★★
24	Monika Wędrocha	WRESZCIE JEST!

Source: own study.

That tactic has, in fact, a much broader application, one might even say that it was adapted for e-mail communication from its general application. It is also worth stressing that the e-mail communication netiquette posits that it should be avoided as capitals are considered a non-verbal expression of a raised voice or even shouting.

The final distinctive tactic in the strategy is the use of the message's receiver's name in the topic of the e-mail. That utilises the cocktail party effect[9]. It is a slightly more complex mechanism based on natural human psychological inclinations. Its influence has been explained by researchers as follows:

> In all sensory modalities, the normal mode of analyzing a complex scene is to focus on one object while other objects are in the perceptual background. In vision, this mode of perceiving is described as a biased competition between perceptual objects. Biased competition takes place automatically and ubiquitously when there are multiple objects in a scene. Which object wins the competition depends both on the inherent salience of the objects and the influence of volitional, top-down attention, which biases the competition to favour objects with desired perceptual features[10].

Initially, the cocktail party effect was associated with auditory sensations, only later was it shown that the phenomenon also applies to visual stimuli, thus having a more general nature. According to Barbara G. Shinn – Cunningham, "the similarities between auditory and visual perception in complex scenes suggest that common neural mechanisms control attention across modalities"[11]. Therefore, what features of a message trigger in receivers natural and automatic interest? Certainly those which include content referring directly to a person, i.e. her/his name and surname. Thus e-mail messages include statements which use the name of the receiver, sometimes even the surname.

Figure 4. Use of the cocktail party effect in e-mail marketing

	od:	temat:
25	Alicja	Anito, Twoja rejestracja przebiegła pomyślnie
26	Ashampoo News	Special Newsletter for Anita Filipczak
27	Sklep Toys4Boys.pl	Pani Anito wkrótce wazny dzien!

Source: own study.

[9] W.L. Wilkie, "Consumer Behaviour", Willey, New York 1994.

[10] B.G. Shinn-Cunningham, "Object based auditory and visual attention", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 2008, Issue 12, p. 183.

[11] Ibid., p. 186.

Researchers into the cocktail party effect have noted that in the vendor-customer relationship, the effect may have a limited influence due to the customer's awareness as she/he realises the aim of the message: "Customers might infer that name remembrance is a tactic used to help facilitate sales"[12]. The strength of the tactic within e-mail marketing is further diminished by the fact that it is fairly easy to establish the receiver's name and surname based on her/his e-mail address, while the influence is nearly completely shattered by the fact that the application of said personal data in the topic of the message often entails errors in declension suggesting that it was generated by an automatic algorithm.

Camouflage strategy

However, a large group consisted of messages which at a glance would be difficult to identify as advertising content. Their task is to mask their true commercial nature, and thus motivate the receiver to open a message and in turn force her/him into a longer and deeper contact with the advertising content. The mechanism of the strategy is based on the emulation phenomenon, a type of communicational mimicry. Subject literature includes the term **genre homotypia**, which was developed in relation to press advertising[13]. Later researchers postulated the expansion of the term stating that the phenomenon also appeared in advertising content designed for release within traditional television advertising blocks, and in radio or internet advertising considered as advertising spots released on websites[14]. The following analysis attempts a confirmation of the validity of expanding the notion (with some modifications of its meaning), and also including it within the scope of e-mail communication-based mechanisms.

The goal of applying genre homotypia is to mask the true mercantile identity of a message, and to conceal its commercial dimension in order to impair the receivers' vigilance, thus increasing the illocutionary and perlocutionary efficiency of the message[15]. In general, one could conclude that the persuasive strength of that type of activity is based on two pillars: blurring the source of an expression, and utilising the prestige and the social-cultural status of the genre

[12] D.J. Howard, Ch. Gengler, A. Jain, "What is in a Name? A Complimentary Means of Persuasion", *Journal of Consumer Research* 1995, Issue 22 (2), p. 209.

[13] Cf. S. Camm, "O mechanizmach homotypii gatunkowej", in: "Komunikacja wizualna w przestrzeni społecznej", A. Obrębska (ed.), Primum Verbum, Lodz 2009, pp. 111–139.

[14] Cf. A. Obrębska, "Reklama jako komunikacyjny kameleon", in: "Dyskursy komunikacji medialnej", A. Filipczak-Białkowska (ed.), Primum Verbum, Lodz 2011, pp. 82–92.

[15] Cf. S. Camm, op. cit.

it mimics[16]. Therefore, I propose to consider genre homotypia in advertising communication as all the mechanisms utilised by an advertising message to simulate other genres of expression typical for the source (medium) in which the message appears. In the press, advertising messages take the form of typical journalistic content, there appear attempts to mimic the style of an interview or a report[17], while on the television they mainly emulate news programmes[18]. In e-mail communication, e-mail marketing also often masks its mercantile identity, though, in fact, retaining it.

In terms of the camouflage strategy, two tactics are clearly visible: one which consists of emulating professional correspondence, and the other which consists of emulating social communication (often with a visible ludic tint). What distinguishes both tactics is the mimicking of another communicative goal to the one which the messages actually fulfil, as the actual content of an e-mail remains unchanged – it is still an advertisement.

At the level of the camouflage strategy, one should identify two elements of an e-mail message which jointly work towards achieving the final result. The first is the field where the message's sender is specified, the second – the message topic. Within each, there appear intentional actions of the sender whose goal is to alter the commercial content for it to emulate a message free of any marketing activities.

The sender field in e-mail marketing communication usually includes:

– company name;

– name and surname of a specific person and the name of a company which she/he represents;

– name and surname;

– name alone or name and the first letter of the surname;

– hidden sender.

The first two combinations reveal the identity of the sender, which enables the receiver to infer the aim of the initiated act of communication. In that case, one cannot refer to the camouflage strategy. In fact, it appears in the case of using the combination of a name and surname, name alone, or name and the first letter of the surname. In a thus constructed message sender field, the personal aspect is clearly marked. The addressee can infer that a specific real person is

[16] One should note the shift which has occurred within the understanding of the word *genre*, and consider the validity of applying the genre category in relation to e-mail communication as the subject literature does not include any such typology. There is a visible differentiation of e-mail communication based on the aim of the message, senders use various modes of image-building and expressions, yet it seems that it would be more justified to talk about some variants of one genre. The settling of the issue was not the aim of this study; my intention was only to indicate some terminological inconsistencies which appear when one attempts to expand an existing definition.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Vide: A. Obrębska, op. cit.

writing in her/his own name. Using the same e-mail inbox for professional and private communication impels the receiver to consider a message as a normal factual e-mail when the field includes a name and a surname, even of a person the receiver does not know. The inclusion of a name alone in the sender field, so common in e-mail marketing communication, exploits the receiver's trust. I would venture to state that we all know someone by the name of *Kate*, *Anne* or *Peter*, which suggests the sender might be someone known to us. The first letter of the presumed surname or the intimate phrase *Dear Anne* makes the message more probable, and it blocks any assumptions on its advertising nature.

The following tactics are clearly visible in terms of formulating e-mail topics: emulating professional correspondence, and emulating social communication.

By emulating the style of professional communication, an e-mail message suggests factual, i.e. non-advertising content. Thus the topic of an e-mail induces a receiver to locate the communicational situation to which it applies within the professional space, e.g.: *Cooperation proposal*, *Message from a foreign office, urgent!* It is often suggested that a message constitutes a type of a continuation or summary of a previously fulfilled project, e.g.: *Conclusion of the experiment [RESULTS]*, *Further cooperation*, *Second presentation for Marcin*, which raises the interest of the receiver, and impels her/him to open it.

Similarly often there appear e-mails the topics of which suggest that the message belongs to the unofficial or social correspondence type. The topics of such e-mails include speech acts with unofficial greetings: *Hi*, *Hey there!*, apologies, a thank you; wishes regarding culturally accepted holidays: *Happy New year,* received on 2 January, *And for the holidays, we wish you…*, received on 24 December; as well as holidays associated with the receiver's personal life: *Happy birthday*, sent exactly on the receiver's birthday). At the same time, all such messages included in the study material were sent by senders completely unknown to the receiver, while their contents included advertising messages of particular companies.

One particularly interesting tactic is the use of enigmatic expressions as the topic of a message, often with a ludic tint. In such e-mails, the senders do not reveal to what the message applies. They use the structures of general questions, e.g.: *What do you think?*, *Oh, again?*; or use the indefinite pronoun "it", e.g.: *Have you seen it?*, *I cannot stop thinking about it*. Often, those topics include a strong emotional tint (either positive or negative), e.g.: *Bad news*, *I wouldn't like you to lose*, *Nice action*, *Sandra is going to kill me*. The goal of such statements is to generate an information gap. The organisation of the receivers' attention is based in that case on the mechanism discussed within the theory of curiosity[19]. From

[19] G. Loewenstein, "The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Interpretation", *Psychological Bulletin* 1994, Issue 116 (1), pp. 75–98.

the point of view of linguistics, one could assume that the topic of an e-mail constitutes an invitation to engage in an act of communication, while the object of the interaction is left undefined on purpose. Thus, the receiver's decision whether to engage in the communication on the proposed topic or not is blocked. For the receiver to be able to decide, she/he must conceptualise the object of the interaction. George Loewenstein discussed the issue thus: "[…] Curiosity refers to a 'motivation inherent in information processing' […]. Curiosity is influenced by cognitive variables such as the state of one's knowledge structures but may, in turn, be one of the most important motives encouraging their formation in the first place"[20]. The above-quoted examples of enigmatic statements were aimed at generating such an inclination to conceptualise the problem, to expand one's knowledge, to make the message more precise as "message involvement is postulated to be one of the critical antecedents of message elaboration"[21]. The easiest way of filling the gap is to open the e-mail and read its contents, which in the case of e-mail marketing means exposing oneself to the influence of the advertising content included therein.

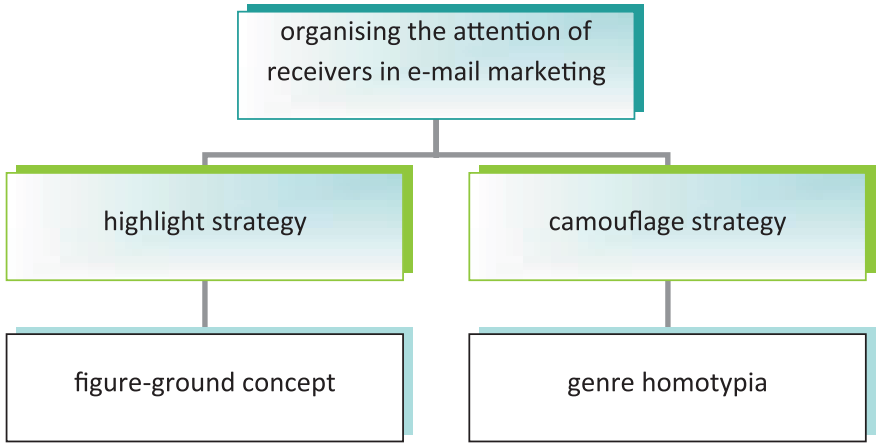
Conclusion

One of the main goals of advertising communication is to focus the receivers' attention on the communication offer, this includes e-mail marketing as for that it is a *sine qua non* condition for initiating the persuasive effect of advertising. By applying appropriate communication strategies which utilise knowledge regarding human perception and cognitive processes, senders can meet that requirement. In the article, I discussed two such strategies.

[20] Ibid., p. 95.

[21] J. Sengupta, R.C. Goodstein, D.S. Boninger, "All Cues Are Not Created Equal: Obtaining Attitude Persistence under Low-involvement Conditions", *Journal Of Consumer Research* 1997, Issue 23, pp. 351–352.

Diagram 1. Strategies for organising attention in e-mail marketing



Source: own study.

The highlight strategy enables an advertising message to seize the receivers' attention at first glance. Usually, one can immediately identify the advertising nature of an e-mail devised based on that strategy. The camouflage strategy is different. It is an extremely sophisticated method of impelling receivers to undertake an intended action exploiting the properties of cognitive processes, and it constitutes a type of game, though based on the violation of rules as one cannot forget the main goal for which the discussed strategy is used, i.e. the mercantile dimension of such communication. The conscious and intentional concealment of the purpose of an e-mail constitutes an instrumental approach to receivers. Therefore, the application of that strategy raises justified ethical doubts.

It should be noted that the tactics analysed within the discussed strategies overlap in real-life messages. The final shape of a message that reaches a receiver is the creative mixture of various elements calculated to evoke an effect designed for a specific communication act.

In this study, I presented two global strategies of organising receivers' attention in e-mail marketing which could be identified based on the gathered study material. Surely, though, the topic has not been exhausted, and it might be necessary to supplement (e.g. considering the communication-based cultural differences) or modify it as new tools for influencing potential customers are still being developed, which in turn results in the continuous expansion of advertising content into the communication reality in which 21st century people exist.

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Strategies for organising the attention of receivers in e-mail marketing

(Summary)

The article entitled "Strategies for organising the attention of receivers in e-mail marketing" discusses issues within social communication, more specifically e-mail advertising communication. In it, I consider the intention to draw the attention of receivers as the major element of said type of communication. The creators of advertisements utilise various methods for presenting their offers, as, in the light of market research, e-mail communication still holds a high significance in marketing. E-mail inboxes are often filled with advertising messages. Users easily identify some of those as advertising messages, and remove them without engaging their attention resources. Other, however, require more careful consideration as they do not reveal their commercial provenance, or

even force users to open them. In order to discover the communication-based mechanisms which lay at the foundation of the influence on the receiver, I conducted a study of the material that I collected within a period of 2 years; there I analysed only those elements of an e-mail visible to receivers prior to clicking on a message. Eventually, I extracted 300 examples indicating the applications of the strategies discussed in the article, one of which is based on the intention to highlight an offer among other messages, while the other is aimed at concealing the marketing dimension of an offer. The assumed perspective of this communication-based study was explained by a description of an interdisciplinary nature: I discuss each strategy from the perspective of a linguist, I propose explanations of the mechanisms of their operation based on the knowledge regarding selected psychological mechanisms, and I indicated the operating tactics utilised within each strategy. The significance of the study was emphasised by the fact that a conscious and intentional concealment of the purpose of an e-mail constitutes an instrumental approach to receivers. Therefore, the application by the senders of advertising messages of the discussed strategies raises justified ethical doubts, and demands further research consideration, which might lead to legislative solutions.

Keywords: social communication, receiver's attention, advertising, e-mail marketing, genre homotopia, figure-ground concept.